



The Metropolis and Nose Life. Sensory Memories, Odors and Emotions

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Volume 24, Number 2, 2020

Simmel in Latinamerica

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1075567ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1075567ar>

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Publisher(s)

Georg Simmel Gesellschaft

ISSN

1616-2552 (print)

2512-1022 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Ramos, O. S. (2020). The Metropolis and Nose Life. Sensory Memories, Odors and Emotions. *Simmel Studies*, 24(2), 63–89. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1075567ar>

Article abstract

Following Simmel's legacy, the present paper shows how 'sensory memories' and emotions are related to the meanings attributed to the smells of human and non-human entities in the metropolis. Based on the findings of a larger research project on urban youth in Mexico City, the article emphasizes how even though the smell is one of the most undervalued senses; it has a significant presence, not only unpleasant but also pleasant memories. In other words, these findings show how 'sensory memory' permits a 'somatic work' (Vannini et al. 2012) on the sensations and emotions that have persisted in our sensitive bodies, in which smell is not necessarily a "dissociating sense" as Simmel believed, even in the metropolis.

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Abstract. Following Simmel's legacy, the present paper shows how 'sensory memories' and emotions are related to the meanings attributed to the smells of human and non-human entities in the metropolis. Based on the findings of a larger research project on urban youth in Mexico City, the article emphasizes how even though the smell is one of the most undervalued senses; it has a significant presence, not only unpleasant but also pleasant memories. In other words, these findings show how 'sensory memory' permits a 'somatic work' (Vannini et al. 2012) on the sensations and emotions that have persisted in our sensitive bodies, in which smell is not necessarily a "dissociating sense" as Simmel believed, even in the metropolis.

The present paper aims to show how 'sensory memories' (Seremetakis, 1993; Low, 2013; Huffs Schmid, 2013; Pink, 2015) and emotions are related to the meanings attributed to the smells of human and non-human entities in the metropolis. I attempt to outline the scope of Georg Simmel's Sociology of the senses, specifically the Sociology of smell, through a contemporary review (Vannini, et al. 2012; Low, 2013; Sabido Ramos, 2017). Based on the findings of a larger research project on urban youth in Mexico City, the article emphasizes how, despite the fact that smell is one of the most undervalued senses (Classen, 1997; Howes, 2014), even from the point of view of the actors, in their memories of situations of pleasure and displeasure in major cities, multiple olfactory references have a significant presence. In other words, these findings show how 'sensory memory' (Seremetakis, 1993) permits a 'somatic work' (Vannini, et al. 2012) on the sensations and emotions that have persisted in our sensitive bodies, in which smell

is not necessarily a “dissociating sense” as Simmel believed, even in the metropolis. That’s why, as a nod to Simmel’s essay (1950), I have titled this paper ‘The Metropolis and Nose Life’ because I want to show the sociological relevance of smell and sensory memories in a major city like Mexico City.

Simmel’s contributions to Sociology of Smell

In his discussion of a “Sociology of the senses”, Simmel (2009: 570-583) anticipates certain aspects that will be recovered and refined by various authors who have explored the Sociology of smell in recent times (Synnott, 1991; Largey and Watson, 2006; Low, 2009, 2013; Waskul, *et al.* 2009). First, the Berlin sociologist points out how it is possible to establish a certain type of social relations from smells and the meaning we attribute to them. For example, if a person has an unpleasant odor, this can lead us to exclude or reject them. At the same time, certain relationships ‘frame’ the possible meanings we may attribute to a scent, since we share sensory expectations about the smell a certain category of people should have, for example, how a man or a woman, a person who lives on the streets or a baker should smell. In recent years, several research projects have related the issue of categorization to the odors attributed to people (Classen, 1997; Synnott, 1991; Low, 2009; Mata-Codesal, 2018).

Second, for Simmel, sensory experiences are related to affective states. The sensory impressions we perceive from other people’s bodies, objects, places or a mixture of them, can elicit emotions in us, as well as various affective states. For example, the smell of family meals can be associated with happiness and can persist as nostalgia over time. Hence, as Classen, Howes and Synnott point out: “The perception of smell, thus, consists not only of the sensation of the odors themselves, but of the experiences and emotions associated with them” (1994: 2). Several contemporary authors have explored the relationship between smells and emotions (Waskul, Vannini and Wilson, 2009; Low, 2013; Peláez, 2016; Verbeek and Campen, 2013).

Third, for Simmel, other activities involving the body and its feelings imply forms of ritualization in which sensory molding takes place. In this respect, it is no coincidence that the essay on the “Sociology of meal” (Simmel, 1997) has been considered another significant reference in the line of sensory research (Vannini *et al.*, 2012; De la Fuente, 2007). In the act of eating, the body learns the use of certain artifacts, chromatic sensitivities conventionally associated with food, gestural ritualization such as manners, and even the regulation of physiological needs in accordance with mealtimes (Simmel, 1997). De la Fuente posits how we find in Simmel’s oeuvre an “aestheticization of everyday life” (2007: 95) that relates objects, drinks and food. Although Simmel does not refer to smells in this particular text, several authors highlight the dimension of the ‘aesthetics of food’ that implies a “sensual-sensory experience” associated with smells, aromas, emotions, colors and textures (Seremetakis, 1993; Sutton, 2001; Ayora, 2017: 224), since food is “a total sensory object” (Le Breton, 2007: 257).

Fourth, although Simmel’s oeuvre does not contain references to the relationship between cities and smell, for this author it is important to consider how a repulsion for bodily contact with others prevails in major cities (Simmel, 2009: 232). Thus, for Simmel, “the sense of smell is the dissociating sense” (Simmel, 2009: 579). In modern conditions of coexistence, Simmel notes that:

[...] the bringing together of the many never grants it any such attractions as that situation can unfold them for the other senses, at least under certain conditions: indeed, in general, such interferences of the sense of smell will increase in a direct quantitative relation of the mass in whose midst they affect us (Simmel, 2009: 579).

Accordingly, for Simmel, perfume is the correlate of ornament and jewelry, since its use is intended to please others. As we shall see later, other authors have explored the relationship between smells and cities more recently, as well as the world of the consumption and commercialization of smells (Howes and Classen,

2014; Synnott, 1991; Hirsch, 2006). For example, according to Alan Hirsch, who interviewed 1,000 shoppers in 1991 in Chicago, people who were born before 1930 in “less urbanized and industrialized times,” mentioned natural odors as pine or horses associated with their memories of childhood. While people who were born after 1930, mentioned “food and artificial odors such as plastic scented markers, airplane fuel, Vaporub and Play-Doh as reminiscent of their childhood” (2006: 188).

Studies on smell, odors and scents are becoming increasingly important in the context of sensory studies (Bull, *et al.* 2006; Howes, 2014). As Drobnik notes, whereas it was once a sense in the lowest echelon of the sensory hierarchy in the West, we are now witnessing an “olfatocentrism” (2006: 3). Beyond Simmel’s contributions, various perspectives have incorporated new items linked to a Sociology of smell and odors. For example, one line of reflection has associated odors with the *self* and its presentation. Thus, for example, Largey and Watson point out the relationship between odors and moral status, as well as their handling in the presentation of the self (2006). In a similar vein, Kelvin Low has pointed out how the smell is a ‘symbol of the self’ in that it is related to the projection and presentation of the self (Low, 2009: 49). The need to consider the olfactory norms learned, which involve social class, ethnicity and gender, among others, (Synnott, 1991; Low, 2009; 2013) has also been highlighted.

Moreover, emphasis has been placed on the way our body experiences sensuality broadly rather than through the “five senses” traditionally understood (Vannini, *et al.* 2012: 6). This underscores the way the senses are interconnected to the body and their movements in place located in space and time. This is where I consider that beyond Simmel, it is important to incorporate an approach that highlights the materiality of the body, for example, the physical condition of the person, including both their health and age (Henshaw, 2014; McLean, 2019; Waskul, *et al.* 2009; Verbeek and Campen, 2013). The analysis should also include the relationship between the act of smelling and non-human entities,

such as the thermoperceptive conditions of the environment (whether it is morning, afternoon or night, and whether it is raining, hot or cold) (Henshaw, 2014; Mc Lean, 2019). As Nadia Seremetakis says: “For smells have seasons and each season smells” (1993: 6). It should also consider the type of construction of houses and buildings and the way air does or does not circulate (Henshaw, 2014; McLean, 2019) as well as the position of the body in space and its relationship with certain artifacts that inhibit or facilitate the circulation of odors (Latour, 2004; Henshaw, 2014).

Recent research in Sociology of smell and scents, explores the meanings attributed to the odors emanating from the bodies of other people, whether intimate or anonymous, in both public and private spaces (Low, 2013; Tovar, 2017; Mata-Codesal, 2018; López, 2002; Peláez, 2016; Sabido Ramos and García Andrade, 2017; Serna, 2019). Also of interest are the studies associating smell and odors with certain places in urban space, air and pollution (López, 2002; Drobnick, 2006; Porteous, 2006; Henshaw, 2014; Tovar, 2017; Low and Fishman, 2018; Serna, 2019).¹ In the specific case of cities, Henshaw proposes the notion of ‘urban smellscape’ (Drobnick, 2006; Henshaw, 2014), because a city can be distinguished by the smells of its markets, parks, garbage dumps, main thoroughfares, public toilets, stationers, bakeries and industrial areas. Smells reflect specific activities and areas where people are in relation to others. Within the framework of sensory studies and explicitly, the sociological research of smell, Simmel’s intuitions have been affirmed. As we have seen, the research assumptions that I have summarized shows a simmelian reasoning, that is, that the meaning attributed to smells refers to social relationships and ways of coexisting with others. It is in that sense that I aim to recover the scope of his legacy.

¹ A key category in these lines of research is *toposmia* (place + smell) (Drobnick, 2006: 85), which has been used to examine the relationship between places and smells

Emotions, sensory memory and smells

Simmel states that when we perceive the bodies of other people in the same space through the senses, we make both sensory, emotional and cognitive associations. For example, a person may smell unpleasant, and therefore we repel her, but from this, we can also infer that they have gone many days without bathing or changing their clothes. Thus feeling, emotion, and cognition mutually reinforce each other. However, for Simmel: “Vis-à-vis nonhuman objects, both of these tend to lie far apart” (Simmel, 2009: 570). When we perceive the “smell of a rose,” we are guided by the feelings it elicits, such as the affective meaning it has for us when it is associated with the memory of a courtship ritual. But when our aim is to know the object, we ask ourselves other questions such as why this rose is here, what type of rose it is, where it was bought and so on.

Thus, for Simmel, when it comes to the mutual perception of people through the senses, it is more difficult to make these separations than when objects are involved. But beyond Simmel, what would happen if non-human objects and entities involved in the mutual perception of bodies acquired meaning precisely because of the type of relationship and situation in which they circulated? For example, a young university student remarked:

When my grandmother died, I was 17 and I remember the flowers they took to her funeral, burial and wake. They still remind me of that and whenever I smell them, I feel sad. (C033, Woman).

For this young woman, flowers and their scent are associated with a painful event related to the loss of an emotional bond. Among other emotions, this olfactory memory produces sadness. There is therefore an exchange of effects between the bonds involved and loss, the flowers, their scent and significance and the memories elicited by smelling them again. The association between smell, memory and emotions is extremely powerful, whether it

involves human or non-human entities: “More than any other sensations, odors are particularly effective in inducing a vivid recall of an entire scene or episode from the past. A special odor may revive a clear image of the past and, more important, the enhanced emotional state associated with that image.” (Hirsch, 2006: 187).

The association between smell and memory has been a topic of great interest for those interested in odor research, since it also involves the possible link with emotions. The “sensory memory” category forms part of the field of sensory studies, resulting from the work of the anthropologist of the senses Nadia Seremetakis who conducted research in the Peloponnese region of southern Greece to collect “sensory and perceptive constructs” in traditional societies in the 1990s (Seremetakis, 1993; Classen, 1997: 407, Sutton, 2001: 15). For Seremetakis: “Commensality can be define as the exchange of sensory memories and emotions, and of the substances and objects incardinating remembrance and feelings.” (1993: 14).

Subsequently, David Sutton analyzed how the inhabitants of the Greek islands of Kalymnos constructed a historical consciousness based on how they associate memories with food in the late 1990s. For example, residents referred to historical events such as the German occupation during World War II, linked to moments such as “eating a bag of peaches” (Sutton, 2001: 2). For Sutton, it is useful to consider how, from the point of view of the hierarchy of the senses in the West - which has classified taste and smell as the most “primitive” senses - the fact that food should be associated with a cognitive process such as memory is almost inconceivable: “Food is not generally seen as conducive to thought”. (Sutton, 2001: 4). According to Sutton, anthropology has attempted to challenge that association within the framework of the criticism of visualism and its centrality in cognitive processes. By considering the act of eating as an embodied practice, Sutton is also able to substantiate the power of food memory, since it is due to synesthesia, in other words, to the synthesis and overlapping of experiences from various sensory registers, such as taste, smell and hearing (Sutton, 2001: 17) set in motion by the act of eating.

As Le Breton (2017) and Ayora (2017) note, eating and drinking involve a vast world of sensory experiences and memories (Sutton, 2001). It is therefore no coincidence that one of the literary referents in sensory studies is the “madeleine incident” in the novel *In Search of Lost Time* by Marcel Proust (Howes, Classen and Synnott, 1994: 88; Sutton, 2001; Waskul, *et al.* 2009; Verbeek, C and Campen, 2013, Low, 2013: 292; Jaquet, 2016). In one scene, the protagonist Marcel tastes a teaspoon of tea in which he has dipped a madeleine, a sensory experience that elicits vivid memories of his childhood. Taking up this literary metaphor, Verbeek and Campen explore how olfactory memory is one of the most powerful, since it elicits moods, gestures and emotions other types of stimuli (whether visual or auditory) fail to achieve (Verbeek and Campen, 2013: 139). For the authors, olfactory memory is an involuntary one, resulting from certain sensory stimuli that provoke emotions and even aesthetic experiences (Verbeek and Campen, 2013: 135). This research also explains how these findings have even had medical applications in elderly patients with cognitive impairment problems. This shows how smelling implies knowing: by recollecting through certain smells, we can associate ideas, feelings and emotions.²

In another research project involving the sociology of the senses, Waskul, Vannini and Wilson identify the relationship between olfactory perception, memory, nostalgia and *self* (2009: 5-22). For these authors, natural scientists reduce the phenomenon of explanation between olfactory perception, memory and emotions by pointing out that this is due to the direct connection between olfactory receptors and the limbic region of the brain (where memories and emotions are stored) (Waskul, *et al.* 2009: 9). For sociologists, ignoring the social context that makes this possible creates a blind spot related to the attribution of significance. From

² In a recent ethnographic research carried out in a medical emergency hospital, a patient who had been in an unconscious state said that he recognized his doctor: “for the smell of his lotion and thanked him for having tried with sponge baths that, since your state of gravity, remember as one of the most rewarding moments.” (Payá and Bracamonte, 2019: 291-292)

their perspective, the reduction of physiological and neurological mechanisms overlooks the socialization of olfactory sensations, the learning of certain olfactory norms and the attributions of meaning to certain socially framed aromas (Waskul, *et al.* 2009: 9).

Along these lines, the sociological scopes regarding how the relationship between smells, memory and emotions shapes the narrative of the self and its relationships with others, has been highlighted by Kelvin Low (2013: 688-708). Through a research project in which he identifies ‘olfactive frames of remembering’, Low distinguishes how memories of childhood, family and peer relationships and memories of difficult times constitute frames (in the Goffmanian sense), from which actors relate their memories, emotions and ways of signifying their self in relation to others (Low, 2013).

In another line of research, Anne Huffschmid takes up “sensory memory” as a resource for explaining the materiality of the terror experienced during the dictatorship in Argentina, from the point of view of the victims. For the author, many of the survivors recall their confinement and torture in clandestine centers in bodily and sensory terms. In recent times, oral trials have shown that, “There are also bodily, sound, tactile and olfactory memories” (Huffschmind, 2013: 122). In this respect, we can say that sensory memory also makes it possible to register suffering and pain, as well as their social and material conditions of possibility.

In sociological terms, the notion of sensory memory allows us to concur with Bourdieu that the body is a reminder (1999: 187). It is no accident that Bernard Lahire uses Proust’s “madeleine incident” to point out how:

Through the famous episode of the softened madeleine, dipped in tea, we achieve the paradigm of that involuntary memory: a smell, a taste suddenly triggers the memory of past analogous sensations or elicits those sensations bringing to mind «all of Combray», in the whole context of the era to which these sensations are inextricably linked (Lahire, 2004: 107).

In other words, sensory memory allows us to visualize how certain sensory dispositions have been incorporated and registered in the body and its senses in a conscious and sometimes unconscious way and can be revived when a new situation activates them. If a particular decor, object, place, landscape or auditory, gustatory or olfactory stimulation can trigger a memory and cause “a great emotion” (Lahire, 2004: 106), we are in the presence of kind of memory that has unwittingly arisen in the actor’s embodied awareness. Sensory memory allows us to appreciate the fact that although the body is a reminder, in the Bourdian sense, this does not refer to a mechanical repetition of the past, but rather to a reflexive reworking by individuals or, like Vannini, Waskul and Gottschalk pointed out, it is a kind of “sensual reflexivity” (2012: 18).

From my perspective, sensory memory allows us to explore how the social is embodied and remains dormant until a certain situation encourages its reactivation. Not in an identical way to the first experience, but rather one that makes it possible to highlight what the significant register of the latter was like from the present moment in which it is recalled. In short, sensory memory is also a methodological resource, since it allows the recording of narratives that evoke sensations, emotions and feelings that in some way affected the body and are associated with certain places, artifacts, people and non-human entities that persist beyond a particular interaction. In this case I am interested in showing how our experience in large cities is associated with the sensory memory of smells.

Methodological approach

Regarding the methodological strategy of this first part of the research, I applied a questionnaire to 108 urban youths (65 women and 43 men) enrolled in a bachelor’s degree program in sociology at

a public university (UAM-A)³ in Mexico City in 2017. A brief sociodemographic survey was conducted considering age, sex, academic trajectory, parents' educational attainment and goods and services. The questionnaire had two sections with closed, stratified and open questions. In the first section, they were asked to name the bodily senses they knew and choose a sense to keep in case they had to do without the others and to provide a brief explanation of why they had made this choice. They were also asked to write down which sense they would choose to lose and give the reasons for their choice.

In the second section, they were asked to recount a pleasant and an unpleasant situation and to say how old they had been when this had happened (this indicator was significant for incorporating temporality), which senses had been involved, which people had taken part and where it had happened. For the specific analysis of smell, open responses were coded considering the senses involved, emphasizing those in which the sense of smell intervened and stating whether the situations were associated with human or non-human entities or a combination of both; whether they were intimate relationships (with family, classmates, friends, boyfriends) or anonymous (passersbys, pedestrians, sellers, drivers, motorists); and which affective states the situation was associated with, if it was in a private or public space; and where it took place.

Answers were obtained from 65 women accounting for 60% of the total respondents and 43 men, equivalent to 40%, the average age being 23. Regarding the profile of the population, we can say that they are urban youth (88% have spent most of their lives in the city). The majority have studied at public schools and nearly four out of every ten students (37%) work as well as study. They are young people who fit the profile of most public university students, particularly those at the UAM (De Garay, Miller, and Montoya, 2016). In other words, they are middle-class, urban youth.

³ Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Campus Azcapotzalco.

Nearly half the respondents (48%) chose smell in the event they would have to do without one of their senses. For both women (47%) and men (49%), the main reason is associated with the fact that they do not find the sense of smell very useful compared to other senses. Although the identification of the senses refers to the “classical senses”, ninety-one students, in other words, 84% (35 men and 56 women) referred to pleasant experiences in which more than one sense was involved. Even more important is that fact that nearly half the respondents (48%) chose smell in the event they would have to do without one of their senses. Forty-five students, in other words, 41% (19 men and 25 women) associated their pleasant experiences with various senses, including the sense of smell and specifically, certain food smells, aromas, essences and perfumes. At the same time, an identical percentage, 41% (17 men and 28 women) associated their unpleasant experiences with the sense of smell.

In the case of women, thirty-one associated their pleasant experiences with more than one sense although not with smell. However, 25 women did relate their pleasant experiences to the sense of smell and scents, among other senses. Five of the women associated these experiences with human entities; seven with non-human entities and 12 with both human and non-human entities⁴. Human entities were mostly relatives, friends and boyfriends, whereas the main non-human entities include food, marijuana, climate, rivers, vineyards, sea and beach, and a combination of entities considering interactive situations such as family meals, outdoor activities with significant others and cultural activities. These affective states were satisfaction, joy, well-being, fun, nostalgia, pleasure, relaxation and confidence (TABLE 1).

⁴ One case does not apply.

Table 1

Pleasant situations for women associated with smell related to human and non-human entities			
Women	Entities	References	Affective states
5	Human	Friends, partners/steady girl/boyfriend, relatives	Satisfaction Happiness
7	Non-human	Food, marijuana, climate, rivers, vineyards, sea, beach, religious images (transgression)	Well-being Fun Nostalgia Pleasure
12	Human and non-human	Family, partner and/or friends associated with a) food (family meals) b) open-air spaces such as nature reserves, forests and beaches, (outings, trips, visits) c) Concerts and cultural activities	Relaxation Confidence
1	Not applicable		
Total: 25			

Source: Compiled by the author.

In the case of men, 24 associated their pleasant experiences with more than one sense but did not link them to smell. However, 19 men did associate their pleasant experiences with smell, among other senses. Seven of the men associated these experiences with human entities, four with non-human entities and 12 with both human and non-human entities. It is striking that the seven men who associated their pleasant experiences with human entities

linked them exclusively to intimate experiences and contacts, from a kiss to sexual contact with their partners. The non-human entities mentioned were food, beach, sea, and designed spaces such as the temazcal, a pre-Hispanic, low heat sweat lodge. Pleasurable situations in which a combination of entities was involved included meals with family or friends and outdoor physical activities or those related to sports such as playing football and learning to ride a bicycle. Affective states included satisfaction, joy, enjoyment, pleasure, dopamine and sexual pleasure (TABLE 2).

Table 2

Pleasant situations for men associated with smell related to human and non-human entities			
Men	Entities	References	Affective states
7	Human	Girlfriends, partners (sexual, sentimental)	Satisfaction Happiness Enjoyment Dopamine Pleasure Sexual pleasure
4	Non-human	Temazcal, animals, food, beach	
8	Human and non-human	Family, partner and/or friends related to: a) food (family meals) b) physical activities such as learning how to ride a bicycle, playing football	
Total: 19			

Source: Compiled by the author.

The importance of associating certain pleasurable situations with outdoor spaces highlights the sensory nature of the landscape, which is usually always associated with exclusively visual characteristics (Simmel, 2007). Hence the importance of the term *smellscape*, (Porteous, 2006), which refers to the way we associate smells with certain places and even times such as changing seasons. We do not only see a landscape, we can walk, smell and breathe (it) and it “becomes part of our bodies” (Henshaw, 2014: 10), as one of the women students remarks:

It was a family outing to a lake. I was about six years old and it was the first time I had visited that place. I thought it was beautiful because it was surrounded by trees. I even enjoyed the journey there, because everything I saw seemed beautiful. There was a smell of trees and grass I still like today. I (enjoyed) the family meal, and spending the whole afternoon playing with my brothers and sisters. (C062, Woman).

As for displeasure, 34 women related their unpleasant experiences to more than one sense but did not link them to smell. However, 28 women did associate their unpleasant experiences with smell, among other senses. Seven of the women associated these experiences with human entities, 14 with non-human entities and 12 with both human and non-human entities. The human entities involved were passersby and public transport passengers, while the non-human referents were dead animals, drains, garbage and public toilets. The combination of entities involved rotting food, being forced to eat certain foods, ‘the smell of hospitals’ and parties. The affective states with which these situations were associated included disgust, displeasure, repulsion, nostalgia, horror, suffering, fear and sadness (TABLE 3).

Table 3

Disagreeable situations in women associated with smell related to human and non-human entities			
Women	Entities	References	Affective states
7	Human	Anonymous (passers-by and passengers, loss of relatives)	Disgust Asphyxia Displeasure
14	Non-human	Dead animals, Street smells, drains, garbage, public toilets.	Horror Nostalgia Repulsion
6	Human and non-human	Family, friends, related to: a) Food (food that has spoiled, being forced to eat something) b) Hospitals c) Parties (alcohol)	Suffering Fear Sadness
1	Not applicable		
Total: 28			

Source: Compiled by the author.

In the case of unpleasant situations in men, 25 associated their pleasant experiences with more than one sense but did not link them to the sense of smell. However, 17 men did associate their pleasant experiences with smell, among other senses. Five of the men associated these experiences with human entities, four with non-human entities and five with both human and non-human entities. References to human entities were associated with anonymous people or personal health conditions such as a Non-human entities were associated with the street, pollution, drains and dead animals. The combination of entities involved hospitals and

city events such as people being run over. Affective states included disgust, nausea, anguish, horror and sadness. (TABLE 4).

Table 4

Unpleasant situations in men associated with smell related to human and non-human entities			
Men	Entities	References	Affective states
5	Human	Anonymous, themselves (excrement, migraine)	Disgust Anguish
7	Non-human	Street, pollution, drains, dead animals	Displeasure Horror
5	Human and non-human	Family and anonymous people: a) Hospitals (loss of relatives) b) People being run over	Nausea Sadness
Total: 17			

Source: Compiled by the author.

Sensual ways of being with others: the life of the nose in the metropolis

As we have previously indicated, although Simmel did not develop reflections on smell in large cities, he did show how the processes of individualization typical of modernity make distance and “fear of contact” significant references for anonymous coexistence. For Simmel, various historical processes have contributed to the exacerbation of sensitivity, which has made us more sensitive to close distances, smell being one of the most

severely affected senses. It is no coincidence that Simmel identified “hyperesthesia” (Simmel 2004: 480), understood as extreme sensitivity to objects and people, hence the need to establish one’s distance if they cause displeasure, which we can apply to unpleasant smells in the way a student pointed out: ... “the most horrific experience, the one we live every day, we can smell and if we do so, it is only in the presence of another stranger, smell is a pedantic sense” (C057: Man).

In public transport in large cities, what Simmel meant by calling smell the ‘dissociating sense’ becomes clearer (Simmel, 2009: 579). As one student notes, “I think the most unpleasant thing [is] smelling people on public transport; it really bothers me and it also makes me uncomfortable, it makes me want to vomit and sometimes it even makes me angry”. (C065, Woman). As one can see, certain smells in the public space produce repulsion and negative affective states. Besides, Simmel considered that the offenses to the sense of smell would increase proportionally to the mass in which we find ourselves (Simmel, 2009: 579). At certain times and in certain subway stations, the chances of experiencing unpleasant situations that are not only olfactive but also tactile significantly increase, as one student notes:

When you use public transport during the peak hour (12:00) in the Indios Verdes metro station. The surroundings are dirty, and the smell is unpleasant because of the different PHs. As for touch, your body comes into contact with various types of bodies. (C058, Woman).

References to dirt and even to ‘physiological’ factors such as the PH that explain its cause, become a means of explaining these unpleasant experiences, because, as Simmel pointed out, hygiene and cleanliness concerns are both a cause and effect of this historical sensitivity towards certain smells (Simmel, 2009: 578). Likewise, everything that escapes the olfactory norm (Low, 2009) can be classified as good or bad in moral terms. Thus, a bad smell can elicit distrust and extreme emotions such as disgust:

As I was on my way to university, recently, when I was 20 years old, a horrible woman got into the collective taxi and unfortunately, she sat next to me. It was unpleasant because she smelled terrible and she looked suspicious. It made me feel sick. (C006, Woman).

Displeasure and disgust in large cities are not only caused by the unpleasant odor of other people, but are also related to certain places, such as subway stations and subway cars:

When it smells like dirt and sweat in the subway. I was 14 when I got on the subway and when I got into the car, it smelled awful, like a dirty toilet. Those smells and sensations caused a very strong impression in me and stayed in my memories for a long time. (C075, Woman).

At the same time, unpleasant smells can also be associated with experiences that leave a strong impression and even horror, such as accidents and the smell of death and/or blood mentioned by some of the students: When I was 20, I went past a place where someone had been run over. You could see body parts scattered everywhere and it smelled like death as I rushed to get out of there” (C084, Man). Another young woman told us:

I was 21 when I was riding the metrobus to transfer to line 6, when suddenly it ran over a little girl, and what I saw was very unpleasant as was the smell of blood I perceived. Seeing it just when it happened was awful and to be honest, I had never smelled such a strong smell of blood as I did then. (C080, Woman).

In this case, smells also function as negative markers that remain in the memory which, as Huffsichmid (2013) posited, record and materialize extreme negative experiences from the point of view of the actor. Another of the non-human entities with which individuals experience displeasure is pollution: “At this age, being stuck in traffic anywhere in Mexico City is unpleasant (because of) the sound of cars and the smell of the fumes they emit” (C061, Man). This is

not a minor fact if we consider the effects of air pollution on collective health in large cities. In addition, this is a case where smell is connected to all the other senses. Henshaw points out how in megacities such as Mexico City, smog (the combination of smoke and fog) hampers visibility (2014: 13). Also, as Sergio López observes, regarding air, “Its absence in blood tissue is the source of multiple health problems ranging from premature aging, to death due to respiratory arrest” (López, 2002: 28).

Along the same lines as Simmel regarding his reflections on medicine, we can say that health problems are not individual but collective (1969: 332) and imply certain socio-structural conditions of possibility. That is why unpleasant situations are framed in specific socio-structural coordinates:

I was 22 and doing field work in the municipality of Nezahualcóyotl on the border with Chimalhuacán where there is nothing but a lot of garbage, railway lines and a dirty water canal, which smells awful. Just looking at the place makes you feel unsafe and want to leave because of the bad smell. (C031, Woman).

The fact that certain sensory landscapes in conurbation areas are associated with unsanitary conditions, insecurity and abandonment is linked to a combination of problems that go beyond individual experience and interactive context. It is here that the scope of Simmelian sociology intervenes, in that it invites us to think about what types of relationship underlie these olfactory experiences. Air and pollution as non-human entities become a social problem, and even, through the regulations and interventions concerning them, it is possible to identify the “links with national economic and political history” (López, 2002: 80) associated with the urban policies and legal relations surrounding air quality. At the same time, the possibility of smelling certain types of air rather than others is not only related to urban policies, but also to social inequality. As López notes, “The constant reference to the air that you smell and that defines forms of relationship in the home or a body that does not

bathe because it has no services or a house that does not have toilets, only underscores social differences” (2002: 18).

However, experiences of pleasure associated with the smells of human and non-human entities also emerged. For example, situations of pleasure related to food that involved not only the attribution of meanings associated with pleasure and enjoyment regarding food and the sensory exchange with them, but also anonymous interaction frames located on the street and sidewalks, as one student recounts:

It may sound bizarre, but one of my most pleasurable moments is eating my favorite pastry (a cream bun). I have a perfect image of the only place where they sold it. A lady with a small table and a parasol on the sidewalk outside a shop. This pastry smells delicious. It has a spongy, porous texture. When I put it in my mouth, I experience a wonderful combination of smells, textures and flavors. I think eating pastry involves all my senses. (C012, Woman).

It is striking how this reply would be a functional equivalent of the “Proustian madeleine”, since sensory recreation through language makes one consciously aware of olfactory, gustatory and tactile memory in a specific place and context. As other research has shown (Hirsch, 2006; Waskul, *et al.* 2009; Low, 2013), the memory of certain odors associated with significant references, as well as the relationship with nostalgia and childhood, appears repeatedly in the records of sensory memory. Another student told us how:

Smell brings back memories of my childhood and my grandfather’s forge. I was seven at the time and he taught me how to ride a bike. Smell and touch were important pillars for that moment. Every time I smell metal from somewhere I remember the sound of the hammers on the anvil, the smell of the hearth, how cold it was when you touched it, the heat of the forge when you got close to it, feeling the impact of the sparks caused by the emery, that sudden heat, the damp smell when the metal cooled. (C025, Man).

The smell of the grandfather's trade is related to significant moments, even kinesthetic ones such as the man's memory of him teaching him to ride a bike. Another student also shared one of his memories associated with childhood, food and smells:

A situation that affected me in a positive way happened a few years ago. I was between 23 and 25 years old at my grandmother's house when the ice cream truck horn tooted. My grandfather took a container and gave me thirty pesos to buy some *lalitas*. I clearly remember the vivid colors and the sound of the horn, the feel of the bowl, even the smell when we reopened the *torpecito*. Oddly enough, I do not really remember the taste of the ice-cream, I remember its color-yellow, green, brown and other colors. But if I had to describe the taste, I would say it tasted of happiness. (Man COO7).

In this case, various senses contributed to the sensation of pleasure, both auditory, visual, tactile, gustatory and olfactory framed in links with significant others such as their grandparents in the public space such as the street. The feeling was enhanced by artifacts such as the horn of the vehicle transporting the ice cream and the container, which activated other senses associated with both the smell and taste of the food. It is also important how the association of flavor refers to the emotion of happiness.

Conclusions

The main purpose of this paper has been to outline the scope of Georg Simmel's Sociology of the senses, specifically the Sociology of smell. In attempting to flesh out these ideas, this paper seeks to explore how the sensory memories related to smells are associated with situations of pleasure and displeasure in a metropolis like Mexico City. On the other hand, it has posited how sensory memory has a methodological effect, since it solves difficulties in researching the sensory field. On the basis of sensory memory, it is possible to capture the type of somatic work (Vannini, *et al.* 2012) and emotional work that entails making sense of sensations by

associating them with affective states, conveying them and thus, realizing what they mean from the point of view of the actor. By activating strategies that reactivate sensory memory, it is possible to relate reflexive processes associated to states we usually normalize because they are embedded in the most intimate part of our bodies as sensory arrangements.

Although the empirical references analyzed are not intended to be representative, they allow us to identify major trends related to a specific profile of informants, urban young men and women at a public university in Mexico City. One of most important findings was the lack of fit between the low value placed on the sense of smell and its significant presence in not only unpleasant but also pleasant memories. Another was the fact that young people recover the sense of smell in a multisensory sense, in other words, they associate it with the other senses and the relationship between them. It also shows how the meaning attributed to smells and aromas is framed in social situations and bonds in such a way that the affective dimension is always present.

Moreover, the sense of smell and odors are related to memories of other people and places, as well as non-human entities, which allows us to think on a material level that co-constitutes our sensitivity. This first review also invites us to think about how smells connect us to other entities beyond interaction, such as the chemical industry, environmental policies and even the ecological debacle that produces “extraordinary” degrees of air pollution in cities such as ours.

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