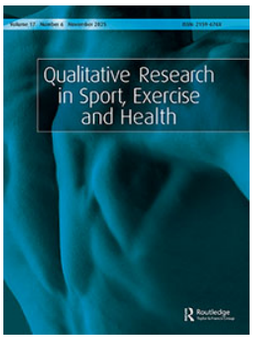

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Being there in sport, exercise and health ethnography: reflections from the bouldering apprentice

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ABSTRACT

This article explores what it means to *be there* in ethnographic research within sport, exercise and health contexts. Drawing upon an eighteen-month ethnography of a bouldering community, we conceptualise *being there* not merely as physical presence, but as a skilled and intentional approach to conducting ethnography. Through a somatic layered account centred on climbing shoes, we illuminate how corporeal immersion facilitates nuanced, reflexive understandings of subcultural practices, identities and sensory codes. In arguing for an embodied, sensuous and apprenticeship-based approach to fieldwork, we contrast our notion of *being there* with others forms of ethnography highlighting the epistemic depth offered by sensuous participation over more detached modalities. We caution against the increasing institutional and methodological drift towards convenience-driven approaches and instead advocate for purposeful, context-sensitive engagements with the field. In doing so, we reposition *being there* as a dynamic mode of knowing: active, emplaced and pedagogical. Ultimately, we call on qualitative researchers to prioritise the *how* rather than the *how long* of ethnographic presence and to revalue the sweaty, sticky and, at times, painful pursuit of becoming-with others in this form of inquiry.

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Introduction

As a form of inquiry, ethnography encompasses many practices, approaches and philosophies that can be very different from one another. This diversity coupled with the constant evolution of this approach means there is no single all-purpose definition of, or model for, ethnography. This said, it is interesting to note that a number of leading scholars have claimed one of the central characteristics of this approach is that of *being there* (Borneman and Hammoudi 2009; Geertz 1988; Pritchard 2011; Uhlin and Ivory 2025; Wolcott 1995). For example, M. Atkinson (2016, 50) believes that in order to understand, translate, and conceptually explain how culture unfolds, and how it provides 'maps of meaning' for people that shape how they act, then the ethnographer needs to become a member of said culture:

> An ethnographic epistemology generally upholds that theoretical knowledge about cultures is best generated by direct contact and experience with members of a culture over time. Therefore, the epistemology is straightforward; one becomes a member of a cultural group, does what they do, travels with them, and lives alongside them as a means of achieving an understanding of their cultural (and indeed psychological) realities.

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In agreement with this notion of *being there*, P. Atkinson (2015) emphasised that some form of participant observation, as it is conventionally known, remains *central* to the ethnographic enterprise and without that degree of engagement, ethnography remains all but impossible. For him, any kind of social research that does not incorporate the core of fieldwork is not worthy of the name ethnography, 'and – more importantly – can rarely if ever do justice to complexity' (39). As Ellingson (2017) also pointed out, being present in the traditionally material, and now increasingly virtual, space being studied is important because the *ability to make credible claims* is grounded in the researchers' direct observation of, and participation in that space, usually for extended periods of time.

Yet, due to the fluidity of space and place in contemporary life *and* contemporary ethnography, the traditional sense of *being there* requires scrutiny (Pritchard 2011). Meanings of 'being' and 'there' are destabilised in *virtual ethnography* (Hine 2000), *digital ethnography* (Pink et al. 2016) and *netnography* (Cleland, Dixon, and Kilvington 2020; Kozinets 2019) with technological advances providing new ways of engaging in ethnographic practice (Pink et al. 2016). For instance, Walsh, Khan, and Ferazzoli (2023, 245), argue that 'portholes of ethnography' – temporary windows of communication, such as video calls with participants – can allow for being there *at a distance*. In fact, because of this widespread embracing of digital media, Pink et al. (2016) claim that *being there* should be conceptualised in four modes of presence: co-presently, remotely, virtually and imaginatively. While the authors acknowledge that all modes of digitally mediated presence and absence entail trade-offs, they also contend that 'we should abandon the received anthropological notion that unmediated physical co-presence is inherently superior to, or more legitimate than, other forms of being there' (134). For Pink et al. (2016, 134), moving between ways of *being there* during fieldwork has become a naturalised part of ethnographic fieldwork. Unsurprisingly, anthropologists Borneman and Hammoudi (2009, 9) view the eschewing of face-to-face interaction for the virtual as 'surfacing', a practice that generates thin rather than thick description. For them, *being there* is an experiential encounter, in which the ethnographer is 'arrested in the act of perception' (19). Although we reject Borneman and Hammoudi's (2009) notion of surfacing – we recognise the legitimacy of digital modalities and the novel ethnographic insights they can produce – we do believe that the gathering of lived, sensuous data, particularly in sporting environments, requires ethnographers to be physically present. For us, this is not a question of superiority, it is one of suitability.

Importantly, while a necessary condition for participant observation, *being there* is not enough. As Geertz (1988, 130) contends 'In itself, Being There is a postcard experience ("I've been to Katmandu – have you?")'. He distinguishes between Being There – *the Written At* – and Being Here – *the Written About* – as sides of an anthropological equation, in which notions of ethnographic representation, authority and positionality diverge. Building on this, and following Wolcott (1995), we view *intentionality* as the essence of *doing* such fieldwork. Such intentionality requires a reflexive somatic mode of attention as described by Csordas (1993) and Vannini, Waskul, and Gottschalk (2012) that involves culturally elaborated ways of attending to, and with, one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others. Here, attention to a bodily sensation can thus become a mode of attending to the intersubjective milieu that gives rise to that sensation in the first place.

But what then does *being there* in sport, exercise and health research look like in practice? More than any other qualitative approach, the conception of *being there* that we are forwarding in this article emphasises the centrality of the ethnographer's skilled and sensate corporeal body as the main 'instrument' of data generation *and* interpretation. This lived, sensuous conception of ethnographic fieldwork is fundamental to a range of diverse approaches, including *embodied* (Hancock 2018; Kumate and Falcous 2017; Sugden and Sheps 2025) and *sensory ethnography* (Pink 2015; Vannini 2024) and, more broadly, *sensuous scholarship* (Sparkes 2009, 2017; Stoller 1997). Notably, *sensory ethnography* has emerged as the transdisciplinary home for this methodological field. Defined as a field of practice rather than an exact method (Pink 2015), 'a sensory ethnography done through the senses, about the senses, and for the senses is a way of knowing and sharing knowledge that is above everything else awake, conscious, animate, and spirited' (Vannini 2024, 5).

In contrast to 'zombie' ethnography, Vannini (2024) argues that it is the aliveness of sensory ethnography that makes it distinctive.

Inevitably, due to its irrefutable corporeal essence, sport scholars have employed sensory ethnography and sensory ethnography-informed approaches in a range of contexts, including high-performance coaching (Ryou, Choi, and Lee 2025), martial arts (Calvey 2021), motorsport (Næss 2017), parkour (Aggerholm and Larsen 2017), running (Larsen 2024) and skateboarding (Holsgens 2019). In a bouldering context, Dutkiewicz's (2015) embodied ethnography of a rock climb, which we will discuss later, is the only existing example of an overtly sensuous approach to the topic. However, as this field becomes increasingly popular, it faces the danger of what Calvey (2021, 351) terms a 'catch-all' approach with no guarantee of embodied multisensorial research being enacted. According to P. Atkinson (2022), therefore, even sensory ethnography can overlook aspects of sensory experience. Equally, because the senses and sensorial practices underpin *all* ethnographic knowledge, it can be counterproductive to define ethnographies as *sensory* or not because this suggests that there can be a 'senseless' ethnographer and ethnography. Consequently, while our conception of *being there* draws inspiration from sensuous scholarship, we view it as a foundational principle of conducting ethnographic research and of *being* an ethnographer, which is not limited to studies that explicitly attend to sensory phenomena.

Sensory apprenticeships in sport, exercise and health

In our view, the most compelling and meaningful examples of *being there* in ethnography is through the role of *apprentice*. Apprenticeship is the process of developing from novice to proficiency under the guidance of a skilled expert. For the ethnographer, therefore, an apprenticeship offers an ideal entry point into the field of study. It is also an excellent way *to learn skills*, and *to learn about how one learns* such skills (Downey, Dalidowicz, and Mason 2015). All this takes place within what P. Atkinson (2017, 98) describes as communities of practice and pedagogy that have 'distinctive ways of enculturing novices, initiates, and postulants into esoteric, skilled competence'. In these communities, as Ellingson (2017, 97) notes, 'ethnographers can apprentice to participants to learn how to cultivate sensory skills and then how to understand the experiences that we learn to have, within the cultural language, norms, practices of the group we are learning from/about'. As such, undertaking an apprenticeship can be both the *object* and *method* of inquiry (Wacquant 2005).

For Downey, Dalidowicz, and Mason (2015), who undertook extensive apprenticeships in three *bodily arts* (capoeira, kathak and pencak silat), the benefits of ethnographic apprenticeships are wide-ranging. Reflecting on their experiences, they suggest that apprenticeship-based research helps ethnographers to better understand the mechanisms of enculturation, and the processes that shape individuals until they achieve competence, by providing opportunities to gain access to emic types of knowledge via first-hand experience within a particular practicel and pedagogical milieu. Importantly, mastering a skill or a craft is not the purpose of such research; instead, the apprentice is striving to gain an intimate understanding of the paths that lead to expertise. It is an iterative process that requires *thick participation* (P. Atkinson 2022) and situated peer learning and emulation (Grasseni 2022). These views are echoed by Wacquant (2004) in his aptly titled book *Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*, in which he vividly documents his three year ethnographic journey from being an observer of life inside a boxing gym in a poor neighbourhood of Chicago's black ghetto to submitting himself to the fire of action *in situ* and 'gloving up' with professionals on a regular basis. Reflecting back on his experiences in this boxing gym, Wacquant (2013, 19) acknowledged the centrality of the apprenticeship role when he stated that the 'apprenticeship of the sociologist is a methodological mirror of the apprenticeship undergone by the empirical subjects of the study', which involves the former being mined to dig deeper into the latter with a view to unearthing its inner logic and subterranean properties.[1]

Significantly – and somewhat counterintuitively – ethnographers do not necessarily require a *formalised* apprenticeship to become an apprentice. Varying forms of apprenticeship occur in

all fieldwork (Downey, Dalidowicz, and Mason 2015) and not only in communities of practice and pedagogy. In view of this, Pink (2015) uses the term *sensory apprenticeship* to conceptualise a broader sense-making process. As she explains 'learning to sense and make meanings as others do thus involves us not simply observing what they do but learning how to use all our senses and to participate in *their* worlds, on the terms of their embodied understandings' (72). Here, the apprentice's embodiment is the entry point to explore how others sense and make sense of their social world. Whether at a bullfight (Pink 2011), a skatepark (Bäckstöm 2014) or a visually impaired cricket field (Powis 2020), ethnographers of sport have demonstrated the importance of participating in situated and emplaced sense-making activities *through* a sensory apprenticeship. For example, in his ethnographic study of competitive youth swimming, Heath (2022) emphasises the importance of 'participant sensation' in grasping how swimmers develop a tactile feel for the water. His apprenticeship, which involved regularly swimming with his participants, allowed him to re-shape his sensory modalities to experience competive swimmers' ways of being-in-the-water and comprehend the demanding and rigorous embodied practices required to swim fast. Crucially, the researchers' *being there* was not limited to the acquisition of a skill or a simple evaluation of physical performance; their varied, multisensory immersion in formal and informal pedagogical relationships centred on understanding participants' ways of knowing beyond their own subjectivities (Pink 2011; Vannini 2024). P. Atkinson (2022, 40–41), who uses *crafting, practical* and *sensory* as prefixes for his ethnographies, summarises this research philosophy as follows:

> Practical ethnography necessarily implies our physical presence in a social world – in physical, sensory and imaginative ways. We respond to the rhythms, the temporal sequences of everyday life and work. While we do not seek to become fully enculturated experts, we do our work partly through mimetic means. We observe the distinctive ways of others' practices: how they move through time and space; how they talk: how they do things with things. We learn through observation, but also through a more incarnate sense of what it takes to act in that way. We come to understand style, grace and skilful performance.

We do not wish to suggest that the notion of *being there* espoused by P. Atkinson above is more legitimate than other forms of *being there*. Rather, that it is different, and this difference is important in how the ethnographer comes to know and theorise about various phenomena in sport, exercise and health, which are not available to other modes of *being there* (e.g. in web-based virtual realities). It is also key to understanding how researchers make informed, principled and strategic decisions about which form of ethnography to engage with depending on the purposes of any given study.

Against the backdrop described above, we now present an example of our notion *of being there* in action. We do so by drawing on data generated from Chris's eighteen-month ethnography of Boulder Base (pseudonym), an indoor bouldering facility in England. Like the examples of *being there* cited above, the purpose of his sensory apprenticeship in bouldering was not to achieve mastery, but to immerse himself in the subculture. Indeed, as will be evident, rather than overtly focusing on technique or performance, it is through Chris's somatic layered account of choosing shoes and learning to grasp the bouldering sensorium that we begin to understand the embodied and sensory dynamics of *becoming* a boulderer.

Methodology

Following the selection of bouldering as his ethnographic focus, Chris identified Boulder Base, an indoor bouldering facility, as a suitable setting for his study and approached the facility's owner – i.e. the gatekeeper – to negotiate access to its community. He was given permission to become a paid-up member of Boulder Base and, having received university ethical approval, entered the field in the role of novice boulderer. As he interacted and engaged directly with a small group of members of Boulder Base, Chris made them aware that he was a researcher, explained what his study was about, and requested their consent to be involved. It was emphasised that their involvement was voluntary

and they could withdraw it at any time without penalty. They would also remain anonymous, via the use of pseudonyms, in anything written about Boulder Base. Importantly, this consent was revisited and renegotiated at various points throughout the fieldwork by Chris asking, what he described as the main characters he spent time with, if they were still happy to be involved in his study.

To generate data of his becoming a boulderer, Chris engaged in what Vannini, Waskul, and Gottschalk (2012) conceptualise as somatic work by actively climbing at Boulder Base three-four times per week, getting involved in casual conversations, taking field notes, taking photographs, and keeping a reflexive field diary that documented his journey from 'acceptable incompetent' to 'competent member'. This is in keeping with our view that ethnographic fieldwork requires the informed and strategic use of multiple methods if it is to do justice to the complexity of how any setting is socially and culturally organised and given meaning by those interacting within it. For example, 'auto-driven photo-elicitation' (Toll and Norman 2021) was chosen because visual methods have been recognised as providing distinct opportunities for research focused on the body and movement practices by 'enabling researchers to engage with other people's embodied experiences in ways that are empathetic, participatory and aesthetic' (Phoenix and Rich 2016, 139). Accordingly, photographs were taken by Chris throughout his time at Boulder Base to provide a visual record of, for example, the pre-prepared routes that he progressed through on the climbing walls that are arranged in terms of difficulty from VB (beginner) to V8 (expert), and the types of climbing equipment used by himself and the other members of this community of practice.

More specifically, the photographs presented in this article provide an example of what Hockin-Boyers, Pope, and Jamie (2021) describe as 'transformation photos'. In principle this requires two or more images, from different points in time, set alongside one another to represent bodily change. For them, transformational photos can illustrate and provide access to new ways of 'becoming' (e.g. from novice to competent boulderer) and also act as a conduit through which individuals can reflect on, and make sense of, their experiences of the *process* of becoming over time. From this perspective, as pointed out by Toll and Norman (2021, 64), photographs should not therefore be seen as a frozen 'snapshot' of reality but approached as 'evocative texts that conjure memories, imagination, embodied experiences, relationships and a complexity of power relations'. Accordingly, in this instance, Chris used the photographs of his different pairs of climbing shoes to evoke memories of what they felt like on his feet when climbing, what they smelt like, what they looked like, and what they signified to him, and others, as part of the transformational process of becoming a boulderer.

In exploring how boulderers sense *and* make sense, Chris was faced the inevitable ethnographic predicament of representation, which is accentuated when it comes to the senses and sensory experiences (Sparkes 2017). As lisahunter and elke emerald (2016: 39) asked, how can the senses be used not to just to create texts but create texts that can be engaged with sensorially: 'can it be touched, smelt, tasted, can the research text evoke pleasure or pain, where/when is it in place/space/time, how can a text capture me (turn me)?' Such questions informed numerous discussions between Chris and Andrew throughout the study and particularly during the 'writing up' phase when he had left the field accompanied by volumes of accumulated data. As part of this process, and as a way of 'enlivening representation' (Vannini 2015), they were drawn towards what Vannini et al. (2010) described as a *somatic layered account*. To create such an account, which is proportionally prosaic and poetic, requires blending styles and genres – including "the embodied, the somatic, the affective, the imaginative, the linguistic and the nonsymbolic, and the intellectual and analytical' (Vannini et al. 2010, 384) – to represent the already blended senses and sensations.

In proposing the use of somatic layered accounts, Vannini et al. (2010) echo the sentiments of Stoller (1997, xv) who advocates a 'sensuous scholarship in which writers tack between the analytical and the sensible, in which embodied form as well as disembodied logic constitute scholarly argument'. This strategy enables a working with the elusively playful nature of the senses, sensation and sense making *and* an alternative means to represent ethnographic data. It is also a suitable means to grapple with time, ambiguity, prose and the poetic sensibilities of sensuous experience at an individual and collaborative

level. Somatic layered accounts, while acknowledging the temporality of the senses, enable the ethnographer to shift positions and blur further the boundaries between description, analysis and interpretation (Wolcott 1995). Such accounts resonate with the concept of 'holistic description' as described by Sugden and Sheps (2025: 18) which seeks to add depth of experience to qualitative prose by taking the reader into the embodied context, and generating a feeling of understanding, by transporting them 'into the experiential world with us so that they can become soaked in it'.

To achieve the aims stated above, Vannini et al. (2010) suggested a number of strategies authors might use to write sensuously in the construction of a somatic layered account. For example, they suggest that the uncertainty, complexity, and plasticity of interaction between people, and between people and material objects, is best captured through a subjunctive mode of writing expressed in the present tense rather than through the declarative grammar typical of more detached and universalist writing styles. They also recommend that the language and style used should seek to evoke a sense of emergence and unfolding, rather than finality, primarily through attention to the temporal dimensions of interaction and to the dimensions of movement through spatial domains. With these points in mind, Chris constructed a series of written vignettes with the purpose of taking the reader inside his apprenticeship as it occurred over time.

Recently, the use of vignettes has been popularised through *creative nonfiction* (CNF) (see Cavallerio 2022). According to McGannon and McMahon (2022, 68), vignettes are 'brief evocative and compelling storied descriptions of research findings' which predominantly take three forms: 1) the portrait – (i.e. narrative sketches that provide insight into individual participant's character and lives, 2) the snapshot (i.e. narrative sketches that capture observed experiences within a particular time and setting) and 3) the composite (i.e. the creation of one narrator or set of experiences to centralise a story). In terms of this typology, this article's vignettes can be viewed as snapshots. Like other scholars who have used CNF vignettes to represent their findings, we emphasise that these are grounded in real events and peoples' lived experiences which the researcher observed and felt in some fashion whilst *being there* in the field (e.g. Cavallerio 2022; Middleton et al. 2025; Smith, McGannon, and Williams 2016; Sparkes 2002; Sparkes and Smith 2014). The purpose of these vignettes, following Champ et al. (2021, 852) is to enhance the reader's understanding from more than just a cognitive perspective, by connecting with them on an 'emotional, behavioural and embodied level, allowing an empathetic understanding to emerge'. We now present our vignettes, in the form of three scenes, to invite the reader into the sensory world of bouldering via Chris's feet.

Scene One: Starter Shoes

7th November

My first bouldering session and I am dressed in shorts, an old T-shirt, brand new Evolv shoes (see Figure 1) *and feeling (through sensing) rather out of place. The air is stale and extremely dry. My feet skid ever so slightly on the crash mats that are lightly dusted with residual chalk, it makes a swish underneath my shiny, virgin, rubber soles. I glance down and notice the stark visual juxtaposition between the jet-black shoes and the worn faded blue mat. It is remarkable that a shoe designed not to slip on rock or wall is suddenly tricky to walk in given some minor infringement by chalk and the spongy landing area. It is like walking on a bed using only stilts. Despite such awkwardness, the crash mats slightly alleviate the crushing pain that my feet now find themselves in. Yes, they are my feet, but they feel nothing like the feet I am used to being attached to. Sensing walking in these shoes transports me back to a time of severe haptic punishment when ,as a child, I continued to ice-skate in boots far too small for my infant feet. The sense of touch and sensations*

Figure 1. Starter Shoes.

of pressure, balance and heat here prove to be a portal back to the chill of the ice, the distinct recollection of feeling tiny and the hour spent sitting on a coach next to my childhood crush.

From my position in what is called 'The cave', I can attempt some of the simple problems (V0 and V1) whilst eavesdropping and catching a glimpse of the others who seem to be doing more serious things than walking strangely in tight shoes. My aim is to familiarise myself with the shoes and wall outside of the gaze of others, I don't want to be seen by the others and more importantly for me personally, the expert gaze of Phil during such a time of pedagogical sensitivity. The simple problems that I work on are pretty self-explanatory even for me the novice. I see the sequence of holds and quickly find my way through them just like climbing a ladder. My feet feel really small, and they catch the large footholds nicely (must be the shoes).

But seriously, they do feel smaller than usual. Then again, my usual body techniques tend to involve standing, walking and moving horizontally as opposed to moving vertically against gravity. My usual shoes are fitted well but never tightly, my feet aren't often in my consciousness as I move but here, they are very immediate and present. Descartes didn't trust the senses; straight sticks in buckets of water look bent hence why he felt that the senses played tricks on the mind. My senses are playing tricks here. My feet aren't smaller than usual today, they are my usual feet and the same size as normal, but they just aren't allowed to be felt as big and wide and free as usual today. They are restricted inside this tight shoe and contorted through pressure into a different shape in space. It would appear that a different body technique is being formed and presented even from the outset.

Scene Two: Smelling Shoes

2nd December

I walk in full of energy and intent following a mind-numbing morning at work only to find John lying on the floor, Paul curled up eyes shut on the couch and George slowly munching a flapjack. Either I'm the only one up for it or maybe I'm just too enthusiastic. I'm reluctant to get changed due to this lack of energy and instead conform and chip-in to the idle chitchat and piss taking that is going on. Finally, George swallows the last bit of stodgy oat, and I see that as my signal to get ready. My right foot feels tighter than the left as I stretch and gradually warm-up. There is a funny smell on me, it's a sweaty stale odour probably due to the long-sleeved top that has been left in my bag since the last climb. My shoes smell a little less over-powering due to the newspaper trick taught to me by Paul, a good tip.

I have noticed a couple of times that Paul stuffs his climbing shoes with newspaper as this he tells me 'stops them stinking'. Despite the relative 'newness' of my shoes compared to some of the others that I've encountered here, they have recently developed a noxious odour. So rancid in fact that John only the other day proclaimed in front of around ten people, 'fuck me, someone's shoes stink, they must be

Evolvs'. I was mildly embarrassed to say the least and quickly stuffed them back in my bag out of sight to avoid the possibility of olfactory identification. Clearly the wearing of no socks and tight shoes coupled with the exertions of this activity result in odour in many places but the shoes in particular. There is for some perhaps an olfactory code to which my recent acrid attire clashes.

The smell of shoes, clothing, tape, coffee and the brown towel in the toilet collide to create an olfactory smellscape that is and is becoming to me, part of Boulder Base. As an inhabitant, I contribute to such a smellscape and sensory order but at the same time run the risk of either contributing too much or clashing with, the normal whiff (whatever this may be). In other words, my sensory modes are manifested precariously within this situational and socially appropriate sensory code whilst the sensory order requires careful negotiation. It is good to smell but not to smell bad.

Scene Three: Dancing Shoes

19th April

Recently I've noticed that I'm struggling to make tough footholds and I've started slipping in my shoes. I've written previously about the selection of shoes and the comfort criteria that were used to make this difficult decision but what is apparent now is that my shoes aren't up to the job of providing the desired performance on tougher problems. Equally, my participation is becoming increasingly performance orientated, I want to improve and climb harder. Through slowly adapting to the pains of bouldering I have developed physically over the previous five months. My struggles with tiny footholds symbolise advancement in skill as I now climb problems that demand more of my equipment and me technically. So here we reach the predicament, I need to climb harder to experience and research the senses. I need better shoes, I don't really have the money to get some but again, I need to climb harder. To the shop it is then.

Accompanied by George I head to the small outdoors retailer with the intent to buy the best shoes I can afford. I'm going to get them one way or the other, I need them. I'm like a junkie with the need for a fix; nothing is going to stop me getting the shoes I so desperately need. I can't take my eyes of a pair of red leather '5.10 Coyote' lace-ups (see Figure 2).*They are stunning in a climbing shoe sense, the leather looks inviting and feels soft and durable to the touch, the*

Figure 2. Dancing Shoes.

laces cross from the toe to the tongue, and they look tight, sturdy and safe. The sole is hard yet malleable, I can see and almost feel them on my feet as a strange combination of sight, smell and touch transform them into life. The discussion continues in a haze around me as I fantasise about these shoes on my naked feet.

After chatting about shoes in general for ten minutes as I stare at the chosen ones, the bloke is sent off for a pair of size 9's. My other shoes are an 11 and they are too big now hence the movement in them, the soles are far too soft, and my feet are all over the place on the tiny stuff, they are very comfortable though. Comfort is no longer the only criterion. He returns in a flash and sets to lacing them up obviously smelling a sale. 'Pain is insane' he suggests as the right foot first slides halfway into the leather shoe: I use the two loops on the heel to pull them snugly over my whole foot. Wow, that's nice. I proceed to lace it up neatly from the toe to the tongue and they envelope my foot beautifully. They're very tight yet somewhat comfortable, they seem to mould around my foot whereas my others are more like trainers now. The left foot gets the same careful treatment and then I'm bombarded with advice from the two spectators. Do this, do that, you need to do this. No, I need to enjoy this and savour the moment, slowly does it. I use some little screw-in footholds at the base of some stairs to examine their effective grip and precise edging and smearing capabilities. 'You need to think about how they feel, Chris' notes George, 'are they comfortable'? They are comfortable but tight and uncomfortable also, they are bouldering comfortable, well at least in the shop.

I imagine bouldering in them and my response to their questions is 'I could imagine bouldering for a good hour before feeling the need to take them off'. Such imagination is evoked through the recollections of my now massive Evolv shoes on tiny holds. I anticipate the sensations that are sure to be evoked through the constant stretching and relaxing of flesh in this leather and I just know how they will 'tighten' my feet and thus facilitate security on the tiny notches of resin. Like a loving hug or a warm cosy bed, these new climbing shoes create a sense of security. Our discussions continue for another ten minutes as I poke and prod my way along these footholds, I walk around in them too, I love them. The truth is that they were the only shoes that I was going to buy; I wore them with my eyes before they touched my feet, there was an attraction, a visual-somatic connection where they simply said 'Yes, I need your feet'. Having handed over £53.90 we set off to break the babies in.

Back at Boulder Base I open the box in awe, the other guys in there look and examine them as I again carefully lace them up, this time for action. 'New shoes, eh?' asks someone I've never met before, 'yeah, these are going to be my dancing shoes'. Then to the wall together (the shoes and I) we go. They/we/me stick so nice to footholds and I can really push off my toes and rotate my body on the small solid edges, they/we/me feel great. They don't feel like shoes, they feel like an extra layer of super protective skin; they just cover my hardened feet beautifully. I jump off a couple of easy V2's and they still feel great even when I hit the mat, wow! Wrapped up snugly in red leather I can feel every notch, groove or edge through the rubber sole. My toes are wedged firmly creating a solid structure, almost hoof-like I guess. Whilst they initiate a dull warm ache and restrict usual dexterity, they seem to enhance and hone such feelings on the wall. In Merleau-Pontian terms they are an extension of my body and an extension of my craft, security, precision and possibility. They transcend the wall and take me somewhere I don't quite understand.

Discussion

In forwarding our conception of *being there* – a sweaty, fleshy, embodied mode of sense-making – the selected scenes provided above may appear somewhat mundane. We could have offered more high-octane moments from Chris's sensory apprenticeship, such as, his perilous scrambles up craggy rockfaces. So, why our focus on shoes? As qualitative researchers, we are often encouraged to figuratively 'put' ourselves in our participant's shoes as a form of reductive empathy building; in other words, I, the researcher, understand you, the participant, and your experiences because I have imagined myself in your position. Similarly, this notion of imagined participation can also be applied to ethnographic approaches in which the ethnographer is present in a social world *yet*

simultaneously unengaged in the world itself – a form of being there, but from the sidelines. However, for Chris, he *literally* put himself in somebody else's shoes: repulsive, sticky, ill-fitting rental shoes that provided his first (if wholly inadequate) connection between body and rock.

But what do we gain from this approach to *being there*? For ethnographers, in putting on shoes – or gloves, or a helmet, or other material artefacts – we are provided with an intimate connection, a sensuous entry point, to the field of study. While there is an illuminating range of climbing literature, which we will draw upon in this discussion, that employ ethnography (Cohen 2025; Dutkiewicz 2015; Wiercinski 2022) and/or participant observation (Barratt 2011; Goodrich 2004), Chris's apprenticeship offers a unique perspective. To return to Pink's (2015, 72) notion of sensory apprenticeship as 'learning how to use all our senses and to participate in *their* worlds', this form of inquiry is active, intentional and pedagogical. Similarly, while not an *overt* apprenticeship, Wiercinski (2022) also captures the intersubjectivity of both climbing and experiential forms of inquiry. In his climbing ethnography, he explains that his findings have 'emerged explicitly from being with and among the people' (41). For Chris, as a novice member of the Boulder Base community, he was learning how to boulder *and* how to be a part of a subculture on *their* terms. His ethnographic journey in shoes – from the entry-level Evolvs to the red 'dancing shoes' – reflected his immersion in this community of practice and his *becoming* a boulderer.

Chris's *being there* also forced a recalibration and re-tuning of his sensory self. In Scene One, through the 'crushing pain' of his new shoes, he was confronted by his own feet that haptically felt smaller, more contorted, squashed and confined than ever before. Yet, by Scene Three, it was the substantially increased tightness of his new shoes that created a 'sense of security' and made them 'bouldering comfortable'. Of course, as a boulderer, his ability to experience haptic extremes increased, however it was his learning to *sense* like a boulderer and his grasp of the bouldering sensorium that was significant. Barratt (2011: 404) theorises this process as the fusion between shoe and body in which an 'inherently rubber' climbing hybrid is co-produced. In conceptualising 'the foot – climbing-shoe – rock assemblage' (403), he also recognises the importance of necessary discomfort and how shoes are gradually reformed through the practice of climbing. Yet, despite the theoretical richness of Barratt's work, it is through sensuous scholarship (i.e. this article's vignettes) that we come to know the gritty and evocative nature of this lived experience. Here, we see the important methodological difference between researching *about* the bouldering body and researching *through* the bouldering body.

In her ethnographic research exploring the 'qualia' – or the sensuous quality – of climbing, Cohen (2025) centralises the *intensity* of this embodied practice. As she argues, for climbers, 'their project is most basically about increasing intensity: How much effort, care, power, and difficulty can be packed into a moment? How hard can humans try?'(37). While much of the existing literature (e.g. Dutkiewicz 2015; Goodrich 2004; Wiercinski 2022), including Cohen's work, considers the embodied intensity of negotiating highly graded routes and shared sensory knowledge, there is also value in understanding how such intensity is learnt in seemingly mundane everyday situations. As evident in the outdoor retail store, the process of learning the *feel* of a shoe, including acceptable levels of pain, required the guidance of others. When lacing up, both George and the retailer described what Chris *should* be experiencing and, importantly, emphasised that comfort and pain are learnt, situated sensations. Because of his growing bouldering knowledge, Chris deemed their interjections unnecessary; instead, as a now self-identifying boulderer, he wanted to 'savour the moment' and rely upon his own sensory perceptions. His journey from novice apprentice to informed member of a subculture was made possible by this very type of pedagogical interaction. Moments of informal and formal learning, which take place in all ethnography, are made meaningful by Chris's feeling the sensory pleasures and displeasures of this activity *with* his fellow boulderers.

Conversely, what would we lose by not *being there* in this way? A more detached ethnographer may make the same trip to the outdoor retailer and observe the conversations about fit and feel of bouldering shoes. They could go over to the shelf and inspect the shoes, maybe even *dip their toes* into the subculture by trying them on. In the moment, the researcher is likely to recognise and briefly

feel a haptic difference in the climbing shoes opposed to their 'normal' shoes. They may even feel severe yet fleeting discomfort before they return both feet to a less pressurised and more comfortable environment. All this could certainly happen, but without the intention of *becoming* a boulderer, to quote Geertz (1988, 130), our distanced ethnographer would only gain a 'postcard experience' of this sensory practice: a disembodied glimpse into a thoroughly embodied mode of being.

In Scene 2's exploration of Boulder Base's smellscape, a detached ethnographer may passively note the facility's distinctive odour but fail to grasp the nuances of smell and its contextual significance. Equally, for an experienced bouldering ethnographer, while not detached from the subject matter, these everyday sensuous encounters may be deemed inconsequential. Instead, Chris's long-term participation and immersion in the community's sensory order and its somatic code revealed the olfactory complexity of the bouldering sensorium. His negotiation of subcultural norms, including the *no sock norm*, was possible because of his knowledge of the space and its participants. Like Hjortborg and Ravn's (2020) cultivation of bodily awareness in tai chi and Lev's (2024) ethnographic examination of bodily secretions in distance running, Chris's learning *how* to sense – both as an individual and as an act of sense-making – demonstrates that *being there*, in our terms, is a skilled ethnographic endeavour in which participation is the route to understanding.

Finally, for an ethnographer who is not co-present, the experience would be even more stark. For instance, while they could access detailed reviews of bouldering shoes via online forums or browse the retailer's social media page, the researcher is unable to *feel* the shoes on their feet. In fact, their knowledge of bouldering shoes may be exhaustive, knowing the minute details of each and every shoe brand – including the offensive smell of certain pairs after extended use. Similarly, they could go on the Boulder Base website or read customer reviews to know about the social setting and its community without ever physically *being there*. Notably, this knowledge has not been cultivated first-hand: it is *somebody else's* learnt knowledge. Without a corporeal presence, the researcher can only piece together a second-hand understanding of what it means to be a boulderer. Clearly, this mode of *being there* does tell us something about bouldering – but it is eminently different from the *being there* evident in Chris's vignettes.

The methodological position of *being there* that we have presented above clearly raises ontological questions about the forms of reality we seek to explore as qualitative researchers, and how we go about gaining access to these realities, in an ethical manner, both *in* and *through* our own bodies. As Sugden and Sheps (2025) note in their reflections on the dilemmas they encountered when conducting embodied research in sport and physical cultures, such questions revolve around the levels of involvement with the research context and those that populate it. This being particularly so with regards to the continuous and precarious movement along the continuums of insider/outsider and participant/observer in the quest for intersubjective understanding. Yet, there are no easy answers: engaging in embodied research that plunges oneself inside the cultures of others to become fluent in them is fraught with challenges that require further attention. As we have in this article, Sugden and Sheps (2025) also emphasise the immense possibilities that *being there* – in our terms – and participating in the action affords the embodied researcher in entering new plains of understanding and remedying our increasingly detached relationships from our surroundings and each other.

Unfortunately, despite its evident value, our notion of *being there* appears to be under threat. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many ethnographers went online and are yet to return to the kind of embodied, situated fieldwork that Chris undertook in his study. While remote forms of being there served an important purpose in socially distanced times (Walsh, Khan, and Ferazzoli 2023), particularly for students who were required to adapt their doctoral studies, there is a danger that digital ethnography might become the first port of call for the wrong reasons. Despite all forms of *being there* requiring justification, our apprehension is that exclusively online approaches are being selected for convenience over methodological appropriateness (Lane and Lingel 2022; Masullo and Coppola 2023), which Lane and Lingel (2022) describe as a *reactive* rather than a *proactive* approach to digital ethnography. Misplaced assumptions about such approaches, including ease of use and low cost, also work in tandem with wider institutional

pressures to 'produce' research outputs. Within the neoliberal university, academic staff and doctoral students operate within an intensive audit culture that transforms people into auditable entities (Sparkes 2021). This may pressure some academic staff, particularly those early in their career, to guide students wishing to engage with ethnography towards what is wrongly perceived to be an easier, more convenient online approach in order to complete doctoral studies 'on time'. In this scenario, the kind of ethnography and way of *being there* we have advocated for in this article will be elided and gradually excluded in the pursuit of achieving specific metric outcomes.

Given these methodological and institutional challenges, it is an opportunity to creatively, innovatively and critically rethink our *being there* in contemporary ethnography. For sport, exercise and health researchers, ethnographic apprenticeships provide an immersive, embodied and intentional means of getting off the sidelines and into the action. For those who are interested in the generation of embodied knowledge through *doing*, this article raises two key methodological considerations for future research. First, a rethinking of duration and intensity in ethnographic fieldwork. While time for lengthy immersion is scarce, this is no bad thing. We encourage ethnographers to prioritise the *how* rather than the *how long* when planning or undertaking sensuous research, particularly in institutional contexts marked by limited time and precarious funding. As we have demonstrated, *being there* should be active, intentional and pedagogical, but this does not necessarily require long-term immersive fieldwork. Depending on circumstance and based on the depth of immersion required to generate appropriate data to address a study's research questions, one can therefore choose to conduct what have been variously described as short-term ethnographies, focused ethnographies or mini-ethnography case studies (Allison 2023; Bayeck 2023; Bradshaw et al. 2021). Following P. Atkinson's (2022, 3) notion of an *aliquot of fieldwork* – 'small amounts (time not precisely defined) of fieldwork that are "just enough" for one's research purposes' – we argue that focused, short-term *being there* is as valuable and effective as traditional ethnographic modes. As he suggests 'one should sometimes try to learn a lot from a little, rather than always learning a little from a lot' (3). In practical-focused ethnographies, this intense approach both invites and provokes the researcher to be actively present. In returning to the notion of the detached ethnographer, there is no time to sit on the sidelines in short-term fieldwork. For those who are learning a new skill or becoming a member of a community of practice, a focused ethnography also limits over-immersion in which knowledge and routines become taken-for-granted and lose their significance.

Relatedly, our second methodological consideration also concerns the *how* of *being there*, but in the context of representing sensuous data. As evident in this article, somatic layered accounts are one response to the ongoing challenge of how to represent the senses in ways that evoke rather than simply describe. Considering the contemporary ascendence of creative nonfiction (CNF) and composite stories as described by Middleton et al. (2025), our approach presents an alternative form of creative analytical practice. As Middleton and colleagues argue, while there are benefits to CNF, its continued dominance may reduce the desire to push boundaries of representation that would take us into different ways of knowing and being. Similarly, P. Atkinson (2020) suggests, given the historically clear and deep influences on ethnography from modernist art and literature, those authors who wish to engage in experimental forms of representation might go further and be more – not less – radical. For example, we might begin to explore multimodal forms of *being there* using digital methods *alongside* face-to-face interaction or collaborative accounts with fellow novice participants that employ sensory elicitation to foreground the senses as a site of shared inquiry. Such approaches would continue to unsettle the dominance of text and work towards more enlivened forms of qualitative representation. The question now is not whether embodied modes of inquiry and representation are legitimate, but how we might cultivate them with imagination, adventure and reflexive methodological awareness. So, let's step into the sticky, smelly, ill-fitting shoes, get into the action and advance this qualitatively significant way of understanding the varied life-worlds of sport, exercise and health.

Note

1. According to Downey, Dalidowicz, and Mason (2015), the inherent reflexivity of apprenticeship-based research has led some to suggest that its practitioners are engaged in a form of 'reflexive autoethnography". They, along with Wacquant (2005, 2013), vigorously countered these arguments. To avoid the conflation of method with the research object, it was pointed out that it is analytical reflexivity rather than excessive rhetorical self-reference that distinguishes an ethnographic apprenticeship. More recently, as P. Atkinson (2020, 2022) made clear, one can write ethnographically from a highly personalised point of view about learning and becoming in the field without doing autoethnography or having one's work wrongly labelled as such by others. This is particularly so when the experiences of the ethnographer's self are used for analytic purposes to illuminate the central topics of a study, such as materials, tools and techniques, and embodied skills and the senses.

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