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Following one's nose: 'Smellwalks' through qualitative data

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Abstract

This Note utilises the idea of 'smellwalks' as a novel way of engaging with qualitative data. Based on a larger study of victims-/survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, it argues that smelling data – and allowing ourselves to viscerally imagine the odours and scents that the data evoke for us – can foster deeper insights into interviewees' embodied experiences; in this case, embodied experiences of war and armed conflict. Within the data – consisting of 63 semi-structured interviews with victims-/survivors of conflict-related sexual violence in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH), Colombia and Uganda – there were frequent references to food and cooking. This Note follows the scent trails within two particular interviews – one from BiH and the other from Colombia.

Keywords

'Smellwalks', embodied experiences, food and cooking, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Colombia

Introduction

Medical students are taught that “‘When you hear hoofbeats, think horses not zebras’” (Cormier and Buikstra, 2021: 196). In other words, they should assume that a patient is suffering from a common condition and not a rare one. Part of being a researcher is about always keeping one's proverbial ear to the ground and, in so doing, never assuming that any 'hoofbeats' we hear are necessarily horses – or even zebras. More broadly, research is in many ways a multi-sensory process, and there is growing literature on sensory methods

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(see, e.g. [Bingley and Milligan, 2007](#); [Harris et al., 2020](#); [Mason and Davies, 2009](#)). This short Note approaches the topic of sensory research from a completely novel angle.

Stoller (1997: 136), in his discussion of what he calls sensuous scholarship, argues that ‘No matter how learned we may become, no matter how deeply we have mastered a subject, the world, for the sensuous scholar, remains a wondrous place that stirs the imagination and sparks creativity’. My aim is to demonstrate how the senses – and specifically sense of smell – stir the imagination and spark creativity by offering a largely unexplored route to analysing qualitative data. However, rather than provide the reader with an ‘aromatic inventory’ ([Rhys-Taylor, 2013](#): 398) of powerful odours or fragrant scents associated with particular places from my own fieldwork experiences, my approach to smells is more indirect. Reflecting on a 5-year research project, I argue – and demonstrate – that going on a ‘smellwalk’ ([Allen, 2021](#)) through qualitative data can elucidate new meanings and connections and, in so doing, impart deeper insights into the lived experiences embedded within that data.

There are particular sights and sounds from my years of doing fieldwork in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) that will always remain with me. Grieving widows and mothers at the Potočari Memorial Centre, kneeling by the graves of their loved ones killed during the Srebrenica genocide in 1995 ([Sahovic, 2019](#)). The ice-cold blue eyes of a (now convicted) war criminal whom I met in the town of Višegrad in 2008 ([Zuvella and Robinson, 2014](#)). The small wooden figure, head down and arms behind its back, crafted by an interviewee during his time in the Manjača camp near Banja Luka in 1992 ([Šarić, 2009](#)). The sound of cars hooting in celebration in Sarajevo when the former Bosnian Serb leader and convicted war criminal, Radovan Karadžić, was arrested in Serbia in 2008 ([Borger, 2008](#)). The particularly melodious call to prayer of an imam in the town of Konjic. In contrast, I have few recollections of smells, beyond the pungent smell of sulphur (due to a sulphur spring) in the town of Ilidža near Sarajevo.

Smells and qualitative research

The Italian physician Bernardino Ramazzini remarked that ‘A GREAT MANY THINGS have been said of *Smells*’ (cited in [Jenner, 2011](#): 335). Certainly, some fascinating research exists. Riach and Warren’s sensory research on office smells, for example, offers a novel perspective on workplace life, relationships and dynamics. Smells, the authors maintain, highlight ‘corporeal porosity’ and entanglements, thereby challenging ‘our view of organizational life and organizational beings as somehow ontologically distinct or separable from each other, *prima facie*’ ([Riach and Warren, 2015](#): 806). [Sou and Webber’s \(2021\)](#) research examines how our sense of home is fundamentally linked to our senses. Disturbance of the senses – and particularly sense of smell, taste and sound – is therefore an important aspect of how people experience natural disasters. Focused on low-income Puerto Rican households in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria in 2017, the authors argue that ‘the impacts of disasters also transpire via disruption to the olfactory, gustatory, and sonic’, which, in turn, foregrounds the need for a ‘sensory analytical lens’ ([Sou and Webber, 2021](#)).

Relatedly, [Xiao et al.'s \(2020\)](#) discussion of 'smellscape' examines some of the ways that smells can emotionally connect us to particular places; and [Rhys-Taylor's \(2013: 394\)](#) research, which presents a vibrant olfactory mosaic of a multi-cultural market in east London, explores how the diverse smells of the market – fruit, fish, bacon, spices, dumplings, incense – provide migrant communities with a sense of familiarity and, hence, comfort. Yet, his work also highlights that 'smells and flavours of home [...] provide markers through which migrant groups' cultural differences are identified by more established groups, often with negative consequences' ([Rhys-Taylor, 2013: 394](#)). On the theme of smells and boundary markers, Tullett's analysis unpacks how smells in eighteenth-century England produced and entrenched historically located 'us'/'them' divides, thus accentuating the 'otherness' of particular groups, including Jews. These divides, moreover, had an important political utility, in the sense of protecting the boundaries of 'polite English spaces' and ultimately prefiguring 'the nineteenth-century sanitarian's pairing of the fetid lower classes and their foul slums' ([Tullett, 2016: 318](#)).

I became curious about smells after reading [Allen's \(2021\)](#) recent article about 'smellwalks'. She went on six smellwalks within her local community in Aotearoa-New Zealand – three during lockdown and three after lockdown. As she explains, 'My aim was to compare the presence and absence of smells during these times, to ascertain what kind of access to the experience of lockdown smell might engender' ([Allen, 2021](#)). In a very different context, [McLean \(2017: 93\)](#) has written about 'smellwalking' with local residents in Amsterdam and fostering new physical experiences of the city by 'reorienting the senses so that temporarily the olfactory becomes active and visualization takes a secondary role'. It has never occurred to me to undertake a 'smellwalk' while doing fieldwork. It was after reading Allen's article in particular, however, that I started to think about smells in relation to my own work and interview data.

Smelling research data

The research on which this article draws is not itself about smells. It is about resilience and specifically about some of the ways that victims-/survivors of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) demonstrate resilience. It locates the concept in the interactions between individuals and their social ecologies (environments), and explores how these ecologies – which include families, communities, non-governmental organisations, institutions and places – support or impede resilience. To cite [Ungar \(2013: 256\)](#), 'The personal agency of individuals to navigate and negotiate for what they need is dependent upon the capacity and willingness of people's social ecologies to meet those needs'. Consistent with its emphasis on context and social ecologies – which resonates with a broader shift within resilience literature away from person-centred conceptualisations towards more complex multi-systemic framings (see, e.g. [Masten, 2021](#); [Oldfield and Ainsworth, 2022](#); [Theron, 2016](#); [Ungar, 2011](#)) – the study adopts a comparative case study approach. It focuses on three particular countries where high levels of CRSV have occurred over different periods, namely BiH, Colombia and Uganda.

The 63 women and men who took part in the qualitative stage of the research, all of whom had suffered CRSV, were selected from a larger quantitative dataset ($N = 449$).

Significant efforts were made to ensure that the samples, as much as possible, captured some of the heterogeneity and diversity – in particular gender, ethnic and age diversity – of victims-/survivors of CRSV in each country. The main fieldwork (undertaken by the author as PI and two postdoctoral researchers, with crucial support from several in-country organisations) took place in 2018 and 2019. The fieldwork, methods and ethics issues have been extensively discussed elsewhere (Clark, 2022a, 2022b). It is important to note that the research did not involve the use of sensory methods, although post-interview notes did sometimes include comments about particular smells, as well as sights and sounds.

I immersed myself in the data – coding the material, analysing it and developing the core themes – for almost 2 years, and during this time I noted just a handful of references to smells. Two of them, from the same interviewee in Colombia, were particularly powerful. First, this Indigenous woman described how one of the armed groups in her area – either the paramilitaries or the guerrillas (she was unsure which group) – had killed a young man and his friend. When a relative approached the bodies, he too was shot. The interviewee recalled: ‘How long were they lying there, the poor boys? My God, more than 8 days, rotting, and we were there having to put up with the smell of rotting – because that smells really bad’. She described it as ‘a scene from Dante’. Second, this interviewee spoke about washing herself with sugar for about a year after she was raped, to try and scrub away what had happened to her. As she explained, ‘I’d put glasses of sugar into my body wash and I’d bathe with that. I needed to keep doing it to get rid of the stench and sweat of those people [the two men who raped her]. I felt that I still smelt of them, but with time it began to go’ (interview, Colombia, 6 March 2019).

Overall, interviewees did not frequently refer to smells. As the research is now coming to an end, however, I decided to try something different with the data and to go on my own ‘smellwalk’. This did not involve physically returning to particular field sites and developing a ‘sensuous description’ (Stoller, 1997: xvi) of smells that I personally experienced. Rather, I focused on what smells I *imagined* as I went through the data – all of it coded in NVivo – one last time. In his work on sensory history, Tullett (2021: 820) refers to ‘openness and engagement with diverse ways of sensing and knowing’. My smellwalk was similarly about sensing and knowing the data in diverse and new ways, by allowing myself to smell it. In the process, what particularly struck me was the frequency with which interviewees in all three countries spoke about food and cooking. It was not that I had previously failed to notice such references, but in the context of my smellwalk they took on a different meaning and relevance.

The interviewees, to reiterate, were all victims-/survivors of CRSV. Such violence is often viewed as both reflecting and forming part of a larger continuum of violence that extends across war/peace dichotomies (Boesten, 2017: 507; Dolan et al., 2020: 1152; Kreft, 2020: 458). It also has an ‘inherent viscosity and drift’ (Logan, 2018: 265), meaning that it frequently occurs alongside other types of war- and conflict-related violence. One of the aims of the research, therefore, was to give expression to the fact that all interviewees had experienced multiple forms of direct and indirect violence – from displacement and physical beatings to forced witnessing of brutality, as well as, in some cases, domestic violence and abuse from family members. It is therefore significant that

just as Allen's (2021) aforementioned smellwalks in her community gave her a unique sensory experience of lockdown, my own smellwalks gave me new sensory experiences of the data. In her work on LGBTQ archives, Cifor (2017: 6) emphasises the 'liveliness' of archival materials; 'the bodily traces, fragments, and fluids' (see also Steedman, 2001: 17). The interview material from my own research was similarly lively, awakening sensory imaginings that provided new insights into the interviewees' embodied experiences. I will use two particular examples to illustrate this, from BiH and Colombia respectively.

A Bosnian camp and the smells of unnamed recipes

I met 'Denis' (not his real name), a 54-year-old Bosniak, in April 2019. He was arrested in May 1992, he recalled, and spent approximately 1 month in a camp near his home. He was subsequently moved to a second camp, from which he was released in July 1993. The second camp was much better than the first, he emphasised. It was a labour camp and he was able to use his skills as a craftsman. He worked hard and this helped him to get through each day; 'This was good for me [...]. I would go to a building, do my job. I would work for 8 hours, would have something to eat, cigarettes, and then they would bring us back' (interview, BiH, 10 April 2019). The first camp was completely different. If a film were to be made about it, he reflected, it would be 'unwatchable' because of what went on there. He spoke very little about that first camp and about what he had experienced and witnessed. He did, however, share a particular food-related memory. In his words:

There was an occasion when almost the whole camp – and there were about 1,000 people accommodated in this one hangar – when we all talked about recipes for dishes, our experiences. Some people were even writing them down, to eat when they get out. I don't know what happened then. But it was the whole camp. I talk about something that I know how to make, like something from camping. Whatever. One talks about this, the other about that... And, in fact, we are hungry. It is not enough what they give us because there is nothing in it, there is nothing. No vitamins, no calories, nothing.

The first time I read this passage, I was particularly struck by Denis' use of the present tense (and indeed there were many examples in the data – from all three countries – of interviewees using the present tense to speak about past events). Ochs and Capps (1996: 25) note that 'The use of the present tense to relate past events may indicate a continuing preoccupation; the events are not contained in the past but rather continue to invade a narrator's current consciousness'. Tense usage can also have important emotional dimensions; experiences that evoke particularly intense emotions may be narrated in the present tense (Pillemer, 1998: 138; Pólya, 2021: 288). What also stood out was the fact that Denis' narrative about the camp had a strong collective focus. He spoke about himself not as an individual in the camp, but as part of a larger prisoner population. This may reflect the de-individualisation that he experienced – his name being replaced with a number – but also the way that the men in the camp helped each other to get through each

day; ‘the *whole* camp was looking for recipes. They say: “I have a good recipe, will you write it down, you know, when I get out to make it.” Like that’.

In Memory's Kitchen is a collection of recipes – as well as letters and poems – put together by Mina Pächter, a Czechoslovakian woman who was sent to the Terezín concentration camp (near Prague) during World War II. Discussing *In Memory's Kitchen*, Mastrangelo (2021: 141) notes that ‘The recipes are for actual dishes and were intended to be as accurate as memory would allow. However, when examined more closely there are certainly many irregularities for those who are used to more standard cookbook formats’. For example, the recipes do not include all food groups and their diversity is limited. As Mastrangelo (2021: 141) argues, ‘Regardless of the type, all of the recipes in *In Memory's Kitchen* are for heavy and filling meat, pasta, or egg dishes or sweets. Overall, Pächter’s collection represents fantasy foods or food ghosts – foods that the inmates dreamed about – that greatly contrasted with the food they received’. When Denis talked about recipe-sharing in the camp in BiH in 1992, he gave no information about those recipes, thus allowing my olfactory imagination to add in the necessary details. The rich meaty smell of *jagnje na ražnju* (spit-roasted lamb), a Bosnian speciality. The mouth-watering scent of Bosnian *sarma* (stuffed cabbage). The sweet or savoury aroma of *pita* (pies made with thin layers of filo pastry).

Denis linked the prisoners’ exchange of recipes to hunger; ‘We probably talked about recipes because of our huge desire to eat’. Yet, it was almost certainly about more than just hunger. It was also about ‘a desire for a return to family and table and an escape of the mind when the body was imprisoned’ (Mastrangelo, 2021: 141). It was significant in this regard that Denis’ first words in the interview – when I asked him if he could tell me something about his life today – were ‘My life is within my family’. I chose to interview Denis, in part, because he was one of only 27 men in the entire quantitative dataset (meaning the data from BiH, Colombia and Uganda), and one of only 12 men in the Bosnian part of the dataset. While conscious of the fact that he had experienced many different types of violence, I had primarily focused on him as a victim-/survivor of *sexual* violence in conflict.

Going on a smellwalk through Denis’ interview, thinking about the recipe-sharing that he talked about and imagining the smells of those unnamed recipes being prepared and cooked focused my attention on the many different layers of his experiences and the deprivations that he had faced. What had he felt during those conversations about recipes? What were his own yearnings that must have seemed completely chimeric and out of reach? These were crucial parts of his experiences that, in hindsight, I wish I had explored further. As McSorley (2013: 12) highlights, ‘War lives and breeds through a panoply of sensory, affective and embodied experiences’. This is certainly an important topic for future research.

Forced displacement, smells of the countryside and *rellenas*

Lucia is a Colombian woman who was born in 1967. In the quantitative part of the study, she did not identify with any of the ethnicity options listed in the questionnaire and instead accentuated her *campesina* identity as a woman from the countryside. In so doing, she

expressed an enduring connectivity to the land and to a way of life from which she had become physically severed – due to Colombia’s armed conflict – and a deep longing to recreate what she once had. She explained:

The only thing I long for, in order to be able to live well, in peace, is to get some farmland and be able to keep cows, pigs, chickens [...]. That would be the only thing that would enable me to rebuild, for everything to be as it was before in XXX [the department in Colombia where she used to live]. It would be having a farm again, being able to keep animals and all the things I had there (interview, Colombia, 3 April 2019).

During my smellwalk though her interview, I imagined the earthy smells of the countryside, of freshly cut hay, of farm animals. I allowed myself to follow this powerful scent trail, thereby gaining a deeper visceral sense of what Lucia had lost. [Carneiro et al. \(2015: 1230\)](#) point to ‘a large range of less tangible features of the rural landscape’ – including smells – which, combined, ‘create a landscape of calm, contrasting with the noisy and stressful landscape of urban areas’. Lucia was now internally displaced in a large city, where she felt neither safe nor at home. ‘[L]iving here is like being imprisoned’, she maintained. Her experiences had robbed her of the ‘change of air’ that she associated with living in the countryside and having one’s own land. I imagined the smell of fetid, polluted air, trapped in a space from which it cannot escape, and tried once again to focus on the smells of the countryside.

What also permeated Lucia’s interview were the rich smells of the hearty dishes that she had learned to cook in the countryside. Food and cooking were an important part of the juxtaposition that she established between her current and former lives. Women in the countryside are hard-working, she stressed, and not afraid to chop wood and to make a fire; ‘Cooking over an open fire. Wow! Could you see some city girl cooking over a fire? We have no fear of that. If I had to go get wood to cook, I’d go get it’. She particularly spoke about making *tamales* (savoury parcels made from corn dough and filled with meat, beans or vegetables) and *rellenas* (potato balls filled with minced beef). That she continued to regularly prepare these dishes illuminates, in turn, the significance of food and cooking in the performativity of identity. In short, part of Lucia’s ‘doing’ of her *campesina* identity occurred ‘through the everyday bodily practices of foodmaking’ ([Brady, 2011: 324](#)). Following the smells within her interview made this much more prominent.

There was something else that struck me during my smellwalk. Lucia mentioned *rellenas* five times during her interview. Noteworthy in this regard was how she had learned to make them. She recalled:

I remember once when I was 15, I was still at school, in fifth grade and I went to see gran...the mother of...of my uncle’s wife...I went to have some *rellenas*; well, to help her make the *rellenas*. I learned to make *rellenas* from her and now I make them too. And that day, her grandson shoved me into the bathroom and tried to rape me. I was 15. That day, well, by some miracle I managed to dodge him. I fought and I fought that time...and afterwards.

In focusing on the smell of the *rellenas*, I gained a different understanding of their significance within Lucia's interview. Ugelvik (2011: 48) points out that food can be 'an arena for resistance'. Lucia's emphasis on her ability to make *rellenas* might be seen, in part, as a form of embodied resistance against the act of violence with which her experience of learning to make this food was fundamentally entangled. Giving her life story the title 'The Fighting Woman', *rellenas* and food more broadly were part of her narrative and of her efforts to resist the impact of violence on her life. In short, the smells that her interview powerfully evoked, when I gave them my attention, were an integral part of her desire to 'go back to the countryside of my memories'.

Conclusion

McSorley (2020: 156) underlines that 'the sense of smell, or olfaction, is a significant but nonetheless largely under-researched and under-theorized topic in analysis of the experiences and practices of war'. As I read his words, I think about the ongoing war and bloodshed in Ukraine. How do people experience war in an olfactory sense? Do cities like Kyiv and Zaporizhzhia smell differently now to those who live in them, knowing that the danger from Russian forces is never far away? Does life in cities such as Mariupol, Kherson and Lysychansk, currently under Russian control, have a different smell to what it once did? How long does it take for the smells of burning buildings, scorched earth, the bodies of the dead, to pass? Will they always linger in some way, creating a new olfactory landscape?

If, as Howes (1987: 401) argues, smell is 'the liminal sense par excellence', there is no question that it has an important part to play in qualitative research. It is relevant in the context of sensory methods more broadly, but also in its own right. Accentuating this, Śliwa and Riach (2012: 25) have called for 'a sensitivity to smell within research agendas'. Incorporating smell into our methodologies and research, however, is not simply about asking those with whom we co-create data to talk about smells, and nor is it just about being aware of particular smells and taking note of them in the field. It is also about smelling our data and using our senses to engage with it in exploratory ways. What this Note has specifically sought to demonstrate is that taking a smellwalk through our interviews can foster new relationships with qualitative data – and new insights into interviewees' experiences. Reading between the lines is an integral part of analysing and interpreting qualitative data (Poland and Pederson, 1998). So too is 'smelling between the lines'.

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