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Participant sensing as a feminist methodological tool: an application to gender studies

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the sensory tradition within the ethnographic method and defends the value of participant sensing as a feminist tool in socio-cultural research. This methodology would help to overcome the androcentric bias reproduced by participant observation as an eminently visual and auditory practice. Firstly, the article highlights the link between masculinity and sight, which is forged historically in the West, and reintroduces gender analysis in the anthropological study of the senses. Sensory anthropology, a recent perspective in the study of the senses which brought about participant sensing, did not continue gender analyses proposed in the preceding anthropology of the senses; therefore, its methodological concerns lacked the feminist reflection that I intend to redress here. Secondly, this article presents the ethnographical application of participant sensing for gender analysis, in the context of an adapted sport as football 5-a-side for visually impaired people. The embedded practices and experiences of a group of blind men and of the ethnographer, as viewed from a multisensory prism, reveal a new dimension of gender which helps to comprehend how adapted football 5-a-side contributes to the re-production of hegemonic masculinity and therefore of the patriarchal gender order.

KEY WORDS

Anthropology, feminism, gender, senses, participant sensing.

**LA PERCEPCIÓN PARTICIPANTE COMO UNA HERRAMIENTA METODOLÓGICA FEMINISTA:
UNA APLICACIÓN A LOS ESTUDIOS DE GÉNERO**

RESUMEN

Este artículo reflexiona acerca de la tradición sensorial del método etnográfico y reclama el valor de la *percepción participante* como herramienta feminista de investigación sociocultural. Esta metodología contribuiría a la superación del sesgo androcéntrico que reproduce la observación participante en tanto que práctica eminentemente visual y auditiva. Para ello, en primer lugar, el artículo destaca el vínculo entre la masculinidad y la vista, forjado históricamente en Occidente, y restablece el análisis de género en el estudio antropológico de los sentidos. La *antropología sensorial*, perspectiva más reciente en el ámbito de estudio de los sentidos y cuna de la percepción participante, no retomó el análisis de género presente en algunos de los trabajos de su antecesora e inaugural *antropología de los sentidos* y, por tanto, sus preocupaciones metodológicas quedaron huérfanas de una reflexión feminista que aquí se vuelve a reanudar. En segundo lugar, empleando concretamente la percepción participante en un análisis de género, el artículo presenta la aplicación etnográfica de la misma en el contexto de un deporte adaptado como es el fútbol sala para personas con discapacidad visual. Las prácticas y las experiencias emplazadas de un grupo de varones ciegos y del etnógrafo, desde un prisma multisensorial, revelan una nueva dimensión del género que ayuda a profundizar acerca de cómo el fútbol sala adaptado contribuye de manera eficaz a la reproducción de la masculinidad hegemónica y, por ende, del orden de género patriarcal.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Antropología, feminismo, género, sentidos, percepción participante.

Introduction

The senses, as the object of study, became part of social and cultural anthropology, as well as other social sciences, since the 1980s. Since then, the fundamental debate that has taken place about human sensoriality has resulted in two broad approaches. The initial sub-discipline known as *Anthropology of the Senses*, which was centered on the socio-cultural construction of the senses, has more recently been joined by *Sensorial Anthropology*, which focuses on perception and a revision of the ethnographic method. In this interesting debate, the seed of an emerging feminist and gender perspective has, however, been extinguished.

Initially, while the socio-cultural study of the senses contemplated gender as a transversal category to be taken into account for the construction of the different sensorial domains, the move towards sensorial anthropology saw the abandonment of feminist reflexivity. For this reason, in an attempt to prevent the return of an androcentric bias, the main aim of this article will be to establish a bridge between both anthropologies, and so combine the socio-cultural critique and feminist political position offered by the anthropology of the senses with the awareness of the field of the perception and methodology from sensorial anthropology. As a result, it is hoped that this will enable both a renewed way of practicing ethnography and the emergence of an unusual gender dimension.

1. The senses in Anthropology

1.1. *Anthropology of the senses and gender*

In the book *The Varieties of Sensory Experience*, David Howes (1991) pointed out the sensory link between culture and individuals and made it the basis for the anthropology of the senses. Howes argued that the meaning, configuration and organization, which is always hierarchical, of the different sensorial modalities influenced the different fields of cultural expression such as identity and emotions. As Constance Classen (1997) stated, the underlying premise of this alternative approach to the study of culture was the consideration of sensory perception as a cultural act rather than just as a natural act. Understood in this way, human sensoriality — the experience of seeing, smelling, touching, hearing and tasting — is modeled through cultural practices and so transports and transmits a variety of meanings, ideas and values that make up the way in which in-

dividuals perceive the world. Howes (1991) therefore argues that the anthropological task should focus on giving an account of the *sensorial profile* for the study of culture.

Sensoriality has always been related to anthropology. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1975) reminded us that the cultural clash between Europe and the New World, as one of the basic sources for the ethnological reflection, aroused an unusual sensuality for the former: “The cultured Europe [discovered] within itself unprecedented possibilities of delectation and [emerged] in this form out of a medieval past made of, at least partially, insipid food and sensory monotony, all of which bewildered the consciousness that man could have of himself and his terrestrial condition” (Lévi-Strauss, 1975: 18). But while sensory confrontation has always been an engine for anthropological estrangement, to consider sense as a subject of study did not occur due to what Classen has referred to as the “cloak of invisibility” (1998: 1) of an oculo-centric or visocentric modernity. Although the body had become an object of reflection for the analysis of the senses (e.g. Marcel Mauss, 1979), the emphasis on sight remained privileged in the history of sensory imagery in both the West itself and in other cultures (Classen, 1998).

The anthropology of the senses considered Western culture as an ocular culture. The exaltation of the eyes appears in Classical Greek philosophers such as Aristotle, and Plato, who valued sight as the noblest of the senses, while the modern refinement of that approach, as indicated by Marshall McLuhan (1962) and Walter J. Ong (1967), came about as a result of the invention of printing and the literacy process. However, it was the development of science from the Age of the Enlightenment that resulted in vision becoming the main metaphor for thought, reason and objectivity (Classen, 1998).

The sensorial profile dominated by sight prevailed in nineteenth-century anthropology as sight, and to a lesser extent hearing, became the senses of civilization, whereas touch, taste and smell were the senses of savagery. This “sensist” anthropological tradition, which marginalized the ignoble senses and left sensoriality beyond reflection, has lasted until post-modernity (Classen, 1997: 405). Indeed, the anthropology of the senses arose in reaction to the visual bias of the postmodern anthropological perspective which, as Clifford Geertz argued, considered cultures as “an ensemble of texts which the anthropologists strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong” (Geertz, 1973: 452).

However, the visocentric sensory profile does not only respond to a form of ethnocentrism but also to a form of androcentrism. Luce Irigaray pointed to the association of masculinity with sight, and femininity with

touch ties and argued that “the siege of the gaze is not as privileged in women as in men” and that “women, on the other hand, preserve more archaic sensitive stratifications, rejected, censored and devalued by the empire of the gaze” (Irigaray, 1985: 41). In this way, the tactile senses would be privileged by women rather than the gaze of eyes that objectify, dominate, distance and maintain distance. Similarly, Donna J. Haraway (1995) stated that sight had been *disembodied* in favor of a conquering and unplaced gaze, whose eyes, in the context of science, militarism, capitalism, colonialism and male supremacy, had the ability to distance the knowing subject from the known and hide it in order to exercise unhindered power.

From the perspective of the anthropology of the senses, Classen (1998) also pointed out the historical relationship between the Western sensory order and the gender order that is drawn from premodernity. She showed how imagination and stereotypes around the senses have served to create and express, also in a stereotypical way, different identities and gender roles through which masculinity has been generally linked to sight or at least the aspects considered positive of this or other senses.

In the Middle Ages, according to Classen (1998), the model of a single chain of human perfectibility¹ (Laqueur, 1990), considered each sensory domain, traversed by gender, having differently valued qualities. Within the visual domain, men were associated with sight through their intellectual purposes and their imposition of social order through the quality of light and form, whereas women were associated with sight through color and darkness in relation to their social roles linked to decoration, seduction and, in short, to their alleged propensity to vanity. Starting from Modernity, as well as the correspondence between the dualisms of culture / nature, and man / woman proposed by Sherry Ortner (1972), the Cartesian mind-body dichotomy was reflected in the order of gender through a double association: the masculine with reason and the feminine with sensitivity. Likewise, the field of the senses also cracked along such a dichotomy and in function of the prevailing gendered order, associating the senses of sight and hearing with the masculine mind while the rest of the senses were associated with the female body. In addition, the link of masculinity with sight and hearing as the senses of distance, made men conducive for expedition and government, while the connection

1. Classen takes the idea of the single chain of human perfectibility to Thomas Laqueur's book *Making sex: Body and Gender from Greeks to Freud* (1990) to refer, in the Middle Age, to the absence of a bisexual model, that is, to the absence of conception of two sexes. Man and woman were understood as two versions of a single human biological model, in which the woman was the previous, unfinished and imperfect version of man.

of femininity with the other senses as those of proximity made women suitable for caregiving and the home.

The Western sensory model manifested by the anthropology of the senses from a gender and ethnic perspective, therefore reveals a symbolic order in which sight is a metaphor for the superiority of the world view of Western cultures against other cultures and, at the same time, of the superiority of masculinity over femininity. While noble sight is a metaphor for men, for reason, for progress, for science and civilization, women fall on the side of the irrational, the passionate, the exotic and the wild in their association with the other sensory domains.

1.2. *Sensorial anthropology and ethnography*

Since these important first steps in the 1990s, the anthropology of the senses has turned to a sensorial anthropology that proposes innovation in the ethnographic method. According to the anthropologist Sarah Pink (2009), if the central questions for the former were the senses as object of study and showing the diversity of sensory models of cultures that mould their particular cosmo-perceptions, for the latter the emphasis rests on sensory perception and, therefore, in the analysis of multisensory experiences of both subjects of study and ethnographers. Sensory anthropology inevitably led to a consideration of how to investigate other worlds through reflection on sensory experience. In this context, Pink, in her book *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, proposes “participant sensing” as a reconceptualization of the fundamental ethnographic technique of participant observation, given the relation of the latter to the supremacy of the eye (Pink, 2009: 65). This proposal, beyond the theoretical level, reaches the ethnographer in the practical field to realize their greatest potential when they use their whole body and sensoriality as a source for reflection.

The anthropology of the senses, in contrast to Pink’s (2009) sensorial ethnography, proposes that senses should be approached culturally, using classic ethnographic methods that were based on a consideration of field work as a process of observation, listening and interview (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). But while classic observational methods have led to great ethnographic contributions, Pink presents sensory ethnography as a critical method, not exclusively applicable to sensory research, which attempts to combine the visual and auditory with other sensory experiences, to go beyond what can be seen to perceive “the most profound type of knowledge [which] is not spoken of at all” (Bloch, 1998: 46).

2. Participant sensing as a feminist tool

Although the anthropology of the senses has been challenged by an ethnographic methodological critique; nevertheless, I argue that sensory anthropology has not sufficiently recognized the contributions and the impact of feminist criticism on its methodology. Aurelia Martín Casares (2008), in her journey through gender anthropology, pointed out that it was not only the first anthropologists who poured out a Western point of view in their ethnographies, but also that the *fathers* of anthropology also constructed the discipline from a male point of view that included, in what interests me here, the ethnographic method and its fundamental techniques.

While Classen (1997 and 1998) tried to combat the sensory ethnocentrism of anthropology and the androcentrism implicit in it through a gender political analysis of the Western sensory model, it is no less true that in her article *Fundamentals for an anthropology of the senses* (Classen, 1997) left the perception and the ethnographic method intact in itself. On the contrary, Pink (2009) proposed sensory ethnography and participant sensing as research techniques, presenting a reformulation of the ethnographic method to free it from ethnocentric bias, but did not make explicit the androcentric inclination inherent in it. If participant sensing is a technique that invites us to overcome the biases of a colonial anthropology for the study of cultures, it is no less true that it is also inevitably an appropriate feminist tool for general use or for the analysis itself of gender in particular.

For all these reasons, my aim is to reconcile both criticisms. First, in a political-theoretical key, continuing the path undertaken by Classen, I argue here that participant sensing results from a feminist reflection and the application of a gender perspective that demonstrates that an anthropology that privileges sight is an obstacle to the perception of the worlds of otherness. Second, in a political-practical way, I will use my own ethnographic example to offer a possible use of participant sensing for the study of gender, specifically masculinities, understanding participant sensing as a feminist tool that can perceive very subtle aspects of the reproduction of the androcentric gender system.

The ethnographic case study discussed here results from the field work I carried out with the Spanish National Team of 5-a-side soccer for blind people in category B1² during the summer months of 2011 on the

2. Category determined by an ophthalmological parameter whose range goes from the non-existence of light perception in both eyes to light perception, but with the inability to recognize the shape of a hand at any distance or in any direction.

campus of the European University of Madrid located in Villaviciosa de Odón (Madrid). During this period the team was preparing intensely for an international competition that would take place between August and September of that same summer. The team consisted of a group of blind men of very varied geographical origins and age³. None of them worked professionally in 5-a-side soccer and among their occupations were the sale of lottery tickets⁴, the law and journalism. Not all were blind from birth, but all belonged to the B1 category because of their visual characteristics. In addition, sighted people belonged to the team, as were the two goalkeepers (titular and substitute) and the members of the coaching staff, comprising two coaches (among whom was the national coach), a doctor, a physical trainer and a physiotherapist.

3. The adapted sport

As indicated by Niko Besnier and Susan Brownell (2012), the world of sports has become an ideal field to analyze issues central to the postmodern anthropological approach, such as modernity, body, gender, and I would add, the senses, whose purpose is to identify power relations not yet perceived. Despite the widespread confidence of sport as a social and cultural integrator of the first order, some anthropological and sociological analyzes have shown that it functions as a reproducer of dominant hierarchical systems (Díez Mintegui, 2003; Elias y Dunning, 1992; González-Abrisketa, 2013; Messner y Sabo, 1990).

To understand the experiences of blind players, mine as an ethnographer and also those of the spectators, in the context of an adapted sport such as 5-a-side soccer, I consider it necessary to emphasize that one of the important elements for these experiences is the modern individual, as the idealised subject, and the discourses derived from it, around which the sport revolves.

Feminist and gender studies have revealed that this idealised individual is identified as a heterosexual white male of upper-middle class and so

3. The players that made up the national team at that time came from the Spanish regions of Andalucía, Cataluña, Madrid, Murcia and Valencia. In addition, the team had a Moroccan player recently nationalized in Spain and called for the national team. Regarding age, one of the newest and the youngest of the players in the formation was twenty-five years old, while one of the oldest was forty-one. The ages of the rest of the players varied within that range.

4. The Spanish National Organization of the Blind (in Spanish, O.N.C.E.) organizes a daily lottery draw called “el cupón”, whose tickets are usually sold by blind employees on the street or in lottery booth.

sport, as a key institution for *biopower* (Foucault, 1987) that operates through bodies, has contributed to the *re-production* of *hegemonic masculinity*⁵ (Connell, 1995) to sustain a patriarchal gender order.

Norbert Elias y Eric Dunning (1992) expressed that civilizing processes promoted the modern character of sport by considering it as an effective instrument for the defense and expansion of the state through the forging of virile men prepared for both the war and leadership of the empire. The sports sphere was thus constituted as “one of the major male preserves and hence of potential significance for the functioning of patriarchal structures” (Dunning, 1992: 324). In addition, the disciplining of bodies, as argued by Michael Messner and Donald Sabo (1990) for sports at the beginning of the industrial age, has had an important impact on males to preserve a masculinity that is sometimes threatened by changes in the social roles of women.

Moreover, sport has served as a creator of masculinities oriented towards a capitalist economic system in need of a work force and, as Carmen Díez Mintegui (2003) showed in the case of soccer in Guipúzcoa (Basque Country, Spain), towards success and social protagonism. In this line, in her article *Cuerpos Desplazados*, Olatz González-Abrisketa (2013) shows us how, in the case of the Basque Country and the Basque *pelota*⁶, the bodies of women are separated from places of social protagonist, as it is the *pelota* court, given the metonymic relationship between these and the bodies of male *pelotaris*⁷, which are at the same time the embodiment of the ideals of the Basque nation which they embody.

As social studies of disability have demonstrated, modern individual has also been identified with a *normal* body or, in terms of Agustina Palacios Rizzo (2008), an *able* body. This is where another fundamental institution for biopower — biomedicine — acquired relevance for the sphere of sports practiced by people with disabilities.

5. Robert W. Connell defines hegemonic masculinity, following the concept of Gramsci's hegemony, as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell, 1995: 77).

6. *Pelota* is a sport that is practiced between two individuals or couples and consists of the alternative hitting of a ball against a wall called *frontón*. Players hit the ball with their hands or with certain instruments, depending on the modality. It is especially played in the north of Spain: in the Basque Country, Navarra and La Rioja, where lots of *pelota* courts are located in the town's main square, so they are at the same time a place for fundamental collective events such as festivals, rituals, concerts, public meetings, etc. According to González-Abrisketa, however, “Although anyone can informally occupy the square, the events worth contemplating are strictly masculine. Only games between men are worth seeing and most spectators are also men” (2013: 89).

7. Denomination of athletes that practice Basque *pelota*.

The terminology of medical-rehabilitation has focused the *a-normal* bodies as deficient bodies in a strictly biological and individual sense. Framed by this paradigm, the deficiency that a person carries can be overcome through rehabilitation therapy to redirect his body to a normal state. It is precisely this terminology that has permeated adapted sport, from its origin in the field of medicine as therapy for soldiers of war, embedding the character of rehabilitation within its practice⁸.

It is precisely the powerful intervention of biomedicine, as an institution of surveillance and control of bodies, that acts on adapted sport as one of the fundamental adaptations, alongside regulation and material aspects. On the one hand this resolves the incompatibility between the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity and able bodies and, on the other hand, deficient bodies *in-capable* of embodying such aspects. As we will be shown below, the discourse of the modern individual will be an important element, although not the only one, for the constitution of different places on the campus where the bodily and sensory experiences diverge from or approach the ideal subject until their embodiment.

The reproduction of order and gender identities, in this case masculinities, is therefore a profound bodily and sensory process, whose knowledge not only comes from recording and reflecting on the observed and heard, but also from my own sensoriality experienced in the field when trying to know the worlds of these blind men, that is, from a particular perception. The ethnographic result that I present here, without any pretense of objectivity, is therefore my attempt to offer a version of my experience as reliable as possible to the “context, negotiations and intersubjectivities through which the knowledge was produced” (Pink, 2009: 8).

4. An ethnographer emplaced in the place of blindness

Walking around campus

During my fieldwork, I often walked along the pedestrian paths that run through the campus with the blind soccer players to move between

8. The adapted sport, according to the Spanish agency specializing in information and social communication Servimedia (Fundosa Group) and the international Paralympic Committee in its publication Paralympics (2006), was born by the hand of the German neurologist of Jewish origin Ludwig Guttman, who after his exile to Great Britain in 1939, worked at the Stoke Mandeville Hospital (Aylesbury, England) developing the application of sports as a means of rehabilitation for a large number of males whose spinal injuries derived from their participation in the Second World War. This road led to the I Stoke Mandeville Games for paralytics in 1948 and the I Paralympic Games in Rome in 1960.

the university residence where they were staying and the usual sports facilities: the sports pavilion⁹ and the outdoor multipurpose field. Moving with them was a somewhat slow, noisy experience: they normally spoke loudly and sometimes stumbled, due to the trips and collisions that occurred from time to time. Time stretched, and distances seemed to be governed by another scale when attention was focused on the immediacy that surrounded us. On one occasion, one of the players grabbed my arm to walk. I felt rigid, tense: I had never led a blind person! It was not only my lack of experience that was making my body stiff; I also felt a certain invasion of my intimacy. It was an uncomfortable contact.

To move around the campus, the players organized their routes in a single line or in group. Normally they walked together supporting each other's hands on the shoulders of others, although the veterans of the team sometimes walked separately from the group. The sighted person leading would guide and warn of obstacles, such as "Left, right, careful with *mataciegos!*"¹⁰

Before reaching the doors of the sports pavilion, the scene of multiple training exercises, the group intensified their attention on the stairs they had to go up to reach the entrance. The concentration made the more talkative quieter and there was an increase in effective communication between them, with the non-blind people reporting on the characteristics of the stairs, such as the height and width of the steps. Once upstairs, conversations were restored.

There were several obstacles that occurred along the journeys they made daily through the campus, sometimes even referring to them with a particular jargon, as the example of *mataciegos*; but, day after day, their recognition made it easier and easier to walk to the training sites. However, the majority opted for a body contact that would serve as a guide, thus facilitating the walk and preventing the sometimes-painful collisions with objects. Bodily contact was almost permanent among them and was very useful, since it intensified the adaptation to the space that they had to travel. With hands resting on their partner's shoulders, each depended on the other to walk and avoid the multiple obstacles that the route offered. The bodies of these men, always willing to collaborate with someone for displacement, were highly instrumentalized. The upper limbs, the hands, above all, were extensions of a body that served to walk along with the

9. The basic facilities that were used inside the sports pavilion were the gymnasium and the indoor multipurpose court.

10. Word they usually use to refer to bollards (metal or concrete posts that are put on the sidewalk to keep vehicles out of it).

legs. Touching and testing were fundamental for perception and understanding the space in which a blind person develops.

Walking with them, moving in the way they did, as expressed by Jo Lee Vergunst and Tim Ingold (2006), constituted the use of an ethnographic sensory technique that opened the possibility of sharing and learning about their world through my body linked to another's body and the elements they bring together. Precisely, sensory anthropology proposes walking with others as a research technique that *entangles* (Ingold, 2008) ethnographers with the subjects of their research and with the places they generate when traveling through their environments (Pink, 2009). The *place*, as presented by Pink, drawing primarily on Ingold, is an open and changing event that comes from the movement and interaction of humans, non-human animals, things, stories, sensations, thoughts and, as noted above, the narratives in which the ethnographer is located or *emplaced* (Pink, 2009).

In her methodological proposal, Pink (2009) presented the paradigm of *emplacement* (Howes, 2005) as a continuation of the paradigm of *embodiment*¹¹ (Csordas, 1990), to which an important nuance was added: the environment. Attending to this new paradigm, the researcher is part of the social, sensory and material environments of the subjects of study and it is precisely our multisensory experience of these contexts, that is the starting point for the production of knowledge of such lived places (Pink, 2009).

During an informational conversation about the practice and contributions of 5-a-side soccer, one of the players, a regular of the national team since 1992, questioned me about the issues that had most grabbed my attention. Without thinking, I replied that I had been surprised by the continuity of contact between them, to which the player immediately nodded and commented that he sometimes said that they looked like “faggots with so much touching” (blind player of the Spanish National 5-a-side soccer Team, personal conversation, July 26, 2011). Thinking about this dialogue, I could not avoid connecting this evaluation with the feelings I had when leading one of the them for the first time; since, in my daily life, with few exceptions, relationships with other men are usually mediated by a careful space that separates my body from theirs. A greet-

11. Although the paradigm of *embodiment* of the 90s meant overcoming the mind-body dualism to understand the body not as an object of rational reflection but as a source of knowledge and agency, for Tim Ingold it was necessary to take a crucial step: recognizing that “[...] the body is the human organisms, as the process of embodiment is one and the same as the development of that organism in its environment” (Ingold, 1998: 28). Therefore, as Howes (2005) indicated, the *emplacement* paradigm implied an interrelation between the body and the mind, as well as between these and the environment.

ing, a gesture of friendship or a joke are the only moments when this distance is broken, but such moments are exceptional occasions within the socially and culturally accepted context in which I live.

According to Robert W. Connell, in the West it must be accepted that “the physical sense of maleness and femaleness is central to the cultural interpretation of gender” (Connell, 1995: 52), as gender relations are enacted and symbolized through corporeal performances. In this way, “the constitution of masculinity through bodily performance means that gender is vulnerable when performance cannot be sustained — for instance, as a result of physical disability” (Connell, 1995: 54); or, in this case, sensory disability. In other words, as discussed by Judith Butler (1990), gender identities would then be vulnerable when bodies cannot adapt to performative repetition acts according to the sociocultural regulation of the same. Thus, my reflection about the strong presence of touch, manifested through the high frequency of contact, came from a shared sensory that I had with that player that provoked a particular gender experience that undermined the ideal of the modern individual and, therefore, the close relationship between an able body and hegemonic masculinity. Faced with this, the shared experience was that of an abnormal masculinity or, depending on the hierarchical structure proposed by Connell (1995), a *subordinate masculinity*¹².

The tactile continuity, in addition, becomes a manifestation of dependence that contributes to forge that masculine identity of inferior status. In the biomedical field, a strong association has been promoted between the value of independence and human biology, far from the capacity for self-control and making decisions about one’s own life. According to Palacios Rizzo (2008), from the medical-rehabilitative model of disability, independence has been related to the number of daily tasks that can be performed without assistance. Through this connection between independence and the able body, these blind men, derived from their continued contact, assess their lack of individuality as a dependence of others, even though the tactile sensory domain is an important part of their own active, immediate and effective way to perceive and to develop their daily life. As David Le Breton indicates, “with the new feeling of being an individual, being himself, before being a member of a community, the body becomes the precise border that marks the difference between one man and another”

12. According to Connell (1995), talking of plural masculinities, there are relations of domination and subordination between men structured according to gender. This author, using homosexual men as an example, refers to this subordination as the product of a series of material practices, cultural and political exclusion, violence and economic discrimination. These material practices for subordination can also be valid for men with disabilities.

(Le Breton, 1990: 45), and it is exactly this bodily frontier that does not stand between these blind men, nor among the non-disabled who are close to them, given the practical use of a sense of proximity such as touch.

As will be shown below, the corporeal and sensory experience related to masculinity that I have described changes dramatically when the players are located in a specific place, the playing field.

5. Blind soccer players emplaced in the place of vision

The 5-a-side soccer field

On the field “it’s as if you could see” (blind player of the Spanish National Team of 5-a-side soccer, personal conversation, July 26, 2011).

Before entering the soccer field, the players put on their shin guards to protect their legs, knee pads, the *chichonera* (a soft helmet which reduces the effect of hits to the head), and the sweat-absorbing eyeshade. Some players also used a mask to provide extra protection to their face. Donning this clothing was a prelude to the fact that the characteristics of the contact between them were going to change drastically. The contact that had been useful for navigation on a daily basis disappeared to give rise to a contact governed by other characteristics.

Training on the field was fundamentally dependent on the oral guidance of the coaches and the other members of the coaching staff, and on oral communication between the players. While warming up, running in circles around the voices of the coaches, they did not touch or search, they only ran individually. Once they had warmed up they were ready to perform exercises with the ball. Each of them had a ball that belonged to him and with which he had to train to exercise his individual control of the ball. Among the exercises performed, some of the most frequent ones were those in which players face each other to take possession of the ball or to score a goal, as is the case of the so-called *king of the court*¹³, whose name already gives us a glimpse of the power that is granted to the one that exercises control of the ball and over others. Sometimes, the training objective was to improve skills of pressing opponents to prevent their play and disrupt their game. Thus, in these exercises of warm up and training and also in matches, the contact through the upper limbs of the body stops being about collaborative contact, instead becoming contact that aims to hinder stop, push, separate, prevent and neutralize the body of others to

13. *Rey de la pista* in Spanish language.

exercise control of the ball. Perception also shifts towards using senses, primarily the sense of hearing, to move, orient, and detect the position of teammates, opposition, the sound ball and the goals.

Wednesday, August 24, 2011, was the first day of the international championship. The National Teams of Argentina, Spain, England, Italy and Turkey faced each other to win a place in the London 2012 Paralympics. Around 7pm, the Turkish and Spanish National Team players entered the soccer field, which had been modified for the occasion. We settled around the field, among around a hundred spectators, the technical teams of each national team, the referees and the organizers. They began to warm-up a few minutes before the whistle marked the beginning of the game. The players moved around the field with ease, ran slowly, accelerating and slowing down again. Each one was then placed on one side or another of the field and, from the side fences that prevented them running out-of-bounds, they began to control the ball taking it from one side to the other. The bells rang, and the coaches gave instructions. Finally, the players, one by one, practiced goal shots.

As the match was about to start the eight blind players who had already taken their place on the field were joined by two goalkeepers, non-visually impaired, in the goals and two guides who stood behind the goal to facilitate the goal. The match began, and with it, the excitement. Each player constantly reported his position, the sound ball rolled, the goalkeepers organized the defense, the coaches guided the midfield and guides prepared the attack. The players ran after the ball and fought for their possession with force. On many occasions, the races ended in forceful collisions with other players or against the side fences. For example, one player took the ball, faced the goal and passed it to his teammate on the other side who received the ball with his feet, controlled it and ran towards the goal. Suddenly, he ran into a rival, they hit the fence, struggled for possession and the ball was thrown to the opposite side. A player heard the ball arrive, went towards it and extended his leg, but it passed by him. Another player, with more success, managed to intercept it listening as it bounced against the side fence. He was very close to the goal, the guide shouted at him, the player faced towards it, approached, delayed his right leg, tensed his musculature, shot with all his strength and the goalkeeper could not prevent the ball from entering the net. GOAL! The players celebrated, some individually and others hugged, raised their hands, shouted and smiled. The rest of the team, on the bench, celebrated. The audience applauded with encouragement.

When the closeness and the contact between the bodies in the field dissipates, when the players run, handle the ball, collide, search for the

ball and shoot at the goal, the separateness of the individual bodies is evident. The dependence they experienced outside the soccer field no longer existed on the field. The usefulness of the upper limbs is replaced by a greater intensity of verbal communication and the use of the legs and feet, all necessary for the handling of the ball and developing good team tactics. Far from being a body that collaborates with others to move, the individual body emerges to maintain control of the ball, which tightens its muscles, tightens its jaws, shows its teeth, screams, exerts its strength and protects itself from the opponent's crude attacks. In a field where there are no obstacles to be avoided, the hand becomes an appendage that helps the body to achieve displacements, ball control, soft passing punches and strong kicks.

It is the blind soccer players who are now emplaced in the place of the vision and, therefore, experience a different place: the field. As a result of this experience, the same veteran player I mentioned earlier, who was blind from an early age, during the same conversation, told me, with emotion, that "it's as if you could see" (blind player of the Spanish National Team of 5-a-side soccer, personal conversation, July 26, 2011). The body of the blind soccer player, whose sensory perception is reconfigured in accordance with the place, supposes the experience of the able body and the hegemonic masculinity that he now embodies in the field and that links, despite being blind, to the sense of vision. But not only blind players have that perception. The spectators are also participating in the creation of the place with their bodies as protagonists (González-Abrisketa, 2013), also share that experience that makes possible their identification with the bodies of the players. When blind players are in the field, it is common to hear people in the audience who, in amazement, say in a similar way: "they do not seem blind, it's as if they could see".

It is also in these moments, following feminist analyses that have linked the nation and gender (González-Abrisketa, 2013; Sharp, 1996), when the supreme values of the nation, such as freedom and independence, are lived and embodied, by the blind soccer players. As an example, the captain of the National Team points out very clearly that, among the contributions of soccer practice, independence is fundamental. As he suggests, training and playing soccer has made him live an independence that has also projected into his daily life at the time of unfolding through very different spaces:

Indoor soccer has given me a lot of orientation, it has given me a lot of independence in the aspect that, for example, on a soccer field there are four teammates and four rivals in a field of forty by twenty, yes it is true that you have guides, yes it is true that you have references, but it is you, you with the ball,

with your teammates, your rivals, deciding, knowing at all times where you are, how you are (captain of the Spanish National Team of 5-a-side soccer, personal interview, July 28, 2011).

I have recorded other statements that reveal similar perceptions. For example, the midfielder of the Argentine National Team of 5-a-side soccer *Los Murciélagos* (The Bats), in a documentary by Gabriel Antonielli and Matías Scilabra (2011), also talks about the freedom experienced in the field of play, saying “The truth is that, well, it was for me something very good. I have my life back. Well, and it is until now the place where I feel most free, where I do not depend on anyone when I play soccer on the field” (Antonielli and Scilabra, 2011: 11’26” – 11’43”).

Conclusions

The combination of Classen’s anthropological approach (1998) to the study of the senses in its gender aspect and the technique of participant sensing proposed by Pink (2009), as a questioning of the ethnographic method from a multisensory perceptual approach, has as its first consequence the overcoming of ethno- and androcentric biases of participant observation. Such an achievement makes participant sensing a critical methodological tool applicable to the field of ethnography, providing a feminist perspective for the study of society and culture, while the extension of feminist criticism to the terrain of sensory anthropology has a second outcome of great importance in its application to the study of gender: it reveals a perceptual dimension of it.

Gender, marked by the paradigm of *emplacement*, while not ignoring the body that performs it, re-signifies or resists, relocates or places itself in the *place*, or rather, immerses itself in the array of relations that occur between the distinct elements configuring that place. In this manner, gender, not only in relation to the bodies and discourses, but also with the objects and other components, converts itself in a cultural element that is also experienced sensorily through the emplaced body. As Connell indicates, referring to masculinity, gender is among other things “a certain feel to the skin, certain muscular shapes and tensions, certain postures and ways of moving” (Connell, 1995: 52). Nevertheless, one should have in mind that these experiences do not come exclusively from one correlation between bodies and gender structures, but from a wider conjuncture of relationships with other components, also present in the environment, that are fundamental for perception.

Therefore, based on the ethnographic example discussed here, I consider that participant sensing, as a feminist ethnographic technique that throws us more fully into the worlds of others, where not only images and words are important but also everything, material or not material, with which the subjects of study are related and that ethnographers can perceive once our body is in such context, is configured in the field of gender studies as an useful tool to analyze and delve into those perceptual aspects that, until now, have not been sufficiently considered in the field of anthropology.

Framed in this way, adapted 5-a-side soccer, as a practice developed in specific places that host or *displace* (González-Abrisketa, 2013) certain bodies, affects the gender status of blind soccer players through deep processes that, as I have already pointed out, occur in the plane of perception.

The experiences located outwith the playing field — where objects become potential obstacles, sighted people become guides and touch is characterized by its usefulness and continuity — entail the embodiment of a chain of signifiers: touch-dependence-disabled body that is contrary to the modern individual and emplaces their bodies practically out of any place (González-Abrisketa, 2013). Thus, blind players identify themselves with a masculinity inferior to the hegemonic. On the contrary, in the field of play, the experiences characterized by elements such as the sound ball, the rules of the game, the coach, the goalkeepers, the goal guides, the side fences and so on, in spite of the adaptation, emplace the players in a place where it is possible to physically and sensorily inhabit the world of visual perception, which entails the embodiment of the chain of signifiers: sight-independence-freedom-able body. In this context, blind players can now identify with hegemonic masculinity and the modern individual. This is how 5-a-side soccer for the blind operates to enhance, in a momentarily but effective manner, the male status of players and to sustain the reproduction of a patriarchal gender order.

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