

Cosmologies, Structuralism, and the Sociology of Smell

Abstract This paper explores the theoretical concept of cosmologies in structuralist research on smell. It suggests that the main advantage of a structuralist approach is empirical, as it enables schematic representations of complex social phenomena, thus providing a solid basis for inter- and intracultural comparisons. An important drawback lies in the inherent use of predetermined categorizations, which can lead to essentializations, oversimplifications or misrepresentations of social reality.

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An old truism about scent is that it evokes emotional responses in people. It has been discussed as such by philosophers, poets and writers since Theophrastus of Athens,¹ and continues to pervade the current popular media. The rise of psychological and biological studies on smell gave further legitimation to this notion in the past century: the effects of odors on our health, and their role in sexual attraction and consumer behaviour are dominant topics in olfactory research. Curiously, the act of smelling is perceived by many people – laymen and scientists alike – as a strictly subjective experience; it wasn't until the early 1990s that social scientists began giving attention to the sociocultural dimension of smell.²

This new area of academic interest was pioneered by anthropologists Constance Classen, David Howes, and Anthony Synnott (Concordia University of Montreal) in 1988. They described and categorized the symbolic meanings of sensorial perceptions, and compared them cross-culturally. In the wake of the Durkheimian tradition, they used the term 'cosmology' to designate how people make sense of the world. For example, in her analysis of three cultures rooted in oral traditions Classen showed that the cosmology of the Tzotzil (Mexico) is embedded in thermal symbolism, while the Desana of Colombia order the world predominantly through color, and the Ongee of Little Andaman Island rely on olfactory models of representation (Classen, 1993: 122). In this paper I will examine the theoretical and methodological implications of the cosmology concept in relation to Western smell culture, and how it fits in a structuralist framework.

¹ *Concerning Odours* (Theophrastus, [1926] 1980) is one of the earliest treatises on smell in Western culture.

² Gale Largey and Rod Watson proposed a 'sociology of odors' in a research article in 1977, but their initiative was not picked up by contemporary social scientists.

1 Why structuralism?

Studies on the culture of odors have been conducted in several manners, but the prevailing literature on the subject focuses either on linguistic-semiotic analyses of olfactory symbols, which essentialize smell as a universal language,³ or on anthropological comparisons of olfactory meaning, which emphasize commonalities and differences between cultures (see Moeran, 2005: 97). Both approaches are concerned with meaning, symbolism, and classification systems. Whereas the former leans heavily on psychological theories, the latter tries to uncover the relation between common traditions, social hierarchies, and organizational structures. The clear emphasis on structures of meaning and classifications in those early studies on smell reveals their ties with the structuralist tradition. It is worth exploring what makes this theoretical framework appropriate, and where it may fall short.⁴

In its earliest form, structuralism dealt primarily with issues of kinship and mythology. It presented taxonomies as social constructions, and analyzed the creation, reproduction, and exchange of symbolic meaning to explain the sociogenesis of different world views, and of cultural diversity in general. The concept of cosmology itself is firmly anchored in the structuralist tradition, and can be traced back to Durkheim's studies on rituals and collective representations. Durkheim was primarily concerned with the way in which religious rituals produce symbols and ties of membership in a society. In *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, a study on Australian totemism, he referred to cosmology as one of the elements of mythology through which a group or society represents the world to itself:

"[...] la mythologie d'un groupe, c'est l'ensemble des croyances communes à ce groupe. Ce qu'expriment les traditions dont elle perpétue le souvenir, c'est la manière dont la société se représente l'homme et le monde ; c'est une morale et une cosmologie en même temps qu'une histoire."
(Durkheim, [1912] 1968: 357)

In an earlier work on religion, Durkheim argued that the seemingly natural hierarchy of concepts stemming from common beliefs and collective representations is not inherent to objects ("donnée dans les choses") or to the psychological associations of ideas, but instead that it reflects socially organized systems of ideas (Durkheim and Mauss, 1903: 4; Durkheim, [1912] 1968: 404).

In *Natural Symbols*, Mary Douglas elaborates Durkheim's sociological thesis on religion in order to make it applicable to modern industrialized societies (Douglas, [1970] 2001: xxv). She is critical of Durkheim's notion of a progressive evolution from one social type to another, arguing instead that differentiations between highly collectivized and highly individualized groups exist within tribal cultures as well. But on this new premise, she adopts his concept of cosmologies to draw parallels between structures of group identification in pre-modern and modern societies. Douglas explains this point as follows:

³ For example, Mariette Julien's semiotic analysis of olfactory communication in *L'image publicitaire des parfums*.

⁴ I will ignore the linguistic approach in this paper.

"[w]e should try to think of cosmology as a set of categories that are in use. It is like lenses which bring into focus and make bearable the manifold challenge of experience." (Douglas, [1970] 2001: 158)

In other words, it can be argued that the fragmented and highly individualized experiences of modern life do not escape from structuralism, and that they can indeed be mapped in a cosmological order. Like Durkheim, Douglas views this order as stemming from structures of meaning, and argues that social classifications and values do not emerge from individual action, but from organizational processes (Douglas, [1970] 2001: xxvi).

2 Social meanings of smell

The notion that smell can be invested with symbolic meaning is relatively novel to social scientists. Although anthropologists incorporated smell in their ethnographical observations since the early 20th century, and French historians wrote elaborate studies on how smell posed a threat to the social order (see Vigarello, 1985; Corbin, 1986), the notion of smell as a symbolic cue to social bonding has long been neglected. Yet there are plenty of examples surrounding us, be it in old traditional ceremonies, or in everyday life. The burning of incense in Catholic churches is an example of a ritual where group identification occurs through smell: the odor of incense itself has indeed become invested with liturgical connotations. Obviously, the symbolic meaning of smell extends well beyond the religious sphere. It can draw cultural boundaries, or create social distance; it can be a warning signal, a status symbol, an impression management technique, or even a sign of protest (Moeran, 2005: 97). In a famous passage from *The Road to Wigan Pier*, George Orwell illustrates how class hatred in England is expressed through smell:

"Here you come to the real secret of class distinctions in the West – the real reason why a European of bourgeois upbringing, even when he calls himself a Communist, cannot without a hard effort think of a working man as his equal. It is summed up in four frightful words which people nowadays are chary of uttering, but which were bandied about quite freely in my childhood. The words were: *The lower classes smell*. That was what we were taught – *the lower classes smell*. [...] And in my childhood we were brought up to believe that they were dirty. Very early in life you acquired the idea that there was something subtly repulsive about a working-class body; you would not get nearer to it than you could help. [...] And even 'lower-class' people whom you knew to be quite clean – servants, for instance – were faintly unappetizing. The smell of their sweat, the very texture of their skins, were mysteriously different from yours." (Orwell, [1937] 2001: 119-120; italics in original)

Orwell's depiction suggests that it is the symbolic dimension of odor, rather than odor itself, that carries social meaning. In the construction of one's identity, the smell of the

other is naturalized as something *mysteriously different* through discourse; this social exclusion is conveyed by, or expressed through the body by physical repulsion. Classen argues that olfactory classifications stem from differentiating structures of class, race, and gender:

"[o]dours are symbolically employed by many cultures to serve as identifying marks of different classes of beings. [...] As a rule, the dominant group in a society ascribes to itself a pleasant or neutral smell within this system of olfactory classification" (Classen, 1993: 101-102).

The diametrical opposition between sameness and otherness, integrated and marginalized, desirable and undesirable can thus be rendered by the olfactory contrast between foul and fragrant. This contrast is not static or universal; although it may be true that some odors are liked or disliked by people of all cultures, foul and fragrant must be understood and analyzed within their cultural context – just like the absence of smell can be perceived as pleasant or disturbing, depending on the specific social setting or environment.

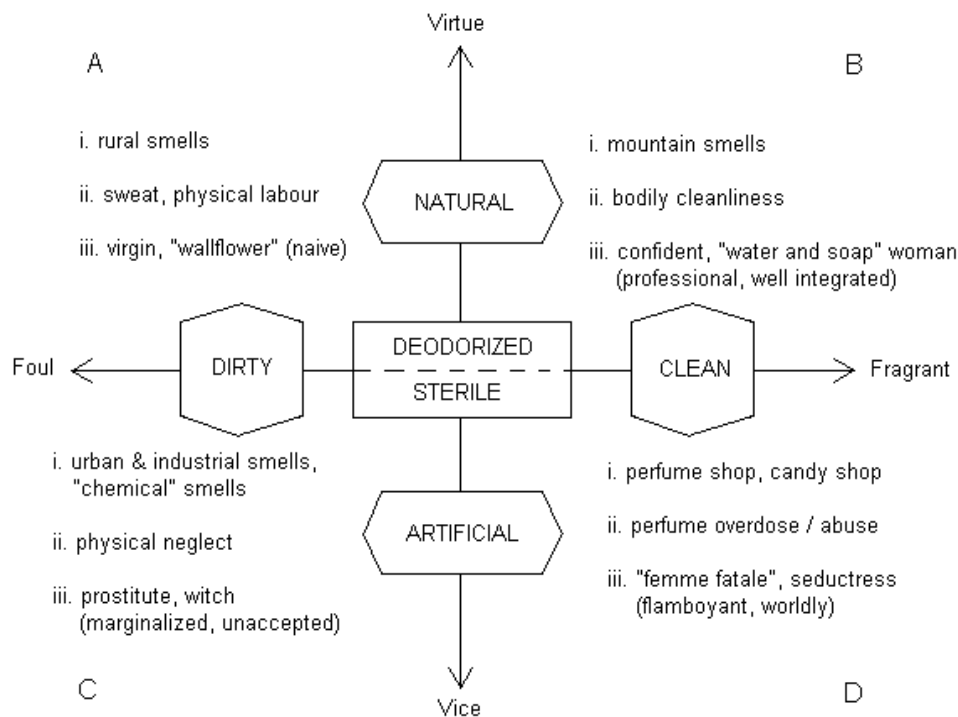


Figure 1: olfactory classifications in contemporary Western societies

Figure 1 is a hypothetical and exemplary sketch of olfactory classification in contemporary Western societies. It represents a (fictitious) cosmology based on smell and morality, in which the 'fragrant' category corresponds with 'virtue', and 'foul' is paired with 'vice'. The examples in each quadrant are arbitrary; they relate to (i) the

public dimension of smell,⁵ (ii) the body, and (iii) definitions of femininity, respectively. This diagram implies an opposition between 'clean' (B, D) and 'dirty' (A, C), as well as between the 'natural' (A, B) and 'artificial' (C, D) realm. Both axes represent social contrasts: what is dirty or clean, foul or fragrant is as much a reflection of moral values as the opposition between virtue and vice. Hence the differentiation between 'deodorized' and 'sterile' around the center of the diagram, the latter being defined as the 'artificial' counter to the former.

Although Figure 1 is not intended as a variation on the original Grid and Group diagram proposed by Douglas ([1970] 2001: 64), it does share at least one feature with the latter, in that the two dimensions represent continuums between oppositional concepts. The concepts in this diagram are highly normative. Some of the labels are best described as 'olfactory stereotypes', and are more closely related to actual odors (for example: 'urban smells', 'physical neglect'), while others are more associative or representational ('prostitute', 'witch'). The degree of normativity we attribute to categories is in itself a reflection of the cosmological order that structures our perceptions. Not only do 'urban smells' and 'witch' carry different meanings to different people (who may for instance attribute a much more positive value to them than the above diagram suggests), but they can also occupy different positions in cosmological hierarchies.

3 Classifying smell: the problem of odor taxonomies

A problem that affects laymen and fragrance professionals alike is the non-discursiveness of smell. More than half a century ago, perfumer Edward Sagarin wrote about his profession as a "science in search of a language", pointing out that we fail to describe smell by means of exact terms (Sagarin, 1945: 137). Despite significant technological advance in the measurement of odors in recent decades, the creation of a common scientific nomenclature or universal classification remains problematic. Descriptions continue to be based on material analogies (fruity, floral, fatty, etc.) and on metaphors redolent of other senses ("green", "warm", "loud", etc.). In turn, these descriptors are intertwined with the specific cultural context in which they are produced. In a structuralist analysis of odors, one must therefore not overlook the contextual differences in which the nomenclature and classification were produced.

Another problem of odor taxonomies, and one that complicates a comparative historical analysis, relates to continuing shifts in the role and meaning of smell through time. Odorous categories must therefore not be treated as static entities, as Mark Smith points out in his book *Sensing the Past*:

"Premodern Westerners understood smell to have special spiritual significance and tied it closely to physical health. Smell also indicated truth and was a sense associated with knowledge" (Smith, 2007: 59-60).

The shift to modernity implied a cultural discreditation of the sense of smell, that ran more or less parallel with processes of deodorization of public spaces and the private

⁵ The term 'smellscapes' is sometimes used as well.

arena (see Corbin, 1985; Classen, 1993, 1994). Indeed, one of the paradoxes of a Western sociology of smell is that it needs to deal with the 'olfactive silence' that characterizes modernity. The tendency to remove foul odors from our daily experience goes hand in hand with an increased moral sensitivity to smells. As Norbert Elias showed in *The Civilizing Process*, these new olfactory values cannot be attributed to hygienic motives; the rules of etiquette were based on moral, not medical principles. To a certain extent, our contemporary Western olfactory cosmology still reflects those principles.

A third issue relates to the linguistic bias in describing data. When we speak or write in English (or in any other European language for that matter), it comes as 'natural' to us to describe sensorial perceptions and experiences by means of visual terms. We "show", "demonstrate", "illustrate", "describe", and so on; this becomes problematic in an olfactory context, especially when explaining relations between odorous properties. Classen (1993, 1994) argues that the visual paradigm in which Western languages are anchored became dominant with the emergence of Enlightenment, when vision was hailed as the sense of reason, experiment, and science. Vision became the language of truth, and pushed the other senses to the background. Meanwhile, smell was demoted as the sense of intuition, sentiment, and sensuality, which had acquired negative connotations. The act of deliberately or ostentaciously smelling objects, people, or our surroundings started raising suspicion, especially among the higher social classes, and was therefore best avoided. Smell was an animalic, and altogether dangerous sense, that soon became associated with moral corruption.

Looking at Figure 1, it becomes clear how this paradigmatic shift affects not only the researcher's subjects, but also the researcher himself/herself. The situation is not unlike that of the feminist writer, who is constantly made aware of the male orientation in dominant Western discourses when he/she formulates a problem involving an unequal power balance. Elias called this the "inherited structures of speech and thought": in the case of smell culture, the visual discourse is so deeply interwoven in science itself, that all preconstructions appear natural to us, and shape our thoughts accordingly. The researcher would have to literally transform his vision of the social world into an "osmology",⁶ therewith engaging in what Bourdieu calls an "epistemological rupture" with the preconstructed world (see Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 241, 251). This is obviously a steep hill to climb for all the practical reasons mentioned earlier; it is important, however, that the smell researcher is as reflexive as possible in his own academic practice.

4 Cosmologies and structuralist theories of smell

In her studies on smell, Classen (1993, 1994) refers to cosmologies as the way in which societies order the world by means of olfactory concepts. Both pre-modern and modern societies make use of olfactory rituals and representations, be they expressed through religion, the politics of the body, or by other means. Olfactory cosmologies

⁶ The term 'osmology' means 'study of odors'. It is also used by Classen (1994) as a word play on 'cosmology'.

tend to be more differentiated, more individualized, and less apparent in modern (secular) societies than in pre-modern cultures. And yet, according to Classen, perceptions of the 'other' through smell display the same pattern across different cultures. Otherness is always characterized either as foul, dangerously fragrant (see quadrant D in Figure 1), or sterile, whereas sameness is perceived as fragrant or deodorized (Classen, 1993: 101). The hierarchical position of each category is structured, but that does not mean it is fixed; in fact it can vary considerably, especially within modern societies. If we adopt a view of modern cultures as "made up of many different 'tribes'" that move away from each other in different directions (Collins, 1994: 224), then each of these tribes can be perceived as having its own distinct cosmology, its own mythology, and its own history. We can then speak of 'situated' moral values coupled with 'situated' odors, where the structures of each tribe correlate with local symbolic meaning.

Placing the genesis of symbolic meaning in social structures, rather than in individual action, implies that olfactory symbols are not subjective or arbitrary. When we look at Figure 1, we can for instance contest the fact that 'mountain smells' belongs in quadrant B, the fragrant and virtuous realm, on grounds of personal preference. But if we would conduct an empirical experiment, asking people to assign a place to 'mountain smells' in that same diagram, it is unlikely that it would end up in quadrant C by popular decree. The diagram in Figure 1 suggests that what we think of as 'personal preference' is not innate, but rather inscribed and internalized through structures and processes that we are largely unaware of.

For this very reason, Figure 1 may also serve as a comparative tool for collective representations and modes of cultural reproduction. Not to compare the positions of fragrant concepts in the diagram, but rather to analyze the way in which they are related to each other, and how these positions are produced. This is where the traditional structuralist framework falls short, and where Bourdieu's notion of the habitus can fill some of the voids. In its current guise, the diagram in Figure 1 does not provide any information on the relation between odor preferences and social origin, ethnicity, gender, or educational background. It would have to be altered, or altogether redesigned, for instance by adding the dimension of cultural capital. A study of olfactory dispositions could be conducted in the same manner as with people's tastes in food or music; while it would not necessarily contribute to our understanding of smell per se, it could reveal how symbolic olfactory meaning is historicized and naturalized by modern institutions, and how it has become part of our personal make-up.

Discourses on hygiene, particularly within the educational realm, play an important role in this process; but as the works of Elias ([1939] 2000) and Bourdieu ([1979] 2007) suggest, issues of morality and social conformity were equally important. As can be discerned from Vigarello's (1985) historical account of French public bath houses in the Middle Ages (where bathing was a social, rather than a hygienic practice), the notion of hygiene itself can be viewed as a social construction.

One of the things that can be discerned from this, is that the act of smelling is by definition an embodied practice. This may trigger a new set of questions related to the exploration of physical bodies as constructed through smell, and to the cultural effect of sensorial experiences that are limited by temporal and spacial proximity. However, such endeavours go beyond the scope of the structuralist approach, and probably

exceed the very limits of empirical sociology. I believe it suffices here to remark that there is a wide terrain left to explore from a poststructuralist or postmodernist approach, which cannot be fitted in a classical structuralist framework.

5 Methodological implications and theoretical critiques

Returning to the aforementioned problems of nomenclature and taxonomy, it becomes clear that we are confronted with an inherent weakness of the structuralist approach: that it requires the development of a common vocabulary, and a set of formal definitions that enable comparisons. Furthermore, terminology is susceptible to different interpretations, and can at all times be contested. The diagram in Figure 1 can be criticized for its inaccuracies, its pretentiousness, or its incommensurability with other cultures. It forces the researcher to cast olfactory symbolism in a rigid form, like a road sign that communicates in a universal language. A similar concern was expressed by Douglas in relation to religion: "Trying to get a common vocabulary means forcing formal definitions where they have not been needed before [...]" (Douglas, [1970] 2001: xv). In an ethnomethodological study of olfaction, that vocabulary is even less unified and consistent than in the case of religion.

A structuralist sociology of odors will at some point need to fall back on semiotics, which is an essential tool for interpretation. In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Clifford Geertz explains how this method helps in "gaining access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live so that we can [...] converse with them" (Geertz, 1973: 24). This begs the question, however, to what extent one can or should pursue a semiological analysis of odor. If Roland Barthes (1983) was able to successfully develop a study of 'written clothing', it is difficult to transpose that same methodology to the realm of olfaction, where tangible signifiers are very scarce. Mariette Julien's study on olfactive communication (1997) was only possible thanks to perfume advertisements: she used pictures and slogans from magazines to show how they visually and narratively conveyed an olfactory message. Similarly, Richard Stamelman made a brief iconographical analysis of Pierre Bonnard's painting *Nu à contre-jour* (1908) to show how perfume can be rendered visual (see Stamelman, 2006: 17); but such exercises are bound to remain particularist, and limited in scope.

The notion of 'layers of meaning' is another difficult issue to tackle within smell culture. Some smells are created with the specific intent to lure customers, such as the artificial scent of pine, which is spread in the air of some department stores during the Christmas season. How would we categorize this odor in a diagram like Figure 1? If we think in terms of various layers of meaning in interaction, or more specifically, in terms of the difference between a twitch, wink, fake-wink, or parody as described by Geertz (see Geertz, 1973: 6-7), and then interpret the artificial scent of pine as a parody of the concept of 'Christmas spirit', we could agree to locate it in quadrant D, along with other commercialized odors, such as the perfume store. But if instead we interpret it as a twitch (thinking that we smell the actual scent of pine trees inside the department store), its naturalized interpretation would perhaps lead us to locate it in quadrant B.

Geertz argues that an interpretative analysis must see through all the layers of socially constructed meaning. In other words, when conducting a smell survey in a

department store during the Christmas season, the researcher must beware of the fact that the data can be preconstructed in different ways, and that those differences must be accounted for in the research report. Creating a schematic approach as in Figure 1 may contribute in making the researcher aware of the fact that "our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to", as Geertz put it (Geertz, 1973: 9).

That said, I believe that the Geertzian approach is too much of a linguistic departure from the classical structuralist approach. Critics like Adam Kuper may be right when they insist that this route is ultimately a dead end (see Kuper, 1999). The latter is a strong advocate of the notion that each culture comes with its own history, and that discourse is not created spontaneously and independently from traditions. Indeed, the focus on cosmologies in this paper is to try to embed symbolic meaning in social structures, not to disembed them.

As suggested earlier, cosmologies and social structures are intimately intertwined, and play a central role in structuralist theories. The downside of this focus is the lack of agency, and the deterministic view of culture that comes with it. There are ways to solve this problem, for instance with Anthony Giddens's structuration theory. He rejects the notion that structures are "simply models posited by the observer", and views structure and agency as mutually dependent: instead of being a barrier to action, structure is involved in its production (Calhoun, 2007: 235, 238). However, the cosmology concept as used by Douglas and Classen is not applicable within this highly dynamic approach, as the basic premise of structuration theory (structural dualism) is in fundamental disagreement with the very notion of cosmologies as rather static, categorizing entities.

The lack of attention to agency may also explain why both Douglas and Classen stay clear from psychological or psychoanalytical interpretations. One could regard this an unfortunate omission, given the great scientific progress in the psychology of odor in recent decades. But also on theoretical grounds, it can be argued that psychological and sociological explanations do not exclude one another, and that they are indeed mutually reinforcing (see Keesing, 1981: 341-342). An example of the interlinking between psychology and sociology can be found in Norbert Elias' theory of the civilizing process, where the concept of civilization encompasses changes in the psychological make-up of people and in macrosociological transformations all at once (Calhoun, 2007: 419). However, it would require a long-term historical perspective to uncover the dynamic of these processes, and there simply may not be sufficient data to conduct such research properly.

Another general shortcoming of structuralism is that the social conditions in which culture evolves remain largely unexplored. This is only partially true for Classen's work, who does indeed look at changing power balances in class and gender. This materialist approach to the culture of smell gives room for neo-Marxist theoretical interpretations within a structuralist framework. Shifting olfactory definitions of masculinity and femininity can for instance be viewed as a reflection of changing power balances between the sexes, and be traced back historically in the use of perfumes. The gender dichotomy in 20th century perfumery can be viewed as the result of long-term processes of differentiation that simultaneously affected class and gender relations.

Finally, the structuralist approach as presented here may be accused of being overly deterministic. Giddens's structuration theory is difficult to integrate in the current framework, and would probably require an entirely different approach to the culture of smell, its main problems and challenges. The scientific ambitions of structuralism provide something for the researcher to hold on to, in a field as elusive as the culture of smell. Earlier on I argued that Bourdieu's notion of the habitus could fill in some of the voids in this framework; what makes his approach particularly challenging is that he makes us aware of the correspondence between the "objective structures of the world and the cognitive structures through which the latter is apprehended" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 247). The space of objective relations inside a field remains structurally the same, whether the symbolic meaning attributed to objects is olfactory, or related to any other sense. The added dimension in this new model is in the reflexivity of our classificatory notions. We cannot uncritically accept categories of perception as they already exist in the social world, for instance as they are expressed in books or magazines, and must instead beware that questions of definition are at stake within the object of study itself (see Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 244).

Conclusion

The findings in this paper suggest that the main advantage of a structuralist approach to the culture of smell is empirical. One of the original pursuits of structuralism was to find some level of order in a world of chaos; although many will dismiss this as archaic, I believe that our grasp of the culture of smell is still so limited, that it can greatly benefit from it. It can enable the creation of schematic representations of complex social phenomena, thus providing a solid basis for inter- and intracultural comparisons. The two-dimensional diagram can play an important guiding role in olfactory research design: it helps in making the elusive more tangible, and forces the researcher to think in binary oppositions, stereotypes, stratifications, and hierarchies. This is, at the same time, a major downside to the structuralist approach: if we are bound to predetermined categorizations, we risk to be lead into essentializations, oversimplifications or misrepresentations of social reality. Moreover, these categorizations are limited by the paucity of our olfactory vocabulary.

If the method works well in the field, but the theory leaves to be desired, the end result is bound to remain unsatisfactory. My main concern with the structuralist approach is that it may be difficult to apply to issues such as gender, where materialist accounts of power and oppression are only part of the equation. Nevertheless, whether we deal with the foul and fragrant odors that surround us, or with gender issues in olfaction (or even a combination of both), we must keep in mind that they are social constructions, which are far too complex to deconstruct on an individual, psychological pretext alone. From our routines and dispositions in everyday life, to how we identify with one group and exclude the other, smell plays a silent and elusive role in our personal habits, and in our social interactions. As Lewis Thomas (1984) once wrote: "[smell] may not seem a profound enough problem to dominate all of the life sciences, but it contains, piece by piece, all the mysteries".

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