What does it feel like to live here? Exploring sensory ethnography as a method for investigating lived determinants of health in place.

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This paper presents a novel ‘sensory ethnographic’ methodology for health research in the community. Specifically the paper reports on a current exploratory ‘sensory ethnography’ of social determinants of health in Logan-Beaudesert. The sensory ethnography is being conducted in partnership with the Logan-Beaudesert place based initiative on chronic disease.

While there is much academic and policy work that assumes an inexorable link between place and health, there is not much attention paid to the everyday observable and invisible ways in which this deterministic connection takes hold and plays out in people’s lives. That is, while we are all persuaded that there is a strong link between place and health, there is little in depth understanding of how specific places come to determine health, why, for whom, and in what circumstances. In recognition of this gap, this project draws on a multidisciplinary sensory ethnographic research design and team to investigate and render visible some links between a defined geographical place (Logan-Beaudesert) and the health and wellbeing of the people who live there.

Sensory ethnography is an expansive research methodology that is suitable for social research and interventions that want to understand or shape “place” as a meta-determinant of health and wellbeing. In contrast to other forms of ethnography, sensory ethnography emphasises what it feels like to inhabit particular social contexts, spaces, and places and in turn how people make meanings, act, and react in response to sensory experiences. Sensory ethnography builds understanding of how people’s ‘multisensorial’ experience of place (i.e. touch, taste, smell, sight, sound, movement, and so on) shapes their experience and subsequent health and wellbeing values, behaviours, and dispositions.

The research team will summarise the overarching sensory ethnographic approach and a range of data creation and analysis methods used in the exploratory study including: geographical information systems (GIS) mapping of local determinants of health data (quantitative and qualitative); photo voice and multimedia narratives by local residents; documentary photography; walk along interviews; and mixed media ethnographic observation of place. Examples of data will be used to highlight these different methods.