

Running as nature intended: Barefoot running as enskillment and a way of becoming

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Abstract

In recent years, recreational running has been growing in popularity in Slovenia, and it appears that the trend will continue unabated. Simultaneously, practices of running and the meanings that people ascribe to them have also been diversifying. One such faction has evolved around and through running barefoot. Adherents of this particular way of running reject conventional running shoes as being potentially harmful to the human body and as an obstacle to an authentic way of running and perceiving the environment. Defined by its practitioners as the most natural mode of running, it necessitates a gradual accustoming to a barefoot running technique and the gradual development of feet to be able to withstand the demands of such running. Moreover, it requires novices to learn to perceive and to react to the contours of the ground in a specific manner. This learning takes place with the help of more experienced practitioners and with the help of exemplars embodied in some non-Modern peoples.

KEYWORDS: barefoot running, body techniques, environment, popular culture, anthropology of sport

Introduction

Writing about the New York City Marathon, the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard observed that the overwhelming majority of the participants in the marathon were not running to win, running ‘without even a thought for victory, but simply in order to feel alive’ (1989: 19). For him, running the marathon was tantamount to suffering, a meaningless ‘demonstrative suicide,’ by which the runners proved nothing except the endlessly self-evident fact that they exist (Baudrillard 1989: 21). In this article, however, I am not concerned with the New York City Marathon, nor with some other running event in which thousands or even tens of thousands of people participate, where huge investments are involved and widespread media coverage is generated. I am concerned with a somewhat more modest occasion and practice that Baudrillard would, presumably, find equally or even more futile. In the following pages, I will be focusing on the relatively small number

of people in Slovenia who purposefully run barefoot, who – as they themselves often emphasise – run naturally, purely for joy and pleasure.

Running for exercise, or “jogging” as it is most often termed after the eponymous 1966 best-selling book by Bill Bowerman and W. E. Harris, has come to attract numerous people in many different parts of the world since the 1970s. Closely connected to this popular leisure activity is a multi-million dollar industry of sports equipment and auxiliary gear, among which none embodies jogging better than the humble running-shoe. This paper is not the place to address the manufacturers’ role in reproduction of inequalities, namely the issues of exploitation of workers into which some of the biggest manufacturers of running-shoes are involved while presenting “a humane face” (see Klein 2005) or their role in the international presentation and migration of world-class athletes (see Bale in Sang 1996; Bale 2004 Maguire and Bale 1994), of which barefoot runners have curiously little to say. I am mentioning running-shoes as this is a topic on which barefoot runners are highly critical from another point of view. It is also the point at which they themselves most often and readily differentiate from joggers and runners shod in conventional running shoes. Historically, however, I would argue, they are inscribing themselves in the same trend precisely with their differentiation and entering a structure of common difference (Wilk 1995). Through establishing such differences they are “looping back” into discourses of health and recreation and ultimately new middle-class habitus and concerns with self-presentation in the gaze of others where these ‘body techniques and practices are promoted, transmitted, purveyed and stylised as part of legitimate lifestyle, i.e. their lifestyle’ (Jarvie & Maguire 2000: 204). It is true, however, that a ‘back to nature’ narrative is being incorporated in the process,¹ but it would seem only to emphasize the advantages running barefoot supposedly has in comparison to running shod.

Hereinafter, I will elaborate on barefoot runners’ understandings of running-shoes, and how can these affect one’s feet and running stride. Afterwards, I will give a short ethnographical vignette of a barefoot running course and my own experience of running barefoot. After presenting discourses of identity and on the Other embodied in such “pristine peoples” such as the Tarahumara, I conclude with some descriptions of experiences of running barefoot given by some well-versed barefoot runners themselves. Through these successive sections, I will attempt to address the question of how do barefoot runners, by running barefoot and through the experiences it yields, create themselves and *their* environments.

Contemporary forms of running have to be understood as a historical and social phenomenon, often with class-based dimensions and not as an expression of some kind of natural human need. Neither should temporally earlier forms of running be understood as “natural” predecessors to present-day practices (see Bale 2004; Bale & Sang 1996; Jarvie & Maguire 2000; Mewett 2012). Despite the reoccurring theme of nature and a clear cut

¹ A “back to nature” discourse, is in hindsight, hardly new in the context of running (see Bale 2004: 41–76), though most barefoot runners feel that they are indeed countering the overly-commercialised running that has removed people from natural environments.

distinction between nature and culture that is present in the barefoot runner's discourse, I will not construct my argument on the basis of anthropological thinking focusing on conceptualisations of nature(s) in societies (Descola & Pallson 1996; Macnaghten & Urry 2001). I will take the particular notions and experiences of nature at face value, accepting the characteristics attributed and derived from what is said to fall under the domain of nature. First, however, allow me to briefly sketch the way I came to be interested in barefoot running and how I addressed the subject ethnographically.

Short methodological and autobiographical note

For the purposes of this article, I attempted to take seriously Tim Ingold's suggestion to take anthropological inquiry out of doors and to go barefoot (Ingold 2011: 119, 15). I conducted a number of interviews during the spring of 2014, had numerous conversations with runners, both shod and barefooted, followed online chat rooms and online journals (blogs), read different publications on the topic of barefoot running and related subjects. Arguably, the most important part of my inquiry was taking up barefoot running myself. However, I must emphasise that, as the process of becoming able to run without shoes without hindrances can take up to a year or even more, I have barely scratched the surface, as I have (at the time writing) been practicing barefoot running for only two months. Nonetheless, I believe that in combining my experiences with observations of other people running barefoot and with an attentive following of a discourse of barefoot running, I have managed to make some valid, albeit only initial and temporary conclusions. It is beyond my ambitions and capabilities to address the biomechanics of running barefoot regardless of how important these are to barefoot runners themselves. It is a somewhat controversial theme, receiving both strong support and opposition (see Bramble & Lieberman 2004; Hatala et al. 2013; Lieberman et al. 2010). It has also become an important cultural resource for some runners, and I emphasise that the claims and experiences of efficiency and tenderness are of concern in the present paper only as such.

Furthermore, I would like to note that even before taking up barefoot running as a part of the ethnographic research for my emerging doctoral thesis on running, running was not entirely alien to me. I have been running sporadically for a number of years but have never given much thought to either running shoes or running technique. In fact, I have only owned one second-hand pair of shoes that I still use today. To a certain extent, I have been aware, of course, that some people do pay attention (and money) to new developments and trends in the fields of footwear and kinesiology as I have come into contact with them either on my own or through my father, who has also been running for over thirty years. I emphasise these autobiographical remarks not simply because the experiences they allude to having influenced my choice of topic and fieldwork *per se* but because in bringing them into the light I can more readily use them as a way of attending to some of the culturally meaningful practices, differences, relationships and identities of barefoot runners in Slovenia (see Okely 1992).

Bodies in movement

The human body has always been present in cultural anthropology but has not always been problematised or put at the forefront (Csordas 1999). Despite a substantial quantity of work since the 1980s focusing on the body from a number of different theoretical starting points and in different cultural contexts, it is sometimes forgotten that bodies are not only stationary (Farnell 1999). Even approaches that emphasise the experiential dimension and the active role of the body² mostly neglected that bodies also – or even mostly – move around *through* the world. People not only traverse it, but engage with the world they live in, appropriating and transforming it in the process (Ingold 2000, 2011; Tilley 1997, 2004). It is through their daily activities that people create places and alter their environments, despite sometimes unfavourable social, economic and political circumstances that influence or block movements even when these factors “radiate” from faraway. Movement from one place to another is often simultaneously a movement from one social group and/or identity to another as well as it often a movement with(in) one social group and/or identity. Many environments, however, change not only under the work of human minds, hands and stomping of feet, but also due to animal activity and plant growth, the weather and, of course, to long-term geological processes. Setting these aside, it must be noted that whatever activities people enact in their environment, however mundane and small tasks of movement and other modes of engagement might be, these demand particular skills. Walking in unfamiliar environments, such as industrial ruins or a rainforest, can, for example, become a strange practice, requiring re-learning, unusual actions and close attentiveness to the surroundings (see Edensor 2008; Tuck-Po 2008). For the most part, though, people move about and act in a habitual manner. In his famous essay on *Techniques of the Body*, Marcel Mauss (1996) noted that the ways people walk and run differ from one society to another as well as within them (see also Bourdieu 2002; Devine 1985; Ingold 2011; Ingold & Lee Vergunst 2008a; Lee & Ingold 2006). These techniques, themselves socially produced, are but a part of an embodied habitus that further generates cultural forms and (re)produces social distinctions (Bourdieu 1977). Everyday activities, such as walking and for some people, indeed, running, incorporate specific bodily gestures and postures, a certain bodily *hexis*, and express cultural forms, embodied through education, while at the same time “living through” these forms, thus generating them (Bourdieu 1977; also Ingold & Lee Vergunst 2008b).

Recently, a number of authors have focused on the importance of different sorts of movements as a social and skilled practice in a certain environment and as a part of making different social groups and/or identities (Benediktsson & Lund 2010; Collins & Coleman 2006; Edensor 2010; Ingold & Lee Vergunst 2008a; Lee & Ingold 2006). To the best of my knowledge, very few have focused on running in this fashion. One

² In such often phenomenologically inspired conceptualizations it was often sidelined that bodies can and do become objectified despite phenomenology’s acceptance of this fact (Csordas 1990). While I do not intend to dwell on this point, I nonetheless stress it as is important to bear it in mind especially in contexts of sport discipline (see Hargreaves 1996; Starc 2003) and sporting places (see Bale 2003; Bale 2004; Henirch 1998) where different bodily exercises are used to subject bodies to regimes of surveillance and power.

example is Peter Mewett's (2012) historical analysis of running in late 19th and early 20th century Britain as a way of re-establishing class divisions and identities; another is John Bale's *Running Cultures* (Bale 2004) in which the author, amongst other things, shows that running can contribute to favourable attitudes to particular environments while simultaneously presenting a resource for establishing national, gender and other social differences and identities. Most attempts in cultural anthropology and cognate disciplines³ to describe the running practices of different groups have primarily focused on running as part of economic practices (Lund Christensen & Damkjaer 2012; Manners 2007), as games and play (Sheehan 2006) or as part of wider colonial intervention and neo-colonial relationships, reproducing inequalities and stereotypes (Bale & Sang 1996). Interestingly, running and jogging are barely mentioned even in a recent review of anthropology of sport (Besinger & Brownell 2012). Concerned primarily with running as play, cultural geographer Rebecca Sheehan, though overlooking Bale's book (2004), similarly asserts that there were acknowledgements in academic writing, but most aspects were yet to be thoroughly considered in relation to broader social practices, such as tourism and creating identities (2006). Recently, some work did also attempt to examine the connection between running marathon races and tourism (Shipway & Jones 2008).

Considering that in many parts of the world thousands of people run or jog daily just about everywhere they can – in the woods, meadows, parks, city streets, fitness centres – with many devoting much time, energy and funds not only for suitable equipment but also for attending different running events, and, presumably, a certain degree of diversity of the ways and reasons why people run, I find the relative lack of academic attention curious. This, however, is not the place to address the reasons as to why this is so – if my observation is indeed correct – but instead to take a closer look at how does one group of runners – nicknamed *bosonogci*, meaning *barefooters* – in Slovenia actually run, what cultural forms they make use of and what, forever temporary “products” they create. In other words, it is an attempt to show how people learn to run barefoot and identify with certain cultural notions while engaging in movement through a world-in-formation (see Ingold 2011).

On running shoes and bare feet

An obvious and purposively naïve question one might ask is why someone would deliberately renounce running shoes and start running barefoot, with no regard to all the small dangers, such as sharp rocks and shattered glass that prey on the runners as they swiftly move through the environment. Considering the commoditised context of contemporary recreational running, where every manufacturer promises safer and more comfortable shoes, this might be seen as even more striking. Indeed, most barefoot runners have answered the above question numerous times, and their answer is usually one that

³ Some volumes attempting to integrate biological and evolutionary perspectives with cultural and social perspectives on running have appeared, but have, in my opinion, done little else that directly compared texts from different traditions (Sands & Sands 2012; Pitsiladis et al. 2007).

turns the very presuppositions of the question upside down. Contrary to the widespread and well-established discourse according to which sturdily made running shoes with a thick, well-cushioned sole, and especially heel, provide not only comfort but also better protection for a runner's soles, feet, ankles, knees, legs and ultimately the whole body, proponents of barefoot running posit that such sneakers do not only *not* provide what they promise, but can be actually harmful to one's physical well-being. According to their account, modern-day running shoes severely impede person's ability to stride properly, the way human feet and legs have evolved to do. Running shoes are likely to cause the feet to land heel first, sending severe shocks up the leg and into the rest of the body. One interlocutor described the shocks caused by an improper stride as similar to the effects of smoking cigarettes:

One, two, or even ten will not harm you immediately, but the damage of each individual cigarette is going to accumulate and eventually the effects can be, as we all know, very serious. It's the same with steps – one, two or even more steps on the heel won't harm you, but after kilometres and kilometres, it will take its toll.

Several barefoot runners I talked to mention having numerous injuries in the past, while still running shod. These injuries were, according to their testimonies, at the time normally taken for granted as something inherent in running itself, as were various aids, such as different gels, sprays and special bandages. Indeed, many texts, either printed or published online, suggest injuries such as runner's knee (irritation of the cartilage on the underside of the kneecap), Achilles tendinitis (irritated Achilles tendon), plantar fasciitis (inflammation or small tears of the tendons and ligaments in the foot) and several others, as so common as to be virtually inevitable.⁴ Barefoot runners, though, readily admit that barefoot running is by no means without its perils – such as getting a nasty sore, severely hitting the toes or stepping on something sharp – but most are, deriving from personal experiences, nonetheless certain that when executed properly running barefoot is far more benign for the human body than running shod. Human heels are a part of the foot, as proponents of barefoot running readily emphasise, not meant for landing and absorbing stress. What was designed to absorb, however, is the whole of the foot and the leg – the entire intricate and complex intertwinement of skin, fat, muscles, ligaments, bones, and joints working in unison as a tremendous spring. In order to re-activate this spring, it is said, runners have to change the way they land on their feet when running. This necessitates that they step on their forefeet or land on the entire sole when running, which is a technique much more feasible when running barefoot and not in thickly padded shoes. It is often said that a barefoot runner is only stupid enough to land on his heels but once.

⁴ Most written accounts on barefoot running also emphasise the authors' struggle with injuries while running in shoes and – after hitting rock bottom – they discovered barefoot running which has eliminated or alleviated the great majority of problems (see Robillard 2010; McDougall 2009; Sandler & Lee 2010). The repetitive use of same narrative elements and arc suggest a cultural way of structuring biographies in a story of personal triumph against all adversities.

Indeed, one of my interlocutors and most probably the first in Slovenia to take up running barefoot challenged the participants of one his workshops on barefoot running to jump up and down and to land on their heels, implying that such a feat is nearly impossible and certainly quite painful.

Barefoot runners usually argue that people who run without running shoes and continually land on their forefeet start making shorter and more frequent strides thus enabling a much more gentle and far less harmful landing each time. This type of stride, while making the most of human feet and legs' natural shock absorbing capabilities, is simultaneously using the same flexibility as a means of propelling the runner forward. Each barefoot stride is, in sum, defined as both a body's own way of absorbing already substantially diminished stress of each contact with the ground and as the most efficient manner of using the force stored in the tensioned feet and legs to "launch" the whole body forward. Consequently, this supposedly produces an energetically more efficient stride, greater stamina and quite possibly faster running. Many barefoot runners claim to have noticeably improved their "performance", i.e. able to run faster and with much greater ease, because they were not wearing running shoes.

However, it would seem that running shoe manufacturers can make very little, if anything from people running barefoot. In a recurring, biting remark on this topic, barefoot runners bluntly say that one cannot make any profit off of bare feet. Other than the occasional barefoot running workshop, this would certainly appear to be true if it were not for a considerable industry of so-called minimalist footwear and barefoot running shoes. Both are lighter, have much thinner soles and have much less cushioning than conventional running shoes. However, the former only have a reduced ratio of thickness of the shoe sole between the heel and front part, whereas the latter have what is amongst runners known as zero-drop soles. As the name implies, the whole sole of the shoe is of the same thickness. Most often they are made out of a highly mouldable material so as to adjust to movement of the foot while running. Such shoes are meant to copy barefoot running as closely as possible. Additionally, some shoe models have cavities purposefully made to accommodate each toe individually; some are entirely open, named and modelled on huaraches, a type of sandals from Mexico of pre-Colombian origin.

There is much debate among adherents of barefoot running on the subject of which sole drop ratio is the threshold for minimalist shoes, whether such shoes should be worn only in the most unfavourable weather conditions and for running on the roughest terrain, whether they are a convenient way to gradually reduce the thickness and cushioning of one's running shoes before ultimately going barefoot. It is in connection to gradual reduction of padding that, sometimes, *true* barefoot runners distinguish themselves from those who merely run barefoot or in minimalist and barefoot shoes so as to be fashionable. Furthermore, some runners actively oppose the gradual reduction of cushioning on one's shoes as they see this as a cheap trick of major running shoe manufacturers to get people to eventually buy an even greater number of shoes than they would otherwise. Together with viewing conventional running shoes as potentially adverse to the human body, these new shoes came to "objectify" (Miller 2010) much of what is understood as improper, corrupt, or simply bad in contemporary society; notably, a prevalent estrangement from

nature and our primal roots. Nonetheless, even those who are against such a course of action do, from time to time, buy a new pair of minimalist or barefoot running shoes only to reaffirm after running in them – or any old pair for that matter – a barefoot runners’ truth on which, it would seem, just about every supporter agrees: No matter how thin the soles of the shoes are, what material they are made from, how little damping they offer, no pair of shoes can provide the richness of experience ensured by running barefoot. Not only is the barefoot running stride – “the most natural way of running” – defined as gentler, far less harmful to one’s body, a more efficient in terms of energy expenditure, and a sort of rejection of unhealthy trends of the modern world, it is also characterised – and, as we will see in the continuation of this paper, experienced – as far more sensuous.

Herein lies a particular paradox. As I briefly mentioned in the beginning, it can take a year or, in some cases, even more for a person to be able to run a fair distance without shoes. In short, it takes patient perseverance and gradual advancement in and of running to eventually be able to “run naturally”. Now, of course, just about everyone of average health and without any severe impediments can run a few steps or even a couple of hundred meters on the very first try, but, as any self-respecting runner will observe, this would not be running proper, but only a learning jog, i.e. literally a practice run and not yet “the real deal”. According to my interlocutors, most people can replicate the correct barefoot running stride quite quickly, while some need more practice. It is said that such a reaction, a change in stride and gait, is to be expected, as it is only natural to step on the forefoot first when running without obstructions, such as padded running shoes. Nevertheless, these first steps are seen first and foremost as an exercise, strongly recommended by more experienced barefoot runners to be done on asphalt or some other hard, smooth surface. It is argued that flat, regular surfaces are easy to keep an eye on and thus to manage while learning a barefoot running stride, helping the novice to maintain even steps, controlling the way he puts his feet down on the ground and how he simultaneously jumps into every new step. Much like the novice violinist described by Ingold (2007: 147–8), the novice barefoot runner:

has to practise regularly, under expert guidance, ideally from a young age when her body is still undergoing rapid growth. In the course of this training certain patterns of posture and gesture, and of attentiveness and response, are incorporated into her body as it develops. Novices are of course expected to follow certain rules as they take their first steps.

Once barefoot steps are mastered with a reasonable efficiency, one can leave the safe asphalt grounds – probably the closest thing to a template one can find out of doors for helping perform desired bodily movements – and venture into more demanding terrain. ‘Sending a novice to run in a forest would just not be a right thing to do’, said one of the more experienced barefoot runners in Slovenia, before he continued with his reflections on the learning process of barefoot running:

You know, I find it interesting, in the beginning your brain is working hard and then it becomes automatic. Of course, you look in front of you but your legs jump by themselves, not according to your conscious impulse; I think this is something completely natural, as you simply can not think so fast, but

your legs nonetheless swim through [suitable] spots without your conscious guidance ... It comes with practice, with time.

One important rule, concerning the course of learning, has to do with gradualness. It is ceaselessly repeated by more experienced runners and in handbooks on barefoot running that this form of running requires extreme gradualness in attempting to run longer distances and on somewhat more demanding terrain. It was strongly emphasised by the instructor during the abovementioned barefoot running workshop, as well as during one of our conversations, that slowness is, along with gentleness one of the attitudes essential to this practice, something that must be taken very seriously if one is to not only run or learn to run barefoot, but be able to learn to run barefoot:

A novice should first start just by doing home chores barefoot, run only a few meters at home, and then by taking short strolls barefoot. Only then, and if no aches are experienced, should he start running a couple of hundred meters every few days or even once a week.

Another interlocutor similarly asserted that the transition to barefoot running ‘... demands – and this should be emphasised a hundred times – gradual progress. This is very hard to conceive for good runners who are used to long distances; this patience is remarkably exhausting.’

Now, why exactly should one, even a runner with a considerable experience, “take it slow” if, after all, the correct barefoot running stride technique appears, so to speak, naturally? The answer can perhaps best be described on the basis of my first barefoot running venture. Before running barefoot for the first time, I had been told several times to take the whole learning process very slowly, but once I took the first steps I did not heed these warnings. During the barefoot running event organised by a group of enthusiasts in the sports park on the outskirts of Kranj, Slovenia, I decided to have a try. The course took the participants along several suburban streets, before taking a turnaround through some fields and meadows, thus encircling a store specialised in minimalist footwear and barefoot running shoes, and owned and run by the organisers of the event, where the non-competitive run both started and finished. Despite a gentle descent followed by a gradual ascent, the route was mostly flat, taking place exclusively on paved surfaces, thus being ideal for learning the proper stride. After I made the first few shy steps, each one surprising me with just how much the ground kept changing as I moved along, and even a several hundred meters I thought to myself that all the grave, but well-intended advice and warnings were surely to be taken *cum grano salis*. Being careful to step on the forefoot first, I felt that my strides were light. As the distance already covered increased, however, I first started to feel a slight pinching sensation in my soles that increased as I ran on. Finally, my soles started to ache and burn. While the pain was by no means excruciating, I nonetheless decided to end my running after finishing only one lap, or approximately 2.5 kilometres. After stopping and catching my breath, I checked my feet: there were a few blisters, but covering a significant part of the soles and also the undersides of both big toes, with some blood oozing from between the toes. At

that point, the pain was not too bad, but it did become quite a nuisance when I walked to the bus station in the centre of the town and whenever I stood or walked in the next few days.

It is no secret that different clothes have a profound effect on how people use and live (in) their bodies (Miller 2010) and that the feet of a huge majority of people in the West have been grown through habitual wearing of shoes and boots, walking very often through environments where paved surfaces prevail (Ingold 2011). Indeed, different types of footwear mediate and influence the relations one has, and is capable of having, within a certain environment and the actions he is capable of enacting (Michael 2001). If, for instance, someone is accustomed to walking his entire life exclusively in hard clad boots and on smooth, even pavement, this will most certainly have an impact both on how this individual uses and experiences his body and the ground beneath his feet, as well as the way in which his body and, more precisely, his toes, soles, feet and legs, are grown. As we have seen, different kinds of running shoes and the possibilities they enable, severely impede or possibly prevent give rise to a number of potent opinions (or is it the other way around?). What they also do as part and parcel of a whole array of other footwear, of course, is influence the growth of the lower extremities in such a way that they are practically incapable of running without shoes. Not only do they help to produce relatively soft soles, as evident from the above description of my first running experience, but they affect the development, strength and stamina of muscles, tendons and even bones. One interlocutor reflected that it took him well over a year to make the transition to barefoot running, only because his ‘... feet were weak, underdeveloped for running this way. I had to adjust my soles, awaken dormant muscles in my feet; [the muscles] were asleep for years because of shoes!’ What the small (yet in this context significant) change of going barefoot rather than shod thus entails is that runners, quite literally, develop new legs and feet through a process of enskillment (Ingold 2000) in actual routine of running barefoot (see Ingold 2011).

Growing natural shoes

To this point, I have only hinted at the social contexts in which people come to learn to run barefoot and have, as well, only implied the role barefoot running has in experiencing the environment. I have mentioned above that barefoot running workshops are occasionally organised. Like the aforementioned barefoot running event, these also take place in Kranj, on the paved platform in front of the indoor swimming pool and the adjoining gym complex, where the shop of the organisers is located. If necessary, the workshop, or rather its participants, also proceed into the surrounding sport park. Though quite thorough in their approach, their influence should, I believe, not be overstated as these workshops are meant as an introduction to barefoot running or a way checking one’s running stride. This way of running is presented through different exercises in addition to demonstrations of running itself and with the help of detailed explanations of the workings of the human body in motion. Participants, of course, also perform the exercises and engage in short-term running. In addition, video equipment is used for in depth analysing of participants’ running techniques and as an aid to – if need be – improve it with the assistance of

the instructor. However, no matter how insightful the descriptions, how invigorating the exercises and how helpful the instructor's advices are, no one can, as we have seen, become a full-fledged barefoot runner in only a few hours. What is needed for novices are not only descriptions and demonstrations, but primarily their own extended, if gradual action through which they slowly educate themselves in a specific sort of bodily attention to the environment and in it (Ingold 2000). It is upon them to take steps and learn for and by themselves, under the guidance of those who have run barefoot for a longer period and have already covered much more ground. Such workshops take place only a few times a year; the number of participants is limited and, again, learning takes a far longer period. From whom, if from anyone at all, do people who are learning to run barefoot then get their long-term guidance, for it would seem that running is, as Robert Sands (2002: 29) asserted, after all quite often a solitary activity, requiring a sole participant?

While talking to barefoot runners, it became apparent that for many of them the World Wide Web is – with its many different forms of exchanging information – the central medium of engaging in interaction with others interested in barefoot and minimalist running. It was mentioned numerous times that in their own beginnings they would search the Web for videos, pictorial and textual descriptions and advice on barefoot running techniques. Indeed, a *barefoot running* headword search yields numerous results, ranging from web forums, profiles on different social networks to more conventional web journals and web pages. These transmit various questions on the topic, instructions, often in the form of a “rule of thumb” for beginners. Suggestions and recommendations by and for already more knowledgeable runners, who most often base their narrations on their own experiences, are also shared there. I was told by several interlocutors, mostly quite experienced barefoot runners themselves, that they had indeed tried out new approaches to running in the past, and occasionally still do. In a conversation with a barefoot running instructor and arguably the most-experienced barefoot runner in Slovenia – he has, amongst other things, run several marathons barefoot – I was told that keeping an open mind is essential to barefoot running:

As far as I am concerned, it is of the utmost importance to stay open, that you're not dogmatically focused on something and are ignoring everything else. It is important that you are ready to learn, to accept new evidence, that you doubt your convictions, and willing to better that which you know, to progress. I had, for instance, at first thought that it is better to step on your toes [when running barefoot], but am now convinced that it is better to step on the entire sole. It is important that you admit your mistakes. I think that barefoot running encourages openness.

For all intents and purposes, regardless of how detailed the instructions and suggestions one is able to find while comfortably browsing the internet or reading handbooks, they, of course, are not actually running in the actual world. The narratives told and written by others are to be taken outside, onto the forest path or a nearby meadow, tried out by barefoot runners in practice and done to discover their worth and validity in the context of their own actions while moving through an actual setting. In taking the

narratives outside, in their own running, there is no clear-cut distinction between the two, but a connecting thread and a continuation (Ingold 2007, 2011). Even the most-experienced barefoot runner is thus, in a way, a novice, always learning by doing new actions with the help of others. They are, no doubt, knowledgeable, but what makes them experienced is:

not a greater accumulation of mental content – as though with every increment of learning yet more representations were packed inside the head – but a greater sensitivity to cues in the environment and a greater capacity to respond to these cues with judgement and precision. The difference, if you will, is not one of how *much* you know but of how *well* you know (Ingold 2011: 161; original emphasis).

What makes an experienced runner experienced is not the sheer mileage of his past running, but the way in which he can pay attention to the ground on which he is running on as well as to his own body. It was often emphasised by the runners that while running ‘one has to listen to his body all the time. It knows what to do and also when it is enough [i.e. when to stop running].’ According to the expert barefoot runner, to whom I have already referred above, in barefoot running to be aware of the environment and one’s bodily movement is paramount:

We are closer to our surroundings than normal [i.e. shod] runners. It is often said in the mainstream opinion that we are running in the best possible way when we forget that we are running. To me this makes no sense; it means that we isolate ourselves – with sneakers, with music – it means that we don’t feel the ground, the wind, nor do we feel possible pains, which also leads to injuries. These people don’t even know where and how they are running, that they are running at all! Why not stay at home then, sitting on the couch?

In short, it is accepted that no one is all-knowing – about running techniques, about footwear, about the ground and the environment – and despite the numerous kilometres one may have run – or is it precisely because of that? – it is possible to always conceive a way forward, toward bettering one’s self and knowledge. This “working on yourself”, which is always also, quite literally a moving forward, has, however, a twist. It is simultaneously a “going back”.

The question, of course, is where and to whom would barefoot runners be likely to return? Articles, books, blogs, comments and other writings and talks on barefoot running and associated practices often make reference to numerous peoples from all over the world and also from the past. Children are often added as another group of people to look up to. They are defined as unspoiled by the adverse factors of contemporary life, such as an improper footwear, and thus still retaining a natural stride while running, for example. From different angles and for different aims these pristine peoples are mentioned not only to legitimise the practice of barefoot running here and now by formally generalising and normalising it, but also posited as an ideal to which to strive. Without going into detail, let me just note that the precise values that these peoples come to embody, vary according

to the narrative context but are, as the examples below demonstrate, always closely connected with nature, good health and physical strength, incredible running capabilities stemming from these relations, natural foods these peoples eat, and, of course, from the fact that they move about in the most basic of footwear or barefoot.

In the book *Barefoot Running: How to run light and free by getting in touch with the Earth* numerous peoples, and individuals are mentioned and typically described as being able to somehow transcend the normal human embeddedness in the world. It is, for instance, mentioned that the Lung-Gom-Pa runners of Tibet and the Marathon Monks of Mount Hiei in Japan are in such a state of mindfulness while running their daily marathon loop, so present and aware of their surroundings that they can know every rock and twig on their path (Sandler & Lee 2010). Much attention is also paid to the practices of the indigenous peoples of North America, specifically mentioning the Zuni, Hopi, Taos, Navajo, focusing on ‘a rich tradition of relay racing and running games’ of which it is said that ‘no one knows for certain why they disappeared in the U.S., but they were an essential part of Indian culture’ (Sandler & Lee 2010: 225). After emphasising that such games helped produce stronger runners and strong feet capable of running enormous distances in the harshest terrains imaginable with ease, the authors conclude that:

while kick racing is for the most part gone, it can be as useful today as it was back then in building strong feet, balance, stamina, and coordination. Stories and pictures depict people playing kick stick barefoot through cactus-riddled prairie lands at modern racing speeds for hours on end. If we can get our feet in even half the condition of these famed kick racers, we’ll have some of the strongest feet around (Sandler & Lee 2010: 225–6).

Arguably, most known example of the peoples mentioned as the perfect runners are the Tarahumara, made famous by Christopher McDougall (2009) in his best-selling and widely read and cited book *Born to Run: A hidden tribe, super-athletes and the greatest race the world has never seen*. At the very beginning of the book, the Tarahumara are described, for instance, as:

... a near mythical tribe of Stone Age superathletes. The Tarahumara ... may be the healthiest and most serene people on earth, and the greatest runners of all time. When it comes to ultradistances, nothing can beat a Tarahumara runner – not a racehorse, not a cheetah, not an Olympic marathoner. Very few outsiders have ever seen the Tarahumara in action, but amazing stories of their superhuman toughness and tranquillity have drifted out of the canyons for centuries... (McDougall 2009: 1).

Such amazing stories continue to drift around also with the help of these books. It is beside the point if they are factual or made up, or most probably a little of both. It is also not my intention to analyse how such portraits are discursively constructed only to discover what is more or less obvious – that they re-produce effects of power, that what is at stake here is, to paraphrase a well-know statement made by Edward Said (2003: 2), ‘a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between’ Us and Them, where They are completely muted, not able to speak, as if they

were without a history, barely passive observers. What is important in terms of this article is that the occurrences and characteristics to which they allude to are drawn into, and are for many an integral part of present experience or, in other words, what barefoot runners *do* with these stories.

While discussing the Tarahumara, one of the runners I was talking to on that occasion reflected about how we, Westerners, live and what can we do in order to better our lives:

Thank goodness that there are still this kind of populations in the world who are still so, how should I put it, backwards that we can still learn something from our roots. The world is globalised, it is just a singular culture, and it is important to search, to dig to our roots. This is one way, though maybe unconventional, but if we look at it from the perspective of running it can tell us a lot about our own social order, our customs, as consumers or whatever ... From what I've read, at least between the lines, they [Other peoples, the Tarahumara] are happier than we are. They run, but they run focused, towards a goal, while we are just in a hurry all the time, without any [meaningful] effect. We are forced to run around without stopping. They are running and I believe that they find meaning in it. After all this hurrying, we need some relaxation to eliminate the stress. They don't even know stress ... I think that the paragons we find with these peoples are something truly positive. You have to look with a magnifying glass to find something negative, in their lifestyle; if you compare our lifestyle with theirs ... I believe that anyone who can think critically will find this. Of course, you won't start living like they do, but [will change] aspects of your life, wherever it is possible you will adapt to that lifestyle; whether that is barefoot running, a diet or something similar.

This statement neatly summarises what lies beyond the “mere” imagining of the Tarahumara and other peoples. This would seem to be a silent critique stemming from dissatisfaction with the perceived way of living in the contemporary Western world, namely the severed connection with nature, loss of bodily well-being, incessant and tantalising consumption of causally harmful things. Through it, They come to embody much of what We are not, but desire to be. These peoples are simultaneously perceived in two contradictory ways: on the one hand, they are radically different from Us and, on the other hand, they are essentially the same, ‘our roots,’ to use a phrase of my interlocutors. Likewise, We are characterised as being simultaneously natural beings and forcefully removed from nature. Some barefoot runners will readily identify themselves with this statement, others less so and many will do so only in certain contexts and on certain occasions.

What has to be distinguished here are, I believe, two connected levels: on one hand, we have the level referring to *contents* and *images* that characterise the Tarahumara and Us, while the other concerns *relationships* between Them and Us. Within in these stories as an image of naturalness and unspoiled life the Tarahumara and other peoples come to be seen in a mythical light (Lévi-Strauss 2004). The importance of the characteristics ascribed to the peoples lies not in that barefoot runners simply become

more like the Tarahumara or some other more pristine people just by deciding so, by somehow applying an aspect of Tarahumar-ness to resolve the tensions inherent in the image of themselves and their lives as Westerners. Rather, the runners can, by running barefoot, perform a sensible action, occupy a particular place in the relationship (as well as physical place), “consume” a form, which in its enactment provides for an identification with naturalness and thus providing a “genuineness” of that part of the runner’s identity. By running barefoot, they incorporate an aspect against which they ordinarily define themselves, but recognise as a part crucial of their humanness, a part shared with the Tarahumara and all other peoples in the world, for that matter. They can, through this particular practice, temporarily at least, resolve the contradictory nature of the image of themselves, jumping from the dividedness to a sense of completeness.

In short, the share of attraction of running barefoot lies in that it is defined in these stories (a somewhat inadequate term perhaps as there is a great deal of work hailing from biological anthropology, sports medicine and kinesiology all arguing much the same point, and that can be seen as part and parcel of the same narrative) as natural, which is for many not only an acceptable but also a desirable trait, something that is vital to the sense of being human and of being alive. Besides being a very practical engagement with one’s environment, barefoot running is also a symbolic movement back (in)to nature. However, as this naturalness is constituted in the midst of social relationships between Us and Them, it is by its definition, so to speak, lacking on the side of Us and presumed to be in possession by Them. It enables Them to run for hours on end, be healthy and strong, while for Us it is inherently evasive, indeed an embodied lack, pulling towards itself, inducing Us to run.

Running naturally

The stories mentioned above become through barefoot running – that is, through performing as if they were a Tarahumara, for instance – a part of their own identities for, at least, some runners; an ability, strength even, to openly declare and recognise oneself as a barefoot runner. In running barefoot, they follow in the way of their ancestors who, as it is often emphasised among proponents of barefoot running, rarely left any footprints at all. Attributed sometimes to the Tarahumara, sometimes to the ancient Chinese text *Tao Te Ching* (as in McDougall 2009) this saying is most often used in the context of discussions on running techniques and refers to the lightness of a well-executed stride. Such a stride is said not to be harmful to bodily wellbeing of the runner and to leave no footprints on the ground. Now, if barefoot runners are following in the footsteps of those who leave none behind, how exactly are they progressing forward?

As a practice, barefoot running is always already “soaked” with various notions and embedded in relationships discussed above and thus enables or, rather more precisely, is a particular positive attitude towards, openness in motion, a want of and for what is characterised as natural. This attitude is enabled and mediated, it would seem, through a ‘subject presumed to know’ (Lacan 2010: 215–42) embodied in the pristine peoples. As such, they function as a guarantee of validity of barefoot runners’ own knowledge and practices. In the confidence that, contrary to Us, mere Westerners whose knowledge

of running is only partial, there are those who in fact know the well-kept secrets of the Tarahumara (McDougell 2009), whose knowledge is (more) complete, a space is created to, in the words of one runner, ‘clear your head of everything, relax completely’ and to go forward and – well – run barefoot. These “elders”, though purely notional and constituted in suppositions, are nonetheless factual and given a distinct image in stories, offer support to those willing to follow.

The experience of barefoot running, then, is not only an encouragement to openness, as it was emphasised by one my interlocutors, but it *is* openness. Questions yet to be answered are, of course, to what kind of openness are barefoot runners referring and to what are they (trying to be) open? The answer lies, as with many things when it comes to barefoot running, on the soles of the feet.

During the barefoot running event in Kranj, I engaged in a discussion with a young medical doctor, who has been running barefoot for five years. At one point in the conversation, he compared shoes to earplugs, running to playing the piano: ‘Running in shoes is like playing with earplugs – you don’t know what you’re doing.’ Some weeks later he told me that this is a well-known adage among barefoot runners and was first used by an American populariser of barefoot running Ken Bob Saxton. Like earplugs are a hindrance to hearing the sounds with which the pianist creates his art, so are running shoes to a runner, who cannot feel the ground with which he runs, skilfully performing a series of bodily actions in movement through the environment. However, if this comparison is to be valid, one aspect is missing. By putting his fingers on the keyboard, the pianist – through a complex mechanism hidden in the body of the piano, of course – creates sounds, music even that he and a potential audience can hear and possibly feel connected to. However, what, if indeed anything, does the runner create when putting his feet on the ground?

At that same occasion in Kranj, I, as already mentioned, ran barefoot for the first time. Being accustomed to shoes, the changing textures of the paved road we were running on caught me somewhat by surprise. Talking to more experienced barefoot runners, I learnt that most find it not dangerous – recall that pavement is considered to be a surface ideal for beginners – but utterly boring. The same runner who first mentioned the comparison of running and playing a piano enthusiastically and vividly described his experiences of running on a paved road and through a less artificial environment:

I find natural terrain extremely interesting. I agree that it is best to learn on a hard surface, on asphalt, for example, because you have an overview [of the ground], you can see, there are no stones, no thorns, nothing dangerous. Asphalt is the best for a start, but I got bored after a while. It is the same every time you put your foot down! In nature you have roots, you have compacted soil, wet soil, you have stones, sand, and it is so interesting! Then you have crossings from the sun to the cold of the shade and then some; you have the dew, water, puddles, you have – how should I put it – an explosion of unforgettable sensations! You have such an incredible diversity, everything is so dynamic, and it is truly a joy for me! In comparison to paved roads where everything is the same – well, ok, you do have these old asphalts that

are rough and coarse, somewhat unpleasant really, and these smooth new asphalts and white lines [road markings], there is some variety – but for me, the natural terrains of the forest, these beaten paths under the trees, for me this is the greatest pleasure, as it offers an unbelievable diversity!

Reflecting on his experiences of running through different environments, an expert barefoot runner from Kranj similarly asserted that:

... for the real deal, not too rough gravel is perfect; running on it becomes a good massage for the feet. It is not too hard, and you relax. I also love macadam roads winding through the forest or the fields to run on; if you do it with some feeling it is possible to run smoothly – it is a total pleasure! Or also forest trails [covered] with pine-needles, they subside and pinch so nicely! This is truly the point of the whole thing [of barefoot running] – this consciousness of everything that is going on around you as you run! To run with the terrain, not against it ... You have to always be in contact with the surroundings, knowing them, adjusting to them, checking them as you go. As you're always present mentally, focusing on your responsiveness and steps on the terrain, you get so much out of running; you clear your head of everything, relax completely! ... And it never gets boring, it is different each time I run, even on my standard routes; the seasons, the weather, the light⁵ they make things so intriguing!

Recall that it is strongly recommended among barefoot runners that novices not venture off paved roads and into the forests, meadows or some other demanding terrain. Such environments are only accessible barefoot to those runners skilled and hardy enough to successfully manage the difficulties of the ever-changing ground. The skill to navigate a difficult route is located first and foremost in the feet and legs, though, of course, the coordinated movements of the whole body are required. In these movements, a learned perceptual awareness of almost all senses working in synesthetic unison (Bale 2004; Tilley 2004) is required. Such awareness in skilled movement, however, is not possible in advance of actual running; rather it unfolds as 'instantiated in the world as a path of movement along a way of life' (Ingold 2011: 5). Observations in advance, decontextualised in relation to running can, as the following description demonstrates, often be premature, deceptive even:

When it comes to terrain people say 'Oh, but there are thorns, rocks and roots, and dog shit...' and in the beginning I was also [a bit sceptical] ... however, when I go running on some forest trail where there are mostly rocks and I look and think that this is not a nice trail to run on. But when I actually go through there I find a smooth rock here, another one half a me-

⁵ On several occasions I had been told that running barefoot at night-time or during storms is the most eventful. 'There were lightning bolts swishing in the distance, the black gloomy clouds above, the tension in the air. It was truly magical', said an interlocutor. While another emphasised his passion for running in the middle of the night so to better see with his feet.

ter on. Sometimes I am quite surprised with myself, as after a few months of running barefoot, I came to automatically find these sweet spots; a first smooth stone, a second and a third ... When you acquire this feeling, you don't think, you just do it; when I come to certain terrain, a path with jagged rocks, for example, I just ... [starts hitting the table with his hand to show the intensity of his steps] ... start moving my legs so much faster!

However, not only skilful barefoot runners are capable of adjusting their steps coupled with perception – or, rather more precisely, steps which are perception – to the roughest, most-demanding terrains such as mountain trails, for example, but also through repeated, habituated runs through an increasingly familiar environment are able to acquire an intimately embodied knowledge of the minute details of their trails. During his studies, the young doctor mentioned above lived in Maribor where, after a while and after running several times, made his own trail:

I had, for instance, a circular route on Maribor's island, about a kilometre long, where there are two parts of compacted soil, one is sandy, and another of soft soil, one part is completely rocky ... I was doing laps there, and when I knew the route I could go through by heart – like playing [an instrument] by heart, I went through so beautifully, I openly adjusted [to the contours of the terrain].

Once mastered to a reasonable degree, barefoot running affords to its adherents and practitioners a specific way of getting to know the world they are running through. Despite often being quite solitary, it is nonetheless deeply cultural and social. Taking part in a specific system of apprenticeship, 'constituted by relationships between more and less experienced practitioners' (Ingold 2000: 37), both of flesh and blood and of imaginings and notions, a runner:

... learns to perceive in the manner appropriate to a [barefoot running] culture, not by acquiring programmes or conceptual schemata for organising sensory data into higher-order representations, but by ["feet-on", rather than] "hands-on" training in everyday tasks whose successful fulfilment requires a practised ability to notice and to respond fluently to salient aspects of the environment' (Ingold 2000: 166–7).

As learning to run barefoot is learning to perceive barefoot, a new, diverse and lively world as discovered by the runners. Whatever is perceived while running, however, comes not from imagining the Tarahumara or children, Our expulsion from nature or whoever else may be posited as appropriate, as this is only required to open the social space for the very action of barefoot running, as many barefoot runners feel that this sort of running is frowned upon and deemed uncultured by the mainstream society; new perceptions come from the very act of running barefoot in a changing environment. Barefoot running is a learned bodily technique of striding coupled with a perception that demands of the runner to be not only alert, but also that he continually adjusts to the terrain. 'To run with the terrain, not against it' is a bodily openness to the world around,

a process of perceiving and acting in movement with the terrain. Whatever gravel, rocks, pine needles or roots are encountered along the path while running barefoot, they are ‘immersed in sentience’ and ‘can, as it were, double back so as to touch ... themselves’ (Ingold 2010: 248) affecting the runner and helping to structure his consciousness (Tilley 2004). The willingness to adjust and to let the actual terrain lead, while supposing that “it knows best” how to move, is reflected in the terrain itself, in experiencing the terrain as a reliable guide for action, no matter who or how it was constituted. With running barefoot, they switch to a more “open” way of perceiving and knowing through which they create an open terrain and the ground which for runners assume an ontological priority to their perception and knowing; a meaningful natural world as one always already there, waiting to be discovered. Running in such a world, a world created through the experience of running and with a little help from their friends, barefoot runners *recreate* themselves, both in bodily terms and in terms of identity.

Conclusion

‘Runners notice the difference between running in town and country, on concrete and tarmac, on grass on sand’ (Bale 2004: 74) and in the process of running along discover the ‘ground to be composite and heterogeneous, not so much an isotropic platform for life as a coarse cloth or patchwork woven from the comings and goings of its manifold inhabitants’ (Ingold 2011: 16). It is exactly in these comings and goings, as well as passing through, running laps, repeated returns in sunshine, rain, snow, light and darkness that environments where barefoot runners run become known, personalised and woven in their lives as well as their lives woven into the nearby meadow, forest or field (Tilley 1994). Running as an indispensable part of their lives is an incessant becoming – a necessity to keep on going, despite a muffled tendency to return to a supposed universal essence of human running by substituting particularities of one environment and culture with another – together with all sorts of other constituents of their world. From this perspective, a barefoot runner could, “habitu(s)ally”, of course, reply to Baudrillard, with whom I began this article, if he would indeed see barefoot running as an attempt to prove one’s existence, that it is not about existence as such but the way in which one exists.

Acknowledgments

A shorter version of this article was presented at the Anthropology Student Session on May the 7th, 2014. I would like to express my gratitude to everyone present there for their useful critiques. I would especially like to thank Miha Kozorog for his helpful comments on an earlier version of the article and to Matic Šavli for proofreading the text. I would also like to thank Gregor Starc for encouraging me to write on this particular topic. Lastly, I would like to acknowledge the invaluable and selfless help of my all interlocutors.

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POVZETEK

V Sloveniji je v preteklih letih priljubljenost rekreativnega teka poskočila in zdi se, da trend ne upada. Sočasno so se prakse teka in pomeni, ki jim jih ljudje pripisujejo, pomnožili in oblikovali v več prepoznavnih smeri. Ena tovrstnih "smeri" je skozi t.i. bosonogi tek. Privrženci teka z bosimi nogami zavračajo konvencionalno tekaško obutev kot potencialno škodljivo človeškemu telesu, kot oviro avtentičnemu načinu gibanja in pristnemu stiku z okoljem. Tek z bosimi nogami, ki ga privrženci opredeljujejo kot najbolj naraven način teka, zahteva od začetnikov postopno učenje oziroma izpopolnjevanje tehnike in postopen razvoj stopal ter nog, da so le-te zmožne zdržati dalj časa trajajoče napore. Poleg tega se morajo začetniki naučiti specifičnega zaznavanja tal pod nogami in delovanja v odnosu do tistega, kar zaznavajo med tekom. To učenje poteka ob pomoči bolj izkušenih tekačev in ob pomoči zgledov, ki jih utelešajo izbrana ne-Moderna ljudstva.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: bosonogi tek, telesne tehnike, okolje, popularna kultura, antropologija športa

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