Jographies: four reasons why geographers are studying running

Lead

Running has become a hot topic in geography and the spatial social sciences over the last decade. But why and why are geographers studying running? This article proposes four reasons for this and why researching running is valuable for understanding human-spatial relations.

Introduction

In recent years, running has really captured the imagination of geographers and social scientists interested in matters of space, place, movement and bodies. From a field occupied entirely for many years by the late, great John Bale and his interest in sport geography, running geographies – or 'jographies' as I like to call it – has developed into a flourishing area of geographical enquiry over the last decade. This work has made valuable contributions across the breadth of human geography with running making inroads into areas of social and cultural geographies, health geographies, tourism geographies, political geographies, urban geographies, mobility geographies, transport geographies, and planning and urban design geographies to name a few. In this article, I want to take stock of this work, not by reviewing it (you can find a review article signposted in the Selection of Relevant Literature below), but by reflecting on why geographers have been so drawn to running recently. What is it about running that it has proved such a productive lens for geographical thinking across a range of theoretical and applied areas?

Here I offer four reasons for why this may be that also hint at why running is so valuable for understanding human-spatial relations. This is a personal list, rather than a definitive one, but I am continually curious and inspired by jographies. From my first steps into running geographies as an undergraduate 12 years ago, to now being a fully-fledged Doctor of Jography, I have been endlessly fascinated by how running can illuminate geographical ideas and push spatial thinking further. I hope these four reasons distil why that is and share some of the enthusiasm geographer's have found in running with you.

Reason 1: Meaningful movement

As a physical form, running is as close as pure, unadulterated movement as it gets. As a bodily act, there is little more to it than simply moving, but with a bit more speed. Yet, running is clearly about so much more than just moving. It is imbued with all sorts of meanings, experiences, contexts and cultures that results in the same physical form representing different things and feeling very different to different people, in different

places and in different situations. Arguably, running as means of movement is now an uncommon understanding, with its meanings as a sport, health or fitness practice more dominant. For geographers, running has been valuable for making the point that movement is meaningful, exploring the diverse ways it is, and the implications of those meanings.

I start with this point as it was my entry point into running research. Geography is a key player in the interdisciplinary mobilities studies field, that collectively seeks to explore the importance and implication of movement in society. Prior to the mobilities turn in the mid-2000s, movement was often approached as neutral and abstract in social sciences, something best understood by considering what is pushing someone from one place or attracting them to another. Movement itself was seen as an empty container, devoid of its own effects. Mobilities research sought to challenge this and to show how movement matters and is full of meaning, context and power. To me, running exemplified this brilliantly. It cannot be understood by push and pull factors as often the departure and destination location are the same as people run loops of their neighbourhoods. Something else is needed to understand this form of movement, inviting attention to the realm of meaning, experience and cultures of movement instead. Such interest still sustains much running research today as different forms of running further illuminate what movement can mean, can do and the consequences of that.

My own research has since challenged my original starting point with running geographies. I have been researching run-commuting where people use running as a form of transport to undertake their commute. Suddenly, push and pull factors *have* become important in understanding running and I've enjoyed trying to unpick how the meanings of transport entangle with meanings of sport, health and leisure in a single run through my research. As a form of meaningful movement, running still has much left in the legs!

Reason 2: Lively engagement with spaces, places and bodies

Geographers have also been enthused by the way that running offers not only meaningful movement, but also deeply embodied movement where the visceral experience of being on the run is a defining feature of this practice. In turn, this gifts runners a lively engagement with places, often transforming their understanding of and connection to those spaces and their bodies. Jonas Larsen has a lovely way of explaining this. He thinks of runners as "emplaced" and in his work seeks to develop a "material understanding of running as a mobile place event with a complex ecology of diverse things, corporeal bodies, places and environments".

I see running as a unique way of inhabiting the world and many geographers have been drawn to exploring this and the new perspectives on places and bodies that can be gained by running. This has included researching the senses, emotions and experiences of running, how running develops a sense of place, why blue and green exercise have purported higher wellbeing benefits, and the rhythmic ensemble of bodies and places that produce running and running events.

Engaging with bodies and places with the greater intensity, speed and exertion of running has proved valuable to geographers aiming to better understand how mobility constitutes space, helps us understand bodies and what they can do, as well how bodies and places affect each other. Such work has informed both our theoretical and applied knowledges of human-spatial relations and particularly the role of mobility in this.

Reason 3: Where and why exercise happens

One of the more applied avenues for this work strikes at a core question for sport geography: where does sport happen? With the increasing use of self-tracking and GPS devices in running, we can now answer this question in ways previously impossible and a range of big data studies are exploring precisely that, analysing data from the likes of Strava to better understand running patterns and behaviours. This is complemented by other survey and interview work that explores *why* particular routes are chosen by runners and what affordances built or natural environments offer to facilitate and encourage running there. This is, obviously, very subjective but tends to combine a range of experiential, practical, and instrumental considerations that relate back to the meaning and desired experiences of running mentioned above. People may run in particular places because of the abundance of nature, the views they provide, the experiences they offer, the convenience, the perceived safety, the potential for uninterrupted running or the topography, for example. If you need to do a hill running session, then you'll need a hill! All of these insights are being used to develop ideas and applications of 'runnable' cities and how built environments can better encourage and plan for runners. It is an area of work I expect to grow.

This work also has a political edge, however, and geographers have found running valuable to question rights to the city and differential priorities in public space. Most running does not happen in designated 'running spaces' (such as an athletics track) but rather occurs in the shared spaces of towns and cities where runners negotiate their right to space as they seek to reappropriate it for activities it was perhaps not designed for. In this way, running has often been considered as transgressive. While this can be sanctioned and celebrated, as in the case of big city marathons where roads are temporarily closed and given over to running, it is often less positive. News media is

littered with examples of where runners have been deemed as out of place and the social and human consequences of this. For some, this is fatal. Ahmad Arbery was shot dead while jogging in a predominantly white neighbourhood in Bunswick, Georgia (USA) in 2020, his running having been racialised and misinterpreted for that of a burglar. Running is a valuable lens for exploring *what* and *who* is deemed to belong in particular spaces, which is a vital to questions for contemporary critical geographies of sport.

Reason 4: Technological mediation and augmentation

My final suggestion for why geographers are so drawn to running is a newer area of study and one where future research could still make much ground. The technological creep of running practices has well and truly set in. Not only are runners more likely to be adorned with all sorts of sensors and bio-tracking devices – measuring location, distance, speed, heart rate, cadence, and all other sort of metrics – but runs are then shared on social media replete with data, images and descriptions that create digital archives of runners' repertoires with social afterlives. In line with thinking in digital geographies, virtual and technological worlds are no longer considered separate from the 'real world', but rather deeply entwined, simultaneous and co-constitutive. For many, running is as much a digital experience as a physical one and geographers have only just begun to explore how this transforms the geographies of running discussed so far in this article.

Questions of how digital technologies mediate and augment everyday practices will likely engage running geographers for years to come as we unravel how adding digital layers to running transforms runners' understanding of their own bodies and the places they run with. How do digital ways of knowing, evaluating and sharing running alter the experiences, meanings, and implications of running? How does this change where people want to run, what makes a place runnable and what people actually do on the run? How do augmented and virtual technologies affect this further? For those interested in human-spatial relations on the move, digital running practices are a valuable area of future study.

Conclusion

In this brief article, I have tried to captured the current enthusiasm for studying running within geography and the spatial social sciences to suggest why that may be. My four proposed reasons centre on running's value for understanding the meaning of movement in society, how lively embodiments alter relations to places and bodies, the politics of where and why sport happens, as well as understanding the impact of increasing digital technologies and self-tracking use in everyday practices. There are

undoubtedly other reasons too and different jographers would choose to emphasise different elements here. So while this may be, in part, an autobiographical list, it is enough to demonstrate the value of running for those interested in human-spatial relations. Running has been a constructive practice for geographers to think with and to think about. Its future also seems bright, with many areas of geographical thinking it can continue to illuminate.

However, future running geographies work needs to strengthen its critical perspectives. In the Western world, running is largely a white, middle-class pursuit and research reflects this, often making claims for the positives of running without also considering who is excluded from doing it or for who such narratives do not hold true. While a critical lens is held throughout running research, particularly considered how running geographies differ across bodies, cultures and contexts, this needs strengthening in future work to really understand the politics of running geographies across a range of registers to produce more equitable and inclusive running practices, societies and spaces.

Author's Note

Dr Simon Cook is a human geographer at Birmingham City University and his research concerns a variety of sport mobilities and active practices. He is interested in how they happen, how they change and what that tells us about societies and spaces. While he has also researched cycling, walking and active travel, he principally sees himself as a jographer and is enthused by all things running geographies. You can see some of this on his website https://jographies.wordpress.com/ or feel free to get in touch via Simon.Cook@bcu.ac.uk

Selection of Relevant Literature

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