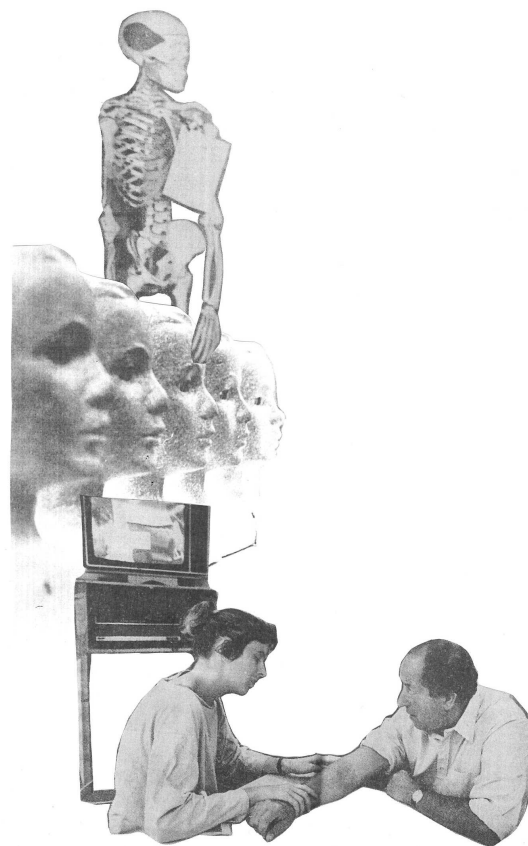


# How to disrupt our field habits with sensory probes

Anna Harris (Maastricht University, The Netherlands), based on experiments conducted with Rachel Vaden Allison, John Nott and Andrea Wojcik

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Activiti 22a #2 Anna 05.04.18

Image 1: Results of a probe activity (22a, 5<sup>th</sup> October 2018): Make a collage from field site images (Anna Harris)

## Summary

Sensory probes are devices designed to deliberately disrupt ethnographers' habits and cultivate new ways of noticing in the field. They bear witness to the fact that ethnographers often do fieldwork out of habit, using improvised practices developed over time and implicitly from others. Sensory probes help to not to take too much for granted in fieldwork, to develop the intricate muscles of our sideways glances and avoid the traps of complacency. It is an ethnographic device that is useful not only for the individual fieldworker but can also help align the sensibility of a team of ethnographers in a common project. Collaborative ethnographic projects are becoming increasingly common and demand creative approaches to team work. The sensory probe is a seemingly simple yet potentially

powerful device for opening up new kind of exchange and insight in team projects. Ultimately the sensory probe acts *as a disruptive prompt for discontinuity* and *elicits a form of education*, through both the crafting and following of instruction, for sensing ethnographers.

## File card

**Fieldwork device:** Sensory probes.

**Mode of enquiry:** Cultivated noticing of, through disruption, sensory habits and details of fieldwork.

**Ideal for:** team and collaborative ethnographic projects.

## Based on the following experiments:

**Geographical locations:** Maastricht, the Netherlands (50.8514° N, 5.6910° E), Budapest, Hungary (47.4979° N, 19.0402° E) and Tamale, Ghana (9.4034° N, 0.8424° W).

**Duration:** September 2017- August 2019.

**Collaborators and co-probers:** Rachel Vaden Allison, Andrea Wojcik and John Nott, participants of the Dutch STS Graduate School (WTMC, year 2018).

**Resources:** Fieldwork funded by the European Research Council (ERC), creative inspiration from artists and others (see Sources), IKEA assemblage experience, digital devices, recorders, pens, glue sticks, scissors, paper.

**Website:** Making Clinical Sense, [www.makingclinicalsense.com](http://www.makingclinicalsense.com)

**Degree of difficulty:** Medium to hard.

**Cross-categories:** collaboration, comparison, instructions, making, senses.

## Description and learnings

### An unexpected disruption

My fieldsites are medical schools, the current one only a bicycle ride away from the Arts Faculty where I work in Maastricht, the Netherlands. Here I study aspects of medical practice such as how students learn the sensory skills of diagnosis. One particular morning I was sitting at the desk in the office I had been allocated during fieldwork, surrounded by photocopied pieces of paper, glue sticks and scissors. These were not my usual fieldwork supplies. Normally I needed little more in my shoulder bag than: my notepad (stenographer's), two gel roller pens, some tissues, a hard candy, my audio recorder, my smartphone, a few coins for the vending machine and my security pass. Yet here I was as if practically in a craft class. What is more, I was looking into something I rarely investigated: the archives of my site. The photocopies were of fragile and yellowed newspaper clippings that documented my field site's history. One of my interlocutors and officemates had carefully filed them away in a manila envelope and kept them in her filing cabinet until my probing enquiries.

Usually I am firmly located in the present when doing fieldwork. In this particular team ethnographic project I was collaborating with historians, but my own particular attention was on the practices, routines and tasks that I found myself part of in my daily fieldwork encounters. Yet here I was looking at black-and-white images of medical students learning how to train their bodies to do medical techniques from the 60s, the 70s and the 80s, with mannequins, skeletons and video lessons. As our group project examines the materiality of medical learning encounters, I had been focusing on interactions with the objects and tools that were in this particular educational environment during live lessons for example. The prompt to look at these interactions differently than I was used to doing had come from a sensory probe, delivered into our team's shared drive a few days earlier. It had been inspired by Harrel Fletcher and Miranda July's (2007) *Learning to Love*

*you More*, an artistic project where the public were given a standard set of assignments to complete, such as Assignment 28 - "Edit a photo album page". Our own version of this was to "find a photograph of your field site from 'the past', photocopy it and cut out elements of it so as to edit/collage it into a new image", which all members of our team that week were instructed to complete.

Soon my crafting was attracting attention from my officemates, then from passers' by. Someone stopped with a cup of coffee in their hands to remark on the image that I had just cut out. After they reminisced about using the teaching models in the picture, they wondered why I was making these collages? Another medical teacher stopped to listen. I told them that I was doing an activity with other members in my research team. We were all making collages of archival material that week. They asked where these colleagues were doing their fieldwork. I put the scissors down and picked up my own cup of coffee. We started talking about medical schools in different places, about the kinds of materials and techniques which are used to teach students. Someone retrieved a model from their office to show me a particular feature of it, another leafed through my photocopied materials and pointed out some interesting images I had overlooked. The morning went by and my notepad lay dormant in my shoulder bag, waiting for another time.

This story, though on the surface a simple encounter and an unremarkable moment that happens often during fieldwork, of small talk and showing, of coffee and sharing, was for me filled with unexpected disruptions to my fieldwork habits that I would not have experienced if not for that week's sensory probe. Here I think of sensory probes as fieldwork devices that open up new possibilities for anthropological inquiry, through ethnographic experimentation. My understanding of probes builds on previous uses of probes in anthropology, such as material and walking probes (De Leon & Cohen, 2005) and auditory probes (Vokes, 2007), both of which are used as ways to tap into previously hard to articulate experiences. It also draws on disruptions outlined in Harold Garfinkel's breaching experiments in sociology (Rafalovich, 2006) and the cultural probes used by design ethnographers. Finally it comes out of my previous work on sensory instruction (Harris, 2020) as a way of reorientating the senses through instruction, a way of knowing inspired by others' transformational and embodied "experiments in becoming" (Latham & Wagner, 2020, p. 105) and my own experiments in making instructions (e.g. a video for how to make a cyanometer, a knitting pattern for a uterus and a smartphone cover).

The sensory probe device I outline here was developed in the context of a team ethnography. Three ethnographers (me, Andrea Wojcik and Rachel Vaden Allison) and a historian (John Nott) undertook research during an overlapping period of time (the ethnographers synchronously September 2017 – May 2018, the historian followed, January 2018 – August 2019) for the Making Clinical Sense project. As stated above, this study focused on the role of technologies in how medical students learn sensory skills of diagnosis, such as listening to hearts, palpating lumps and orientating themselves within the body at an anatomical scale. We were located in three different medical schools – I was in a place called a Skills Laboratory, in Maastricht, in the Netherlands, which was dedicated to learning practical clinical skills; Rachel did her fieldwork in the anatomy department of a medical school in Budapest, Hungary; and Andrea did her fieldwork in another Skills Laboratory in Tamale, in Northern Ghana. John travelled across the three sites.

The sensory probe fieldwork device helped our team to work together across time and place. They offered our collaboration a different way of re-orientating our sensory knowledge as ethnographers, through disrupting what we were observing and learning about in the field. It was a form of sensory education, both in the writing and in the following of the instructions. In the following section, I explore our team instructions and probes in more detail.

## **Making instructions**

Before starting field work the three ethnographers embarked on a series of methodological experiments in kitchens in Maastricht to test our comparative approach. We have written about these sensory methods experiments elsewhere (Harris et al., 2020), showing how such a “proof of concept” methodological approach can reveal assumptions and habitual research practices in a group, helpful before starting out on team field work. This study then led to another series of experiments which I refer to here as the sensory probes. We realised, before heading into the medical schools, that we wanted to share our materials in a way that would complement the immersive experience of fieldwork rather than impose upon it. We decided to share sensory snippets of data, drawing inspiration from artists’ work (e.g. Fletcher and July 2007), and from sensory ethnographers’ lessons such as Dara Culhane’s sensing exercises (Culhane, 2016). Our own snippets would be generated through weekly assignments designed to be able to be incorporated into our “regular” fieldwork. The idea was that they would offer accessible bite-sized windows into each other’s fieldwork to help us unravel some of the specificities of our field sites, through comparison in real time.

We decided to write the first set of probes on the fly. Before leaving for fieldwork we created a shared folder and a word document with blank spaces each week for us to fill in the activities. Our homework, each week, was to take turns writing instructions for the other, then upload our outcomes, whether sound recordings, drawings or videos, to a shared folder. Our rules were simple:

- 1) We would take in turns writing the activity by midday Thursday for everyone to do the following week;
- 2) The activities should involve multimedia in feasible way (we all had the same tools: smartphones for taking photos and videos, digital drawing notebooks for making sketches, audio recorders for recording interviews);
- 3) The activities must be able to be performed in around 15 minutes;
- 4) The activities must explore the relationship between sensing and technologies;
- 5) Instructions needed to have clear boundaries and specifics where possible;
- 6) We needed to upload our results by the end of that week.

And so, we gave ourselves over to the instructions of others. In total we created and attempted 25 sensory probes. The first round had a fairly open format and the topics of the instructions varied greatly. We did not always adhere to our own rules but the more specific the instructions were, we realized the easier it was to find creative synergies and points of intersection, to explore the differences and similarities across our sites. We had telephone, video and face-to-face meetings throughout this period of time, with these discussions influencing how we noticed in our own field sites in subsequent fieldwork. Halfway through our field work, back in Maastricht, we looked at our list of activities and reassessed what we wanted to investigate in our remaining field work. In our second round of probes we decided to think of themes and topics we wanted to explore and assigned each week one of these topics being: materiality, sensoriality, history, recording equipment and “getting outside of yourself”.

Whatever the topic of our probes, the instructions expanded our imaginative spaces and reorientated our ways of noticing, whether in how to describe touch through new words, through creating disruptions in fieldwork encounters through collage making, through rethinking our own materials from making, or from outside, from other points of view. I explore this sensory reorientation further below.

## **Sensory reorientation**

In the Making Clinical Sense project instructions were both an object of enquiry (in the medical school) and a methodological approach (the probes). Instructions also simultaneously give form to this written piece, are explored as a way of learning in the field, of knowing our fields, and as the guidebook for instructions to play further with (see more in the guide for researchers at the end). Perhaps this entry may prompt you, the reader, in the same way. In this final section I explore sensory probes further as a way to educate the sensing and noticing of fieldworkers.

Ethnography is always a form of disruption; intense attention to reflexivity and positionality has long disregarded claims of capturing an isolatable real in fieldnotes. However that said, how we do fieldwork often comes with routines and norms, standard materials and habits that can be hard in themselves to disrupt. In their own methodological enquiry geographers Alan Latham and Lauren Wagner highlight that John Dewey's understanding of habit, which informed theories of habitus, was led by a curiosity about techniques that might explicitly refashion the habitual ways we are embodied in the world (Latham & Wagner, 2020). While ever more attention is paid now to disrupting what were long entrenched traditional conventions of ethnographic research, others have looked helpfully at how to productively explore existing cracks through our awkward collaborations (Yates-Doerr, 2019) for example, that upturn taken-for-granted assumptions.

Sensory probes are a particular form of habitual disruption. They work by way of education through instruction, offering a prompt for ethnographers to try something new, suggested in the team situation by collaborators. While fieldwork is always an act of "relational invention" (*quote from the editors*), sometimes field workers need a prompt, a probe, to get them out of their own particular routines of improvisation and invention. In our weekly activities in Making Clinical Sense we tried different forms of notation – drawing, musical notation, dance notation. We performed re-enactments, a method which is being used increasingly in the history of art and science (Dupré et al., 2020) and which has had an as yet limited presence in ethnographic research. We stood on tables, when allowed, to get a different view, and experimented with the idea of developing a digital-sensory elicitation kit that we could use in our interviews.

Our probes helped our research team to collaborate while doing simultaneous fieldwork, and in the case of the historian, connected fieldwork, to find points of comparison and new avenues to explore. We played with the genre of instruction writing in order to inform our project on how instructions are used in medical education but this technique has wider relevance. In discussion with a team of media archaeologists for example, they became interested in how the sensory probes may allow them to explore aspects of media technologies they had not previously considered. PhD students have experimented with our sensory probes in graduate school seminars. Elsewhere we have written about these activities in the context of an edited book on collaborative fieldnotes (Wojcik et al., 2020), where we explored the relationship between bumblng and accountability in writing fieldnotes simultaneously. We suggested that the rise of team ethnography also challenges ethnographic practices built around the ideal of a "lone ranger" in the field, and demands creative, research practices that facilitate new forms of collaboration. We showed, following anthropologist Janelle Taylor (2014), the value of being able to "bumble" using devices such as this – allowing ourselves to be flexible and responsive to our experiences in the field.

Thus, the sensory probes aim not only to facilitate comparisons and generate data but also to disrupt, in the most productive way, our routines of fieldwork. They help, similar to Calhune's exercises (Culhane, 2016), to educate a closer attention to our own and others sensory practices and knowledge, and reflect on the specificities of this in our field. They provoke, through disruption, purposeful, closer attention to "observing assumptions", working as part of the fieldworkers' apparatus to reconfigure and help attune researchers to what may be "intelligibly observable" (Latham & Wagner, 2020, p. 94). In making probes in our team we made a kind of self-fashioned

ethnographic manual, on the fly, yet one which seriously considered our goals and circumstances, for as Latham and Wagner (2020) point out, such disruptions need to be designed with care.

How might similar sensory probes be crafted and used in other ethnographic projects, in ways which attend, carefully, to the needs and curiosities of the researchers and teachers? How might others learn from this project or draw inspiration from our endeavours? What kind of ethnography may happen through probes? I have suggested in this device description that sensory probes offer a means by which to disrupt ethnographic habits, through instruction. Our team's experiments with sensory probes show how productive they are for group projects particularly. The kind of projects that sensory probes make possible is a collaborative ethnography, where ethnographers align or resonate with each other, through making and experiencing shared disruptions and instructions. This also makes ethnography an instructive space, the device merely a catalyst and highlighter of the learning and teaching that makes up all of our encounters in the field.

## **How to make sensory probes**

### **A guide for collaborative researchers and teachers**

#### *General comments*

- Sensory probes are devices designed to deliberately disrupt ethnographers' habits and cultivate new ways of noticing in the field.
  - Sensory probes are ideal particularly for collaborative/team projects.
  - Sensory probes aim not only to facilitate comparisons and generate data but also to disrupt, in the most productive way, our routines of fieldwork.
  - Be as specific as possible when designing probes, the more concrete the activity the better.
  - Probes must be feasible for members of the research team to do within the environment they find themselves in.
- Probes must not take too long to do.

#### *Instructions:*

1. The research team decides on who will take part in the probe activity and whether they want the topics of the probes to be open or focused on particular themes or topics in their project.
2. Probes are then created by each member of the team. This can be done all at once, before fieldwork starts, or on a week-by-week basis as fieldwork progresses.
3. Share the results of the probes on a shared drive or online folder.
4. Meet regularly to discuss insights from the probe activity, during fieldwork and afterwards.
5. Redesign probes if you wish, to focus on more specific themes.

#### *Appendices*

##### **This device can also be used in the classroom by following these instructions:**

1. Each group takes a blank index card (or an online document) and writes out some keywords or phrases concerning their particular ethnographic topic, focusing on the issues that they would like to explore with this probe activity.
2. Share the index cards (or online document) with another group and take time to read the topics.
3. Each group now takes another blank index card (or a new page of an online document) and writes a "probe" that helps the other group interrogate one or more aspects of their topical interests. If this is too difficult, then another stimulating probe activity can be crafted.
4. Swap probes with the other group.
5. Each person in the group now completes the probe individually or in pairs.

6. Return to the group and compare results. Group discusses together what they find interesting and insightful in comparing their findings, tacking their postcards (topic list, probe description and any relevant findings) to a large sheet of paper/online document and drawing analytical threads where relevant.
7. Reconvene as a larger group and discuss insights, questions, reflections on the activity.

### **Possible probes ideas**

- *Find something that is broken in the field, and see if you can offer to repair it*
- *Insert a creative poster or banner into your field site somewhere that shares some of your insights so far*
- *Design a lesson plan for one of your interlocuters to follow or ask them to design one for you*
- *Reread your favourite ethnographic textbook or text from the first year you trained in ethnography*
- *Make a paper replica of some objects or furniture in your field site*
- *Find a way to document colour and texture in your field site*
- *Take a photo of a set-up*
- *A body mapping exercise*
- *Make something that is used in your field site*
- *Use time lapse/slow motion video recordings on phone to capture a scene*
- *Take a 360 degree photo*
- *Circulate a picture to the others from your fieldsite. Each tries to recreate the scenes received in their own field sites.*

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## Biography

Anna Harris worked as a doctor before learning anthropology and turning her ethnographic gaze back to the medical profession. Missing the hands-on element of clinical practice in academia, her work endeavours to find creative and practically engaging methods for studying questions of embodiment, learning, materiality and infrastructures of medical practice. She is an Associate Professor in the STS group and leads a team of anthropologists and historians on the European Research Council funded project Making Clinical Sense. Recent books include *A Sensory Education* (Routledge) and the co-edited *Reconstruction, Replication and Re-enactment in the Humanities and Social Sciences* (Amsterdam University Press).