Atmospheres of pleasure & danger: sociological phenomenology & women’s sporting embodiment

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To explore

• Why sociological and/or feminist phenomenology?
• Autophenomenography / autoethnography of female distance running
• Trying to ‘capture’ shifting atmospheres, incl. of pleasure & danger - sometimes pre-reflective, nuanced, nebulous, transient, fleeting – representational issues

The sociological lacunae

• Even the sociology of the body [including the sporting body]:
  • ...is characterised by an abundance of theorising, but a systematic empirical research tradition is lacking... Research on the body has been chastised for privileging theorizing, of bracketing out the individual, and for ignoring the practical experiences of embodiment... (Wainwright and Turner, 2006: 238)

   Atmospheric aesthetics?
   • aesthetics of atmosphere shifts attention from the "what" something represents, to the "how" something is present. In this way, sensory perception as opposed to judgment is rehabilitated in aesthetics, and the term "esthetic" is restored to its original meaning, namely the theory of perception (Böhme [philosopher] 1998, cited in Wagenfeld, 2015: 9)

   • Sociology of the senses now beginning to flourish

Autoethnography / autophenomenography

• Autoethnographic focus is on ethnós (social group sharing a common (sub)culture) or cultural ‘place’; researcher qua member of this social group

• Autophenomenography* too is autobiographical genre but focus is on a particular phenomenon as experienced by researcher

• Use of epoché – or best efforts (only ever partial)

*See Allen-Collinson, J (2014) Intention and epoché in tension: autophenomenography, bracketing and a novel approach to researching sporting embodiment, Qualitative Research in Sport & Exercise, 7 (3): 48-62.
The Research
- 3-year autoethnographic & autophenomenographic project, commenced at University of Exeter
- Focused on women’s distance running & training in ‘public’ (gendered) space
- Systematic, almost daily data collection via:
  - detailed fieldnotes, training-logs, recordings via digi-recorder, photos, video
- Weather & atmospheres as key structures of experience in distance running...

Findings
- Data revealed nexus of structure/agency in lived sporting body
- Constraints of social structure and potentials of female agency coalesce powerfully in lived experiences of running in ‘public’ places
- Simone de Beauvoir (1972) signalled empowering force of outdoor recreation for women - exhorted to battle against the elements, take risks, & seek adventure
- Feminist phenomenology seeks to ‘capture’ something of these moments (sometimes transient/sometimes protracted duration): tensions & paradoxes
- Here, I explore the lived-body experience of atmosphere via combined lenses:
  - Corporeal (often tiny nuances) – phenomenology
  - Social context – feminist phenomenology

Atmospheric shifts: workspace/body to runningscape/body
- Nearly 3 weeks’ solid of marking. Legs and arms heavy from it, neck and shoulders rigid, strained, taut to breaking. Eyes red and gritty. It’s going to be a hard run tonight, I guess. But just a few minutes into my stride and the navy-dusk wind is cutting away the work smog, sloughing off the grey skin of the working day. I am being cleansed. I am back. I am back in-body after yet another day of attempted body denial, and enforced focus on the headwork. Quads surge forwards, muscles strong and bulking, pushing against tracksters, abs tighten and flatten against the chill wind as I begin to up the pace…

Inner-outer intertwining
- As I set off in the last rays of April sunshine, down the hill towards the playing fields and river, dark, lowering cloud obscures the hills on the other side of the valley. It looks as though it’s going to pour down or snow heavily. Sure enough the temperature is dropping rapidly and an icy wind’s edge chills my skin, which chafes against thin cotton tee shirt. Shall I head home for warmer gear now, is there time??... No, but best divert away from the open fields and head towards the scant cover of early spring trees.
- As I continue, the thin wind is bitter against my slight body, but as my core begins to warm to the labour, a strange sensation comes over me. Like Baked Alaska in reverse: my wind-chilled outer skin is bitterly cold, grey-blue, but it seems as though just a few layers beneath the epidermis, my inner body is glow-warm orange. The strangeness of the feeling preoccupies me so that the discomfort of the cold is forgotten for a while and I can concentrate on a steady even pace.
**Atmospheres of danger**

- Decided to take the bracken route down the moor to the track, but as I enter the head-height, dense bracken, I feel hemmed in, trapped – I can’t see what’s around the corner, who might be lurking at the path sides. My breath catches, holds, ears straining for any sound, goose pimples catch the moor breeze, trying to quieten my heart beat so that I can hear… probably just sheep… I have to walk some of the way, the path is too steep, too friable for running, but I’m light and primed for flight as any moorland creature… Hit the open space with relief.

**Why feminist/socio phenomenology**

- Phenomenology provides complex & holistic view of human experience, encouraging understanding of what it means to be the woman/person in the body – Leib: the lived body of everyday life
- Epoché / bracketing encourage fundamental questioning of tacit, taken-for-granted assumptions & pre-suppositions re the everyday – n.b. epoché can only ever be partial
- Search for essences of a phenomenon / phenomena – antithesis to ‘lived atmospheres’
- As a sociologist, limitations of philosophical phenomenology include its universalisation thesis, lived experience as that of ‘everywoman’/’everyman’ (see Allen-Collinson, 2010a, for critique)
- So feminist / sociological phenomenology (also queer pheno), acknowledges impact/constraints of historical, structural, ideological, socio-cultural location upon our lived-body experience
- Highlights specificities of lived-body experience – gender, age, ethnicity, class, degrees of dis/ability, etc
- Challenges of representation – the nebulous, transient, pre-reflexive...

**Bibliography**

- For copies of papers, please see my page on ResearchGate: Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Jacquelyn_Allen-Collinson
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