As mediators between meaning and materiality, the senses have an ambiguous status. Ethnographic research on them straddles the interface between body and mind, and between the ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ realities of an individual. It has opened up a field for anthropological study long neglected by the disembodied discourses on meaning making in the social sciences and the empiricist assessments of matter in the natural sciences. This volume on The Senses and the Social aims to overcome entrenched culturalistic and materialistic positions with its emphasis on how people’s sensory experiences (of their bodies and the environments they interact with) are specific to social situations.

Sensory experience is socially made and mediated. It would be wrong to say it is ‘culturally constructed’ and thereupon ‘inscribed in the body’ because that would presuppose the primacy of the mental over the physical. Also the opposite viewpoint that ‘bodily experience’ is ‘translated’ into ‘culturally recognizable forms’ is unsatisfactory because it presupposes that primordial bodily experience can be unconnected to cultural form. All contributors in this volume are aware of the phenomenology of perception in so far as they take the body as the source of existence that generates and shapes one’s experience of the world. They are aware of the debates as to whether or not the pre-objective is pre-cultural. While they take an individual’s experiences, as lived with one’s body, as the starting point for creating culture-specific concepts in social interaction, they view these concepts as equally significant in shaping those sensory experiences. Even though none of the authors uses the term, their articles implicitly build on the assumption of there being a ‘mutuality’ between social relations and the material world, where mutuality is a concept coined by recent research aims to overcome the historically
given separation between anthropological research into the social world and material objects.1

Research on the senses highlights how entrenched anthropology is in its own tradition and how limited is its language for reflecting on them. The idea of the senses as ‘windows to the world’ predates Descartes and it would be wrong to blame ‘Cartesian dualism’ for the lack of an adequate vocabulary for framing the problem. Nor can the idea be put to ethnocentricity, as it resurfaces in other cultural contexts. In ancient China, for instance, the eyes or ears and other so-called ‘sense organs’ were called ‘openings’ (qiao). ‘Windows’ and ‘openings’ invoke the cross-cultural experience of unimpaired senses in Drew Leder’s (1990) ‘absent body’, which, as he shows, leaves us unaware as long as it functions and which only becomes a ‘body’ once it is in pain or dysfunctional.

The sciences have always provided an alternative to the notion of the senses as windows to the world, which is steeped in phenomenal experience. Ancient Greek science located them in sense organs, and it conceived of them as mediators (e.g. Lloyd 1996:126–137), among them also the skin, the largest human sense organ. Not that its openings and pores were ever made responsible for the production of sensory experience. Psychophysical research found many sense receptors in it. Yet this research on the psychophysics of the skin was also the first to question that every sense receptor produces a sensation that triggers a distinctive perception (Krueger 1982; Hsu 2000:261–263, and references therein).

Many social anthropologists have adopted from the biological sciences the viewpoint that the sense organs relate nervous signals to the brain, which, in turn, is responsible for processing these stimuli into an event of perception. Biologically speaking, sensory experience is a perception, not a sensation. Nor is it a reflex. Some anthropologists, keen on establishing an anthropology of the senses as a distinctive field, have aimed at transcending the biologically biased viewpoint that a culturally recognised sensory experience relies on the five sense organs. Guided by Walter Ong’s (1967:6) view that ‘Given sufficient knowledge of the sensorium exploited within a specific culture, one could probably define the culture as a whole in virtually all its aspects’, they suggest each culture has its own sensorium.

The starting point was the claim that ‘vision’ is central to Wissen and ‘wisdom’ in Enlightenment Europe, while other senses are cultivated in other cultures. In the early twentieth century, such an observation consolidated the European superiority, as ever since antiquity vision and sound
have been valued higher than taste, smell and touch (Synott 1991) – vision was an attribute of men, touch of women (Classen 1997). More recently, and within another framework, David Howes emphasized the significance of odour in gendered relations on the Trobriand Islands and of sound in the kula exchanges (Howes 1991 and 2003: 61–94). Kathryn Geurts (2002) provided a compelling account of moral and bodily-enacted ‘balance’ among the Anlo Ewe in Ghana.

Tim Ingold (2000:243–87) took issue with the claim that vision allows for a more detached observation than any other mode of perception. Based on James Gibson’s (1979) ecological phenomenology, he argues that a person’s immersion in light is qualitatively no different from that in sound. Seeing per se need not facilitate detached and objective thinking. An ocular-centric culture need not necessarily result in a more logo-centric one. Accordingly, claims for the primacy of vision are nothing more than ethnocentric expressions of superiority.

Moreover, is the modern West really ocular-centric (Potter 2007)? In primates 70 percent of the body’s sense receptors cluster in the eye (Deacon 1992) and Maurice Bloch (2008) is in this respect right to say that in every human culture vision plays a prime role. In this volume, Caroline Potter demonstrates that the London Modern Dance School is a modern Western institution that cultivates a sensorium not dominated by vision. Her focus is on kinaesthesia, a sense not included among the usual five, but nevertheless recognised by modern science. She stresses that modern Western dancers seek perfection in it, although one could object that their socialisation is not mainstream and that their audiences have a primarily visual experience.

On a different note, it is questionable whether the ‘modern Western’ is in fact the ‘modern’, Potter mentions how ‘warming up’ is a way of preparing oneself for movement and dance, and how getting ‘hot’ is associated with becoming alive. Although her ethnography centres on the twenty-first century West, one is tempted to see in the association of heat and vitality a cultural pattern that can be traced to ancient Greek philosophy (Lloyd 2007), as too is the association of the painful and the cold which she reports on. Evidently, ancient European thought and practice is here intrinsic to a modern Western sensorium.

Koen Stroeken criticises the notion of a culturally-specific sensorium. He elaborates on Ingold’s phenomenology, but in an analysis that has borrowed its intellectual tool kit from structural linguistics. He differentiates between sensory modes and codes. Modes arise from the bodily stimulation of sense
organs, codes are situational and socially appropriate. Stroeken highlights that the conflation of the two led to an ‘essensualizing’ of cultures at the expense of attending to intra-cultural variation. Ingold is in this respect no better than Howes.

Stroeken reminds us that a look is a look is a look. Or, as Michael Herzfeld (2001:244) puts it: ‘To stare at someone may signify rudeness, curiosity, flattery, or domination, depending on the circumstances and the culture. Downcast eyes, in contrast, may suggest modesty, fear, contemplation, or inattention. And these are simply the possibilities for cultural coding, within which personal idiosyncrasies may produce further variation...’ Stroeken shows that the same mode of sensing, as for instance seeing, can be differently encoded. Among the Sukuma in Northwestern Tanzania one’s seeing may shift from the glance of ‘being-with’ another person in daily interaction to being persecuted by the ‘intrusive’ look of a witch that can only be banned through a sensory shift to the ancestor’s ‘expulsing’ eye, a transformation that requires the respective ritual set up. Stroeken argues that as the social situation changes, the same sensory mode, i.e. visual perception, can be activated in a different sensory code.

One would assume that seeing and looking is done with the eyes, but one can find people speaking of visions that are not related to the sense organ of the eyes. Stroeken speaks of yet another encoded form of seeing in possession rituals. This suggests anthropological inquiry into sensory experience cannot be limited to experiences produced by the five sense organs or any other sense organ for that matter (for instance, the speech organ among the Anlo Ewe).

In contradistinction to the biologistic assumptions intrinsic to the concept of the senses (even in recent anthropological writing), an interdisciplinary Taiwanese research group has coined the notion of shentigan (Yu in press). Here, the Chinese vernacular language has yielded an analytically interesting anthropological concept: in addition to sensory perception, shentigan can refer to hunger, thirst, feelings of nausea, anxiousness, hope and other experiences of the mind-body. Considering that the notion of ‘sensory perception’ is tightly linked to the idea that it is the starting point for all scientific investigation, that via sense perception the material world is distinguished from the immaterial one, and fact from fabulation, while anthropologists work with people who are not concerned with such distinctions, the notion of shentigan which invokes no such Cartesian dichotomies, may provide a welcome framework of analysis. In the interim, the word ‘sensory experience’...
is often being used (perhaps deliberately rather than ‘sensory perception’) in a way that aims to transcend the understandings of the interrelation between matter and mind, as given in the natural scientific framework within which the notion of sense perception was initially developed.

Although the Taiwanese group has made no serious attempt to translate *shentigan* into a European language, a case could be made for rendering it as ‘bodily resonances’, and relate it to Adam Chau’s (this volume) argument that sensory experience is an interpersonal event that is socially produced. Chau goes beyond the usual assumption held among both natural and social scientists, which takes sensory experience primarily to be a matter of one or several of the body’s sense organs encoding stimuli from the environment which the brain then processes into a perception. The ‘red and fiery’ (*honghuo*), a sensory experience produced by means of heightened interaction between people, is a form of sociality. Just as in the local theories of how emotions arise interpersonally (Myers 1979), sensory experience is generated, in Chau’s view, *between* people rather than in an individual body’s sense organs.

The senses are socialised in at least two respects. First, we generally can only perceive those sensations that are socially and culturally patterned (linguists distinguish therefore between phonetics, the study of sound, and phonemics, the study of meaningful sound in a given language). Second, a particular social situation often elicits specific sensory experiences. One cannot overemphasize the social and contextual nature of sensory experience. Hence the focus on the sensory provides ethnographers with new perspectives on sociality. The contributors to this volume work with Thomas Csordas’ (1990) notion of ‘embodiment’ and account for the subjectively felt in terms of the habitus. They build on insights gained from the performative turn in ritual studies and, like Janice Boddy (1989), aim beyond instrumentality in anthropological explanation. Some draw furthermore on Carol Laderman and Marina Roseman’s (1996) performative approach to healing and curing. Embedded in this scholarship, the study of the senses intensifies an already nascent attentiveness towards dispositions and dynamic aspects of sociality. In particular, it sensitizes ethnographers to the dynamic side of social practice, since perception hinges on the constancy of social and environmental change.

**The Materiality of Sociality**

Research on bodily dispositions and sensory experience cannot rely solely on interviews and questionnaires but calls for innovative forms of fieldwork. To be sure, participant observation does lend itself to a study of the senses,
as the articles by Elizabeth Ewart and Gabriele Alex show. In order to carry out research that centred on the sensory experience in modern dance training, however, Caroline Potter passed an entrance exam that allowed her to train her own body, as she engaged in ‘participant experience’. She often reports on episodes she herself experienced through and with her body, in an auto-ethnographic manner reminiscent of Glyn Adams’ (2002) shiatsu session. The body she experienced was a Cartesian one, in which the dancer distinguished between mind and body, and Potter highlights how dancers acquired mastery in modulating the interdependency between the two. In a similar vein, Clare Brant seems to have been sensitized to nuanced odours through participant experience, with the deerhound as companion species on her daily walks through the neighbourhoods of North Oxford.

People have bodies and interact with objects. Hence, as Howes (2003) noted, the sensorial is intrinsic to the social. Indeed. Yet social relations are not merely created and reinforced through the exchange of material objects, say, of food, furniture or jewellery. The materiality of sociality resides also in our bodies, odours and movements, vision, hearing and speech, sensations of heat or pain, the taste of what we eat and drink, and tactile interaction. A sense of belonging arises from joint experiences of real stuff, such as the sweat from dancing or from gardening. It is felt, sometimes, in moral terms as in instances of loyalty or compassion, and it is maintained though the refashioning of memories. In addition to the memories and emotions so closely intertwined with sensory experience (Brenneis 2005), the sensorial has a titillating quality, which triggers imagination and play – hence, presumably, its etymological closeness to the ‘sensational’. One’s sociality, if not acquired and maintained through bodily experiences, finds bodily expression.

Social bonding is not only a matter of taking on social roles, in order to structurally and functionally fit into the group’s larger whole. It is enacted between and through bodies. Bendix (2005:10) describes one such moment of bonding through harmonic vibration in one of the many pub occasions in rural Appenzell, where New Year is celebrated by men:

The signals of his body communicated with the men around the table, with heads slightly leaned back, eyes, but more so bodily attention, focused on the person who had made a start and then, once the lead bars were sung and the yodel tune recognized, the others joined in, constructing the expected harmony, eyes mostly half closed, sensing each other with bodies and ears... these men performed and their bodies seemed to heat up in the memory of the festive energy experienced in earlier years.
People communicate not only through words and mental meaning making, but also in instances of simultaneously felt emotions, physically instantiated memories and sensations; Nadia Seremetakis (1991) has long made this point in her study on the aesthetics of wailing during funerary rites in northern Greece. Ritual arouses the senses and has a peculiar quality that awakens alertness; Gilbert Lewis (1980) noted this long before the senses became a theme of investigation in anthropology. When assembling in celebration, Australian aboriginals were described as experiencing ‘exceptionally intense forces’ that produced a ‘violent super-excitation of the whole physical and mental life’; Emile Durkheim (1926 [1915]:214–219), a century ago, spoke of ‘effervescence’.

In an earlier article, called ‘Acute Pain Infliction as Therapy’, I argued along precisely these lines that in the intense moment of social bonding, a moment reminiscent of the Durkheimian ‘collective effervescence’, people made pain acute in a temporally monitored and structured way (by intentionally inflicting pain on patients with an acupuncture needle or on young men or women in initiation rites, or by intensifying the pain over the loss of a loved one through wailing in drawn-out rhythms, which could suddenly start or come to an end at funerals, switched on and off like an electric current). My suggestion was that the human capacity to experience pain is not only necessary for the survival of the individual, as biologists have it, but crucial for social bonding and, ultimately, community building, as anthropologists stubbornly refuse to see. These intense moments of synchronicity between people, which may involve synaesthesia (Young 2005), are important not only because the sensory experiences, emotions and memories that they create in the individual. More importantly, they make the social group physically real, engendering vitality in the group as whole (Hsu 2005).

As the articles in this volume show, sociality is generated in often less dramatic ways although, perhaps, in no less intense moments: during children’s play, a dancer’s daily training, an evening stroll on the look-out for food or a brief moment of heightened sensory awareness while waiting for the train. The sociality of the actors described is defined not merely through coordinated movement, a teasing pinch, a wanting look, or the taking of a deep breath, but importantly also through being heard, being touched, being seen and being smelt.

This point is stressed, in particular, by Elizabeth Ewart, whose article, much in line with Stroeken’s, points to different ways of seeing among a single people. In contrast to the asocial witch whose look can hit you (Seeger
2004), without you yourself having seen her, Ewart discusses social ways of interacting and looking in everyday life. When young mothers among the Panara say ‘let’s go looking’ and stroll around the settlement shortly before sunset, they are engaging in the social activity of being seen. As Ewart comments, the activities that are visible to all are considered the most beautiful. This form of looking and being looked at is no different from the sensory engagement in touch, where ‘whatever you touch, touches you too’. In contrast to philosophers like Merleau-Ponty, whose deliberations tend to reflect how the individual senses and makes sense of the world, anthropologists like Ewart have noted that seeing is a social activity that simultaneously involves being seen. To be sure, anthropologists are not the first to have remarked on this. The poet Ovid said of the young women in ancient Rome who frequented the theatre that ‘they come to see, but in fact come to be seen themselves’ (spectandum veniunt, veniunt spectentur ut ipsae). Socialising is not merely a process of actively approaching others. People need time to observe each other and prepare themselves for each other before becoming engaged with each other.

Gabriele Alex focuses also on interpersonal negotiations between people, in this case tactile ones, which result in a sense of either belonging or exclusion. The birth ritual she describes makes a Tamil baby part of house and homestead, not merely through the cuddles he or she receives from female, and later also male, family members, but also in a ritual called totu (to touch). Totu involves placing the baby in the midst of the house with its back on the floor and its head pointing north, and as it is then turned over onto its stomach, putting it in direct physical contact with the house. The social relations of care and love, belonging and inclusion, are not negotiated merely in a social field full of people and things, where people present themselves through the wearing and holding of things. They are furthermore made real to the baby by making it feel the homestead’s earthen floor on the skin. This sensorial production of social relatedness happens not only in ritualised touch but also in children’s play when pinching marriageable kin can be just as constitutive of sociality.

The volume ends with an essay that reinforces the observations made throughout that sensory experiences are produced, enacted and perceived in combination with each other, intertwined with emotion, meaning and memory. Countering the claim that the ocular-centrism of the modern sciences has reduced attentiveness to odours, Clare Brant’s notes on smells in smellscapes show how nested odours are in capitalist ‘worldliness’. She suggests
that specific instances of the sensory experience of scent, as expressed and experienced through metaphor and language, reveal cultural preoccupations and conditions of possibility that are nested, like Russian dolls, and structured by language that itself is structured in a similar manner (Ardener 2007).

This volume explores how through the senses we experience, enact, shape and express ourselves in social relations. While the contributors to this volume build on research that sensory experience is culture-specific, they have gone a step further, highlighting that the sensory is situation-specifically encoded and that people intentionally make certain situations become charged with the sensorial to make real the social. The wide-spread assumption about vision and hearing, the former as distancing and objective, the latter as emotion- and sociality-enhancing, emerges also in this volume as ethnocentrically tainted. The discussions of kinaesthesia, touch and odours provide new perspectives for researching sociality. By highlighting how people activate the sensory in their engagement with the world and each other, the volume highlights how meaning is made material. In this sensual way, it plays on the materiality of sociality.

Acknowledgments

Most of the articles in this volume were presented in the Ethnicity and Identity seminar series on Senses of Identity at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Oxford, in Hilary Term 2006. My thanks go first and foremost to Shirley Ardener, as she knew of my ongoing research on tactility and pain, and had the idea of doing a seminar series on the senses, but generously left the choice of speakers and editing of the volume to myself. I also wish to thank the speakers and contributors for a pleasant process of collaboration, Koen Stroeken for valuable comments on the introduction, and Mark Graham for his rigorous editorial advice and judicious choice of anonymous reviewers.

Notes

2. Herzfeld’s (ibid.) definition, ‘Social codes determine what constitutes acceptable sensory behaviour and indicate what different sensory experiences mean’, obviously is the one Stroeken works with as well.

References


