

Bodies as Arenas of Experimentation: Experiencing Novel Ways of Running

Journal of Contemporary Ethnography
2021, Vol. 50(4) 524–549
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DOI: 10.1177/0891241621996789
journals.sagepub.com/home/jce



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Abstract

Recreational running has been a widely popular form of leisure for half a century, and many countries have experienced a marathon boom in the past decades. In recent years, however, runners have started to run in new ways, often in unconventional settings, and compete in races with various alternative formats. Through an ethnographic approach that builds on in-depth narrative interviews with recreational runners, analysis of runners' blogs, and participant observation in running events in Estonia, I suggest that as completing a marathon becomes a routine activity, increasingly many dedicated runners turn their bodies into veritable “arenas of experimentation.” Drawing on Zeiler's concept of bodily “eu-appearance” and Ingold's concerted approach to movement, perception, and knowledge, and building more generally on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological perspective, I argue that such corporeal experimentation is motivated by novel sensorial experiences that lead to a heightened awareness of one's own body as well as by a pursuit of altered and intensified perceptual awareness of the environment one runs in.

Keywords

Running, body, experimentation, senses, Estonia

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Introduction

A straight line drawn through Estonia mainly traverses forests and marshes, covering 51 percent and 22 percent of the country's territory, respectively. It inevitably crosses some of its roughly 2,800 lakes and 7,000 watercourses, and hits a farm, a village, or a town. Yet Oliver, a 48-year-old software engineer, ran 101 kilometers along such line drawn on his map during the unofficial "Estonian Championship in Straight Line Running" in spring 2020. Two weeks later, he completed 111 kilometers, along a different line. The idea of this race format is simple—using a GPS tracking device, the runner runs as long a distance as possible without deviating from either side of the straight line by more than a hundred meters. As Oliver later wrote in his blog about the longer run experience:

Yesterday I sensed Estonia [. . .], all its rivers and streams, fields and meadows, forests and thickets, swamps and bogs. [. . .] I was like a small child learning to walk again. The forest was an extremely cruel teacher, my every mistake was corporeally punished. I was like an animal using its whole body from the tip of its nose to its tail to instinctively find the right way to move [forward].

Robert, a university professor, also aged 48 years, similarly got excited about this running format and, after multiple attempts, pushed his personal best to 54 kilometers. When preparing for these runs, Robert spent hours on comparing alternative routes, shifting his line on the map literally fraction by fraction to find the longest coverable distance. The experience was both addictive and revelatory—as he later admitted, it offered him "a truly honest cut-through of the countryside," "immediate engagement with nature," and a new bodily experience. Being a sub-three-hour marathoner, Robert was perplexed and amused by how slow his pace was when forcing himself through "the thickets that not even a deer can penetrate, only hares and hedgehogs." It felt very different from ordinary running, and it physically engaged his whole body, not just his legs.

The straight-line run is but one example of "alternative" forms of recreational running that have now become increasingly popular. "Alternative" in my usage stands for the ways of running that differ from "conventional" road-running either because of their format, context, mode of movement, unconventional distance, or any combination of these. Ultra- and trail-running—relatively standard alternatives to road running—have, of course, experienced growing popularity for decades. Fell-running and coasteering have also been common for long in some regional contexts, but the palette of running formats is now getting increasingly diverse. Mud, color, and obstacle

runs, beermiles, vertical kilometers, “Everesting” challenges, and backyard ultras are but some examples. As Merchant (2017, 120) has noted about sporting events more generally, the blurring of the boundary between sport and leisure has given rise to events that “foreground and play with the ways in which spatial perception, experience, and in particular sensory experience contribute to arguably a more memorable, interesting, in short ‘sensational’ event experience.”

Motivated by the analytical potential of the topic, this article explores alternative forms of running in the ethnographic example of recreational runners in Estonia. Based on 55 narrative interviews, notes on runners’ blogs, and participant observation in numerous running events, I argue that as the satisfaction derived from road running and completing city marathons fades or when these become routine activities, many dedicated runners turn their bodies into “arenas of experimentation.” Drawing on Zeiler’s concept of bodily “eu-appearance” and Ingold’s concerted approach to movement, perception, and knowledge, as well as building on Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology more generally, I suggest that at the core of such experimental endeavors is the experience of novel bodily sensations that lead to a particular kind of awareness of one’s own body, as well as heightened awareness of the environment one runs in.

The discussion unfolds as follows: I will start with a brief overview of ethnographic research on running and will clarify my engagement with phenomenology to contextualize this study ethnographically and theoretically. I will then introduce the Estonian running scene, my research methods, and data, and will present my ethnographic material, categorizing it into three different forms of experimentation. After that I will scrutinize the implications of alternative running more in depth by distinguishing between “inward” and “outward experiences” while drawing on Zeiler and Ingold, and I will close with the discussion of the impact of experimental context on running as a lived experience.

Doing Ethnography of Running Bodies that Sense and Perceive

Ethnographic research on distance running has proliferated in recent years, to the extent that offering a representative selection of examples of these studies that does justice to the field is increasingly difficult.¹ Within this body of research, studies of alternatives to road running have also become more numerous. Ultra-running figures most prominently in these accounts (Hanold 2010, 2016; Nowak 2010; Simpson et al. 2014), but recent ethnographic

studies have also focused, for instance, on fell running (Nettleton 2013), parkour and freerunning (Clegg and Butryn 2012), nature running (Allen-Collinson and Leledaki 2015; Ludwig 2011), mud running (Weedon 2016), and the sensing of different off-road terrains and environments (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2015), and have discussed running in the wider context of “green exercise” (Bamberg, Hitchings, and Latham 2018). My focus, however, is not on any *one* form of running—the article aims at an integrated approach to alternative running in general from the perspective of experimentation and experience. Although many ethnographic studies have scrutinized how the sensorial aspects of running are sometimes intentionally created, their main focus has usually not been on the *deliberately experimental* dimensions of this, with the exception of Simpson et al. (2014, 181) who approach ultramarathons as runners’ endeavors “to explore unknown or uncertain elements” about themselves and the environment.²

The recognition that the body is an “experiencing agent” (Csordas 1994, 3) is not new, of course. The past two decades in social sciences have seen “a sensorial revolution” (Howes 2006), and rethinking ethnography through the senses (Pink 2009; Sparkes 2009) is one manifestation of this. Considering that sport is primarily about cultivating the body, it constitutes, not surprisingly, a fruitful context for studying different topics related to embodiment and the senses. After all, as Hockey and Allen-Collinson (2007, 118) eloquently stress, the athlete’s body is not a finely tuned “robotic” machine, but athletes “move, see, hear, feel, touch, and smell in the sporting milieu.” At least since Wacquant’s (2004) plea to do research not only *of* but also *from* the body, studies foregrounding the sensorial dimensions and embodied experiences in sports have thrived. Focus on running and runners figures prominently in such, mainly phenomenological, research on sporting bodies. Studies by Allen-Collinson and Hockey—individually, jointly, and with various co-authors—stand out in particular, discussing, for example, pain, flow, and runner’s high (Allen-Collinson 2003; Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2007), the sense of heat (Allen-Collinson and Owton 2015; Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2017), haptic experiences (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2010; Allen-Collinson and Leledaki 2015), “auditory work” (Allen-Collinson and Owton 2014), and sensing the running route (Hockey 2006).

Phenomenology also constitutes a broad basis for my discussion, although more indirectly than in the just-cited accounts. The potential of phenomenology in the study of “sporting embodiment,” both as a methodology and as a multi-stranded set of approaches, many of which deviate from Edmund Husserl’s (1962; 1970) foundational ideas, has been extensively scrutinized in various programmatic articles by Allen-Collinson and Hockey (Allen-Collinson 2009; Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2009; Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2007)

and in many accounts mentioned in the previous paragraph. I will thus limit my brief introduction to the topic here to what is immediately relevant for the contextualization of my discussion that builds, broadly speaking, on existential phenomenology and Merleau-Ponty's ideas on body and perception.

As is well known, in Merleau-Ponty's (2005) understanding, one's "own body"—*le corps propre* in his original wording—is the subject of perception, a standpoint from which one perceives the world and the medium for producing it. Or, as Leder (1990, 25), drawing directly on Merleau-Ponty, succinctly says: the lived body is "a way in which the world comes to be." Merleau-Ponty treats body as an integral part of the mind-body-world nexus and explicitly emphasizes the corporeal dimension of existence, essentially "being-in-the-world" or *Dasein*, literally "being-there" or "there being," as Heidegger (1962) called it.

Merleau-Ponty's (2005) approach in particular, sometimes in combination with Heideggerian-inspired analysis as well as ideas of other existential phenomenologists, has been explicitly used in the study of many physical cultures (Sparkes 2017), also in the ones mentioned earlier that directly engage with the core concepts of his approach such as "embodied consciousness" "intentionality," "reversibility," "intercorporeality," "flesh," and many others. My engagement with Merleau-Ponty is more indirect, however—although returning to his ideas occasionally later, my immediate theoretical points of departure are Zeiler's (2010) notion of bodily "eu-appearance" and Ingold's (2000, 2004) approach to the relationship between knowledge, perception, and movement, both of which build on Merleau-Ponty and existential phenomenology, among others. Zeiler's extension of Merleau-Ponty's ideas on bodily self-awareness and her revision of Leder's (1990) approach to bodily "dys-appearance" are useful when discussing "inward experiences" that experimental running triggers. Ingold's approach, building on Merleau-Ponty's (2005) understanding that all perception is inseparably linked to movement, is helpful for theorizing "outward experiences." I will introduce Zeiler's and Ingold's ideas more in detail after the presentation of my data—it is in tandem with the ethnographic material that the analytical value of these approaches becomes more apparent.

Research Setting

Long-term data on running in Estonia are most exhaustively available on marathon participation, which is at least partially illustrative of the overall running trends in the country and is a suitable backdrop for discussing alternative running also because it is commonly from city marathons, deemed "too easy" or "boring," that my interlocutors transferred to experimental running.

Statistical data on marathon running in Estonia are collected by a company called Marathon100 that maintains a database allegedly containing information on all marathons run by Estonian runners of all times.³ Based on these data, the Estonian marathon trends of the past four decades could be summarized accordingly: the number of marathon finishers grew slowly throughout the 1980s but ebbed considerably in the following decade. The figure started to increase exponentially after the turn of the millennium and until 2015 the year-on-year growth rate of marathon finishers was mostly over 10 percent. In recent years, the pace of growth has slowed down but participation in other types of races has increased.

The growing popularity of running in Estonia has been notable in all age groups, but it is particularly marked among runners in their 30s and 40s, both men and women (Marathon100). The marathon boom has also been manifested in the mushrooming of running events. In 2009, only two official marathons were held in the country. By 2015, the figure had grown to 30. One can now also take part in biweekly “virtual marathons,” the popularity of which increased considerably during the COVID-19 pandemic. Increasingly common marathon tourism, although put on hold by the pandemic, is yet another aspect of the boom (Marathon100).

The past few years have also seen the diversification of the ways Estonians run. Races on trails and in wildlife were the first to become commonplace, followed by various formats imported from abroad such as the popular Pajusi Mud Run and Saku Beer Mile, named after the provincial towns where they are held, as well as various obstacle runs, relay races such as the 340-kilometer run through Estonia that imitates the Hood to Coast run in Oregon, or Playtech Office Marathon, run on the five floors of an IT company’s office building. Estonian ultrarunning community is also burgeoning and has recently embraced various novel race formats promoted by selected enthusiasts, such as backyard ultras,⁴ escape,⁵ and the earlier-described straight line runs.

Although my analytical focus on the experiential aspects of alternative running is, as such, context-independent, the fact that the study is set in Estonia is nevertheless relevant. The running trends outlined earlier are reflective of overall social and economic changes in the country in the past decades. The decline in the popularity of running in the 1990s occurred in the post-Soviet transitional context of radical economic reforms, rapid increase of socio-economic inequality (Heyns 2005, 174), and the decline of life expectancy (Cockerham 2005, 119). The next two decades, on the contrary, saw the consolidation of the middle class, increased prosperity, and health awareness. The running boom in general but also the diversification of the

ways people run could be seen as manifestations of the latter changes and as endeavors to live a “good life.”

Data and Methods

Studying and textually representing the sensory aspects of physical cultures is methodologically challenging, as frequently acknowledged (Allen-Collinson and Leledaki 2015; Samudra 2008; Sparkes 2017). Consequently, phenomenological accounts of embodied experiences in sports are often autoethnographic (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2010; Allen-Collinson and Owton 2014; Atkinson 2017; Hockey 2006; Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2009, 2017; Merchant 2017, 2020). This study, however, is not. Indeed, autoethnography eliminates the barrier between the researcher and the research subjects and thus one stage in the verbalization of bodily experience, reducing the loss in translation of its meaning. My interest in this study, however, is predominantly on what people *do*, what they *say* they *do*, and what they *say* they *feel*—in other words, the *narrative representations* of these experiences. It is nevertheless important to highlight here my own background as also a recreational runner, with an experience from roughly 80 marathons and ultramarathons. Although not doing autoethnography, this has allowed me to engage in what Samudra (2008) calls “thick participation” and acquire an intuitive sense of the bodily experiences, sometimes difficult to verbalize, on which this study focuses.

The discussion builds on 55 semi-structured interviews, notes on runners’ blogs, and participant observation in numerous running events. The first round of interviews with 50 runners focused on a wide range of topics: running career histories, motivations for running, the relationship between running and personal life, the technology of self-monitoring, and long-distance running as a bodily experience. Here I asked my interlocutors to describe the sensory and emotional experiences of running; its spatial dimensions; the sensations of “flow,” “runner’s high,” and hitting the “wall”; and mental and physical strategies of overcoming pain, as well as recovery tactics and dealing with injuries. These interviews thus aimed at exploring the bodily aspects of long-distance running more broadly, and my interview guide *did not* include explicit questions on alternative ways of running and experimentation. These themes were addressed by my interlocutors without being purposefully led to them. Five follow-up interviews focused more specifically on running in “other” ways, the differences between “conventional” and “alternative running,” bodily and mental experiences in case of the latter, as well as environmental perception.

The length of interview recordings varied from half an hour to two hours. Oral or written informed consent was obtained from all interviewees to whom the purposes of the study were thoroughly explained. The interviewees were expected to be “serious recreational runners” by which I mean individuals who purposefully train for and take part in official races. Such delimitation enabled me to better situate my interlocutors’ experiences into the context of their individual running careers that could be reconstructed based on the Marathon100 database.

The selection of initial 50 interviewees was based on purposive maximum variation sampling to ensure as wide as possible a variation of the interlocutors’ age (26–64 years) and the length of their running careers (up to several decades). These interviewees included 16 female and 34 male runners, and such gender disparity was purposeful. The numbers of Estonian male and female runners completing at least one official race a year that is shorter than a marathon has recently been roughly equal, while the share of women among yearly marathon finishers has fluctuated around 25 percent (Marathon100). The male–female ratio among my interviewees is a compromise between these two figures. Moreover, it almost coincides with the gender ratio of yearly finishers of ultramarathons—a form of alternative running for which official statistical data are most comprehensively available. The five interviewees (two female and three male runners) for the follow-up interviews were recruited based on extreme case sampling—they were runners in whose running careers experimentation was particularly marked. An overwhelming majority of my interviewees had university education; most held executive, managerial, academic, or administrative positions, thus belonging to the so-called “professional middle class.” All interlocutors’ names used in the text are pseudonyms.

I also followed roughly 30 runners’ blogs on the Internet. Among other things, blogs constitute platforms for self-fashioning – by sharing their training and race reports runners construct their public selves for others. For the purposes of this article, I specifically focused on reports on “alternative running” and on the descriptions of resultant experiences.

Interview transcripts and observation notes on blogs were subjected to thematic analysis with two distinct aims—to identify the predominant *forms* of experimentation and the *types* of embodied experiences they triggered. The former, among which I distinguish between “running quantities,” “running environments,” and a more open category of “personalized running,” emerged from the data fairly unambiguously. The types of embodied experiences were defined through a two-stage analysis. It first entailed identifying phrases from interviews and blogs that were categorized under the themes of “senses/sensations,” “environment,” “knowledge,” “cognition/thinking,” “curiosity,” “flow,”

“mind/spirit,” “good pain,” “bad pain,” and “emotions.” These themes were then grouped into two distinct but interlinked categories: “inward experiences” related to sensing one’s own body and “outward experiences” emphasizing the perception of running environment.

It is important to note in advance that my data did not reveal significant gender differences, although some psychological studies suggest that males generally score higher than females in sensation seeking scales (Ball, Farnill, and Wangeman 2011). Also, the discussion of runners’ class position remains outside the direct focus of this article. The fact that most of my interlocutors belonged to the middle class is certainly important. Experimentation often leads to increased spending on specialized running gear, technological gadgets, and travel. The pursuit of novel bodily experiences requires not only financial resources but also the availability of free time, and it is thus affordable to relatively privileged individuals. However, since I have discussed the relationship between middle-classness and recreational running elsewhere (Gross 2020), the topic will not be addressed explicitly here.

Forms of Experimentation

Three distinct forms of experimentation—experiments related to running quantities, environments, and what I call “personalized” running—emerged from my ethnographic material. In reality, these categories are at least partly overlapping. For example, experimenting with extreme distances often happens in novel running environments. “Experimentation” is both an emic and an etic term here. Some runners explicitly used it, others did not, a few proposed alternative terms. For example, one runner compared alternative running to “playing,” suggesting that “like a child” he was constantly trying to come up with something “new, different, and interesting.”

Running Quantities

Increasing running distances, frequencies, or both is the most common form of experimentation. As the statistical data suggest, not only do more people in Estonia run but they run increasingly more. For example, 31.4 percent of all Estonian marathon finishers in 2019 ran more than one marathon that year; 3.8 percent ran more than five. In 2010, the respective figures were 18.1 and 1.1 (Marathon100). Nearly all my interlocutors had gradually increased their running quantities, and several runners ran 20–30 marathons a year. Although not everyone defined this in terms of experimentation, many did. Runners often set themselves new goals beyond breaking their personal best—for instance, to run a marathon on consecutive days, finish more marathons a

year than previously done, or, as two male runners did in 2018, complete 100 yearly marathons.

Experimentation with running quantities can also entail shorter distances. For example, Karl, a 47-year-old auditor and an experienced marathoner, tried twice to “run until you drop.” In this format, one runs consecutively the distance in kilometers or miles corresponding to the date, starting from the first day of the month. Karl’s main motivation was to find out how his body adapts to gradually increasing distances, especially from the 20th day onwards. In his blog that he had kept for over a decade, Karl analyzed in detail these experiences drawing on meticulous monitoring of his bodily sensations.

Turning to ultrarunning is another common form of experimentation with running quantities, often triggered by the curiosity about “what it feels like.” Kaja, a 35-year-old musician, explained her reasons to complete a 100-mile trail run accordingly:

I wanted to find out what it feels like to experience that—wow—I have already run 130 kilometers and I keep going!

Kaja’s transition to ultrarunning was relatively fast—she completed her first 100-kilometer race a year after running her first marathon, and a 100-mile race another two years later. For Preet, a 34-year-old financial analyst, it took longer. The idea to try ultrarunning six years after his first marathon came from reading Christopher McDougall’s bestseller *Born to Run* (2009):

I was fascinated by the Tarahumaras and decided I want to run a longer distance, be with myself as if in trance, *just* run.

Runners also rationalized such experimentation in terms of “testing their limits” or “pushing their boundaries.” As 42-year-old Kaido, a high-ranking government official, explained his transition from sedentary lifestyle to running marathons and eventually to ultrarunning: “It was about testing my limits—not in terms of risk, but knowledge and experience.” These limits are often numerically definable—most commonly, to run more than a marathon distance, 100 kilometers, or for 24 hours. To bring another example: Henrik, a 45-year-old biologist had started running marathons in his mid-30s and after many years of failing to achieve a sub-3:30 finishing time, he set himself a new goal—to complete a 100-kilometer race:

Breaking the 100K mark was really important to me as I am obsessed with numbers. It marks a new level of self-transcendence.

His first 100-kilometer run was a race in the Alps, and by now he has completed several in different settings. As Henrik summed up his realizations through such experimentation:

I have concluded that if I have been given this body and the ability to use it, it makes sense to do so, because soon it will be at a cemetery anyways. [. . .] I've gone down the path of running longer distances – the more you do it, the more you enjoy suffering, that you are able to overcome pain, and through all this you get a better sense of your self-worth.⁶

The novelty of running longer distances also appealed to Robert, the history professor referred to in the opening vignette of this article. Having already completed several trail ultras, including the prestigious Ultra-Trail du Mont Blanc, he decided in 2019 to take part in an iconic 431-kilometer Spine Race in Britain. His main motivation, as he retrospectively argued in an interview, was to “gain knowledge” about himself. Some of this knowledge turned out to be primarily embodied that Robert, despite trying, found difficult to verbalize. But finishing the race also gave him a straightforward answer to the question whether his body was able to deal with the distance and lack of sleep “despite what the brain says.” As he reasoned:

One likes to talk about challenges these days but a true challenge is when you are not sure that you are capable of it. I had no motivation for doing another 100-miler, knowing that I am quite able to finish it. But is my mind (*vaim*) strong enough to cover two and a half times longer a distance on a harsh profile, while dealing with unforeseeable hardships?

It took Robert slightly more than five days to complete the race. He summed up the experience with the words that the race organizers use as the event's slogan: “epic and brutal.”

Running Environments

Robert's Spine Race experience brings me to another set of experiments, often coinciding with running increasingly longer distances. As Merchant (2017, 120) argues in her autoethnographic study of glow swimming, besides “increased distances to differentiate themselves from the ‘traditional’ sport events market,” athletes may try to concentrate more on “the (re)introduction of sensory engagement with space.” By “(re)introduction” Merchant means that through marketization of sporting events, their distance, terrain, seasonality, safety, and securitization have become increasingly standardized. Participants in alternative

events, Merchant (2017, 121) maintains, do not necessarily seek an additional physical challenge, but instead seek a novel experiential dimension in a form of sensory excess or deprivation.

Experimentation with running in new environments—especially in “beautiful places” as some runners simply described it—can be fundamentally different from road running. As Robert suggested:

Running in nature is not abstract running. Say, when you take part in a German city marathon, environment is secondary—you compete in a relatively random location for the finishing time. But during a mountain ultra, the environment becomes primary—you want to traverse a certain region, you want it to be as exciting as possible.

To my interlocutors, unfamiliar natural environments were often particularly appealing. Runners mentioned deserts, the Arctic, the Alps, the Grand Canyon, and even the North Pole as their dream running destinations in contrast to “flat and temperate Estonia.” Jaak, a 42-year-old entrepreneur, for example, claimed that for him city marathons no longer produced the “wow effect,” and in order to “catch an emotion,” he had run the Sahara Marathon and a multi-day race in Namibia. “Everything was different, even the runners,” he described these experiences.

What also distinguished such runs from road running was the relative self-sufficiency that they required from runners who generally carry with them obligatory equipment, some food and water. In this sense, running in alternative environments has similarities to adventure sports, which, as Laviolette (2007, 1) argues, also involve “pitting oneself against the elements of one’s environment, whether natural or architectural.” However, while the appeal of adventure sports, according to Laviolette, derives mainly from reintroducing and then confronting risk in the context where modern society is obsessed with controlling it, alternative running, at least for my interlocutors, did not entail voluntary risk-taking, although some runners did admit that they were lured by the *uncertainty* they faced in these races.

Other ethnographic studies have also highlighted that the event environment can play a prominent role in the running experience. Runners have been described to cherish “the visual wonders of the natural world” (Allen-Collinson and Leledaki 2015, 462) and have “very vivid memories of landscapes and scenery encapsulating natural beauty” (Simpson et al. 2014, 182). Some of my interviewees retrospectively defined the value of such experiments in terms of embodied knowledge they had acquired. Henrik, for example, recounted how the harshness of the straight-line run made him respect “our ancestors who centuries ago turned some of these thickets, forests, and swamps into arable land.” Running through such environments, he had sensed with his own body

what an enormous task it must have been. Robert, in turn, claimed that various trail races constituted for him “participatory experiments” and sites for historical reenactment. As a historian, he sometimes consciously tried to sense how people in the past, before proper roads and motorized transportation, had moved around in the space that he was now running through. During the British Spine Race that passes by the Hadrian’s Wall, he claimed to have imagined of Roman legionaries pushing northwards and the Picts attacking southwards over the border. Just like himself moving through that environment, “they were not sent with buses, they walked,” Robert noted.

The experiences of running in novel environments also figure prominently in runners’ blogs. These accounts often include scenic photos, an altitude profile of the route if mountainous, meticulous summaries of what the runner had “learned” from the endeavor, and detailed descriptions of nature that the runner tried to “read” while running. Oliver’s blog, which I also referred to in the introduction, contains many such examples. A keen hiker, kayaker, and rock climber for decades, Oliver seriously picked up long-distance running only in 2015. He immediately clocked a sub-three-hour marathon finishing time and soon started combining running with his preference for off-the-beaten-tracks. Oliver’s running trips have taken him to Grand and Black Canyon in the United States, Copper Canyon in Mexico, Cabo Verde, Argentina, and Oman, for example. Here is an excerpt from his description of a race in Ushuaia, Argentina:

What matters in the mountains is neither time nor distance but only altitude. I notice that when I step on the first snow-covered muddy spot in the forest, the altitude is 250–300 meters. When rain stops but the snow has not yet started falling, it must be the narrow altitude range of 350–400 meters. The wind starts to blow, the forest becomes thinner until trees disappear completely—I am at the altitude of 500 meters. The landscape opens up, the snow becomes thicker and the wind stronger—the altitude is 600–650 meters.

In an entry on a race in Oman he writes:

Against the background of the sky, you realize that the ghostly silence and the heat of the *wadi* are caused by steep, at least half a kilometer high rock walls on its both sides. Every falling stone, sound of the running pole, sigh, and finger snapping echoes back from them many times.

Combined with such detailed narrative on the physical running environment, blog accounts often also include descriptions of bodily sensations and emotions. Here is an example by Oskar, a 46-year-old entrepreneur, describing his experiences at a Backyard ultra in Finland:

In the morning, because of an overdose of endorphins, a great and all-encompassing feeling of well-being fell over me. The sun was rising, Pink Floyd's "The Wall" was playing in my earphones, running was very easy despite the seventh hour, the nature around me was beautiful. All particles matched together like puzzle pieces. You realize that you are in the right place, doing the right thing and enjoying every moment of it.

All previous examples are about running in nature but artificial, urban or other milieus—for instance obstacle runs—can also constitute settings for experimentation. The Playtech Office Marathon held in Tartu, Estonia's second-largest city, is a particularly noteworthy example. The organizers market it as "[t]he craziest indoor marathon with the most stairs that you have ever seen and experienced." The race consists of 102 laps and requires ascending and descending 510 floors, 21,420 steps altogether. Many among my interlocutors who had taken part in this race enjoyed it because it "felt different." Quoting again from Oskar's blog:

Almost no straight sections longer than 20 steps. [. . .] throughout the race you will non-stop either climb up, run down, turn, brake, or accelerate. There is no moment when your body can relax and move calmly. [. . .] I even got a blister on my left *hand* while running – because of pulling from the handrail when running up the stairs!

Personalized Running

And finally, runners may engage in experimentation that is not necessarily related to the running distance or environment, but that involves distinctively personal challenges or practices within the framework of ordinary races or training. For example, Hugo, a 36-year-old psychotherapist and a part-time running instructor, included in his corporeal experimentations also experiments with eating. Before one marathon, he fasted for four days in order to learn what running "on empty" feels like. He retrospectively, in an interview, described it in terms of feeling "superlight" and "heavenly." The same year he ran a marathon backwards, which was a "fantastic experience" of pain, exhaustion, and self-transcendence, as well as an emotional revelation:

For five hours I was face-to-face with other runners, I could witness the emotions with which they were running, I could see their faces. If you run normally, you cannot experience this.

Some runners merged running with various personal rituals. Norman, a 51-year-old software developer, for example, claimed to have combined his

morning runs with the controversial practice of sungazing—a prolonged act of looking directly into the sun during sunrise or sunset. He ran daily to a spot where he could witness sunrise and gaze into the sun for as long as he could. Other runners put their bodies' capacity to withstand pain and exhaustion on trial. Emma, a 44-year-old sports store manager, for instance, participated to a backyard ultra while suffering from borreliosis and completed 114 kilometers. Retrospectively, in my interview with her, she defined it as an experiment to screen the state of her body and the impact of illness on it for an upcoming 24-hour race. Half a year earlier, she had participated to the earlier-described Playtech Office Marathon just a day after another 24-hour race. This, for her, was not just a physical, but also a mental experiment:

I did not go there to run a good finishing time—I simply wanted to test whether the body obeys my will, while the brain tells it not to run.

Various among my interlocutors already quoted earlier also engaged in such “cheating on the brain.” Robert described how he, midway through the Spine Race, had tricked his brain by sleeping for just 15 minutes at the right moment, waking up fresh. Karl analyzed in his blog how he “outsmarted” his brain during shorter runs and ultramarathons. He also described in detail what it felt like to run with or without certain energy drinks, or when experimenting with Jeff Galloway’s run-walk-run method, for instance. Hugo, in turn, recounted how he had switched to Chi running, a mode of running influenced by Tai chi that allegedly reduces injury risk and shortens recovery time. “Recoding” his “movement patterns” had taken him six months. The experience prompted him to experiment even more—to run a marathon after fasting and backwards, as described earlier, and also while pushing a stroller and bouncing a basketball.

Some among my interviewees also claimed to have felt extraordinary sensations during their runs. These sensations were very personal, intimate, sometimes “almost mystical”—to the extent that runners generally lacked words to adequately describe them and often turned to metaphorical or even spiritual vocabulary. Despite the highly varied nature of the mentioned sensations, the interviewees almost unanimously used the phrase “as if” (*justkui, nagu*) in their recollections. Here are a few examples. Oskar, quoted earlier, suggested that occasionally running in the immediate vicinity of immense landscape rendered it “*as if* a pilgrimage-like journey.” 51-year-old Olivia, a university administrator, described how running towards a sunset sometimes produced a strange but pleasurable feeling of “*as if* the blinding sun pulls you into itself.” Katrin, a 53-year-old medical doctor, portrayed, in turn, how once, running through an oak grove, the trees *as if* gave her energy that she

could almost visualize though not describe in words. Hugo, the earlier-quoted psychotherapist, tried, although found it difficult, to communicate coherently a very particular and, in his words, “revelatory” moment during one ordinary run:

Many conditions coincided. The air temperature somehow matched my body temperature. It was a warm August evening, the park was empty, there was silence, the sky was full. From an alley of oaks, it was *as if* one tree called me. I stopped and felt that I had somehow arrived. My mundane thoughts vanished, I ceased to be my conscious self, always in control. Instead, I felt some kind of unity with the surroundings.

Experiencing the experiments

I will now examine the implications of alternative running more in depth by distinguishing between “inward” and “outward” experiences and drawing on Zeiler and Ingold, respectively. The distinction is primarily analytical, in actuality “inward” and “outward” experiences often merge into the same lived experience. For example, a straight-line runner, penetrating the thicket, engages in novel ways with this environment while also using one’s body differently compared to ordinary running.

Inward Experiences: Eu-appearance of the Body

Studies of exercising bodies often draw on Leder’s (1990) notion of the “absent body.” According to Leder, a healthy body at ease generally “disappears” from consciousness. One’s awareness of it is pre-reflective or what Merleau-Ponty (2005, 469) called *tacit cogito*—“myself experienced by myself”—contrary to reflective self-awareness that stems from attending to the body as an object of experience. This, Leder (1990, 4) argues, only happens in case of pain or illness. It is then that body “seizes our attention,” in Leder’s terms, “dys-appears” as “ill” or “bad.” Put differently, during these moments, one shifts from “being” to “having a body.” Hockey and Allen-Collinson (2016), for example, use Leder’s notion of corporeal “dys-ease” when demonstrating how body is brought to the forefront of runners’ consciousness while “doing endurance.” Aalten (2005), in turn, describes how ballet dancers strive for the “absence” of their painful bodies. In a recent study, Lev (2020) develops Leder’s argument further by distinguishing between three variants of dys-appearance—first-person, social, and socio-political—among runners experiencing physical pain.

Although pain is nearly inevitable to running (Bale 2006). and my interlocutors likewise described experiences of “bad pain” and frustrating injuries

that they often dealt with by “ignoring” or “silencing” their bodies, Leder’s notion of “dys-appearance” falls short of analytical value when scrutinizing the bodily experiences that conscious experimentation with running entails. A revision of Leder’s notion by Zeiler (2010) is useful, however. Zeiler (2010, 334) opposes the claim that “the transformation into the bodily as physical always means discomfort and malaise,” and, contrary to Leder, she highlights experiences where the body appears to the subject as something “good, easy, or well.” Zeiler calls this “eu-appearance,” labels the states where the body stands positively forth to the subject as “eu-static modes of being,” and considers exercising as one trigger of such states. The frequently studied experiences of “flow” and “runner’s high” are certainly instances of this, but alternative running could also be approached through such theoretical perspective. In nearly all contexts of experimentation, my interlocutors claimed to have developed a pleasurable recognition of their bodies and a novel sense of “being-in-the-world.” In Zeiler’s (2010, 334) terms, these were moments when “the subject can attend to her or his body as something positive and [. . .] this attention need not result in discomfort or alienation.”

The relationship between bodily eu-appearance and the sensations of exhaustion, pain, and sleep deprivation—common consequences of many running experiments—is particularly interesting. At first glance, these sensations do not fit with Zeiler’s (2010, 339) claim that eu-appearance, unlike dys-appearance, implies comfort and harmony. One way to reconceptualize them as “eu-static modes of being” is to argue that runners simply learn to derive pleasure from these sensations. As Lev (2019, 799) suggests in his ethnography of runners in Tel Aviv, “[i]n order to complete the transition to becoming a distance-runner, pain and bodily distress must be reframed into something significantly meaningful and pleasurable.” Lev’s interlocutors claimed, for example, that muscle soreness made them feel that their body was alive—the negative sensation was thus redefined as something enjoyable. The same has been argued in case of other sports. Green (2011, 386), for example, explores the “seduction of pain” in mixed martial arts where it constitutes “an essential part of the pleasure because it symbolizes passing a barrier and provides confidence that some sort of growth, whether physical or spiritual, is occurring.” McNarry, Allen-Collinson, and Evans (2020), in turn, explore how “discomfort” and “good pain” are experienced by competitive swimmers in the pursuit of athletic improvement.

But the relationship between pain and bodily eu-appearance during experimental running is more complex. Zeiler (2010, 338) briefly also discusses “masochist experiences,” suggesting that it is not necessarily the sensation of pain as such that is pleasurable in them. What is sought is knowledge about “the meaning of the sensation of pain” and its effect. My interlocutors,

likewise, argued that although pain from running reminded them of “being alive,” it was never an aim in itself. To understand how the meaning of pain is constructed as contributor to bodily eu-appearance, the impact of the experimental context needs to be acknowledged. Swann et al.’s (2019) psychological study of flow and clutch states, two optimal experiences reported by exercisers they interviewed, is helpful here. While flow had an energizing effect, was described as enjoyable, and involved lower perceived effort, clutch states were considered fatiguing and were perceived enjoyable only retrospectively. Importantly, flow was more often reported in contexts involving exploration, novelty, and variation. Cassaniti and Luhrmann (2014) in their comparative phenomenology of spiritual experience use the term “bodily affordance,” building on Gibson (1986), to mark “the events of the body that [. . .] are only identified as religious in those social settings when they afford, or make available, an interpretation that makes sense in that setting.” Sensations of exhaustion, pain, physical fatigue, or sleep deprivation that my interlocutors experienced are precisely such “bodily affordances”—in the experimental setting they were identified as constituents of the eu-appearance and not dys-appearance of the body and did not necessarily result in the experience of bodily alienation.

Outward Experiences: “Authenticized” Perception of the Environment

The novel perceptual awareness emanating from the runner’s body can also be directed “outwards” – towards the world. Alternative running “reproduces the world” in new ways through novel bodily engagement with the running environment. This idea correlates with Merleau-Ponty’s (2005) understanding that bodily perception is inseparably linked to movement. Ingold’s concerted approach to movement, body, knowledge, and perception is particularly helpful when analyzing runners’ outward experiences.

For Ingold (2000, 47), walking—and this can be extrapolated to running—is “a highly intelligent activity.” Contesting “the bias of head over heels” in studies of environmental perception, Ingold (2004, 332) argues that this intelligence “is not located exclusively in the head but is distributed throughout the entire field of relations comprised by the presence of the human being in the inhabited world.” Ingold thus links movement to the acquisition of knowledge and defines walking as “a form of circumambulatory knowing” (2004, 331). Developing this idea further in his discussion of “lines,” Ingold (2007, 88) suggests that the conventional understanding of knowledge accumulation assumes that “knowledge is assembled by joining up, into a complete picture, observations taken from a number of fixed points

[. . . and] integrated not by going *along* but by building *up*, that is by fitting these site-specific fragments into structures of progressively greater inclusiveness.” In reality, however, observation and perception do not happen from “stationary platforms” or from “single vantage points” along a “dotted line,” but *along* the *whole* path of movement—in other words, along a continuous line (Ingold 2007, 2015).

Although the notion of “line” in Ingold’s discussion is primarily metaphorical, his approach is also illuminating when analyzing movement along *actual* lines. The earlier-described straight line running lends itself most fittingly to such analysis. Henrik, Robert, and Oskar, cited in relation to this experimental context, all admitted that running along the straight line produced very intense and comprehensive experiences of the environment they traversed. This, interestingly, goes against one of Ingold’s arguments in his discussion of the “life of lines.” For Ingold (2007, 152), a straight line is “a virtual icon of modernity, an index of the triumph of rational, purposeful design over the vicissitudes of the natural world.” In the straight line run format, however, it is namely the strict straightness of the movement that secures intimate and immediate engagement with the natural world and rich sensorial experiences, unlike walking on a trail or hiking. Movement without forced linearity adapts to and circumvents obstacles and thus only yields a “façade” or “superficial experience” of nature as some runners claimed. Moreover, running along the straight line gives “meaning” to objects and obstacles that otherwise would remain “meaningless,” much the same way as what Merleau-Ponty (2005, 507) famously writes about an unclimbable rock or a rock face “which have no meaning for anyone who is not intending to surmount them.”

What unites the outward experiences of straight line runners with those of other experimenters is the certain “authenticization” of the perception of running milieux. To reiterate some of the examples presented earlier, Oliver claimed to have sensed what the world “feels like” to a wild animal, Henrik acquired an embodied insight into past generations’ agricultural efforts, Robert identified corporeally with the lived world of Romans and Picts during the Spine Race. Hugo, while running a marathon backwards, witnessed other runners’ emotions and got a more comprehensive sense of the race. The “almost mystical” sensations described by some runners constituted for them transcendental, multi-layered, and hence more “authentic” experiences of their running environments.

The potential of alternative running to generate experiences of authenticity, intimacy, and transcendence has also been emphasized by other studies. Weedon (2016, 35), for example, suggests that mud running possesses “natural authenticity” because in the era of “overcivilization,” it allows runners

to “revisit nature” that is “embodied in the mythologized primordiality of mud.” Like mud runners described by Weedon, many runners I quoted earlier felt that they had moved not only “closer to” but also truly “into” nature. Simpson et al. (2014, 182–4), in turn, describe the nearly transcendental experiences of ultramarathoners. The length of such races combined with the isolated environments they are held in provides participants with time to be alone with oneself and to open up their “mind, body, and spirit.” Many reported—just like my interlocutors—feelings of attaining “a sense of unity with the outdoor environment.” Similar development of deep intimacy with the natural world has been described in ethnographic studies of extreme sports (Breivik 2010).

Returning to Ingold’s main idea, such “authenticization” of environmental perception could be seen as the result of accumulating “knowledge” through an embodied encounter with the spaces one moves in and interacts with. As Bale (2004, 75) suggests, “the sensual engagement with running may be at its greatest when all the senses are stimulated.” Although the discussed examples of alternative running did not necessarily stimulate *all* senses equally strongly, the novelty of *where* and *how* one runs certainly intensified and broadened the sensorial engagement.

Concluding Reflections

Both inward and outward experiences are present in all forms of experimentation, but to varying degrees. For example, inward experiences are produced most effectively by experimenting with extreme distances and certain forms of personalized running, while outward experiences are particularly prominent when running in inspiring, harsh, or simply unconventional environments.

Despite being “directional opposites,” their essence is similar and entails heightened or intensified perceptual awareness, facilitated by the experimental context. The monotonous nature of running can trigger experiences of “losing the sense of time, place, or one’s own body,” as one of my interviewees claimed, but experimentation works against such sensations. Inward experiences build on raised awareness of one’s own body during the states of its “eu-appearance.” These states could also be interpreted as periods of “intense embodiment” (Allen-Collinson and Owton 2014, 2015), which, according to Hockey and Allen-Collinson (2017, 44) involve “a greater level of conscious awareness of the body and bodily processes, but not necessarily with the more negative or discomforting connotations of the ‘dys’ prefix” and entail “neutral or even a positively heightened sense of corporeal ‘aliveness.’” Outward experiences likewise imply heightened perceptual awareness—in this case towards the novel running milieu. Conceptualizing the

sensory engagement with the sporting space, Merchant (2017, 122) aptly suggests that when moving through unexplored environments, one's "sensory envelope becomes reconfigured to perceive more effectively the sights, sounds, [and] feelings" that shape the experience and understanding of the surroundings. Engaging with "an element of unfamiliarity" can render the body, as Merchant (2017, 131) continues, more susceptible to various aspects of the sporting space that "normally elude consciousness or escape the experience."

Threefold conclusions can be drawn about the importance of the experimental context. First, its novelty implies not just unfamiliarity but also uncertainty, even positive anxiety, and, above all, curiosity about how one's body "will take it." Not all new experiences are necessarily surprising, as runners are often prompted to experimenting by learning about the experiences of others. Nevertheless, the prior lack of lived experience defines these endeavors. Second, such foundational curiosity combined with the context's aesthetic appeal or unconventionality directly affects the embodied experiences of running. Their unifying feature is in various ways altered, generally heightened, and intensified perceptual awareness that is directed either inward or outward—towards oneself or the running milieu, often both. And third, the novelty of these embodied experiences leads, retrospectively, to a very particular kind of reflexivity that builds on a complex mix of "knowledge" that experimentation produces—about oneself, the environment one runs in, or the interaction between the two. Partly, this knowledge is discursive—either directly or sometimes indirectly verbalizable. But it can also be entirely embodied, pre-reflective, and hence non-discursive. To bring these three conclusions together: curiosity, awareness, and reflexivity are the core attributes of alternative running as lived experience and namely in this temporal sequence.

Focusing on experimentation, I have approached the resultant bodily experiences in this article as generally "taken," not "given." In other words, I have scrutinized how alternative running is purposefully used by Estonian recreational runners to trigger, amplify, alter, enrich, and diversify their sensorial, but to some extent also mental and emotional, experiences. Like any study, this one too has its limitations. Most importantly, my focus has exclusively been on positive experiences—both the "eu-appearance" of the body and the "authenticized" perception of the environment are certainly experiences of that kind. This is not to argue that alternative running cannot have negative implications. Experimentation can result in injuries and overtraining. Runners seeking novel experiences may be forced to constantly look for something new or more extreme. This, in turn, has connotations that would allow linking experimentation to addiction. Studies of exercise, especially running addiction, have a long

history (e.g. Sachs and Pargman 1979), and alternative running could also be explored from the perspective of this, health more generally, or, for example, psychology of “sensation seeking” (Zuckerman 1979).

This study, however, has built exclusively on my interlocutors’ own narrative representations of their experiences and sensations, which almost unanimously emphasized the positive meaning of experimentation in their lives. To make a full circle with my discussion, I conclude with the words by the two runners with whom I started this article. Oliver, in his blog, explicitly defined his experimental pursuits as means to “live a fuller life” or, rather, to “live a more alive life” (*elada elusamat elu*) as the phrase he used directly translates into English. Robert, when summing up the experiential value of alternative running, suggested that engaging in bodily experiments enabled him to sense time more acutely and that the “enormous intensity” of these experimental moments provided him, *as if*, “with more life.” In other words, alternative running as *lived experience* affected how they both *experienced life* as a whole.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. A recent volume edited by Bridel, Markula, and Denison (2016) brings together some of the scholars who have recurrently written on the topic.
2. Studies of extreme sports (e.g. Breivik 2010), on the contrary, have often explicitly highlighted the practitioners’ experimental pursuit of new sensations.
3. For more recent years, data are also available on other races. The database can be accessed via the website www.marathon100.com; data entries include the runner’s name, age and gender, the name and date of the race, and the runner’s finishing time and position.
4. In a backyard ultra, competitors must consecutively complete the distance of 6,706 meters (4.167 miles) in less than one hour. The remaining time within the hour is for recovery and the following lap begins at the next full hour. The race ends when all but one runner have dropped out.

5. In the escape format, runners start the race from the same physical location, heading in self-chosen directions. The winner covers the longest distance within 24 hours, measured as a straight line on the map.
6. Henrik's mentioning of "self-worth" points to the moral dimensions of having a physically capable running body. As I have argued elsewhere (Gross 2020), recreational runners consciously submit their bodies to "purposeful suffering" (Atkinson 2008), which fits with the middle-class values of self-discipline, motivation, diligence, and perseverance.

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