

CATHARSIS – PHILOSOPHICAL AND SPIRITUAL ASPECTS OF LONG-DISTANCE RUNNING

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SUMMARY: The purpose of the study was to identify and analyze the occurrence of cathartic states in a sample of long-distance runners. Data collected via questionnaires were used to evaluate quantitative variables complemented by heuristics while aiming at qualitatively categorize the areas of cathartic states in the context of philosophical and spiritual aspects of long-distance running. The study findings objectify philosophical and spiritual aspects affecting personalities of long-distance runners. The study findings have shown that catharsis represents a relevant philosophical and spiritual aspect affecting long-distance running. We assume that authentic experience of catharsis and its effects motivates runners to perform regular physical activity. The analysis of philosophical and spiritual aspects of long-distance running has revealed a multi-spectral holistic relevance based on the transfer affecting a specific way of life, spectrum of values, ethical personality traits, and also the quality of long-distance runners' lives.

Key words: catharsis, philosophy of sport, long-distance running, personality

Introduction

Long-distance running events refer to a group of track and field events during which runners cover a specific distance as fast as possible by applying natural human locomotion – running (Čillík 2009). Long-distance running events fall into category of cyclic track and field events determined primarily by endurance (Varga & Glesk 1986). Long-distance running places considerable emphasis on volitional effort under both training and competition conditions and requires a balanced type of runner's personality endowed with high levels of perseverance, patience and resistance to monotonous exercise. In terms of training demands, education towards self-reflection is an integral part of runner's long-term training preparation (Kučera & Truksa 2000). Performing physical activities in the nature, where runners perform considerable volume of their training, allows for inner purification – catharsis, the renewal of the substantive and natural relationship with oneself, with other people and with the world, respectively (Jirásek 2005). Catharsis (gr. katharsis – purification) refers to a notion coming from ancient Greek esthetics, which characterizes the esthetic effects of art on man. Catharsis probably includes both physiological (relief from emotional stress) and ethical moments (cultivation of human emotions) synthesized in esthetic experience (Brugger 2006). Catharsis in sports is associated with emotional states of emptying following sports performance, when an athlete feels satisfied after having performed continuous sports activity (Sisáková 2001). Catharsis is also referred to as purification, which represents absolute awareness of oneself and thus what “one's life truly represents” (Paštiková 1998). Spirituality of sports enables us to study the general sense of spirituality applied and embodied in sports practice and also how religious movements specific in their interpretation of spirituality are related to sports (Robinson & Parry 2013). As reported by Jirásek (2013), the meaning of spirituality significantly deviates from the original Christian discipline *theologia spiritualis* (theology of spiritual life) to religious ways of life and to searching for spirituality not affected by religious systems. Spirituality may become not only a symbol of religious beliefs, but also a way of searching for the sense of life, perception of life's depth by uncovering ethical and esthetical dimensions of the world, longing for harmony and transcendental experience. We assume that the structure of people's motivation to run, and to participate in mass running events also includes a spiritual dimension of running perceived by runner's personality (Oborný 2015).

Methods

The purpose of the study was to determine the occurrence of cathartic states in long-distance runners. The sample consisted of 74 runners, 48 men and 26 women. Average age of runners who were active participants in running events in 2014 was 26 years. Long-distance runners completed a questionnaire in order to collect data about cathartic states experienced by the runners. Consequently, we applied qualitative analysis and data interpretation to identify spiritual and philosophical aspects of the studied phenomenon. Questionnaire items were selected from the questionnaire “Running and spirituality” (Hurych et al. 2013) and were subsequently modified for the purposes of the study. The questionnaire consisted of 7 questions, of which four were closed-ended polytomic items and three were half-open items with options.

Results and discussion

Question no. 1: “Did you experience a state of inner purification while running?” (Fig. 1).

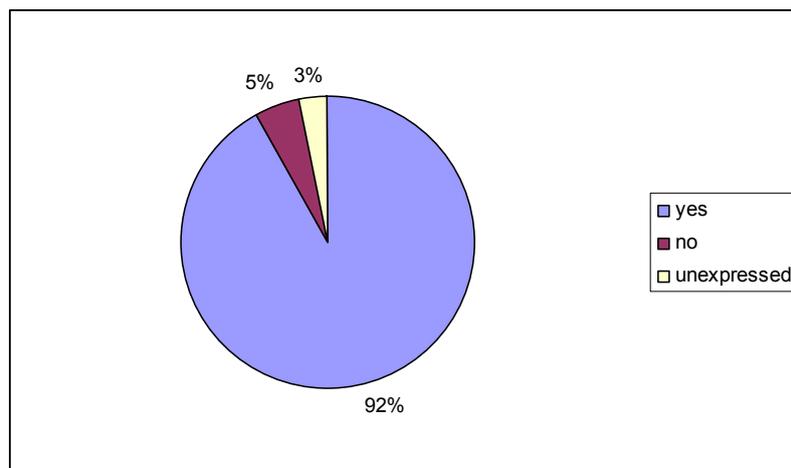


Fig. 1
Running and state of inner purification

Overall, ninety-two percent of runners answered positively, five percent of runners answered negatively and three percent of runners could not express their attitude towards the question’s content. High proportion of positive answers represents responses of runners who probably perceive the cathartic state in terms of positive subjective feelings physiologically induced by running in the aerobic zone of exercise. Experiencing the state of inner purification while running is associated with a complex state of organism’s comfort, the so-called well-being, which results in the elimination of perception and experiencing of negative

stimuli coming from both external and internal environment. We may assume that the attitudes of runners who gave a positive answer were affected by their authentic experience with cathartic effects of running from philosophical or spiritual perspective. It may be assumed that five percent of runners who gave a negative answer were not authentically confronted with the studied cathartic effects. The remaining three percent of runners perceived the state of inner purification while running represented an unknown and irrelevant phenomenon.

Question no. 2: “Did you experience a state of inner peace and balance while running”? (Fig. 2)

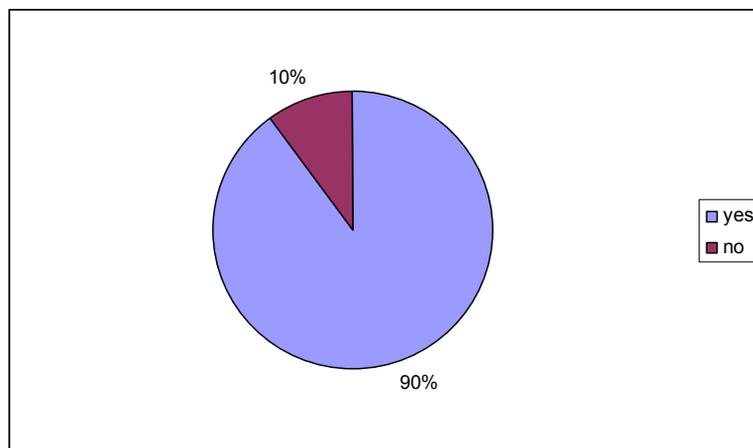


Fig. 2
Running and state of inner harmony

Ninety percent of runners reported state of inner peace and balance as a result of running performance. State of harmony is synonymous to experiencing of inner states of peace and balance induced by the character of the running endurance training and underlies both successful participation in a running event and a positive effect of running. Feeling and experiencing a state of harmony by runners is determined by the elimination of negative emotions and feelings, which represents the use of cathartic mechanisms functioning at both subconscious and conscious levels. Psychological mechanisms in combination with endurance exercise have thus not only prophylactic effect in terms of mental hygiene, but also significantly affect and form ethical aspects of personalities of long-distance runners from the philosophical perspective. Experiencing of inner harmony as a permanent state of existence, may represent a consequence, or a target state induced by runner’s systematic spiritual activity. Ten percent of runners felt negative about the relationship between running activities

and inner states of balance and peace. This finding may be attributed to the degree of introspection or to subjective apprehension of respective notions by the runners.

Question no. 3: “Did you experience a state of deep connection with external environment while running?” (Fig. 3)

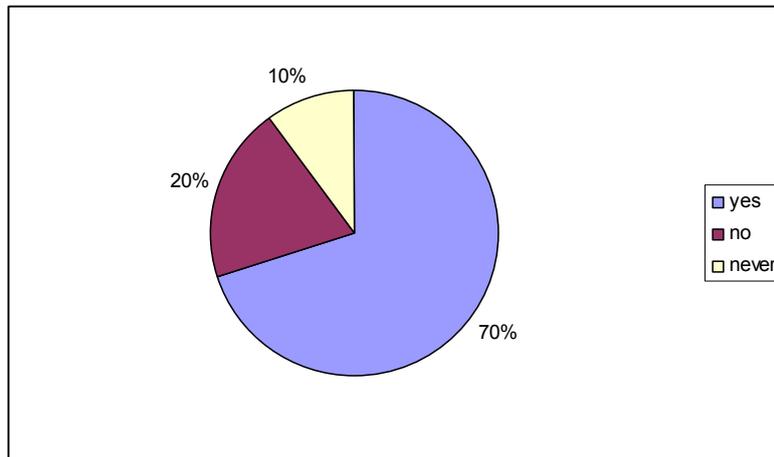


Fig. 3

Running and state of harmony with external environment

This question was aimed to determine the occurrence of specific states, during which a runner experiences an intensive and authentic state of merging with, or harmony with external environment referred to by philosophers and psychologists as peak experience. Seventy percent of runners reported a state of deep connection with external environment while running. Authentic experience of runners with experiencing a deep connection with environment, where runners train or compete, identifies the occurrence of emotionally strong positive states accompanied by feelings of being physically strong and vital, which a runner may experience as states of euphoria and “ease” stimulated by increased hormonal production of endorphins. The occurrence of such states is not determined by running in a pleasant natural environment of woods or parks only, where a runner is not distracted by external stimuli, but is also present in runners who train and compete on an athletic track, or who participate in city road races and marathons, where the course is lined with spectators. We may assume that the occurrence of such states is determined by catharsis experienced by the runners, who managed to situationally eliminate all negative effects of environment, or risks potentially endangering runners. Thus, the occurrence of such state is determined by runner’s capacity to active the cathartic mechanism at the level of introspection. Twenty percent of

runners reported no experienced of the state of harmony with external environment and ten percent of runners reported no knowledge about such state.

Question no. 4: “Are you satisfied with yourself after running?” (Fig. 4)

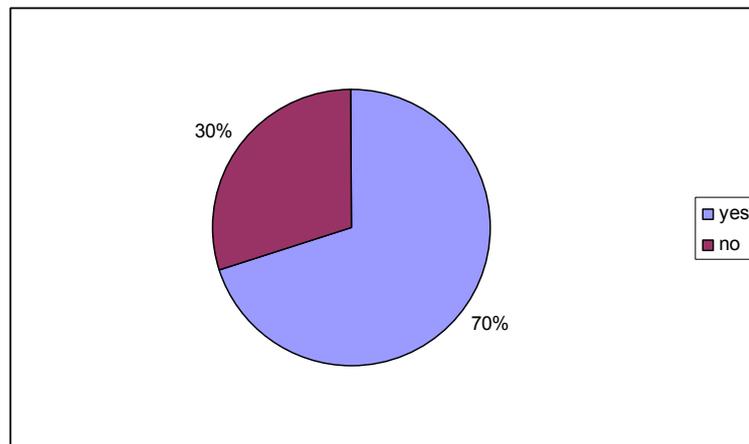


Fig. 4
Running and state of satisfaction

State of satisfaction represents a relevant segment in terms of defining health. Satisfaction refers to a significant attribute determining quality of life and it may be assumed that satisfaction significantly stimulates long-distance runners' motivation to perform regular physical activity, or represents a factor affecting the overall lifestyle of long-distance runners. Seventy percent of runners reported experience of a state of satisfaction with themselves while running. We may assume that state of satisfaction experienced by runners is determined by initiation and catharsis, when the runner evaluates, selects, and subsequently eliminates frustrating and stressful states at the intra-subjective level (connected with performing of physical activity itself, but also with a spectrum of everyday activities and duties) and at the same time perceives and accepts running as an enriching and meaningful activity. Therefore, running is not understood, as a disruption in comfort – “necessary training sacrifice”, is not an instrumental means ensuring “health”; “slim figure”, but to a runner running becomes an activity that in a complex way affects all domains of runner's life by affecting his or her lifestyle. In such case, running becomes a metaphysical activity performed by the runner, which has radical effect on all aspects and levels of existence. Thirty percent of runners reported not being satisfied with themselves after running. This may be caused by the value spectrum, within which running represents an instrumental tool for achievement of other subjective partial goals, or running is perceived and identified with the aspect of sporting

success represented by sports performance or by a placement in sports competition. Of five alternative options, runners were asked to assign a notion, which would correspond to a particular item in 3 questions of the qualitative survey.

Question no. 5: “In addition to being physically active, to me running is also....”

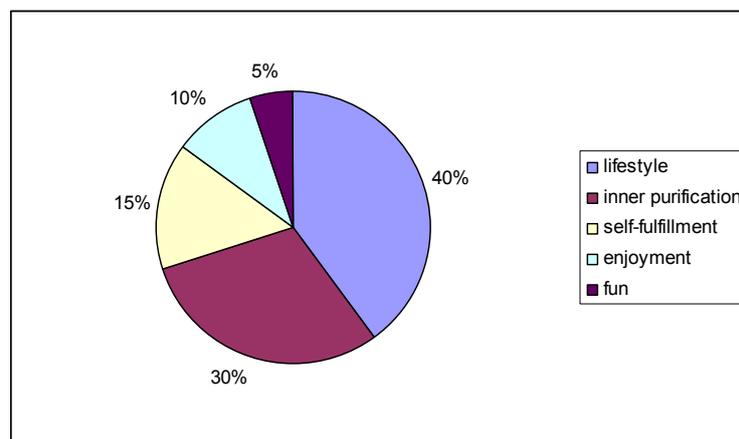


Fig. 5

“In addition to being physically active, to me running is also....”

Forty percent of runners associated long-distance running with adoption of a specific lifestyle. Preference of the basic term by these runners leads to the conclusion that preference of an athlete’s – runner’s lifestyle includes both philosophical aspects affecting behavior and attitudes towards external environment and inner attitudes towards spiritual aspects of life. Thirty percent of runners reported that in addition to being physically active, running to them represented a form of inner purification, which indicates an unequivocal cathartic aspect of physical activity. In case of these runners, we may assume that authentic cathartic experience induces and strengthens perception and understanding of philosophical and spiritual aspects of long-distance running. Fifteen percent of runners reported that in addition to being physical active running to them represented a form of self-fulfilment. In this context of answers, we may hypothesize that in relation to running the term “self-fulfilment” is understood from the perspective of performance aspiration as an achievement of a determined level of sports performance (breaking a personal record, achieving a specific time limit), or as an achievement of an expected placement in competition, or as a participation in a major sporting event (participation in a popular marathon race). This group of runners may be considered a latent group of runners, who may potentially access philosophical and spiritual aspects of running through their own authentic experience. Such change is determined by preference of

values based on perception and understanding of running as an activity, the sense, result and successfulness of which is distant from the values of statistical and mathematical variables. Ten percent of runners reported that running to them represented a form of enjoyment. This group of runners probably perceived and understood running (or any other type of physical activity) as a leisure-time activity bringing about partial health benefits. However, philosophical and spiritual aspects of running in this group of runners could not occur and be uncovered. Similarly, five percent of runners reported having fun while running. In this case, the connotation content of the term “fun” refers to aspects of enjoyment and relief of everyday work and out-of-work duties and running fulfils the function of physical relaxation, or mental hygiene.

In **question no. 6**, runners were asked to assign the most suitable term to an unfinished utterance, or formulation, which most corresponded to the following statement: “The strongest experiences while running may be referred to as” (Fig. 6).

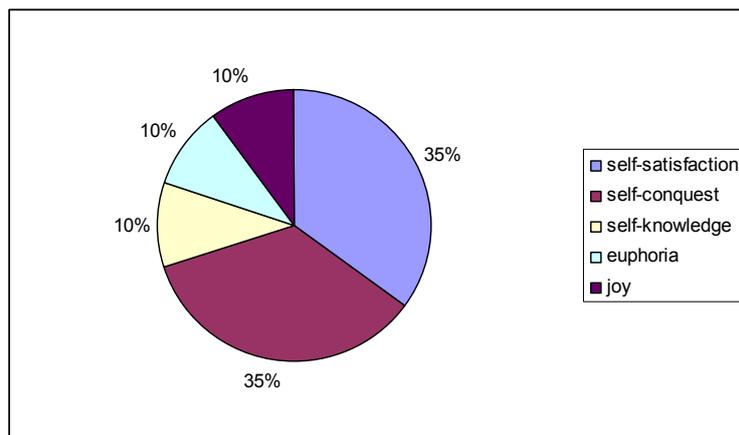


Fig. 6
Strongest experiences while running

Thirty-five percent of runners reported that two strongest experiences while running were self-satisfaction and self-conquest. Cathartic aspect in the context of long-distance running and a self-satisfaction experience may be metaphorically expressed as “fulfilment of a goal”, which is initiated via successful participation in the race, or sustainment of demanding training load. Runner’s self-conquest experience is probably initiated through overcoming of critical states induced by fatigue and exhaustion. Handling such critical states successfully is perceived by runners as a satisfaction related to overcoming of the crucial situation. Critical situations accompanied by physical and mental exhaustion expose runners

to authentic confrontation with perception of hidden life dimensions and enable runners to confront themselves with the area of philosophical knowledge, or with the area of spiritual experiences. Ten percent of runners reported states of self-knowledge, euphoria and joy as strongest experiences. These statements of runners indicate philosophical and spiritual aspects of long-distance running, which to a certain extent are affected by cathartic processes.

In **question no. 7**, runners were asked to assign the most suitable term to an unfinished utterance, or formulation available, which most corresponded to the following statement: “What spiritual experience did you perceive while running? (Fig. 7).

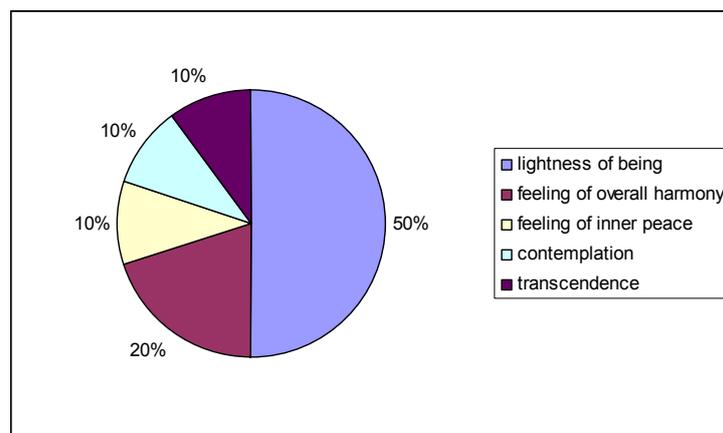


Fig. 7
Spiritual experiences while running

We realize that answers to the previously mentioned question were influenced by runners’ understanding of the terms, which in the field of spiritual sciences and spirituality itself refer to specific and rarely occurring phenomena. The most preferred experience while running reported by fifty percent of runners was the experience of the so-called lightness of being. The preference of this state by the runners represents a specific spiritual experience providing information about runners’ authentic experience of changed dimensions related to perception of reality, which may represent just minute deviations from perception of the real state at the subjective level of experience up to experiences significantly deviating from the normality framework, which accepts the physical three-dimensional description of reality. Nevertheless, lightness of being, or flow (in this case) includes not only at the level of notion content analysis the situational cathartic elimination of unpleasant and taxing states, which commonly affect mental states of runners. Twenty percent of runners reported a spiritual experience of overall inner harmony while running. To runners harmonious experiencing of the state of “conformity” may represent strong positive emotional experience, which in

confrontation with experiencing and solving of everyday problems, may initiate perception of harmonious structures such as entering into and accessibility of mental or spiritual spheres. Running thus represents a unique means enabling runners to have authentic experience of philosophy, spiritual sciences, spirituality, or religiosity. Similar conclusion relates to ten percent of runners who reported experiencing of inner peace while running, which represents an intra-subjective equivalent to the harmonious state. Overall, ten percent of runners reported experiencing of a spiritual state of contemplation and transcendence. The experience of contemplation while running was probably induced by maximal intra-subjective mental activity of runners, which was intensely directed to the sphere of spiritual essence of things, or phenomena during long-term monotonous physical load. To runners, the experience of contemplation represents an entry into the domain of mystic experiences, which in their essence represent a category, which is in marked contrast with experiences in the sphere of rational experience. The spiritual experience of such a phenomenon occurs very rarely and the runner experiencing such a state demonstrates maturity and sensitivity in terms of perceiving spiritual stimuli. Similar conclusions may be drawn in case of runners who reported the state of transcendence as a spiritual experience, which is characterized by runner's extraordinary capability to perceive and experience spiritual stimuli. Runner's experience of transcendence may be characterized as a state of opening and accessing the perception of spheres, which in their essence and nature contrast with everyday experience. An authentic transcendental experience, or an experience of contemplation, enables runners to be acquainted with new dimensions of existence, which significantly affect and change human personality.

Conclusions

The study findings have shown that catharsis represents a relevant philosophical and spiritual aspect affecting long-distance running. We assume that authentic experience of catharsis and its effects motivates runners to perform regular physical activity. The analysis of philosophical and spiritual aspects of long-distance running has revealed a multi-spectral holistic relevance based on the transfer affecting a specific way of life, spectrum of values, ethical personality traits, and also the quality of long-distance runners' lives.

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