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Feeling good, sensory engagements, and time out: embodied pleasures of running

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ABSTRACT

Despite considerable growth in understanding of various aspects of sporting and exercise embodiment over the last decade, in-depth investigations of embodied affectual experiences in running remain limited. Furthermore, within the corpus of literature investigating pleasure and the hedonic dimension in running, much of this research has focused on experiences of pleasure in relation to performance and achievement, or on specific affective states, such as enjoyment, derived *after* completing a run. We directly address this gap in the qualitative literature on sporting and exercise embodiment by contributing novel insights on the mind-body pleasures of running via focusing analytic attention towards the pleasures recalled by runners as experienced *during* positive, rewarding running experiences. Applying conceptual insights drawn from sociological phenomenology, we analyse data from an in-depth, event-focused interview study with distance runners who reported positive, rewarding experiences in recent recreational runs. Through reflexive thematic analysis, we present findings in relation to three themes: (1) 'running feels like it should'; (2) sensory engagements; and (3) time out. The study contributes fresh perspectives, both conceptually and in relation to data-collection approach, to a small literature on the lived experience of pleasure in sport, exercise and physical cultures.

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Introduction

Running is one of the most popular forms of physical activity (PA) globally (Hulteen et al. 2017). Responding to calls for increased scholarly attention towards embodied experiences of sport and physical cultures (e.g. Sparkes 2009), there has been considerable growth in qualitative and also phenomenological research on embodiment in distance-running, including the affective and inter-actional dimensions. This literature has illuminated understanding of: gendered aspects of running (Faulkner 2018; McGannon and McMahon 2021); embodied experiences of injury (Bluhm and Ravn 2022; Hall, Rhodes, and Papatthomas 2021; Lev 2019, 2021) and psychopathology (Busanich, McGannon, and Schinke 2016). The sensory dimensions of running (Allen-Collinson and Jackman 2022; Hall, Allen-Collinson, and Jackman 2022; Hockey 2006) have also been explored, along with: inter-relational features of co-running (Ronkainen, Harrison, and Ryba 2014; Shipway, Holloway, and Jones 2013); runner identity (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2007; Fiset 2015); and phenomenological dimensions of endurance (Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2016; Lev 2021). Researchers have also

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investigated the so-called 'runner's high' (Stoll 2019; Whitehead 2016), and experiencing flow (Jackman et al. 2021).

Although understanding of sporting and exercise embodiment has accumulated, to date, the multidimensional, lived, embodied pleasures of sport and physical cultures in general remain under-researched (Caudwell 2015; Pringle, Rinehart, and Caudwell 2015), including in running (Nettleton 2013). Over the last two decades, calls have grown for researchers to embrace hedonic perspectives in various fields (e.g. psychology, sociology). To date, however, research on the pleasures of running has mainly focused on success and achievement (Caudwell 2015), and (re)configuring the effects of bodily pain as pleasurable (Lev 2019), topics that are relatively consistent with dominant discourses surrounding performance and achievement, and the 'hard work' of sport and exercise. Lev (2019) suggested runners enjoyed the 'effects' of bodily pain, effects that appear to represent a reflective experience described *after* running, for example, 'feeling sore muscles *after* a long run is the best feeling in the world' (Lev 2019, 799, emphasis added). This resonates with notions of reminiscence, wherein enjoyment is described *post hoc* (Smith, Harrison, and Bryant 2014) and the effort exerted evaluated retrospectively (Inzlicht, Shenhav, and Olivola 2018), sometimes considerably post-event; but is not well-suited to accounting for in-the-moment pleasures that are 'lived' as pleasurable *during* running, as is the case with phenomena such as flow (Csikszentmihalyi, Latter, and Weinkauff Duranso 2017). Although some analytic attention has been directed towards these more 'immediate' embodied experiences of running pleasure, alongside experiences of 'dis-pleasure' (Allen-Collinson and Jackman 2022), given the centrality and significance of pleasure to human life, the relative paucity of research on embodied affectual experiences in running is somewhat surprising. We sought to address this gap, by drawing on a theoretical framework particularly appropriate for exploring mind-body linkages in sport and exercise: sociological phenomenology.

Sociological phenomenology

In employing this sociological form of 'empirical phenomenology' (Martínková and Parry 2011), we emphasise that we depart from 'pure' philosophical phenomenology, such as Husserlian ([1913] 2002) transcendental phenomenology, which aimed radically to unsettle traditional habits of thought, both common-sense and scientific. Whilst in agreement with this latter phenomenological aim, here we employ a phenomenologically-inspired form of sociology, or 'sociologised phenomenology' (Allen-Collinson 2009), as originally developed by Schütz (1972). This similarly seeks to question and investigate taken-for-granted assumptions underpinning 'commonsense' understandings used in everyday life. For Husserlian phenomenology, the challenge was to identify the layers of taken-for-grantedness enveloping a phenomenon, via the phenomenological *epochê*: a form of temporary bracketing or 'standing back from' the phenomenon as subjectively encountered in the immediacy of the everyday 'natural attitude', to identify and thematise beliefs and presuppositions about the phenomenon. Whilst as sociological phenomenologists, we acknowledge that 'full' bracketing is an impossibility, nevertheless we consider it good research practice to make best efforts to identify taken-for-granted aspects of everyday life, and study these as lived within their own socio-cultural and physical-cultural contexts.

Of relevance to research on sport and physical cultures generally, is Merleau-Ponty's (2001) emphasis on the corporeal dimension of the mind-body-world nexus, and our own lived body (*le corps propre*) as the standpoint of perception. This lived subject-body cannot be reduced to a thing-like object, but is rather oneself-as-subject. Different modes of experiencing oneself in-the-world are also explored in the phenomenological work of Leder (1990), whose conceptualisation of the 'dis-appearing' and 'dys-appearing' body, respectively, is germane to our study. In terms of the 'dis-appearing' body, Leder (1990) describes how the body may be experienced as largely 'absent' from our conscious mind during everyday life. Our consciousness is free to be directed outwards to the world; we thus experience an 'ecstatic' body from which 'rays of intentionality radiate outward' (Leder 1990, 73). In contrast, when encountering pain, injury, illness, and suffering, our body shifts

from this 'absent' or backgrounded position to become an object of intentionality. Then, a state of bodily 'dys-appearance' prevails: our intentionality shifts from an outward-facing aspect, interoceptively to the site of corporeal pain or discomfort. This inward-facing intentionality has also been demonstrated in more positive, pleasurable experiences of 'intense embodiment' (Allen-Collinson and Owton 2015) and 'eu-appearance', which Zeiler (2010) describes as a bodily mode of being where the body appears to the subject as something good, easy or well (see also Gross 2021).

With this strong focus on embodiment, existential phenomenology has inspired the use of 'empirical phenomenology' (Martínková and Parry 2011) in a number of studies in sport and physical cultures, such as performance swimming (McNarry, Allen-Collinson, and Evans 2021), distance-running (Allen-Collinson et al. 2019; Bluhm and Ravn 2022), parkour (Clegg and Butryn 2012), dance (Purser 2018; Ravn and Hansen 2013), and existential learning in and through sport (Ronkainen et al. 2022), for example. As emphasised above, we did not use philosophical phenomenology, but rather, we applied phenomenological conceptual insights to data generated by qualitative methods; an approach employed highly effectively in other sport and physical-cultural research (e.g. Bluhm and Ravn 2022; McNarry, Allen-Collinson, and Evans 2021; Ravn and Hansen 2013).

The research

The current research was grounded in the interpretivist tradition and involved in-depth 'event-focused interviews' (Jackman et al. 2022) with runners sampled on the basis that they recently partook in a recreational run described as positive and rewarding. The 12 participants (Table 1) were drawn from a larger project that analysed runners' subjective experiences during positive, rewarding runs, through a psychological lens, integrating models on optimal experiences with self-regulation frameworks (Jackman et al. 2021). In the current paper, we draw on interviews conducted on average less than one day after ($M = 20.77$ hours later) recreational runs during which all 12 participants described temporary states that we interpreted as flow (Csikszentmihalyi 2002), and upon which we report in detail elsewhere (Jackman et al. 2021). Although different conceptual views exist on flow experiences in exercise (see Jackman et al. 2019), flow is defined as an intrinsically rewarding state characterised by a perceived sense of control, and perception that tasks can be performed more effortlessly than normal, even in challenging situations (Csikszentmihalyi 2002). Our focus on flow was deemed suitable given that, as Csikszentmihalyi, Latter, and Weinkauff Duranso (2017, 26) point out, the characteristics of flow 'are all highly pleasurable in their own right ... [and] ... this sense of pleasure differentiates flow from other forms of peak experience'. For some time, researchers have noted that flow differs from the so-called 'runner's high' (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi, Latter, and Weinkauff Duranso 2017; McInman and Grove 1991), the latter of which is considered by some to be a chemically-induced phenomenon occurring during or after endurance activity (see Siebers,

Table 1. Participant characteristics and sampling information.

Pseudonym	Gender	Nationality	Age	Years running	Days running per week	Sampling rationale
Jane	Female	British	25	13	4-5	Self-reported
Hazel	Female	British	28	8	5	Identified
Natalie	Female	British	26	0.50	3	Self-reported
Jason	Male	Canadian	30	5	5	Self-reported
Sarah	Female	British	27	7	3	Self-reported
Mark	Male	British	23	3	6	Self-reported
Jack	Male	British	30	6	4-5	Self-reported
Andy	Male	British	20	3	5	Self-reported
Zoe	Female	British	33	19	2-3	Self-reported
Sonia	Female	Irish	29	14	3	Identified
Holly	Female	British	29	6	3	Self-reported
Simon	Male	British	35	0.50	3	Identified

Biedermann, and Fuss 2022), whereas flow is more reliant on psychosocial factors (Csikszentmihalyi, Larter, and Weinkauff Duranso 2017; Stoll 2019).

After gaining ethical approval from Patricia's university, we purposively sampled participants following event-focused interview guidelines (Jackman et al. 2022). Accordingly, participants were eligible if aged 18 or over and they recently had a positive, rewarding experience in a recreational run. Two recruitment approaches were used: (1) interested participants who contacted Patricia after seeing study advertisements posted on social media sites (e.g. Twitter) were asked to contact her as soon as possible after a self-perceived positive, rewarding running experience; and (2) Patricia contacted potential participants after becoming aware of potentially eligible individuals, based on social media posts. Once participants satisfied the eligibility criteria and provided informed consent to partake, Patricia arranged an interview as soon as possible after the relevant run. Most participants, referred to hereafter by pseudonyms, were regular, recreational runners.

Drawing on guidelines for event-focused interviews (Jackman et al. 2022), we sought rich, in-depth recollections of participants' experiences during the specific positive, rewarding run upon which they were sampled. The interviews (M length = 74.2 minutes) were conducted online by Patricia, who herself is a runner and experienced interviewer. Participants were asked to reflect on the run and describe their experience chronologically, with a semi-structured approach adopted to explore areas of interest that arose during the interviews, via curiosity-driven questions (Smith and Sparkes 2016). After initial questions to develop rapport, participants were asked to provide information regarding the run, and a chronological description of events or stages recounted from the activity. As each participant recalled the run sequentially, Patricia took brief notes to develop a chronological experiential account, with a particular interest in the turning points recounted. Drawing on this initial description, the interviewer then posed questions to elicit elaborative details on the runners' experience during each of the specific stages identified. Thus, each interview was grounded in, and shaped by, participants' own interpretations of their recollected experiences during these particular runs. In addition, participants identified the period during the run when they felt their experience was positive and rewarding. Before finishing, interviewees were invited to add any further relevant information not previously discussed.

Our analysis, drawing flexibly on guidelines for reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019, 2021), did not progress in a linear fashion, but was a recursive journey involving regular iterations back and forth between stages (Braun and Clarke 2021). After transcribing the interview recordings, Patricia read and re-read the transcripts to enhance familiarity and embeddedness in the data. She next systematically analysed the dataset, interpreting meaningful segments of texts concerning the embodied pleasures of running as described by participants, labelling these to generate initial codes. For example, a segment of text that included the extract, 'it seemed to flow more easily or effortlessly', was labelled as 'running feels easy/effortless'. Coherent with our interview approach, coding focused on data pertaining to the period(s) participants identified as positive and rewarding, although for our analysis we sought to go beyond simplistic notions of 'positive' and 'rewarding', focusing attention instead on interpreting the meaning of this to participants. After developing initial codes, Patricia reviewed these, and combined those codes interpreted as holding shared meanings, to form candidate themes. For instance, the codes 'running feels easy/effortless' and 'there was no discomfort' were among the codes contributing to the candidate theme, 'running feels like it should'. To help make sense of, and connect, patterns of shared meaning across the dataset, Patricia also engaged in thematic mapping (Braun and Clarke 2021). At this point, the codes and candidate themes were shared with the second, third, and fourth authors. In line with the 'critical friends' process (Smith and McGannon 2018), the second, third, and fourth authors, all of whom have different disciplinary backgrounds, were encouraged to challenge, and suggest (novel) alternatives to Patricia's interpretations. Consequently, this generated new interpretative insights that deepened our analysis. For instance, theoretical insights drawn from phenomenological conceptualisations of *durée* or 'inner-time' were helpful in analysing runners' experiences of 'time out'. After further development and review, three themes were named, defined, and written-up, with participant

quotes used to communicate the analytic interpretations. Based on feedback from peer reviewers, we reflected further on our analysis, revisiting the dataset and drawing on new literature to interpret the dataset in our revised write-up. As a result of this iterative process, and engagement with the *ethos* of bracketing (whilst acknowledging the impossibility of *complete* bracketing) to challenge individual pre-suppositions, three key themes portraying the pleasures of running, described by the participants, were generated: (1) 'running feels like it should'; (2) sensory engagements; and (3) time out.

Findings and discussion

'Running feels like it should'

When I started the run, I was like 'right, cool. I'm going to be tired because of yesterday's run'. But after a mile or so it took me to warm-up . . . I felt really good and I could just switch off again, and I think, for me, it was the state of being able to switch off and just take in everything and remember how lucky I am to live where I live and to be able to take in the views and all of that. It was just a very pleasant experience. (Jack)

The above quote from Jack illustrates shifting mind-body awareness. When starting the run, Jack expected his body to be tired due to the previous day's session, but only a mile or so into the run, his body 'dis-appears' from the forefront of consciousness, so that he can 'switch off', shifting awareness to the outer world, in an ecstatic mode (Leder 1990, 21). As Whitehead (2016) notes, this kind of phenomenal experience of relative effortlessness can be understood only within the context of the expectation of 'effortful-ness'. In addition to relative running-ease, participants also described somatic awareness and intense embodiment experiences (Allen-Collinson and Owton 2015) of 'eu-appearance' (Zeiler 2010), with the embodied pleasures of running typically evolving as the run unfolded. The initial stage of the run often involved a period of actively monitoring corporeal sensations and running at a gentler pace to enable runners to warm-up and loosen their body. Paralleling the above example, several (although not all) runners spoke about feelings of heaviness, mild discomfort, or stiffness in the first few hundred metres or early kilometres. In some cases, this stemmed from a more intense workout the day before, with their subsequent run being an easy 'recovery' run. Intentionality towards these bodily sensations resonates with Leder's (1990) concept of bodily 'dys-appearance'. For many athletes and sportspeople, such as performance swimmers (McNarry, Allen-Collinson, and Evans 2021) and runners and boxers (Allen-Collinson and Owton 2015), a corporeal warm-up period is deemed essential to prepare the body (and mind) for training. For participants, this corporeal 'warming up' often involved initial bodily sensations, such as discomfort, fatigue, or heaviness, gradually becoming more 'backgrounded' and even absent, thus cohering with Leder's (1990) notion of bodily dis-appearance. This latter state was captured by the sense that the runners were moving 'naturally' and as though they were on 'autopilot', with the often-intense cognitive-corporeal demands of running no longer prominent in conscious awareness, freeing up the runners to direct attention to the outer world and 'switch off' from 'controlling' their running locomotion. As one runner explained:

I felt in control of the movements, but not in control of me actually *doing* the movements, if that makes sense. (Sarah)

Can you explain that a little bit more? (Interviewer)

Yeah, so I felt like I was in control and my breathing was good and the movements were flowing, but I didn't actually feel like I was consciously *doing* that. (Sarah)

How does that compare to normal? (Interviewer)

So compared to normal, I'm probably more aware of like trying to make sure that my stance is good, and my gait is right, and I'm sort of upright, etc. But I was doing that without realising yesterday. (Sarah)

Sarah's portrayal of the 'flowing' feeling of movement, without seeking consciously and agentially to control her bodily movement, resonates with Merleau-Ponty's (2001, 137) understanding of 'motility as basic intentionality', and with his (somewhat elusive) concept of 'motor intentionality' (Merleau-Ponty 2001, 138, footnote). This latter concept, Jackson (2018, 764) initially describes as 'a *bodily* consciousness of something or other, a *mobile* directedness or orientation of the subject towards something' (italics in original). Furthermore, the notion that being more 'switched on', and needing agentially to engage cognitive control during 'normal' runs, represented a contrasting experience to the pleasures of bodily ease and flow also conveyed by others. For example, commensurate with Zeiler's (2010) conceptualisation of eu-appearance, Jason commented on the pleasant rhythm and feelings of ease that captured his experience for 20 minutes during the run described below. This contrasted vividly with the intentional control he had been seeking to exert over his 'dys-appearing' body earlier in the run, particularly in relation to working his leg muscles, and having to engage in 'temperature work' (Allen-Collinson et al. 2019) to contend with the cold, including later in the run:

It took me a bit of time to warm up, but I guess as soon as I warmed up, I got into this rhythm that felt pleasant and I had music on and then, within like 500 metres, the trail starts being really steep, it was going fine. But then all of a sudden, there was a song by Eminem that came on to my playlist and I think it was called 'Until It Collapses', but the song talked about how essentially you might come on a time where you want to give up and then, it's a bit cliché, but you need to find the inner strength in you. When I heard those lyrics and it was like everything he was saying was relevant, and then my pace just increased then, and it seemed to flow more easily or effortlessly ... Before that specific song came on, I was consciously having to pull my legs through, to almost concentrate on contracting my muscles and then when that song came through, that stopped happening, and then when I got a bit higher up and it got colder and when I got out of that [pleasurable] zone then I felt like I had to start thinking more about pushing hard or else I was just going to stop.

The pleasures of running were not, however, restricted to the absence of 'unpleasant' bodily sensations; participants also alluded to the concurrent foregrounding of bodily sensations perceived as pleasurable, thus aligning with Zeiler's (2010) conceptualisation of 'eu-appearance'. Within the psychological literature in PA, researchers have highlighted the capacity of music to elicit motivational (Priest and Karageorghis 2008) and affective responses (Terry et al. 2020), but in the above example, we also interpret that the lyrical content of the music connected to running embodiment. Furthermore, runners described the 'eu'-appearing body as feeling light, strong, bouncy, and smooth. Zoe's experience, for instance, reverberates with notions of the 'dis-appearing body' and 'eu-' appearance during a forest run:

When you say 'it felt better' and you were 'feeling good', if you were to imagine your body from where you were touching the ground right up to your upper body, how would you describe how the various body parts were feeling when things were going well today? (Interviewer)

Hitting the ground? [pause] I just felt bouncy, and whether that is just the surface and pine needles and things like that, [and] quite bouncy mud. I didn't feel my body. It felt quite easy to run. (Zoe)

In Zoe's account, not only is the 'absence' of her body of import ('I didn't feel my body') but the mind-body-world linkage, so central to existential phenomenology, is apparent in her discussion of 'ground feel' (Brown 2017), and the pleasurable haptic encounter between her body and the relative softness of the running surface. As found previously (Allen-Collinson and Jackman 2022), runners often develop a heightened form of 'terrestrial tactility' (Brown 2017, 311) requisite for navigating running terrain. For runners, terrain means more than just ground or earth, but also holds connotations of 'affordance' (Gibson 2014) regarding the perceivable properties an environment can offer. As highlighted by Zoe, properties of ground and their interactions with the running-body are also salient: for her, the softness of pine-needles and the 'bounciness' of mud afford pleasurable experiences. Runners' bodily intentionality is thus often directed towards terrain, and 'ground-feel' (Brown 2017), which is important in contouring the degree of 'dys' or 'eu' appearance experienced. Analogously, in relation to body-groundedness and haptic sensory encounters with terrain, Jane

remarked on how her embodied experience contrasted to previous recent runs, when concerns about bodily misalignment (owing to past injury) were foregrounded in consciousness:

Recently, runs have felt like this leg is falling onto the ground and then can't push away from the ground, and on this run, I guess it just felt like I had power in both legs, and they were springing off that road or that path. There is some sort of harmony, I guess, between those two things; my feet hitting the ground, to coming back up. It felt, I don't know, I don't know whether to say it or not because I still don't know what 'normal' feels like, because this injury has gone on for so long, but I think it felt like running *should* feel, and I think my body felt more in alignment and the weight distribution between both legs felt even.

After a long-term injury, returning from bodily dys-appearance to a more flowing and pleasurable running experience was significant. As delineated above, bodily dys-appearance can also constitute part of the non-injured running experience, via conscious awareness of discomfort, fatigue, and heaviness. Such feelings were typically described in moments when the running-task became more difficult, for instance, due to uphill ascent or reaching a level of exertion that prompted increased somatic awareness. Sonia and Natalie described transitions to heightened corporeal intentionality following on from earlier feelings of pleasure:

There was a little bit of a slope on kilometre 11... Maybe it got a little bit hotter, or I just found it felt hotter and I probably got a little bit tired. (Sonia)

I was more aware of my legs being tired. I was starting to become aware of my breathing more and I guess with having like mild asthma, I think it depends on the temperature, I've never really quite figured it out, but sometimes I can feel, not high-chested, but just an awareness of my breath and awareness of it hurting in a sense... As someone who has had breathing difficulties at times with the mild asthma, I guess I'd probably pay more attention to that. (Natalie)

This awareness of, and attention to, bodily processes usually 'absent' (Leder 1990) from everyday consciousness, such as respiration, have been investigated via a sociological phenomenological lens, both in relation to running generally (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2007) and vis-a-vis sportspeople with asthma specifically (Owton and Allen-Collinson 2016).

Sensory engagements

Definitions of 'nature' and 'natural' environments are complex, with shifting criteria coming into play according to the individual, the social group, and the particular context. An urban park might, for example, be perceived as 'natural' by one runner, but fall outside of such a definition for another. For participants themselves, their own constructions of what constituted 'nature' and the 'natural environment' were important in contouring lived experience. Another salient type of pleasure, described vividly by participants, derived from a powerful sense of mind-body-world interconnectivity, even unity, commensurate with Merleau-Ponty's (1969) portrayal of the fundamental continuity between human beings (and other animals) and the world, as part of the same 'flesh' (the French *chair*) or fabric of the world. These pleasurable running experiences often centred on a sensory attunement with the world around, as Sarah described:

I think because it was raining as well, it almost felt as if you were just part of the outside. It's really hard to explain, but as the rain was falling on everything else and falling on us and you were just rustling past the trail path, with like overgrown shrubs and stuff. You just felt part of the environment.

As portrayed above, an important facet of the pleasurable running experiences described to us concerned being-in and being-with the elements (Allen-Collinson and Jackman 2022; Allen-Collinson et al. 2019). Such sensory intermingling of body and elements aligns with Merleau-Ponty's (1969) problematisation of body-environment boundaries such that there is no fixed 'exterior' world. Commensurate with sociological phenomenology, we too highlight the braiding of mind-body-world as the 'external' element of rainwater touched (and was inhaled and ingested by) Sarah,

giving rise to haptic pleasure, alongside the tactile and auditory pleasures of ‘rustling’ amidst vegetation.

Although some participants ran at least a portion of their route in urban locations, the majority reported the pleasures of sensory engagement with the outdoor environment as occurring most vividly whilst running in green spaces (e.g. forest, park, country fields), alongside blue spaces (e.g. river, seaside), or on routes providing scenic views (e.g. of a mountain range). Holly, for instance, explained the visual and spatial pleasures of running in open spaces, including when unexpectedly catching sight of the setting sun:

I remember, it must have been about a kilometre before my legs started hurting. I was running through [country estate] and I just looked into the distance and the sun was just setting over the trees, and it just looked so pretty. And I just really enjoy being outside in nature. It just makes me feel really free ... I think the surroundings of being in the open space certainly helps me just feel freer and like I perform better, rather than trudging around streets, I just find hard ... but then once I get in the open space, I feel more relaxed and am able to just let myself go and get into it more.

Here, sensory engagement with the open spaces of her running route generated pleasurable feelings of freedom and relaxation, which Holly contrasted with the displeasures of ‘trudging around streets’. Natalie similarly reflected on moments of aesthetic pleasure and appreciation when describing visual engagement with the verdancy of trees in an urban park:

I was just aware of the colour of the trees, the greenery, and just of the park, and I wasn’t consciously trying to pay attention to that. I have walked around that park and not really paid attention to it. If I walk around the park and I’m not running, I probably just look at the floor and look at the immediate area ahead of me. But I just got a really positive feeling when I ran that just made me look up and appreciate the world around me really.

For Natalie, this shift in intentionality, heightened awareness of, and sensual engagement with the world, as recounted above, contrasted with her more typical intentionality and sensory experiences of walking in the same location, thus resonating with Gross’ (2021) contention that running can ‘reproduce the world’ in new ways. As identified in previous research on outdoors exercise (Allen-Collinson and Jackman 2022; Allen-Collinson and Owton 2015), urban-based runners often took pleasure from escaping the confines and sensory-scape of the city, to run in countryside. Sarah, for example, described the visual and auditory pleasures of the quieter spaces afforded by countryside running, including an appreciation of escaping the intensity and auditory overload of city noise:

It was really nice. I think because we had gone on like river paths, trails, canal, etc., it was just lovely, like we saw maybe like two or three cars in the whole like hour and a half we were out, and it was just nice to run past fields with sheep, with cows, like quite overgrown, different fields, just like appreciating the countryside. There were not that many people out. . . . But, yeah, just to appreciate the quietness, like not having that city noise all the time ... so not to hear cars buzzing about or, you know, emergency-service vehicles going flying around, etc. It was just nice to just hear nothing, and just like hear the wind and the rain on the trees and things like that.

Here, sensory engagement with the more nuanced ‘soundscape’ (acoustic environments of particular spaces; Schafer 1994), generated auditory pleasures. Whilst Sarah described the enjoyment of hearing ‘nothing’, she then proceeded to qualify this to portray the auditory pleasures generated by ‘just’ the sounds of wind and rain. This ‘auditory attunement’ (Allen-Collinson and Owton 2014) was assisted by the relative peace and quiet of the countryside soundscape, in sharp contrast to intense urban noise. As delineated in the above data extract, sensory engagement with animals also brought pleasure, illustrating the salience of the more-than-human in runspace (Merchant 2019). Simon, for example, recounted the visual pleasures of a rural run, including animal sightings *en route*:

The rural environment to start off with is nice because you’ve got views. So, you’ve got certain things that distract you; we had horses in the field, for example. There was some amazing swans, like a whole flock of swans that were just congregating, so obviously those things distract you, which is really nice.

While such ‘distraction’ has been previously conceptualised phenomenologically from the perspective of pain reduction in runners (Bluhm and Ravn 2022), we found that such a shift in intentionality

away from the bodily effort of running also had more positive and pleasurable aspects of ‘eu-appearance’ (Zeiler 2010).

Time out

Quantification and self-tracking of PA behaviours is increasingly widespread in many ‘Western’ societies, as illustrated by the burgeoning literature on digital leisure studies (see Silk et al. 2016) and the prominence of digital self-tracking devices (Couture 2021). For some runners, self-tracking devices have become akin to ‘body auxiliaries’ (Merleau-Ponty 2001) or extensions to the embodied self. While self-tracking can promote pleasure through the charting of progress (Esmonde 2019), concerns about pacing, and not achieving the desired pace, can reduce enjoyment in running pursuits (Esmonde 2020). Nearly all runners reported wearing a watch or carrying a mobile phone that tracked their distance, pace, and running-time, but also highlighted the pleasures of ‘switching off’ from self-surveillance. While running at a particular and/or usually faster pace was a priority in other scheduled runs, participants evocatively described the pleasures of refraining from continuous (‘objective’) performance monitoring. Andy, for example, contrasted the use of his watch here with other, more intense ‘workout’ runs:

Yesterday, I pretty much pressed ‘go’ and just pressed ‘stop’. The only time I looked at it was, well, because where I run, I know roughly how far everything is . . . so the only time I will look at it is ‘yeah, okay, I just have to finish off this mile and then home’. I didn’t look at speed or anything like that, it’s just start and stop. Whereas, sometimes on a Tuesday and Thursday, if we are doing an interval session and it is mile reps and I want to hit this one [repetition] in five minutes, I will see where I am a quarter of the way around and say ‘right, I am going too slow or I am going too fast, I need to speed it up’ throughout the whole thing.

In Andy’s comments, the lack of self-surveillance appeared to be facilitated by the pursuit of non-specific targets (see also, Jackman et al. 2021), which in and of themselves reduced reliance on quantification. In some instances, participants discussed how the lack of engagement with their watch was an agential act; an active decision to ‘run to feel’ or ‘run on feel’. For many, this involved drawing on their somatic ways of knowing, developed over time, including ‘knowing’ they were running at the ‘right’ speed. This ‘sensory attunement’ (Allen-Collinson and Owton 2015) resonates with notions that runners develop an embodied sense of time and pace through prolonged experiences (Hockey 2006). Sonia and Andy, respectively, illustrate well the phenomenological conceptualisation of the ‘disappearing’ body (Leder 1990), connected to a lack of corporeal monitoring and bodily objectification (Adams 2019). In these instances, the mind-body is at ease, and time seems to go more quickly:

A lot of the time on a normal run or on a tempo run, I would be looking at my watch all the time, like every 100 metres or whatever, but I just felt relaxed and felt I didn’t need to look at my watch and that I was confident in what I was doing, I suppose, because [of] the way my body felt. (Sonia)

Yesterday they [legs] just felt quite good. I didn’t really know what was going on. We were just chatting away, or even if I was running on my own, every step I wasn’t really thinking about anything. It was one of those runs where it just flows and it feels easy, and it goes quite fast. (Andy)

With ‘clock-time’ backgrounded, participants described a change in their subjective time-perception or *durée* (phenomenal time as subjectively lived), portraying this in different ways. For, as Whitehead (2016, 191) notes, commensurate with Merleau-Pontian thinking, ‘Lived time is most certainly not the same as the linear time reckoned by clocks’. Simon, for example, discussed an altered perception of time spent running, due to the pleasurable nature of a particular run:

What was quite interesting actually was my wife said to me, ‘how long do you think we’ve gone for?’ I probably said, ‘I think we’ve probably gone for somewhere between one hour and one hour, 15 minutes, something like that, potentially one-and-a-half hours’. And then obviously the watch said that we’d gone for one hour [and] 45 [minutes].

Further illustrating the hedonic-temporal interlinkage, pleasant experiences can seem more enjoyable when the discrepancy between actual and perceived clock-time is surprising (Sackett et al. 2010). Hazel recalled surprise at how quickly the early repetitions in her interval workout passed:

The first four [intervals] went by so quickly. After the first four, I thought, 'there's only 10 to go'. You know, I remember saying to my friend who I was running with, 'you know, we've already done four of them? It's going by quickly'.

Periods of pleasure, therefore, appeared to resonate with Flaherty's (1999) conceptualisation of 'temporal compression'. In contrast, Holly explained how experiencing difficulty in a run can create a perception of 'protracted duration' (Flaherty 1999):

When you feel heavy, you're having to put a lot of effort in and you're having to say it yourself, 'just keep going' and then you look at your watch and it is like, 'I only did a kilometre', whereas when it feels more natural, you just feel a bit more springy and like you can do it and you're not constantly looking at your watch to see how far you've gone.

Participants' experiences of time thus resonate strongly with other perspectives on time – as an affectively shaped, subjective, lived phenomenon (Adam 1990; Droit-Volet and Gil 2009; Merleau-Ponty 2001).

Concluding thoughts

In responding to calls for increased analytic attention towards pleasure in sporting and physical cultures (Pringle, Rinehart, and Caudwell 2015), our study contributes to the small corpus of research on the pleasures of sport and exercise embodiment, and specifically in running. By interviewing runners in-depth after positive, rewarding runs, our findings offer a different perspective to past studies that have portrayed *post-hoc* evaluations of specific affective states like enjoyment. Our findings also demonstrate the need to move beyond psychological and/or cognitive understandings of pleasure to embrace sensory, embodied, and intersubjective interpretations (Tamminen and Bennett 2017). In addressing notions of 'theoretical generalisability' (Smith 2018), and drawing on conceptual insights afforded by sociological phenomenology, we contribute new understandings of mind-body-world pleasures within distance-running, which highlight in-the-moment pleasures of running. In our focus upon running embodiment and lived, sensory pleasures, we address an under-researched topic in the qualitative sport and exercise literature. Specifically, our findings portray how states of eu-appearance (Zeiler 2010), sensory engagements with the outdoors, including non-human actors, and switching-off from explicit monitoring of performance metrics, can generate highly pleasurable feelings during actual running experiences. In relation to the latter, future studies could investigate if and how digital technologies – so pervasive in running cultures – can hinder or facilitate possibilities for pleasurable running experiences. Our use of sociological phenomenology as a theoretical framework also extends understandings of flow in sport and exercise, illustrating vividly the deeply embodied and sensual nature of the experience, so often overlooked in this literature (Humberstone 2011).

Alongside contributing new knowledge to an under-explored domain, this research could have potential practical implications. Our focus on the pleasures of running is timely, as experiencing pleasure during an activity is considered key to promoting long-term engagement in PA (e.g. Rhodes and Kates 2015). In drawing attention to embodied pleasures of exercise, our findings concur with past work from different theoretical perspectives (e.g. Smith and Wightman 2021; Williams et al. 2018; Wittels and Mansfield 2021) in suggesting policymakers and public health professionals consider that attempts to improve PA should go beyond highlighting only potential health benefits, to emphasise the potential pleasures of engagement in PA and, in this case, in running. Nevertheless,

given that beginner runners often initially report unpleasant sensations (e.g. Brick et al. 2020), future studies are warranted to explore embodied understandings of the (dis)pleasures of running in this population.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflicts of interest were reported by the authors.

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