



Exploring Sensory Memories: Acting Lessons for Anthropologists

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Abstract:

Lee Strasberg and other acting teachers developed sense memory exercises that teach an artistic re-enactment method to explore the interplay of sensory perception and emotional memory. Apparently, secondary sensory stimuli often trigger flashbacks for traumatised people. From my experience as an actress, I learned that the sense memory method is a controlled triggering of emotional memory that allows for exploring phenomena that are may be less accessible through other approaches. Many anthropologists consider sensory experiences and emotions a relevant topic, but how can we teach students to deal with these phenomena? After looking at sense memory exercises against the backdrop of neuroscientific findings, I will consider why and how we should introduce them when teaching anthropology.

Keywords: memory, senses, neuroscience, teaching method, re-enactment, qualitative methodology

Introduction:

To make clear that an imprecise reproduction of emotions offers no insight into human experiences, acting teachers often say: ‘Only bad actors want to weep – real people must weep’. But what makes people weep? Lee Strasberg and many other acting teachers have looked for methods of triggering emotions so that actors are able to weep as involuntarily as ‘real people’, and have developed training based on the so-called sense-memory-exercises. Drawing on Paul Stoller (1997), I consider this method a form of ‘sensuous scholarship’. A burning smell, for example, can evoke a sensation, which recalls a situation that triggers a panic attack (Hinton et. al., 2004). I will argue that the sense memory method is a controlled triggering of emotions grounded on the same effect. Strasberg (2010:28) often referred to Marcel Proust’s ‘A la recherche du temps perdu’ in which the narrator describes how the taste of a little cake, ‘une madeleine’ dipped in tea, recalled the atmosphere at Combray. In the same sense, there is a close connection between perception, sensation and emotion and there are sensual triggers appropriate for recalling complex memories. In a nutshell, one could claim that Strasberg’s methodological research focused on the ‘Proustian effect’.

Sense memory exercises train the actor to use the senses ‘to respond as fully and as vividly to imaginary objects on stage as he’s capable to do with real objects in life’ (Strasberg, 2010:14). But why should an anthropologist learn to respond to imaginary objects? In a seminar on the anthropology of art, I once asked students to explore a sheet of paper. Some rumbled the paper to explore how it feels; some ripped little pieces off it to learn how it sounds. Then I told some of them to put the sheet aside and to handle an imaginary sheet of paper. I asked the others whether the performances were convincing. The students said that they had only perceived some very small actions as convincing. When I asked those who had demonstrated the exercise in front of the others whether they had succeeded in recreating a sheet of paper and recalling how it feels and its weight, they all admitted that the sensation lasted only seconds. When I asked the students to explore the real sheet of paper again, they handled it more carefully and became very attentive. That is what the sense memory



exercises with objects are about: to use Tim Ingold's words (2001), they represent an 'education of attention'. Everyone uses the senses in daily life, but most people use them unconsciously. Actors, in contrast, have to explore perception processes because they must be able to recall a sensory experience on stage. Therefore acting schools start by training the senses: Music students train their ear, visual artists learn to see. However, actors have to develop a multi-sensorial sensitivity and that is a skill which anthropologists need as well. Ingold (2000) repeatedly stresses that the 'knowing' anthropologists seek to explore is based on multi-sensorial perception that requires a specific education of attention (Ingold, 2001). In her seminal publication, 'Doing Sensory Ethnography' (2009) Sarah Pink argues in the same vein and recommends an approach 'that takes as its starting point the multisensoriality of experience, perception, knowing and practice' (Pink, 2009:1). From my experience as an actress, I think this requires specific training. In this article, I will ask if Strasberg's findings on perception and memory processes are confirmed by findings in neuroscience and what sense memory might add to anthropological teaching. I will first draw on my own experience with sense memory exercises and consider them in the light of neuroscientific research to make clear why they allow for opening up an access to memories that are inaccessible by other approaches. On that basis, I will show in which respect the exploration of sensorial memories offers fundamentally new possibilities for an education of attention. I then elaborate on my experiments with these exercises in academic teaching of anthropology.



Learning sense memory: analysing neurocognitive processes

The 'sunshine exercise': performing embodied knowledge

My first encounter with sense memory took place in the so-called 'rote Fabrik' near Lake Zurich. The former factory had just been transformed into an alternative cultural centre – it was winter and the site was still under construction. Other actors and I lay with our eyes closed on the cold floor of a gloomy room and we had to concentrate on the sensation of sunshine. After several hours, we complained. But our teacher Walter Lott, who had learned this exercise at Strasberg's famous Actors Studio, told us that winter is much colder in New York – recalling sunshine in a gloomy room was one of his favourite exercises. Sometimes I felt how the sun warmed a small part of my arm, but just for one or two seconds. Sometimes I could feel the sunshine on my upper chest, but the sensation vanished, then I could perceive the sunshine on my eyelids or maybe on the back of my left hand. When a colleague squinted to show that he perceived the intensity of the sunlight, Lott stopped him instantly: 'Don't pretend, just a second before you've got it.' Strasberg's method, which had a great impact on film acting, is often referred to as 'no acting'. To put it another way, one could claim that Strasberg considered actors re-actors and he conceived the sense memory exercises to enable actors to re-enact reactions to sensorial perceptions.

We all remember once feeling sunshine on our skin, but as an actor I had to train a specific skill, I had to be able to re-enact the perception process, I had to recall a process that I had been unaware of earlier. This required research, which is worth consideration in light of Arne Dietrich's (2004) inquiry on neurocognitive mechanisms and the 'procedural' memory that resides below the level of conscious awareness. This author explored artistic practices and the learning of skills against the backdrop of neurocognitive research to analyse under which premises such learning is possible. Dietrich's analysis is insightful because it reveals aspects of learning that Ingold neglects. Unlike Ingold, Dietrich not only analyses why a learning of skills requires a specific training of perception, he also points out what blocks such learning processes. This is important in view of academic teaching because it all too often promotes a transfer of knowledge that – as Dietrich can show – hinders other kinds of learning. However, looking at Dietrich's text against the backdrop of Ingold's writings helped me to discover some problematic terms that the scientist uses. Ingold (2001) criticises the term 'representation' and argues against the concept that 'knowledge exists in the form of "mental content"' (2001:113), when he analyses the learning of skills. Indeed Dietrich winds himself up in contradictions by using the terms 'mental content' and 'representation' (2004:749) when he analyses recollecting memories and the learning of skills because the terms evoke concepts of two distinct containers, one that contains knowledge and the other manifestations of it. Instead of claiming that people represent mental contents, I would rather use Ingold's expression 'perform knowledge' (2001:113). This expression hints at a complex process rather than two distinct and fixed entities. Lott also advised us against representing a concept of sunshine; our task was to perform embodied knowledge. In other words, he warned us against fixed concepts and emphasized that sensorial memories occur within the process of performing them. I think Dietrich uses the terms 'representation' and 'content' somehow careless and

unreflecting. In any case, when he (2004) analyses the learning of what he calls multidimensional skills Dietrich comes to similar conclusions as Ingold: Both focus on the process of learning and consider it a continuous interplay of perception and performance.

The 'chair relaxation-exercise': a reduction of activities in the prefrontal cortex

Every day, Lott's workshop started with 'chair relaxation' - a well-known preparation exercise developed by Lee Strasberg. The goal of 'chair relaxation' is to feel how postures and movements are connected with sensations and to discover how tensions are related to emotions. It is not easy to relax sitting on a chair. One has to move and explore unusual positions. Lott was very attentive: He sometimes hinted at the parts of our bodies that were still tense, even if we were unaware of it because we were accustomed to this tension. Again he stopped us from repeating the same movements and adopting what he called 'a constant equal' rhythm. Thus he helped us to overcome habits and routines, which Lott claimed would block access to our sensorial and emotional memory. If we couldn't let go of tension in a certain part of the body by moving, he advised us to deflate the tension through a sound like a long 'aaah'. This sound should correspond to the tension we felt. The difficulty of this exercise is to be truthful. I am aware that 'truth' is a problematic category in academia. However, Lott put it like this: 'Don't play relaxation, relax, don't pretend, feel it' and the difference was obvious. He often asked us to let our heads hang back as relaxed as possible. In that position, it is nearly impossible to remember names or texts - we were exposed to our bodily sensations, but it was still difficult to realize the impulse to let out a sound. Lott told us that this is part of our social conditioning. Only babies are allowed to scream. We are trained to suppress such impulses. The purpose of the exercise is not to learn to scream like a baby. The aim is to allow the sound to come out, as unintentionally as possible and that the sound is a reaction that corresponds to a sensation.

'Chair relaxation' causes a feeling of being betwixt and between, somehow naked and passive (Turner, 1964). As an anthropologist, I would describe the effect of this exercise as a liminal state - the neurologist, Arne Dietrich, draws on Mihály Csíkszentmihályi (1996) and uses his term 'flow' when analysing neurocognitive mechanisms underlying experiences of being betwixt and between. Dietrich (2004:749) first draws attention to two distinct processing systems the brain operates 'to acquire, memorize, and represent knowledge' the explicit system and the implicit system:

The explicit system is rule-based, its contentⁱ can be expressed by verbal communication, and it is tied to conscious awareness. In contrast, the implicit system is skill or experience-based, its content is not verbalizable and can only be conveyed through task performance, and it is inaccessible to conscious awareness. (Dietrich, 2004:749)

I suggest that 'chair relaxation' activates the implicit system and when the head hangs back in a slack position, it deactivates the explicit system and actuates a state of flow. Dietrich's remarks on the precondition of flow experiences confirm my hypothesis. He (2004:746) notes: 'a necessary prerequisite to the experience of flow is a state of transient hypofrontality [a reduced activation in the prefrontal cortex]; that enables the temporary suppression of the analytical and meta-conscious capacities of the explicit system'. In a chapter entitled 'Preparing for Sensory Research', Pink (2009) underlines the importance 'to be open and attentive'. She thinks that it 'includes considering how one might use one's own body and senses,' and asks 'what kinds of self-awareness, technologies and epistemologies might equip us well for this task' (2009:44). Exploring 'the sensory ways of knowing', sought by Pink (2009:44), requires preparation of the researcher's body - a topic that has so far been neglected in academia. Openness - a premise for doing anthropological research - is mostly only discussed with regard to appropriate categories and concepts and not with respect to the researcher's bodily disposition. However, muscular tensions and internalized habits have an impact on what a researcher is able to perceive and therefore it is necessary to include exercises that prepare the body in view of an education of attention when teaching anthropology.

The 'coffee cup exercise': a discovery of the implicit neural circuitry

It is also worth looking at another sense memory exercise in the light of findings from neuroscience. We were told to bring the cups or glasses that we always use for coffee, tea or water in the mornings. The task was to explore the object that we knew so very well attentively. I admit that it was boring. Then, we had to put the cup out of sight, and to recreate it. The boring task turned out to be an exercise in humility - I wondered, if I had ever seen or touched my cup before. We were asked to work every morning on that exercise which according to Lott should be considered a finger exercise for actors. The effect of the 'coffee cup exercise' is indeed surprising: I learned little by little to recall the weight of the cup, the texture of its material and the wafting smell of dark coffee, and moreover the exercise aroused the sensual attention and it somehow stirred up the remembrance of

other forgotten sensations connected with emotions in very complex situations, almost as if I had found another access to my memory.

Before analysing how experiences are memorized, Dietrich (2004) again draws attention to the 'two different types of neural systems, each designed to extract a different kind of information from the environment'. The implicit emotional system evaluates 'the biological significance of a given event' (747). The explicit cognitive system 'is designed to perform detailed feature analysis' (747). Referring to Patricia Smith Churchland (2002), Dietrich (2004:749) notes that: 'Unlike the computational mode of [the explicit] cognitive system, the [the implicit] emotional system appears to compute information in a non-algorithmic, skilled-based manner'. Drawing on Joseph LeDoux (1996), Dietrich (2004:749) points out that these two systems keep a record of their activities 'so that emotional memory is part of the emotional circuitry and perceptual and conceptual memory is part of the cognitive circuitry'. The 'coffee cup exercise' seems to activate the emotional system. Setting the cup aside and handling the virtual cup is a tool for opening an access to the emotional memory where information is 'recorded' in a 'non-algorithmic' way. Ingold (2001:141) underlines the importance of copying bodily practices when learning skills in the context of an education of attention. The 'coffee cup exercise' consists in copying an internalized skill, namely handling a coffee cup – however, without the object but by handling a virtual cup. This allows for exploring the sensory perception of the cup - in other words, an education of attention.

As I mentioned above, Dietrich considers reduced activity in the prefrontal cortex that temporarily suppresses the analytical and meta-conscious capacities of the explicit system – a necessary precondition of flow experiences. The prefrontal cortex is neither involved in 'emotional' memorizing (Dietrich, 2004:748) nor does it store long-term memory. The capacity of the working memory in the explicit circuit is limited, so 'multi-dimensional tasks are more likely embedded implicitly' (752). However, the explicit circuit integrates processed information and thus enables cognitive functions such as self-reflective consciousness that following Dietrich 'increases dramatically our cognitive flexibility' (Dietrich, 2004:749). Learning the sense memory method thus requires interaction between the explicit and the implicit system. We needed Lott's explicit, well-reflected instructions, and his sophisticated analysis to discover the access to implicit memory. To display the trade-off of the flexibility enabled by the explicit system and the multi-dimensional efficiency enabled by the implicit system that is needed in such complex learning processes, Dietrich (2004) gives tennis lessons as an example. His conclusion concerning the teaching and learning, in short the training of skills such as playing tennis, holds true for sense memory exercises as well: only with many 'hours of highly dedicated practice' does the application of this methodological tool become part of an efficient 'stimulus-response procedure' (Dietrich, 2004:256). I want to make the point that so far teaching anthropology is rather viewed as a transmission of knowledge than a training of skills. However, an education of attention requires training. The skill to trigger sensory memories developed in basic exercises such as the 'sunshine exercise' and the 'coffee cup exercise' allows for an exploration of complex emotional experiences. I will show in the following how a teacher's explicit instructions help to discover the potential of this methodological tool before I will report how I introduced the exercises when teaching anthropology.

The 'bad news exercise': using the stimulus and response procedure

I related above that the attempt to recall emotion often leads to crocodile tears and that a precise re-enactment of seemingly insignificant sensorial perceptions is more insightful. The exercise 'news on someone's death' is an example of how a stimulus-response procedure facilitates the recall of such details. I worked on this exercise at my drama school in Munich. Our task was to recall step by step what had happened. Our teacher, Rüdiger Hacker, first proposed the so-called w-questions: What did we do before we received the news? What were we wearing? Were we sitting down or standing up and where? Only after recollecting the situation beforehand did Hacker advise us to work on questions such as: How did we receive the news? Who was present in that moment? How did we perceive our environment directly afterwards? We had to concentrate on tiny particulars: The light of a lamp, the feeling of wearing a certain pair of trousers. This blow-by-blow approach proved very efficient and we became aware how the sense memory of these perceptions triggers the emotional memory of the whole situation, a phenomenon that scientific studies have investigated in other contexts (Hinton et. al., 2004). The surprising effect of the exercise was that many of us were able to recall many seemingly forgotten details, but only if we weren't fixed on results such as tears and desperate cries. We were in a state of flow and the stimulus-response procedure applied in the exercise consisted of giving 'implicit' answers to 'explicit' questions. Drawing on Csikszentmihályi's (1996) findings, Dietrich (2004:757/58) describes how the stimulus response procedure operates in states of flow and these explanations helped me when analysing the experience of the 'bad news exercise': the procedure of doing the exercise 'is driven by the progressive realization of the next small goal' (757) and the teacher gives 'immediate feedback' to the re-enactment of the sensory perception.

A balance 'between challenges and skills' is given because the actor concentrates on tiny details and is thereby focused on what he or she does so that 'distractions are excluded from consciousness' (757). Sense memory exercises are meant as a preparation for rehearsals, so there is no immediate pressure and as the actor is not fixed on results, 'there is no worry of failure'. The activation of the implicit system effectuates that 'self-consciousness disappears' and 'the sense of time becomes distorted' (Dietrich, 2004:758). The actor explores a sensory perception that is perceived as being present. This evokes a situation in the past in which the sensation was first perceived, but this situation is also perceived during the exercise as being situated at the present time. This is why involuntary flashbacks are so painful for traumatized people. Such a remembrance is something very different, from recollecting the date when a certain event took place because the latter situates the event in the past whereas a flashback hints at the fact that the experience is still present for the traumatized person.

Teaching sense memory: exploring its application in anthropology

Adapting sense memory exercises to academic contexts

Many years after I learned Strasberg's method from Lott, I became an anthropologist and I always felt that the education of attention this method allows for added to my anthropological research and therefore, I thought of possibilities to teach it to my students. Hence I decided to put the teaching of sense memory exercises to the test when I was invited to a conference for anthropologists at the University of Zurich in 2015.ⁱⁱ However, I had to deal with the conditions of an academic conference: Lott's workshop lasted about two weeks and we worked about eight hours a day in a large, empty room. The participants were actors who were used to unsettling experiences and working with their bodies, their respiration and their feelings. I had one and a half hour for my own workshop and it took place in a lecture hall with fixed seating. Two plenary sessions and a short coffee break were scheduled before the workshop. As I knew that the atmosphere of an academic conference is hardly suitable for a workshop on sensory memories, I had to adapt the exercises to the situation and to participants who were unused to this kind of research. First I explained that we would work on three exercise categories. I had termed the first category 'reset': these exercises should help the participants to shake off the attitude usually adopted during an academic conference. The second category of exercises entitled 'recalling sensations' was meant to discover the complexity of sensorial perceptions by trying to recall certain sensations. These exercises were a preparation for the third category of exercises termed 'recalling of emotions'. I wanted to give the participants a chance to experience a little how recalling sensations can trigger emotions. However, a more profound exploration of this methodological tool would have required another setting. Furthermore, I found it necessary to underline that these exercises were not meant to create a performance for the stage and that this exploration of own sensations and feelings did not pursue any therapeutic purposes.

A multi-sensorial training

I began by asking the participants to imagine their feet rooted to the ground and that their bodies were swaying like trees in the wind. They had to focus their attention on the full back lengths of their bodies and then start walking slowly backwards and try to perceive other participants and obstacles such as walls with their backs. This 'reset'-exercise was meant to raise awareness of the fact that we are usually more aware of the front side of our bodies in everyday life. However, we perceive our environment unconsciously with our entire bodies. Their next task was trying to recall the taste of a lemon. After a short time, I asked the participants to imagine holding a slice of lemon in their hands and to feel its material quality without looking at it. Then they had to move it slowly to their mouths and prepare to bite it. However, they were not meant to turn it into a pantomime. The task was instead to explore the perception process. After that I offered them pieces of pretzels. While they were eating, they had to focus their attention on sensations throughout their bodies. This exercise was meant to reveal a phenomenon that we are not aware of eating something, for example, chocolate: Not only do we smell or taste chocolate; it can change our bodily sensation from head to toe immediately.

In his famous article 'Footprints through the weather-world: walking, breathing, knowing', Ingold (2010) states that anthropologists are not aware that the sensorial perception of basic phenomena such as weather has a heuristic value. His remarks on knowledge production when walking inspired me to conceive another set of exercises. I started the second sequence of my workshop by proposing an imaginary walk through the 'weather-world'. For a 'reset' of the lower limbs, I suggested first marching on tiptoes then on heels, then knock-kneed and lastly bow-legged. After this the participants had to re-enact walking on surfaces such as sand, pebbles, asphalt, a street strewn with leaves and a path that was becoming increasingly muddy. I asked whether they could perceive automatic changes to their respiratory rhythms. Thereby, I underlined an important difference between sense memory exercises and wellness exercises: If a wellness instructor suggests lying on a virtual meadow, the participants are asked to recall pleasant sensations - not prickling grass, nor disturbing ants or flies - sense

memory exercises, by contrast, are conceived to recall the whole spectrum of sensations. The next exercise was meant to give a first impression of how it is possible to recall an emotion by concentrating on sensual perceptions. The participants should remember walking down a street where they had not been for a long time. What season was it? What time of day was it? What were they wearing? Could they hear any noises? I asked them to look up at the sky, to walk faster and slower, to stand still and to become aware of what was behind them. From my own experience, I knew that apparently absurd questions are very helpful when re-enacting being in a certain space: Examples of these questions are: How do you perceive the street with the left side of your body? Can you establish a bodily connection with the materials of buildings, for example with the bricks of the house? The next sequence was about smell. The 'reset'-exercise was a yoga-exercise, often used in acting classes. One inhales through the left nostril and exhales through the right, then inhales through the right nostril and exhales through the left etc. Whereas yoga teachers usually ask participants to close the respective nostrils with their finger, for actors it is important to realize that one can inhale through one nostril without closing the other. Surprise is the intended effect: something, which had never been thought possible, is in fact possible. Then I suggested that the participants try to recall some distinctive smells like the sea air, frankincense, polish, a fir tree, an onion, wall paint and lilac. Recalling smells is facilitated by a seemingly impossible task as well: I suggested that the smell was not easily located, but that it was all around them and they should smell it with their skin.

At first sight, the concept of these exercises seems to confirm the assumption that 'modern western subjects' (acting teachers included) divide 'the senses into vision, hearing, touch, taste and smell' (Pink, 2009:51). Indeed, Strasberg (2010) often uses the expression 'five senses', but in fact the exercises prove the contrary: As studies by neurologists confirm (Newell and Shams 2007), senses are interconnected and the 'Proustian effect' that Strasberg is after, is due to precisely this phenomenon. Ingold (2000:216) notes that the perceptual systems 'overlap in their functions', and are 'subsumed under a total system of bodily orientation'. That is why movements are often very effective when recalling sensations. If one carefully re-enacts bringing a slice of lemon to the mouth or walking on a muddy path, one becomes aware that smelling, tasting, looking, touching and moving are not 'separate activities, they are just different facets of the same activity: that of the whole organism in its environment' (Ingold, 2000:216). Sense memory might remind anthropologists that 'the eyes and the ears should not be understood as separate keyboards for the registration of sensation but as organs of the body as a whole, in whose movement, within an environment, the activity of perception consists' (Ingold, 2000:268).

A la recherche du temps perdu

The last sequence of the workshop was both the riskiest and most intense. I also started with a 'reset' sequence and explained Strasberg's 'chair relaxation' mentioned above. It is impossible to introduce this exercise in such a setting, but I wanted to convey an impression of the 'reset' intended by Strasberg. So I invited the participants to try to feel the weight of their bodies on the seating. Then I suggested that they let their heads hang back as relaxed as possible. After a while, I asked whether they could remember the title of a publication by Michel Foucault – giggles were heard and many participants said they could not reply to a question which a scholar would probably answer immediately in an upright position. The last exercise I proposed is called 'the voyage'. The purpose is to recall a room where one has experienced strong emotions. As acting teachers must ask questions that everyone can answer, I decided to explore childhood homes. In this exercise, actors lie on the floor with their eyes closed and reply in low voices. This constant talking prevents them from fading away and analysing the discoveries. In fact, nobody understands anything if 30 people are all talking at the same time. However, the task is too delicate for people unused to this kind of work. So I suggested the participants sit with their eyes closed and speak inaudibly. The task is to look for significant details, but not to 'celebrate' memories and emotions, neither pleasant nor unpleasant ones. In the given context, I stressed that the participants should not try answering questions that evoke painful memories but instead they should stick closely to the question I had put before. Then I asked questions such as: Is the house near the road or is there a garden in front of the house? What is the house made of? How many entrances are there? Please describe the door as detailed as possible. What kind of material is the doorknob made of? What kind of doorbell is it? How do you enter the house? Do you ring the bell and what sound does it make? How does it smell when you enter the house? Is there a staircase or are you in an apartment? It's mealtime! Who prepared the meal? How many people are present? Where are you sitting? Describe your fork! What meal is on the table? Which meal would you prefer? In this exercise apparently, absurd questions can be very effective as well, for instance, 'can you remember the taste of your comb?' Anthropologists ask a lot of questions when doing research: however, when they try to grasp sensory or emotional experiences they often get 'few rather shallow answers, all of which related to well-known phrases' (Verne, 2013:8). I introduced this exercise not least to reveal a possibility of putting questions otherwise.

Feedback

After the last exercise, we had half an hour for discussion and feedback. One participant said that ‘reset’ exercises might be a good preparation for fieldwork: as she was nervous sometimes, these exercises might help her to focus on her faculties of perception. Another participant said the questions in the exercises, especially the absurd ones, inspired him to rethink questions usually asked in interviews. Many participants thought that sense memory exercises could be very helpful in academic teaching. After the workshop, I received some emails: one participant wrote that she was surprised at her access to such a huge repertoire of sensorial memories. Other participants wrote that whereas the talks at the conference presented theoretic approaches to sensorial experience, the sense memory exercises had given them an opportunity to explore them. After I tested the brief sense memory workshop at the conference, I conceived a one-day sense memory workshop for students as part of a seminar entitled ‘Anthropology of Senses’ in 2016. I introduced the exercises described above, but since we had more time, we were able to explore them more intensely and with regard to a greater variety of perceptions, sensations, and situations. I asked the students to note what they experienced immediately after the workshop. In the essay that they had to write at the end of the semester, some analysed their experiences against the backdrop of texts by Ingold (2001; 2010), Stoller (1997), Pink (2009) or other anthropologists who had published on the interplay of perception, sensation, emotion and knowing. Inspired by the sense memory exercises, others explored everyday life experiences with the help of the sense memory method. One wrote about the perception of time in railway-stations, and another analysed the perception of a football match from a child’s perspective, while yet another compared meals in various cultural contexts. What struck me most was that the descriptions in these essays were very evocative – a learning target Strasberg did not have in mind when he developed the sense memory exercises, but this secondary effect is evident when teaching anthropology. Due to the success of the sense memory workshop in this seminar, I suggested slightly modified versions of it in several courses I taught at the university. Sometimes I also suggested only one particular exercise with respect to one specific topic, for example, the exercise ‘walk through the weather-world’ when we dealt with the ontological turn in anthropological research. As we had weekly sessions, we could repeat some exercises such as the sense memory of a sheet of paper. The repetition allowed for a training of the method and some very motivated students even reported that they worked on the exercises at home.

Conclusion

Sense memory is an education in attention (Ingold 2001) that is useful for anthropological research because it is not limited to specific skills or specific experiences, but helps to perform any forgotten skill and to remember inaccessible experiences. This exploration first targets own skills and experiences, but it is also an education of attention towards others and the environment. As ‘existing scholarship about the senses reveals a strong interest in human experience,’ Pink (2009:23-24) thinks it necessary that researchers ‘have a clear idea of what sensory and embodied experience involve’ and she considers ‘own experiences as a route through which to produce academic knowledge’ (64). However, the crucial point is that anthropologists’ ‘own sensory embodied experience might assist them in learning about other people’s worlds’ (Pink, 2009:24). Recently, Pink and Kerstin Leder Mackley (2014:146) put therapeutic ‘re-enactment methodologies for everyday life research’ to the test and showed ‘how insights from art therapy and art historical accounts of the neurosciences can inform ethnographic ways of knowing’. Pink (2015) also used re-enactments with Yoko Akama and Annie Fergusson to explore experienced worlds ‘asking a participant to perform an event, task or activity that has happened before, that they regularly do, or know how to perform’. The aim was to ‘understand what people habitually [do], for example when going to bed at night’. At a workshop entitled ‘Enacting Modalities of Feeling: Anthropological Explorations into Affective, Sensual and Material Connections’, at the University of Vienna in 2015, Valeria V. Lembo reported on another application area of re-enactment:ⁱⁱⁱ She had learned embroidery as a child, but later discovered that she had totally forgotten the elaborate stitches. During a workshop in physical theatre, she was finally able to re-enact the forgotten stitches. This workshop was convened by Caroline Gatt, an anthropologist who also explores the heuristic value of acting methods (Gatt, 2011) and Ang Gey Pin, an actress who conducted improvisations drawing on the Polish theatre director Jerzy Grotowski’s findings.

There is no single method of re-enacting memories: from my own experience with various methods of re-enactment, I would suggest that anthropological experiments with re-enactment can be more precise, more revealing, and less dangerous, if anthropologists using this tool are familiar with sense memory techniques. I think the last point is of great importance when doing research on sensations and emotions. Pink (2009:58) puts it thus: ‘generally, before considering intruding on the sensory consciousness of research participants, the ethical implications of doing this should be thoroughly considered’. In this context, she warns about the danger of triggering flashbacks. From my own experience, I know that sense memory raises the awareness of people’s vulnerability. Therefore, think I it can help avoid involuntary and uncontrolled flashbacks. I think this topic is often neglected when teaching anthropology. Students who are familiar with sense memory exercises are more

aware of what might trigger painful memories when they do research with other people because they have experienced how a seemingly insignificant detail can evoke an intense emotion. Participant observation implies that the scholars and research partners are exposed to intense experiences and the sense memory exercises offer an opportunity to explore sensations and emotions not only theoretically. Pink (2009:41) is hinting at a blind spot in academic research by emphasizing that there is 'a case for suggesting that a less intellectualized form of sensory knowing in practice might have a role to play in academia'. The method I have presented effectuates a reduced activation in the prefrontal cortex, a temporary suppression of the analytical and meta-conscious capacities, that is to say it rules out faculties academics usually rely on. Thereby sense memory opens practices scarcely activated in academic contexts, but which anthropologists need if they wish to explore the interplay of perception, sensation and emotion.

Pink (2009:38) discerns three tasks when exploring sensory memory: 'First, to aid us in understanding the meaning and nature of the memories that research participants recount, enact, define or reflect on to researchers.' Second, to look for tools that help us to understand how we 'might generate insights into the ways other people remember' and finally, third, to comprehend how anthropologists 'use their own memories'. What could be the role of the sense memory method in reference to these objectives and what specific skills do actors have that anthropologists may need as well? The method I presented here is a tool that actors use to prepare for rehearsals. Sense memory exercises are small-scale-investigations that teach actors to be precise when they re-enact perceptions, sensations and the emergence of emotions. This rigor is also required when anthropologists explore these topics and I suggest sense memory as a magnifying lens for looking at tiny details, which matter when analysing the interplay of perception, sensation and emotion. Sense memory exercises might facilitate the education in attention that anthropologists need to this end.

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Notes:

i As mentioned above, I would rather use Ingold's (2001:113) expression 'perform knowledge'.

ii 'Kulturen der Sinne: Zugänge zur Sensualität der sozialen Welt' ('Cultures of the Senses: Approaches to the Sensuality of the Social World' [My translation]), biennial conference organized by the 'Deutsche Gesellschaft für Volkskunde' ('German Anthropological Association') [My translation], July 22–July 25, 2015 at the university of Zurich.

iii Valeria V. Lembo: 'Sensing Affects and Affordances: Collaborations with Threads, and Dogs Memories.' Paper presented with Jan Peter L. Looers, February 25, 2015 at the Workshop 'Enacting Modalities of Feeling: Anthropological Explorations into Affective, Sensual and Material Connections,' organized by Andrea De Antoni, Bernhard Hadolt and Herta Nöbauer, February 25–February 27, 2015 at the university of Vienna.