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Getting to Know the World Through Air**

Hauge, Bettina

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Analysis of the significance of fresh air from the outside and into the home – a qualitative, comparative study in the following countries:  
Denmark, France, England & Scotland

Bettina Hauge, MSc (anthropology), PhD, post.doc  
Copenhagen University, Dept. of Sociology  
Øster Farimagsgade 5  
1014 Kbh. K  
Denmark



# The Significance of Fresh Air from Outside: Getting to know the World through Air

## SUMMARY

During the autumn of 2009 and 2010 a qualitative, comparative study was performed in Denmark, France, England & Scotland, investigating the relation between the air we breathe, live with, and learn from and the air we practice or perform, for instance in the sense of airing out one's home. The purpose of the research was to investigate what people actually do with air: how we experience air, become knowledgeable about our environment through air, and include sociality in our actions relating to air. The analysis indicates patterns of use that reflect air as a vital element in our being-in-the-world as well as socially and bodily significant for shaping our everyday life, whether living in the countryside or the city. Air appeared as a non-reflected integrative practice in the everyday life that covered a.o. getting smells out of the house, making a circulation to avoid still air – both performed to feel control and show care for the health of the family.

## IMPLICATIONS

This research contributes with qualitative data on the use of fresh air from the outside into private residential. The study investigates the unmeasurable aspects of the use of fresh air from outside in order to describe how we *feel at home in the world through air and air practices* is not answered measurably. Certain identical patterns between the countries appeared when analyzing the empirical data: In its own way 'fresh air from the outside' is not about 'fresh' or 'air', but rather deals with the notion of creating a 'good indoor environment', i.e. in an *emotional* way, creating a sense of belonging and of feeling at home in one's house, something that obviously involves many other aspects than 'fresh air'. 'Fresh air' is shown as a cross-cultural, social and emotional phenomenon, and the study thus contributes to the indoor air research field by describing the sociality of air and providing a more holistic perception of what air signifies to people.

## KEYWORDS

Airing practices; Anthropology, qualitative methods; People's everyday lives; Phenomenology; Impression management.

## INTRODUCTION

Air is a hybrid constituted by several components and, like the wind, a dynamic phenomenon that may be measurable in terms of wind force, temperature, humidity, air change per hour in a room. This research is an attempt to come closer to an understanding of the non-measurable aspects of air: By looking at what people DO with the fresh air from outside, how they think about fresh air, the study investigates the *sociality of air*. Relevant insights on human behaviour regarding air and air activities and management may be gained from qualitative research, providing both manufacturers and researchers in the field with highly detailed, descriptive information. To get such insights a comparative, qualitative research project was performed in Denmark, France, England & Scotland, studying the use and significance of fresh air from the outside and into people's private homes, such as how the air was perceived and the situations and times in which fresh air was used. The aim was to produce country specific s and to compare differences and similarities in airing practices between the countries. The study introduced theories and concepts inductively during the analysis of the empirical data. The research project was financed by VELUX A/S conducted by the University of Copenhagen.

## DESIGN, METHODS & ANALYSIS

This qualitative study focus on the immaterial, sensuous and invisible phenomenon: Fresh air from the outside and into the home ('FAFOH'), and the practices involved with this - what people *do* with air. The most appropriate design of such an investigation is explorative and the following methods were used: *In-depth interviews* based on a semi-structured interview guide, a guide that invites the informant to describe and tell about their motives for use of fresh air. *Photos and videos* were used to illustrate practices



involved with fresh air. *Observations* on airing practices were noted during the visit. The interview and a guided tour in the home took appr. 2 hours, the shortest 1.25 hours, the longest around 3.25. All interviews were transcribed in full length for in-depth analysis. No questions during the interview were asked with a wish to test hypothesis or to find or eliminate specific findings, but with the aim to find the informants' motivations and values with respect to airing practices. Before going into the field relevant literature was studied so as to inform the design of the interview guide, however, never read in order to construct hypothesis but merely used for inspiration. Theories and concepts, such as Goffman's 'impression management' (1959), Ingolds concept of 'dwelling' (2000), literature from the anthropology of the senses (Classen 1993, Howes 1991, 2006), pointing out the cultural significance of the senses, and practice theories (Shove 2003) underlining the importance of the enacting of bodily performances, were introduced in the process of analysis as explanatory tools on the findings. The analysis was based on all the data gathered – interviews, observations, photos, and videos. During the analytical phase repeated themes and words were looked for, identified (hand coded) and, eventually, categorized. A qualitative study often points out categories or dimensions of importance regarding the practice or situation being studied – and the use of fresh air appears to have 3 dimensions: A functional (practical features), an aesthetic (bodily and sensory features), and a social (care and impression management).

### **Informants: Amount and selection criteria:**

The amount of informants and the selection criteria were decided in cooperation with VELUX A/S: 7-11 familiens in each country, making a total of 29 (counting 1 member in the household only, although 2 usually participated). Both men and women were included, in a few cases also children. The following selection criteria were used:

- *Building*: House owners or major privately owned flats, some with VELUX skylights but not necessarily. The hypothesis is that owners will be more attentive to air out in order to take care of the house than people that rent there home.
- *Division between city/countryside*: Both types of areas to be included in order to hear about importance of contexts (smells, sounds, pollution)
- *Division between old/new houses*: So as to include the importance of the buildings for airing out practices
- *Warm & cold, wet & dry areas*: To make sure to have the potentially different perspectives from living in different thermal zones
- *Life phase*: Chosen with a view to where the largest VELUX target group is and based on expectations that the different phases of life implies different activities in and use of the home (activities increase with children) – this may be seen in different use of FAFOH

<b>Life phase</b>	<b>Informants/country</b>	<b>Total</b>
The young family	DK 3	11
	GB/SC 5	
	FR 3	
Families with teenager/s	DK 2	8
	GB/SC 3	
	FR 3	
Couples or singles	DK 2	10
	GB/SC 3	
	FR 5	

Table 1: Informants as per life phase/country

All the selection criteria were met. Socio-economically the majority of informants were middle-class or upper middle-class families owning one house, in France, however, many informants had second homes which is not the common to the French in general. With 29 informants and the variation in the group, the investigation is, of course, in no way representative. Is it then possible to compare airing practices at all,



knowing that actions and air practices will depend on a.o. cultural perceptions regarding smell and smell management; individual bodily characteristics (such as suffering from allergies or feeling cold/warm); the house itself; the context, such as particular risks in the area; climate zone; seasons? The logical answer is no, nonetheless we shall attempt this a.o because identical words and themes were repeated in all interviews. Still, recognizing that it is always a reductionist action to make comparisons in qualitative research the following 'results' are rather to be seen as main impressions.

## RESULTS

From the analysis of the collected empirical data certain common traits were found that relate to air itself: Smell was a constant part of the air management activities. To arrange oneself in the world is to a high degree done with reference to smells and here it is worth remembering that the olfactory sense is the physiologically strongest sense of all our senses. 'Fresh air' as a sensory phenomenon may best be grasped in its negation: When the air is *not* fresh – but, for instance, smelly - it is easier to talk about the quality of the air since it then requires specific attention. In cities with smog and air pollution people think twice before airing out but, ordinarily, fresh air, like many other artefacts and actions in the home, is rarely something we reflect upon. We just 'do it' and it is from the doing that we ascribe significance to air - but in order to 'do it' certain objects are important, such as windows, doors, cracks in the house, chimneys, etc., helping to provide us with the fresh air. Most of these require some kind of action in order to serve as a means to get the fresh air *into* the house, or the air in the house *out*, practices that reflect that the house is alive and inhabited. Airing practices are performed in the *home* and with the house itself as a partner and this is why we may think of the use of FAFOH as a way of everyday life *performance*. Air performances are complex cultural practices that imply activity and use. It is through our creative, dynamic activities regarding the use of the intangible air from the outside and into our homes that we make a social, material imprint in the world.

The analysis showed that air is used to *reflect our engagement with the environment, it changes and touches us and may thus be seen as having an agency of its own, it signifies notions of identity and gender, it represents cultural heritage, morality, conceals particular aspects of social life, and so on*. An example: Taking care of air, 'air management', such as making the air at home fresh - may be associated with certain taboos since the need for fresh air often arises in rooms (bathroom, bedroom) connected with impurity, sin, or shame. In these cases smells in the air are something to be avoided or hidden. So fresh air may be associated with things, ideas or situations that people wish to avoid, hide, or get rid of. In this sense we are able to confirm the importance of Goffman's 'impression management' concept. We may get an idea of the importance of having fresh air in the home - yet in a synthetic form - from the sales figures of air freshener sprays: In 2007 the market in the UK for 'air freshener products' was GBP 351 Million (Guerney 2008, ENHR). Fresh air appears indexical of wellness!

The findings have been divided into 3 categories so as to better express the informant motivations in their daily use of fresh air. From the analysis, documented by descriptions and statements of the informants, fresh air seems particularly relevant and used in the following situations:

### Functional dimension (practical features)

- To air out rooms with a high humidity (bathroom, bedroom, and when drying clothes inside) – *common to all countries*
- When cleaning (fresh air is needed esp. when vacuum cleaning, washing floors, doing the beds - in order to dry the floors faster and get rid of the dust) – *common to all*
- Airing habits are performed in dialogue with weather and the house itself – *common to all*

### An aesthetic (bodily and sensory features)

- As a heat regulator, getting either cold or warm air in or out, but also regulating bodily heat (one informant refers to her climacteric and an urgent need for fresh air, another refers to feeling hot from ironing) – *common to all*



- To get smell out of the house (from cooking, bath, bedroom, or an entrance filled with sports shoes) – *common to all, but slightly more referred to in Denmark and France*
- To have a 'good, fresh smell' in your home – *common to all, but air fresheners appear more popular in England and Scotland*
- To get a circulation and get rid of still air – *common to all, slightly more in Denmark and France*
- To be able to smell oneself – *common to all, slightly more in Denmark and France*
- To enjoy the breeze – *common to all, slightly more in Denmark and France*

#### **A social (care and impression management)**

- To bring sounds and smells from the surroundings into the house – *perhaps more important to Danes and the French*
- To show and feel control – *perhaps seen mostly in Denmark and England and Scotland*
- FAFOH brings to the individual a sense of freedom, makes you able to "push the walls" – *common to all*
- Thinking about the health of the family – *common to all*

Three further traits came forth when analyzing the gathered material (interviews, observations, photos, videos):

(1) Airing out increased in importance in transition periods, when the informants went from one phase to another (usually involving a new 'identity') and where an absence was involved: Going from night to day; from work to leisure time; coming back from the summer cottage to one's home.

(2) Couples did not always agree on how to air out and differences in opinion caused much annoyance. This was common, but the French referred to it more.

(3) People also often defined themselves as either an 'opener' or a 'closer'. This airing practice may in fact be gender specific, at least women refer to themselves as openers and their husbands as closers. The opposite only came forth in a few cases, yet some women described themselves as being/feeling colder than their husbands and thus preferring closed windows.

Reasons for NOT airing out were given as well: Economy (concerns about increasing heating costs from airing out); Noise (traffic sounds) and smells are strategically avoided - people still air out they just pick their moments more carefully; Context specific activities/situations (open windows are avoided because of fear of little children falling out of the windows or getting cold from the wind). These are common to all countries but to various degrees.

## **DISCUSSION**

How may we perceive the above as representing sociality to people, a 'social significance of air'? To show how air is socially composed and how it creates bonds between the individual and the environment, making us feel at home in the world, I briefly turn to the anthropology of the home - since certain concepts from this field turned out to be useful in the analysis. This research field addresses the sociality of practices performed at home, such as airing out, and the interrelations between home, things, and the people living there. 'Home' is what people make out of their houses in order to dwell in them and for creating this 'dwelling' (Ingold 2000), i.e. a sense of feeling at home, practices are important, *but in an emotional perspective*. Practices constitute sociality in the form of representing particular emotions and will include ways to manage other people's impressions of you and your home (Goffmann 1959, Shove 2003) – and they constitute pure sensory enjoyment too (Classen 1991, Howes 1996, 2001).

When using this perspective and looking at the situations of how air is used at home the following emotions appear:

- *Care, love & concern* - as seen when caring about the health of the family, airing out in the children's room as a sign of love, being worried about problems in the house caused by humidity, about Radon or about getting/provoking diseases



- *Control* - appearing when people wish to mark and maintain a feeling of control over their home and its smells (impression management), thus avoiding the risk of being thought of or referred to as a smelly house
- *Enjoyment* - a bodily, sensory way of feeling and being part of the world, through the breeze, enjoying it, the smells of nature, the sounds of the city and of nature.

In its own way FAFOH is not about ‘fresh’ or ‘air’ but rather deals with the notion of creating a ‘good indoor environment’, i.e. in an *emotional way* by creating a sense of belonging and feeling at home in one’s house, something that obviously involves many other aspects than fresh air.

The situations described under RESULTS reflect that fresh air and its use have *functional, social/emotional, and bodily* characteristics, but of course these characteristics cannot be isolated from the context in which air is used.

The following figure illustrates the three dimensions of fresh air and its use: The functional, social/emotional, and bodily characteristics, where social and bodily characteristics should be seen as individual, subjective dimensions and functional characteristics as more visible, measurable aspects of fresh air. Boundaries are, of course, not sharp, nor are the dimensions in any way to be seen as oppositions.

<b>Social/emotional &amp; bodily characteristics</b>	<b>Functional characteristics</b>
Governing the smell of the home and oneself; body & senses	Smells and sounds from the context
Care, love & concern (a clean home=healthy): <i>“There MUST be a pleasant indoor climate for the little ones [...] Not a smell of old, no, it stays in the clothes. I don’t want that for the children.”</i> (Charlotte, daycare mother)	Techniques for indoor climate regulations (warm/cold; humid/dry, etc.), control (in order to control heating costs)
Pure enjoyment, the breeze, and feeling a need to be aired out, feeling free: <i>“Fresh air is almost like an alternative to taking a glass of wine. I think it’s because you relate the fresh air to freedom.”</i> (Anne Margrethe)	Fresh air as a practical help (e.g. the floor dries faster with FAFOH)

Fig. 1: Dimensions of fresh air and its use

## CONCLUSIONS

The analyses show that there are certain identical patterns in the informants’ use and perception of fresh air from outside. In the performance of our daily life activities fresh air is used in an unreflected, ritualized way, in situations where we go from one phase to another (transition periods), e.g. coming home after working, returning to the home after a vacation, waking up after a night’s sleep. There is also a practical dimension (functional) of using fresh air, to get humidity out, when vacuum cleaning or making the beds, all performed in dialogue with the weather and the house itself. Fresh air also has the ability to provoke and awaken our senses, serving as an effective heat and body heat regulator, helping us to control smells in the indoor air and to have a “good, fresh smell” in your home, and making it possible to get rid of still air. In our wish to show care for our family and to maintain impression management, fresh air has a significant role: It allows us to feel individual freedom and control over the indoor climate. ‘Fresh air from outside’ has been found to be much more than ‘fresh’ or ‘air’, it has its own sociality that goes beyond the technical understanding of fresh air. Fresh air is a profound link to our experience of being and feeling alive as a human being.





FAFOH is about making a ‘good indoor environment’ the *emotional way*, by creating a sense of belonging and feeling at home in one’s house. Natural components or constituents of air affect the form, perception and the practices of air, but the house itself and the needs of the everyday life have their own ways of creating specific needs for fresh air: Old furniture may require airing on a regular basis due to its particular smell and the wish to avoid having a smelly home; drying clothes inside or living in an area with high emissions of Radon also influence on airing practices, as do cleaning, cooking, doing the beds, or ironing. Fresh air is *a reflection of life and nature*, and as such it *must be felt as in movement, dynamic*.

Air as a medium is not so much an interactant as the very condition of people’s interaction with the environment as they live their lives, and an interactant that creates a sense of belonging and being in the world, feeling at home in it, through activities that involve the FAFOH. When transmitting the outside environment air creates within the individual not just a knowledge of the world but a sense of belonging. Thus FAFOH brings, in a literal sense, nature *into* the home, by providing people with sounds and smells from their surroundings – and culture *out* of the home, by getting rid of unwanted social absences or embarrassing smells. As a medium for nature air enables the individual to attain a specific attention *à la vie*, an awakening of the senses, as well as a way to greet nature. We thus listen to our environment through air, by using our bodies and senses and by paying attention to our environment. Air is transmitting life, enabling people to feel alive by connecting them with the environment. The fresh air from the outside can thus be seen as a strong agent, capable of making people feel at home in the world. The not so fresh air from the outside obviously does not contribute to create a sense of feeling at home in the world, rather a sense of being insecure or even sick. Both, however, precisely indicating that air, whether fresh or not, has a dynamic force of its own and makes people be part of, connect to, and reflect upon the environment. Air practices can be seen as performances of social, functional and bodily character, establishing this bond between the individual and the environment and, in doing this, important to our identity.

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