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Title: **Sensory ethnography and the cycling body. Challenges of research and communication**

Original Abstract:

Recent interest in sensory ethnography has challenged ethnographers to extend their attention beyond the visual and into the full sensory world. This paper reports on the experiences of a six-month research project exploring the sensory world of cycle users in and around Munich. It explores two contrasting but complimentary sets of urban journeys, one constrained by streetscapes, and one by greenways and urban parks.

The conscious employment of a sensory studies approach assists the researcher to consider how the processes of cycling involve a whole body sensory experience. It also questions the adequacy of the western sensory five-sense construct, which is generally limited to external sensory input and lacks clear articulation of the intra-bodily senses of muscle feel, fatigues and stress. Thus, it begins to unpack the complex of elements subsumed within the general heading of kineaesthetics in recent studies of cycling and walking. Combining visual ethnography - using filmed journeying - with GPS and biometric data, (heart rates and power measurement), more commonly associated with sports training and analysis, provides a different view of the embodied journeying even at a mundane level.

These 'objective' or 'hard' data measurements are also mediated through autoethnographic considerations of the subjective feelings and experiences associated with these 'hard' data. A conventional written paper is presented with accompanying film - incorporating data overlay - so that the story of a sample (composite) journey can narrate the findings of the research.

Introduction

The turn towards greater consciousness of the sensory world in ethnographic work is now well-established; having advanced to the stage of textbooks designed as practical primers for undergraduates (Pink 2009). These considerations of sensoriality have proceeded simultaneously with, and are frequently connected to the growth of mobilities studies (on Mobilities see Urry 2007; Canzler, Kaufmann and Kesselring 2008; on the links see Urry and Larsen 2011). Responding to the modalities of mobility, new methods (including extensive use of digital media) have been extensively explored (Fincham et al 2010; Buscher et al 2011). There is proper debate about the deployment and

utility of novel methods on mobilities research: do they provide a privileged understanding or are they simply another tool through which to see and understand (Merriman 2014). While I would agree with critiques that suggest many of the conventional methods of social scientific study are problematically geared towards considering society through a lens of stasis - where the units of investigation are constructed as (relatively) stable phenomena - I would only go as far as arguing that new methods augment understanding, rather than "better" understand. For the purposes of this investigation, the use of digital techniques has made observations available that might not otherwise have been so. However, their use and resulting data also raise, as we shall see, significant ethical questions over their deployment, and engage with further theoretical debates in the nature of knowledge and the place and status of the material.

Returning to the intersection of mobilities, methods and visual and sensory ethnographies, it is notable that studies of cycling (e.g. Spinney and Brown 2010) have been integral to the development of these intertwined threads of inquiry. The field of cycling studies, while still relatively new, is also sufficiently established over the past decade for patterns of scholarship to be discernible, and key among these are ethnographic approaches (Jungnickel and Aldred 2013) and an interest in kineasthetics as a focal point (Spinney 2007). These thus cross-link to more established fields of social scientific work on the body and embodiment (Schilling 2014). There is, in short, no dearth of theoretical or practical perspectives from which to draw in the study of the cycling body.

If this richness of recent work was not enough, underlying theoretical concerns have also fed strongly into the formation and explorations of this current study. From one perspective, these approaches might point to an exclusive interest in a new empiricism, seeking through the methods employed to work with a realist ontology. Indeed, much of the background upon which this draws comes from an academic tradition often characterised as peculiarly obsessed with empiricism. However, these connections are strongly tempered by engagement with non-representative theory. Following Thrift (2008), the engagement with this work seeks to move from the cognitive towards a more performative methodology where divisions between subject and investigator are questioned. This is especially important in conditions where "kinetic empathy ... is both the means by which the body experiences itself kinaesthetically and also the means by which it apprehends other bodes" (Thrift 2008 p.237).

To investigate the sensory world is neither to identify a clearer picture of a singular reality, nor to produce new data sources as a further contribution to an ever stronger realism. Similarly, to consider and embrace the autobiographic or auto ethnographic is not intended here to reveal or discover an essence of being in an identitiarian register. Rather, it is to engage with, and become implicit in, a set of ongoing performances of selves and others in a constant process of encounter: that which is more properly described as participant observation. Hence I am also drawn to Ingold's anthropology, moving beyond the conventionally phenomenological (Ingold 2000; 2007). His distinction between anthropology and ethnography is useful precisely because it distinguishes studying with, and learning from, as the core of anthropological knowledge, and the work of documentation which constitutes ethnography (Ingold 2013). This twofold process helps clarify the quite different problems and ways of writing within any research between its conduct – and the means by which those processes are

understood or put into a form that enables a degree of recollection – and the manner in which it might subsequently be communicated to others. In sum, the distinction between logos and graphos.

Responding to this wealth of material and interpretative frameworks I undertook an extended study of everyday cycling as part of my work as a Leverhulme International Academic Fellow, working at the Rachel Carson Center for Society and Environment in Munich. The RCC is a joint project between LMU and the Deutsches Museum, and, as an interdisciplinary working space, allowed me to extend my horizons beyond even those formed by my background in the literature alluded to above. The overall fellowship was entitled "developing interdisciplinary research methods into cycling and the environment" and within the application I had outlined a broadly defined project which incorporated ethnographic research on mundane cycling behaviours. From the outset I identified this as an ongoing task but also allowed the fieldwork process to develop as appropriate.

Practical Research design

The underlying research question that was the starting point for this project was "how do people ride, when bicycling is a mundane phenomenon?" The latter part of the question was important because of the recognized influence of broader social contexts on cycling behaviours. In most of England, for example, outside of London and a few other small cities, cycling as everyday transport remains marginal to the point of insignificance (Pooley et al, 2012). Those who do cycle are more likely to be enthusiastic, experienced and skilled cyclists who also ride for leisure purposes. Thus their speeds and behaviours are dually shaped by the constant interaction with motorised road traffic on unsegregated roads, and conditioned by the specificities of history and location. Munich by contrast, has a much higher modal share by bicycle in urban traffic, and to ride on the relatively comprehensive system for cycle travel is an unremarkable activity. Thus a far greater range of people are to be seen riding, for a variety of mundane purposes. Leisure riding, for example, Sunday journeys along the Isar cycle paths, is also popular, but rarely the only form of riding undertaken. In the UK, by way of contrast, many of those to be found on similar leisure routes do not ride in other circumstances and many are likely to drive to the path in order to ride.

To investigate and to try and make sense of how people move around, it is first necessary to observe. Brown and Spinney (2011) provide a good overview of the growing literature on the uses of the "ride-along" method and the use of video recording of rides using head mounted cameras.. They point out that "[w]hen it came to conducting research on the often solitary and traffic laden practices of urban cycling ... our initial problem was one of how to follow people on their everyday journeys, and be able to talk to them in the context of those journeys." (2011: 134). The problem with any mobile interview practice is that the demands of concentration required, even in normal commuting, preclude many practices of mobile interviewing. Instead they found that video elicitation, where a journey is filmed and then discussed, was a more successful means by which to understand people's thoughts about riding. Allied to this they also argue that much of the action they are investigating takes place at a pre-rational, pre-verbal level. When subject to rationalisation and reason a significant and problematic gap is opened between the event and the language of description. "many of the experiences that make

cycling meaningful are fleeting, ephemeral and corporeal in nature, and do not lend themselves to apprehension by language alone" (2011: 134).

Behind their concern with methods is a desire to break with the dominance of instrumentality in the investigation of everyday practices within a disciplinary perspective overshadowed by transport geography. One potential arising from the use of physically discrete digital recording technologies is that of covert recording. Given the original subject of my own study was mundane behaviour in public spaces, it was considered that filming journeys made, for the purposes of research only, and within the confines of the research context, would be justified as a legitimate means to investigate these practices. But such covert surveillance leads to significant ethical problem: one colleague suggested in jest that it might be described in other contexts as a form of stalking. While it was not the case that I was deliberately tracking individuals, or even aiming to do so, the comments made me re-evaluate the research processes. In order to move the focus away from an obsessive covert surveillance of others, the journey recording was connected to, and filtered through a more deeply reflexive process. The investigative method is reversed from a voyeuristic investigation of 'others' to a reflexive engagement with the self as travelling subject. To do this we can turn to as a second approach to understanding the mundane practices of everyday mobility. Auto-ethnographic methods allow the researcher to engage with lived-experience as it is lived, within a spatial context, but avoiding the voyeuristic gaze. Ingold's (2014) powerfully phrased argument, that "knowledge grows from the crucible of lives lived with others", insists on the reinvigoration of participant observation and a move away from the language of ethnographic study in the form it has expanded outside of anthropology. This emphasis provides a positive reinforcement to the process of this study, and acknowledges the interdisciplinary style of its bridging between sociology and anthropology, as well as it openness to the insights of other disciplinary traditions and practices, where these may better illuminate the investigative process. The importance of reflexivity within accounts of mobile practices, and particularly in practise of travel has been highlighted elsewhere (Vannini 2009). However, before discussing issues of reflexivity, ethics, and the way in which these issues were addressed as part of the process, it is useful to consider the practicalities of recording behaviour as it happens.

Data recording

Recent developments in digital recording devices designed for sports training and monitoring allow a complex range of data to be generated and synchronised. For data recording on the move, the integrated capacity of proprietary Garmin cycling devices was used. A Virb digital camera with GPS function designed for sports use allows continuous recording of image and sound, and is therefore also suitable for recording field notes "on the move" without having to do any more than speak at a normal level. Given the not infrequent encounter with those using smartphones on the move (whether hands-free or not) this raises little attention to the user. The camera synchronises with a dedicated bicycle GPS unit (Garmin 1000). Similar in appearance to a smartphone, this unit records speed, elevation, temperature and a host of other spatial and environmental details and unites these with heart rate information from a personal HRM. Designed as an aid for sports training or touring, its employment as a means of recording information on everyday activities is unobtrusive. Both devices

fit onto the handlebars and are easily removed. The camera is similar in size and shape to a bicycle light and evokes minimal comment. Slightly more problematic was the use of power-metering pedals for these journeys. These pedal units replace the normal cycle pedals to record the rider's power output and cadence (rate of rotation). They were selected for portability and because they could be fitted to any sort of bicycle whatever the design, condition or transmission type. However, using a clip-in racing pedal for everyday journeys which involved numerous stop-start situations proved not quite so convenient, and attracts attention. For most of the time, these were left off, after base-line measurements were taken. Power-metering hubs built into a derailleur-equipped rear wheel are also available and for the urban riding these would have provided a better data source though without the conveniences noted above.

From this combination of data recording devices, fitted to a normal urban bicycle a single data source is produced in the form of a unified digital output. The resulting digital video film, embedded and encoded with sound, GPS, heart rate and power data can be uploaded, replayed and edited with proprietary software provided with the camera. Hard data on speed, bodily exertion, the work needed to overcome particular conditions, whether surface texture or terrain provides a second source to accompany the bodily and emotional perceptions that can be recorded by the rider. In theory, these combined elements offer significant potential not only for data-logging journeys but also as potential means for the development of evaluation tools to assess the impact of infrastructure construction. (It is intended to write an evaluation protocol for practical use out of this experience)

The reasons for this choice of equipment was that these units are robust, simple to use, unobtrusive and yet can provide a rich data source to accompany the visuality of film. They also have the advantage of being highly portable and instantly retrofitted to any bicycle or tricycle. The immediate appeal of using such devices is that film sources alone give only a relatively limited amount of information. Head mounting the camera would have given more "line-of sight" information than handlebar mounting, but initial trials revealed that for the conditions, little extra information was gained, and the lack of the filtering processes that one's gaze is constantly engaged in, provided an overall less coherent data set than a rigidly mounted camera.

Ethics and Covert recording: reversing the gaze.

Ian Walker's (2010) discussion of the ethics of recording and reporting road use behaviour provides a very clear starting point for consideration of the problems of using video investigation. Quite clearly, the use of video poses a number of questions. Digital footage including human subjects, time and place encoded, is particularly intrusive, and however tempting, raises issues in terms of the selection and presentation of images as findings. Even when recordings take place in public spaces, problematic questions arise around surveillance and consent. Ethical boundaries need to be drawn to eliminate specific focus on individuals and actions in any identifiable form. Observation in public settings is long established, but moving from simple note talking, where the filtering process of the observer is clear, to the wholesale gathering of digital film records changes the ethical profile of the project. To observe mundane behaviours in public one cannot simply ask permissions - consent is not

possible. Here we enter a realm of ethical ambiguity. Can there be academic justification for activity that might be less acceptable if done for commercial or political ends? Is the researcher truly a neutral and what differentiation will be made between the data gathered and the results communicated in academic output? Simply using the tools outlined to gather data in public settings does not a priori constitute an act of surveillance. Rather, as Green and Zurawski (2015: 29) argue surveillance is created and produced within social interactions within everyday life". Hence the gathering of data through these methods may not be ethically unacceptable in itself, the way in which this data is reproduced and communicated might well constitute unacceptable breaches of the tacit trust-relations that each of us brings into our everyday social interactions in public spaces.

While it can be proper and appropriate to report on the actions of individuals observed in the course of journeying, it is considered generally inappropriate to present selected raw data footage (that is, of specific behaviours) in a public forum: even in the closed context of an academic discussion. Nevertheless, an exception might be made for the presentation of an entire journey, where no individual or event is selected, and no image frozen, in order to assist in the formation of a narrative explanation of the realities of everyday mobility. The focus of such a presentation shifts from depiction of others to a visual record of the researcher's own journey and the encounters which are brought about by that means. If the ethnographic task is to translate meaning from on culture to another then it became clear that my study required a better understanding of the world which I was observing. Thus the locus of the research moved from sensory ethnography as a rich way of writing the experiential encounter, to incorporating these elements within autoethnography..

Autoethnographic approaches have previously been applied to visual methods in tourism research (Scarles 2010) as a means to communicate. Within my original conception, visual data recording, coupled with audio note-taking and supplemented by the biophysical data sources, provide a means by which the sensory experience can be revisited and revealed. The initial premise of the research was conventionally observational, looking outwards at research subjects and supplementing the observational data by the biophysical monitoring of the observer for comparative measurement purposes. In the process of engagement, and in immersion in and expansion of the theoretical dimensions of the work and of reflection on their implications, the research project was re-oriented. I realised that to understand I had to do more than observe and participate. Additionally, I had to let the participation change me. In effect I had not simply to allow for dissolution of the boundaries between the first and send persons of Agar's triad but to actively encourage their transgression: I had to become a mundane Munich cycle commuter. To understand this process for and in myself as a precursor to any communication to another required the cultivation of a degree of reflexivity.

Reflexivity and Location

At a most basic level; the problem of any research of this kind is one of translation. As Agar (2011: 39) most memorably puts it: "when one human tries to make sense out of a second human for the benefit of a third". Agar's concern in his paper is the necessary engagement of both emics and etics in understanding. From my stance however, the problem with which I was confronted were the emic

dimensions of the travelling subject. The translation problem is one of finding a means through which to convey the lifeworlds and practices of the everyday journeyer to a non-mobile audience not grounded in that particular time and space. Yet reflecting on this problem of translation in also became aware that a prerequisite of that process of translation was learning properly the language of the original. For this I had to understand and interrogate my own learning process, aware of the simultaneity of knowing and being..

Mauthner and Doucet (2003) extend the discussion of the situated researcher not simply to consider the degree of reflexivity applied to data analysis, but also "how more neglected factors such as the interpersonal and institutional contexts of research, as well as ontological and epistemological assumptions embedded within data analysis methods and how they are used, can deeply influence research processes and outcomes" (2003: 418). Applied to the current project I became aware that the context of my own engaged research presented me with a number of specific challenges to the preconceptions I brought with me. First, many of the conversations about my work with colleagues took place with scholars engaged in multi-species ethnography. As they deliberately extend their gaze to appreciate the agency of nonhuman biota, so too my understanding of context and space was challenged. While I have previously argued strongly for the agency of landscape in the formation of cycling experiences, the more forceful engagements of this perspective in the built environment forced me to reconsider not simply the sensory experiences as the (agentic) body absorbs and processes information coming in, but also the emotional responses provoked by those outer conditions. For example, weather conditions present not just physically changing circumstances but also inputs that shape emotional changes.

A second insight that Mauthner and Doucet's work provides is how the mechanics of the research process and one's own sense of self interact. The period of research undertaken was sufficiently long to allow for an absorption of everyday what initially had been new and unfamiliar into the mundane and unremarkable. Here, the auto-ethnographic processes are invaluable. There is always a danger that the reflexive dimensions of autoethnography, turning the gaze of the researcher in on oneself, can produce an endlessly recursive descent into solipsism. Nevertheless it slowly became clear that my existing perceptions of fluency in the body-language and performance of the cycle commuter were wholly inadequate for the realties encountered. While I have been riding bicycles for nearly forty years and specifically ridden the everyday journey to the same workplace for over a decade, I had neither the experience of intra-urban riding more broadly, nor the specific experience of riding in Munich where I was conducting the research.

Reviewing the various data sources (film, routing and riding behaviour) I realised how the experience of riding within the specific confines of Munich had altered the way I ride. The spaces and routes had subtly disciplined and reshaped my riding style. Even though I been involved in writing about the shaping and disciplining of the riding subject through discourses of physical infrastructure and broader sets of imagery (Bonham and Cox 2010), it was remarkable to use and understand these processes as my own experience. Field notes made in the early weeks, read back five months later, revealed not simply the details of journeys made, but demonstrated changing points of significance and also of my

understandings of place and space. What had been initially unfamiliar and strange – very “other” - was slowly being absorbed into a sense of home, and belonging. This familiarisation, or “homing”, can be read as a process also of normalising.

It is at this point that the limitations of a five sense model of conceptualising sensory data become most closely apparent. Our conventional western model of sensory perception based on sight sound touch smell and taste still provides a very useful way of understanding and analysing how we apprehend the external world. Its limitations are that it separates out those categories from the complex interweaving that creates the fabric of experience for example; one’s perception of warmth on a spring morning involves temperature perception interwoven with complex sensations in the five senses, and most likely also invokes emotional response as well. Couple this with the intra-muscular and bodily sensations that occur with a body in movement and one has an indication of the difficulty we have in articulating the sensory world, (even to ourselves, let alone to others). Hence the language of kineasthetics has been used to emphasise the importance of the embodied experience that is cycling. Yet all too easily, we can over-prioritise peak experiences, precisely because these are the moments that evoke memory and are the means by which we tend to make sense of the world.

David Bissel (2010) notes the long periods of quiescence, and seeks to restress the importance of passivity in mobility. This is not the same as stasis of course, which is another element entirely especially in humanly active mobility. It is rather, the absence of event, the lack of anything to note, bringing us back to the original focus on the mundane. However, even in the context of specific, peak-event bicycle riding, in which the memory of a single performance/ride becomes an identity creating marker, there are long periods of relative nothingness, of nothing happening. This is especially true for the long-distance cyclist, whose almost metronomic journey becomes at one level, an exercise in avoiding peak experience for the sake of continuity.

Sensory perception through the five senses is an exercise of receptivity. The body receives and processes information and almost simultaneously we interpret and “make sense” of these experiences. This process of making sense is one of response, of emotion. Both are vital elements of cognition: in full, our sensibility. Prior to any act of response of communication to another of these experiential dimensions of life we first find ways of grasping and interpreting events. At the risk of straying too far from the subject matter, we can note the manner in which others have sought to conceptualise sensory experiences and translate them into some form of notation. Wassily Kandisky, in his journey from representation to abstraction in painting, distinguished between three forms of output impressions, improvisations and composition. Respectively, these refer to work that are express the immediate impact of sensation, the feelings evoked of those sensations, with the final composition, a means of consciously responding and working something that is loyal to the sensate experience but in a form conscious of the necessity of finding a communicative language.

As researchers we face the same problem. We need to understand and find ways to annotate our sensations and our emotions and then to form these perceptions into a medium of coherent communication that can be understood by a third party. Tacit, pre-existent knowledge allows us as

human subjects to find socially acceptable ways of reacting to events, and even pre-judging responses. These can become a block to self-conscious experience, but they are also a necessary filter, reducing our awareness to that upon which we need to focus at any given moment. Separating the communicative act from the means by which we notate our experience and knowledge, allows us to move one step further towards recognition that the communicative outcome of academic research is more than simply a representational process. Spinney (2007) employs a deliberate writing of ethnographic fiction in his study of commuter cycling. Composition that remains true to the experiential immersion in daily life, but that seeks not to fragment it into excerpted quotations from "representative" samples allows the researcher/writer to better depict the realities of journeying.

Communicating the research findings – "senses matter"

We are left with a problem. What are the findings? How might the volume of data amassed be presented in any comprehensible means that does not do violence it or traduce it?

Simplest is to produce a suitable headline, as the one above, reducing the study to a single easily remembered "take-home" bullet point. More comprehensively, the results could be presented as a series of policy recommendations, observations made for policy-makers to enhance the quality of the commuting environment. Alternatively (or additionally) the mechanical means of data collection could be recommended with a user protocol to provide (as previously suggested) a set of assessment tools through which to better evaluate the delivery of infrastructure and other interventions into the cycling environment. Both of these are practical outcomes that communicate the findings of the project in meaningful ways to an audience craving realist and practical applications. They would present meaningful and achievable deliverables. Yet they do not intellectually satisfy the desire for a fuller explication of the process undertaken.

Another way could be to weave a story, to write a fictional narrative that evokes the sensate world. Such a move requires further collaboration within others better skilled in the craft of writing than the current author. As a possibility this has profound promise. In previous collaborations on travelling subjects (Cox and Ogden 2011), we confronted the problem of how to communicate the experiences of wheelchair- using travellers in world where to be so is to0 be mobility-impaired. Here we not only used fictions but reversed them, describing the alienation of leg-user travellers in a world built for wheelchairs. Although this strategy risks accusations of moving too far from the empirical findings of the original study, it has the capacity to create empathy in the reader or listener in ways that go beyond the merely representative description.

Most obviously, perhaps one might also, as originally intended in this paper, present an annotated and commentated video performance, in which like a director's commentary on a cinematic movie, the authorial expert voice might elucidate the images and point out those previously hidden or unobserved details. For a long while this was my favoured approach to presenting the outcomes of the study. However, what finally militated against this form of presentation was the very authority of the authorial voice. That the narrative would necessarily dictate what is and isn't important closes off the performative reading of visual material that is core to the audience experience of watching.

Finally, in considering the appropriate means of communicating the findings of a sensory ethnography I realised that the multiple options reflected the very different needs and expectations o different audiences. The translation process of ethnography requires one to write or make presentation in the language and means appropriate to the primary language and communication tools of those with whom one is communicating. Thus the anthropological learning from and studying with embarks the researcher on a journey whose stories can be told in many media. Perhaps ultimately whichever narrative mode is selected might prove its efficacy through contagion: that the audience for this communication of a research project might similarly begin to revisit their own journey practices.

As we reach our destination, the everyday physical journey has mapped itself to a cognitive journey through the intricacies of the investigation of mundane life. The logocentric world of the professional academic researcher can be allied to the visual and to other sources, in order to provide not a "better" or "truer" way of seeing but simply another way of seeing that allows a degree of empathy to be invoked.

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