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# **Sensory ethnography as a methodology for an experience design**

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## **Abstract**

Knowing about the social groups is very important within design practice, especially with the growing interest in social design. For this purpose, it is essential to know the experience of people, emphasizing the emotional dimension, which is fundamental in all human experience. Emotions are the mediators of bodies; with them relationships are built and consequently societies themselves. An ideal research methodology that emphasizes emotions and the multisensoriality of bodies is the ethnography of the senses. This article incorporates knowledge from the anthropology of experience, the anthropology of emotions and sensory ethnography.

## **Key Word**

**Sensory ethnography, experience design, experiential bodies, social design**

## **Introduction**

The trendiest methodologies within design repeat again and again the importance of "experience" on one hand and on the other the idea that "the human is the center of design" but sometimes it seems that these two aspects are not fully understood. Why is it important to talk about experience at a time when it seems just like a trend? This is very evident in advertising not only of services but

also of products: What they sell are not the products themselves but the experience they can provide. However, on many occasions the experiences they reflect can be completely alien to our reality. Design methodologies continue to focus on products/services immersed within a market and what is worse, a market that is not understood or a foreign market. They also completely forget that it is about a "design for humans", even if the opposite is enacted.

## **Body of the article**

I want to emphasize that we design for bodies, and I don't mean a set of bones, muscles, organs, something that is limited to ergonomics. Which bodies am I referring to? About bodies not only biological, but also cultural, social bodies, immersed in a context, that have a history. I would then like to talk about *experiential bodies*, because I consider that it is the most comprehensive way to approach the body. The body is the place where the experience of the world is actively live in.

I define the experiential body as "a field of sensory-affective perceptual experience of intersubjective, intercorporeal, therefore, collective relationships with the world that produces meaning and resistance" (García, 2021:34), a definition that comes from the work developed by Merleau-Ponty (1993), Csordas (1994), Citro (2009), Ramírez (2009), as well as Esteban (2013).

To address the experiential body, the contributions of the anthropology of experience<sup>22</sup>, the anthropology of emotions<sup>23</sup> and

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<sup>22</sup> Victor Turner (1986)

<sup>23</sup> Le Breton (1999), Lutz & White (1986)

**the ethnography of the senses<sup>24</sup> are fundamental because they deal with the sensory, affective and reflective dimensions of experience. They provide us with theoretical-methodological contributions that support that there is an embodied knowledge that transcends languages, is gestated with/from/in/through the sensitive, present in all human bodies and their experiences. For instance, there are activities such as trades in which it is difficult to explain their procedures in words. Such a case is that of the ceramist when she/he wants to teach her/his apprentice the processes of piece construction, no matter how much she/he highlights the different consistencies of drying clay and their names, the apprentice will not understand it, I mean, not with the body, until he feels the clay in his hands, its hardness, humidity, temperature, fragility, etc.**

**Bodies produce knowledge through body techniques (Mauss 1979) that involve gestures and movements and are expressed through the senses. In Western societies more emphasis has been placed on reason, and it has been argued that knowledge starts from thought, when in fact the first knowledge we have as bodies is gestated in perception. Bodies perceive the world and create that world. That is why it is necessary to be attentive to the multisensory world, always taking into account that the senses are built, they are not given by nature. This means that our perceptions as human beings are not universal but vary between cultures.**

**The perceptions that social groups have of their worlds in turn generate a series of emotions, which are also not universal: they are personal and social logics (Le Breton 2012). Emotions are**

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<sup>24</sup> *Sarah Pink [(2009)2015], Howes, D. (2005)*

understandable through processes of construction of meaning (Ramírez 2012) and are recognized as an intrinsic part of the body. In addition, emotions are mediators of bodies, circulate between bodies (Ahmed 2004) so it is convenient to consider them within the collective sphere, especially if we have in mind a social design. That is why I propose to attend to emotions from anthropology, since the discipline studies human groups, unlike psychology, which looks at emotions individually. It is worth mentioning here that design as a discipline has been interested in emotions but generally using them psychologically to influence the user, or rather, the consumer.

## **Sensory ethnography**

An ethnography is vital for the design of the experience since it aims to identify the meaning that people give to their experiences, to their being in the world.

The best way to get to know the bodies for which we are going to design is through contemporary ethnographies, especially an ethnography of the senses<sup>25</sup>. It is about thinking precisely about an ethnography that focuses in the senses, experience and its categories [Pink (2009)2015], attending to the knowledge produced within the bodies. In a sensory ethnography, the designer/ethnographer has to live in the context of people and be

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<sup>25</sup> *In disciplines like History and Anthropology the "sensory turn" began in the 80s. Since then, several authors have made research around it, like David Howes (2005). Sarah Pink brought the term "sensory ethnography" [(2009)2015]. In Latin America Silvia Citro and team have been working for almost four decades with ethnographies that attend to the senses and perception, proposing an ethnography "of and from" the bodies (Citro 2010).*

aware to everything they feel-think-say and do<sup>26</sup>. It involves participant observation, and going further, a "participant perception" [Pink (2009)2015], an ethnographic interview or in-depth interview, and another series of techniques that can be adapted in the context and vary according to specific projects.

In the words of Sarah Pink, "ethnography is a reflective and experiential process through which knowledge is produced" [Pink (2009) 2015:4]. Sensory ethnography goes towards deeper knowledge, that knowledge that resides in bodies but can be inaccessible with a mere observation or an interview. The "participant perception" proposed by Pink, therefore, advocates that the ethnographer use his whole body and sensoriality in the field as a source of reflection.

There is no step-by-step methodology, the designer/ethnographer will eventually have to make adaptations along the investigation.

However, the most important points are:

1. Being in the context. 2. Approach to it in a multisensory way, paying attention to the smells, colors, shapes, temperatures, etc. Sense the spaces but also the objects that inhabit them. 3. Do an in-depth interview with the people who are going to be part of your study, repairing in verbal and non-verbal language, body attitudes, all the gestures they may have. As for the verbal part, be aware of

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<sup>26</sup> *Hermeneutic circuit that "shows that the body-subjects respond to their circumstances in cognitive, emotional, discursive and actancial ways; in addition, it is a form of technical visualization that allows the understanding of the body in its being, and is proposed to evoke the descriptions and metaphors that are capable of transforming the experiences of the body in a pre-reflective mode of information, in a language as a digital mode of information and in action as the flat realization of subjective interaction "* (Ramírez 2016b: 116)

everything that is said but also of everything that is not said, that is, the silences, which often say more than a thousand words. Always have in mind that we are interested in knowing what is meaningful to people and why. Here the emotional dimension is fundamental. 4. The reflective and interpretative part is very important, remember to reflect with the body. Write down everything that the body perceives in relation to the people you are interviewing. Make a record (video, audio, drawings, photographs, other resources) of what people feel-do-say-think and above all, again, what it means to them. 4. Co-creation. How can you create something together with the people in your research? You can make a reflection in conjunction and propose ideas.

The experiences of the bodies that you study are a source of knowledge. Remove a colonialist attitude. It is vital to be aware that the role of the designer is not to influence the behaviors of individuals, rather the opposite: starting from their behaviors, which are knowledge, we can improve design practices, social design and emotional design. Knowing better how people eat, talk, dance, work, etc., we can design objects or spaces that actually can enhance those experiences which are meaningful for them.

## **Conclusion**

A very powerful tool for experience design is precisely the analysis of people's experiences, that is, the inquiry of experiential bodies, through an ethnography of the senses. Through the senses we can understand the being-in-the-world of the bodies, how they relate between each other, between their objects and their spaces.

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