

Original Contributions - Originalbeiträge

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Units of Action - A Psychology of 'Natural' Behaviour Patterns Using the Example of Sport

Introduction: The psychological complexity of everyday actions

In everyday life, action processes often appear self-evident and self-contained. However, from a psychological perspective, it is precisely this apparent self-evidence that raises key conceptual questions: How can actions that structure our everyday lives—from breakfast to endurance running—be adequately captured without reducing them to individual moments or isolated variables? Different theoretical perspectives offer different approaches here. Classic action theory models—such as those developed by Nitsch (2000), Heckhausen (1979), and Hacker (2005)—focus on the goal-oriented nature, control loops, and control mechanisms of actions. Actions are typically divided into phases, organized by internal goal representations, and regulated by feedback.

At the same time, criticism of the methodological limitations of this theoretical tradition has also been voiced. Nitsch (2004), for example, emphasizes that the increasing fragmentation of psychology into “abgeschottete” [“isolated”] (p. 11) individual theories has led to the “Gesamtzusammenhang psychischen Geschehens zunehmend aus dem Blick gerät” [“overall context of psychological events increasingly being lost sight of”] (p. 11). Heckhausen (1979) also called for a more comprehensive view of action that is “nicht wie in der Mutterdisziplin...auf isolierte Aspekte wie Motivation, Planung oder Steuerung beschränkt” [“not limited, as in the parent discipline, to isolated aspects such as motivation, planning, or control”] (p. 55), but rather captures the complex intertwining of psychological processes in their entirety. This self-reflective critique highlights the need for a theoretical expansion that makes actions accessible not primarily through explanatory models, but through an understanding analysis of psychological figurations.

This is precisely where Gestalt psychology comes in. It formulates a radical change of perspective. It is not the individual aspects that determine the whole, but the whole that constitutes the meaning of its parts. Wertheimer (1923) and von Ehrenfels (1890) established the concept of “Gestalt quality” as a figure of thought in which meaning, form, and context are not analytically added together but conceived as an organized whole. This also means that actions are not the product of isolated processes, but the expression of figurative meaning-making.

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Kurt Lewin (1930) had already introduced the concept of “action wholes” in this context to show that actions cannot be broken down into atomistic individual acts, but can only be understood as structured, goal-oriented, and tension-dynamic wholes. Lewin emphasized that experience and behavior in an action only come together to form a functional unit through the interaction of several components—in other words, they are always embedded in a field of intention, situational conditions, and internal tension. In doing so, he was one of the first to point to the structural characteristics of action that later reappeared in Salber’s concept of the units of action (2009).

This theoretical reorientation is consistently pursued in the concept of the unit of action according to Wilhelm Salber in two works, first in 1956 and then in 1965. Building on assumptions from Gestalt psychology and field theory, Salber develops a model that understands psychological occurrences as dynamic, tension-filled forms—as units of action that not only link individual acts, but also act as figures that structure the psyche. The focus here is not on explanation, but on psychological understanding and thus on describing the way in which experience, action, and meaning formation are figuratively organized in the course of their execution.

The aim of this article is to theoretically classify Salber’s concept of the unit of action, to outline its epistemological and methodological scope, and to illustrate it with examples from sport, in particular endurance running. In doing so, it should become clear to what extent the unit of action is to be understood not only as an analytical tool, but also as a fundamental structure of psychological occurrences.

Units of action according to Wilhelm Salber

The concept of the unit of action offers decisive theoretical added value for the psychological understanding of human action. It overcomes the reduction of complex courses of action to individual moments, stimulus–response patterns, or isolated cognitive variables, as prevalent in many classical theories of action psychology. Instead, according to Salber (2009), the morphological perspective allows action to be described as a holistic, dynamic, tension-filled designed movement. Action units are not mere sequences of action steps, but temporally delimited formative processes in which the psyche stages and transforms itself as a meaningfully organized unit. Salber bases his concept of the unit of action on fundamental assumptions of Gestalt psychology and field theory, but also expands and develops these specifically. Accordingly, central historical points of reference for the conceptually relevant currents are first outlined here, followed by a presentation of the essential structural features of the unit of action.

Historical points of reference: Gestalt psychology and field theory

The theoretical foundation of the unit of action lies in Gestalt psychology, as developed by Max Wertheimer (1923), Christian von Ehrenfels (1890), Wolfgang Köhler (1929), and Kurt Koffka (1935), among others. Here, the primacy of the whole over the parts was postulated: actions, perceptions, and thought processes are to be understood as structured wholes, not as additions of individual moments. von Ehrenfels's concept of "Gestalt quality" describes that a melody, for example, cannot be explained by the sum of its notes, but by its meaningful form.

Max Wertheimer (1923) clearly emphasizes this idea: "The individual parts [...] are not primarily considered as pieces in an 'and' sum, but from the outset as parts of their whole" (pp. 349–350). This makes it clear that psychological processes cannot be reduced to a sequence of isolated elements, but can only be understood in the context of the respective structure of meaning.

Wolfgang Köhler (1920) speaks in this context of "supersummatory properties" (p. 191) of the phenomenal field, which is experienced as a self-structured unit with a specific order. Kurt Koffka (1935) also emphasizes that it is not correct to simply understand the whole as "more" than the parts: "The whole is not only more than the sum of its parts. It is more correct to say that the whole is something else than the sum of its parts" (p. 176). This radical revaluation of the relationship between the part and the whole forms the psychological foundation for understanding the unit of action as a structured, internally tense sequence.

Similarly, in the concept of the unit of action, behavior only becomes psychologically understandable in the context of its overall structure. Every change in one part modifies the meaning of the whole—a notion of central relevance for the analysis of psychological action processes.

Kurt Lewin (1926) expanded this holistic approach in his essay *Vorsatz, Wille und Bedürfnis* (Intention, Will, and Need), describing actions as "zeitlich ausgedehnte Ganzheiten" ["temporally extended wholes"] (p. 14) that can have different structural types. Such actions can unfold continuously, gradually approaching a goal, circling around it, or approaching it from different angles with new approaches. Typical introductory and concluding phases can often be observed—such as consciously "Schlusspunkt machen" ["making a final point"] (p. 14) or "Aufatmen" ["breathing a sigh of relief"] (p. 14) after completion—"die sie als psychologische Einheiten von ihrem Umfeld abheben" ["which distinguish them from their environment as psychological units"] (p. 14). Lewin also emphasized the simultaneity of various profound processes within an action sequence: "Nicht minder wichtig wie die Gliederung im zeitlichen Nacheinander ist die Struktur der Handlungen als einer Ganzheit von Prozessen, die in verschiedener Tiefe und mit verschiedenem Gewicht gleichzeitig miteinander ablaufen" ["No less important

than the structure in temporal succession is the structure of actions as a whole of processes that run simultaneously at different depths and with different weights”] (p. 15). This understanding makes it possible to differentiate between complex internal tensions and multi-layered psychological processes—a central concern of morphological psychology. Lewin also emphasized the importance of the inner psychological field for understanding action. For example, the act of writing differs fundamentally depending on whether someone is copying a sentence in calligraphy or writing a personal letter—even though the external movements may appear the same (p. 15). This interplay between external situation, internal goal structure, and psychological field of meaning forms the background against which behavior becomes recognizable as a meaningful unit.

Kurt Lewin’s later field theory (1951) built on these early ideas and developed the image of a dynamic force field within a “living space.” Actions arise from the tension between current conditions and goals, with personal and situational factors being equally effective. The idea of understanding courses of action as an expression of internal tensions in the field of life finds a consistent psychological form in Salber’s unit of action.

Salber explicitly refers to Lewin’s concept of psychological direction (“locomotion”) as an expression of inner shifts in meaning: „Die wesentlichen Eigentümlichkeiten dieses Richtungsbegriffes sind seine eindeutig ‚funktionelle‘ Bestimmung und seine unmittelbare Beziehung zum ‚Ganzheitsbegriff‘. Eine äußerlich zu beobachtende Abwendung kann (vom Ganzen aus) eine psychische Zuwendung sein“ [“The essential characteristics of this concept of direction are its clearly ‘functional’ determination and its direct relationship to the ‘concept of wholeness.’ An outwardly observable turning away can (from the whole) be a psychological turning toward”] (Salber, 1956, p. 63). In doing so, Salber not only ties in with Lewin’s understanding of the psychological living space, but also emphasizes the symbolic depth of everyday actions. Of particular importance here is Lewin’s insight that behavior must always be understood as a function of the overall field—a functional unity of person and environment. This systemic-dynamic approach opens our eyes to the situational embedding and symbolic charge of concrete actions.

The four features of the unit of action according to Salber

Salber (2009, pp. 62–71) defines four central structural features of the unit of action that enable a differentiated analysis of psychological processes in the context of everyday life:

Unification (*Vereinheitlichung*): Units of action do not consist of isolated individual performances, but rather form a tense, meaningful whole. The meaning of individual moments only emerges from their connection within the unit. In this

figurative structure, the psyche becomes visible as a structure of effects that organizes itself, intensifies in conflict, or strives for resolution (Salber, 2009, pp. 62–63).

Hour-world (*Stundenwelt*): Each unit of action forms its own atmospheric reality. It creates a “time of its own” in which the world, the self, and the action are experienced in a special way. This is a kind of microcosm of emotional experience, characterized by a specific mood, rhythmic order, and physical and emotional constitution. These hour-worlds are subjectively highly significant and contribute to inner orientation (Salber, 2009, pp. 64–67).

Form-of-becoming (*Werdeform*): Units of action do not proceed linearly, but rather in transformations, transitions, crises, and upheavals. The unit unfolds in the course of its execution and has its own unique dramaturgy. This form of progression reveals how the psyche moves through tensions, enters into confrontations, and develops new forms of self-organization. The form of becoming refers to the processual quality of psychological development (Salber, 2009, pp. 67–69).

Through-formation (*Durchformung*): Units of action develop a characteristic formal quality in the course of their development. They do not follow an arbitrary logic, but arise from the inner necessities of the respective constellation of tensions. This formation bears a specific signature that results from the respective theme, the inner field of conflict, and the cultural framework. It makes the unit of action comprehensible as a psychological form (Salber, 2009, pp. 70–71).

These four structural elements allow for a psychologically dense understanding of psychological activity as it manifests itself in everyday and sporting activities. They offer a deep understanding of how subjective meaning-making, atmospheric world experience, and symbolic processing intertwine in units of action.

Transfer to sport: Gestalt movement patterns in Kohl, Benary, Straus and Marlovits

The importance of holistic units of action is particularly evident in sport. Kurt Kohl (1956) described sporting activity as a Gestalt unit of body and environment. In movement learning, a subjective action structure develops that does not consist of isolated techniques, but of holistically experienced movement units. Perception, action, and intentional orientation “merge” into a single experiential structure. Movements are not learned additively, but as structured meaningful contexts that are directly experienced and embodied by the athlete.

Kohl emphasizes that sporting movements appear as concise forms that unfold their own logic. The perception of the game situation, body coordination, and goal awareness merge into a unity that the athlete grasps intuitively rather than analytically. The experience of rhythm, tension, playful wit, and overcoming obstacles is just as important as the motor execution itself.

Hugo Benary (1913) also understands sport as an independent form of experience with its own internal laws. For him, sporting activity is not a means to an end, but rather the expression of a gesturally organized game shaped by the tension between challenge, structured skill, and rules. The athlete does not merely pursue a goal, but enters into a symbolic confrontation with the difficulty. In the process, subjective meaning formations and social orders of significance unfold. Benary describes that the appeal of sport lies in overcoming difficulties that cannot be solved. It is precisely this incompleteness that distinguishes sport from mere play. The unit of action in sport thus gains an existential depth: it brings the subject into confrontation with themselves, with others, and with the ideal opponent. The performance of sport becomes a place of psychological self-negotiation.

These perspectives can be fruitfully combined with Erwin Straus's phenomenological theory of movement. For Straus (1978), movement is not merely physical locomotion, but an expression of an inner transition: „Sich-Bewegen bedeutet Selbstbewegung und Selbstwandlung, es bedeutet Metamorphose im ursprünglichen Sinn des Wortes“ [“Moving means self-movement and self-transformation; it means metamorphosis in the original sense of the word”] (p. 347). Movement is not an external activity, but a psychological and physical figure of transformation, of becoming, and of orientation in the space of experience. Marlovits (2001) takes up these ideas and emphasizes: „Die beseelte Bewegung ist Veränderung, Übergang von einem Hier zum Dort [...] Weil die Augenblicke nur Einschränkungen seiner Totalität sind, erlebt sich der Einzelne stets im Übergang“ [“The animated movement is change, a transition from here to there [...] Because moments are only limitations of its totality, the individual always experiences itself in transition”] (p. 83). In sport, this transition can be experienced concretely—the subject not only goes through movements, but also transforms itself in the act of doing, experiencing transitions, tensions, resistance, and a becoming-new of the self in the act of doing.

Units of action and their conditions using the example of endurance running

Marlovits (2000) emphasizes that sporting activities such as running, throwing, and playing are prime examples of how units of action are not simply planned building blocks, but living figurations. Marlovits's (2004) analysis of the psychology of endurance running provides a fitting reference for the application and translation of the unit of action. Running is more than just a means of locomotion. It becomes a figuration in which everyday obstacles, affects, and tensions are formed and transformed in the form of rhythmic self-movement (Marlovits, 2004, pp. 72–73). Endurance running serves as a clear example to illustrate the action unit. First, an insight into the psychological processes involved in running is provided through a description, as “description” is also the central method of

morphological psychology for the concept of action units (as described by Fitzek, 2020, based on Salber, 1969/2006). Following the morphological description, the six conditions of the unit of action will be transferred, described, and explained using endurance running as an example.

The experience of endurance running

Marlovits (2004) uses the results of 100 in-depth psychological interviews to illustrate the description of a single run—on the one hand, because it describes a “ganz normale[r] Lauf” [“completely normal run”] (p. 70) as it is „täglich von Millionen von Menschen in dieser oder einer ähnlichen Form durchgeführt und erlebt wird“ [“performed and experienced daily by millions of people in this or a similar form”] (p. 70); the test subject was also able to “report very vividly what happens to her during the run” (p. 70); and it also “reproduces a prototypical course of endurance running that comes very close to what many runners experience in a ‘normal run’” (p. 70).

[Translation of the original German text:]

“Fully loaded with the ballast of her working day, she arrives home from work and first tries to ‘switch off’ by turning on the television. However, this does not seem to be an effective remedy, because ‘most of the time, everything just keeps going round and round in my head. All the thoughts about work and my colleagues.’ So she watches the soap opera on TV more casually than with much attention. At the same time, she feels the urge to go out again and go for a run. But she also notices a kind of laziness that leaves her in a strange state of indecision. Half an hour passes in this back and forth of ‘should I or shouldn’t I’ until she simply grabs her running clothes and gets dressed. That settles it. She will run ‘the short route’ today. That’s 90 minutes. What helped her decide to go running was the change of clothes. She knows this from other days when she also went back and forth with the decision. ‘Once you put on your running gear, you’ve won. Then it’s clear that you’re going out. Now it’s time for your running gear, your nice, comfortable running gear.’ On other days, however, it’s very easy to decide to go running. ‘The question doesn’t even arise. It’s crystal clear that you’re going running today. Sometimes you even have to go running.’

‘The run begins. She leaves the house and runs briefly through the streets. The first few meters are quite difficult. But after a few minutes, this difficulty is overcome. Then she enters the forest, which feels like liberation, where she already encounters the first runner. They greet each other with a discreet nod and she feels closer to the other runner than to the pedestrians who also come into view. The thought occurs to her that there are no differences between the runners, as they are all dressed the same. Professions and status don’t matter because, in principle, everyone is in the same situation as her. You’re just on the same level as everyone else.’

'Now she notices that, as usual, she has started too fast. Being out of breath forces her to slow down. Slowing down, she concentrates again on herself, on her breathing, and her steps. 'It's usually difficult at the beginning because your head is still somewhere else.' Fragments of everyday thoughts, experiences, encounters, and annoyances with colleagues flare up briefly in images and feelings. She feels how exhausting the working day was. At the same time, however, she also notices a kind of relief that slowly becomes noticeable, that begins to create space in her body. The fresh air also contributes to this. To really enjoy the good air, she takes a few deeper breaths than necessary and consciously notices her breathing. Then she continues on her way.

'As you continue running, the balance between the stress of everyday thoughts and the newly emerging sense of relief shifts. The distance from the burdens of work feels greater than before. The "everyday clutter" somehow becomes lighter. And the moment you realize that you've found your rhythm, that you're running at a certain pace that feels good, and your breathing comes naturally and you start to sweat, then at some point you become a little more aware of nature and less of your own thoughts. Then at some point, you can suddenly think about other things: past runs or childhood memories that come to mind, or plans for the future or situations where you were also in nature and it was beautiful. And then you just run and run.'

Lost in these new thoughts, she runs most of the time. She only notices her surroundings as she passes by. Only stopping at a traffic light at a road that leads through the forest brings her back to reality for a short time. After a few steps, she finds herself lost in thought again. New topics keep popping into her head. They feel strangely light, coming and going without her having to 'think' about them.

'This undirected flow intensifies during this one run into the experience of a happy moment. 'I remember exactly how light and happy I felt, despite the sweat and tired legs. Then I try to get to a point where I say: I am here now and no longer at work. That is now in the past and then I am really only in this moment. And when you've really achieved that, it's a kind of feeling of happiness when you really manage to be only in the moment, in the present. The greatest moment comes when you really think of nothing anymore. Even if it's only three seconds. That's really the very best.' Becoming aware of this moment allows it to melt away again.'

'I don't always get that exhilarating feeling, but most of the time—as was the case during this run—I experience a distinct sense of relief. The initial weight has noticeably lifted. Depending on how stressed I've been, I need at least two hours of running to really shake it off. Otherwise, an hour and a half is enough.' She runs the last few kilometers feeling content. Despite feeling noticeably tired, 'running feels good. Then I'm particularly satisfied.' Looking forward to a shower and proud of the distance she has covered, she feels 'exhausted, worn out. You just feel good' (Marlovits, 2004, pp. 72–73).

The Six Conditions of Psychological Formative Processes in Units of Action according to Salber

The four stages presented in the previous section do not unfold in a vacuum but are linked to further specific conditions, which Salber (2009) describes as conditions for the formative processes (pp. 86–93) and to the stage of through-formation. These conditions do not act in isolation but rather in a mutually dependent and supportive relationship. According to Salber (2009), these six conditions include, in addition to the unit of action itself, the metamorphosis of meanings, historicisation, practice, organisation, and constitution (pp. 89–93).

Metamorphosis of meanings

In morphological psychology, metamorphosis refers to the fundamental condition that psychological Gestalts are not static but are in a constant process of change. It is an expression of an inner lawfulness of psychological events: Gestalts arise, come under tension, dissolve, transform themselves, only to reappear in a new figurative form. This change is not arbitrary variation but takes place in the context of internal and external tensions, resistances and tendencies. Metamorphosis is therefore not merely a change in content but a figuratively structured transformation of meaning – a shift of the entire psychological form into a different constellation. Psychological events are always also changes in meaning – changes of Gestalt (Salber, 2009, p. 90).

In the run described, this metamorphosis of meanings does not manifest itself as an abrupt turn, but as a continuous transformation of a burdened initial form into a rhythmic, present-oriented and more harmonious form. The runner begins in a field of tension between work, exhaustion, inner urge and passivity – a figurative situation that calls for a change of mood. Running, as a unit of action, initiates this process of change, which intensifies through physical experience, breathing rhythm and contact with nature to form a different, freer context of experience. In the process, the runner goes through various intermediate phases: initial overload, then increasing centering and focus, and finally a state of lightness and immersion in the moment.

These changes are not to be understood as additive modifications, but as expressions of a figurative transformation: the original psychological Gestalt is worked through, reshaped and redefined with a changed meaning. The metamorphosis does not produce a different *self*, but a new figurative reality that necessarily results from the tension and structure of the previous constellation. This is where its psychological necessity lies: it is not an external change, but a psychologically inherent, Gestalt-logically driven transformation of experience and action in the sense of a metamorphosis of meaning.

Historicisation

Salber (2009, p. 90) uses the term “Historisierung” [“historicisation”] to refer not merely to a temporal embedding or episodic repetition, but to the fact that psychological events themselves take place within historical processes. Psychological Gestalts develop an inner dramaturgy that is not imposed from outside but arises in the course of the character’s development: as consequence, expected outcome, reversal, retrospection, and new approach. The psyche is not selective, but rather “tells itself” by bringing the past, present, and future into an effective connection.

In the endurance run described above, this condition is particularly evident in the interplay between experience and reference. The runner draws – not deliberately – on previous runs, childhood memories, or symbolically charged images of nature. These do not appear additively, but as moments of a historically structured Gestalt in which earlier experiences, logical sequences, and turning points play a role. Even the decision to run and the associated inner rituals follow a familiar dramaturgy: the hesitation, the shift to action, the finding of rhythm – this is not random but historically constituted and formative.

The unit of action thus not only has a course, but unfolds as a kind of “inner history,” with its own structure of prelude, crisis, transformation and possible moment of happiness. Historicisation is thus not a reflection, but a structural principle of psychological events themselves – a “historical character”, which transforms psychological figurations into ongoing developments of form.

Practice

Salber (2009, p. 90) uses the term “Einübung” [“practice”] to describe the condition that psychological Gestalts are not only formed situationally but are also consolidated and enlivened through repetition, experience, and execution. Practice is not a mere drill but a psychological process of experience through which possibilities of form are created, tried out, modified, and finally become available as formative forces. What has been experienced is not merely remembered—it becomes a practical psychological infrastructure.

This condition is clearly evident in the case of the runner: her decision-making processes, the effect of her clothing, her knowledge of the initial difficulty, her breathing technique—all of this is based on embodied experience that she does not need to reflect on but rather intuitively knows. This also applies to how she deals with threshold moments, such as when she is caught up in a whirlwind of thoughts or when she switches from everyday mode to the flow of movement.

These structures are practiced, not merely known cognitively. They show that the unit of action—endurance running—has developed its own psychological form

through numerous repetitions, which can be recalled, taken up, and modified. In this way, practice represents a psychological resource that enables us to respond figuratively to tensions—not merely “wise from experience,” but rather to have become capable of shaping experience.

Organisation

The concept of “Organisation” [“organisation”] (Salber, 2009, p. 91) refers to the condition that psychological units of action do not arise individually but are always already embedded in higher-level cultural, social, and symbolic structures. These structures do not act as external influences but are structurally involved in the events—they enable and limit certain forms of experience and action.

In the running example, organisation is visible, for example, in the role of the runner as a “runner.” The social figure of running—with its clothing, its symbolic meaning (e.g., autonomy, health, self-determination), and its typical dramaturgy—has a structuring effect on the entire psychological process. The look at the other runners, the silent nodding, the equality in appearance (Marlovits, 2004)—all of this points to a supra-individual order in which the events take place.

The unit of action, endurance running, is thus not merely individually available but part of a collective space of possibilities, which in turn has repercussions on the psychological experience. Organisation is the formative force that places the individual in a larger structure of order, not normatively but gesturally effective. Without organisation, running would be mere locomotion; through organisation, it becomes a psychologically meaningful, figuratively structured unit of action.

Constitution

In Salber’s conceptual approach, “Verfassung” [“constitution”] (Salber, 2009, p. 91) refers to the structural condition under which a unit of action must take shape in a certain way. This is not an external constraint but an internal constraint of form through which the event can only unfold in this way and not in any other. The unit of action arises out of its own necessity—it must proceed in this way and no other in order to be psychologically coherent (Salber, 2009, pp. 91–92). This inner necessity follows the principle of Gestalt closure (Wertheimer, 1923) in the sense of Gestalt psychology: a Gestalt that has begun demands completion, forming a coherent and closed form. Constitution is thus the immanent formal law to which events submit, without it being consciously controllable.

In the example of running, this formal constraint manifests itself in the concrete movement pattern of the action: the initial indecision, the reluctance, the physical start, the gradual easing, the moment of emptiness, and the final satisfaction—all of this must happen exactly as it does in order to bring the Gestalt of running to

completion. The psychological process could not proceed any differently without the figure breaking down or remaining incomplete. Most runners are familiar with the reluctant slowing down at red lights, which is usually countered by continuing to run while standing still, or with the disruption caused by phone calls, which are either briefly answered and then continued while running or ignored. Nor does one simply let the last 500 metres pass by—the fluid run wants to be maintained and completed as fully as possible. The unit of action, continuous running, inherently produces this specific sequence structure—including the obligatory elements, the transitions, and the thresholds that must be passed through.

Constitution therefore refers to the fact that this is not a random arrangement of moments of experience but a process that, due to its internal structure, must necessarily take the form it does—in tension, release, rhythm, and after-effects. It is the form itself that determines the course of events, not the subject who is making decisions. The “man fühlt sich nur gut” [“you just feel good”] (Marlovits, 2004, p. 75) at the end is not the result of a successful plan but the symptom of a completely traversed, figuratively composed unity.

Conclusion

The morphological determination of units of action allows everyday and seemingly routine processes such as endurance running to be understood as differentiated, psychologically meaningful Gestalts in a formative process. The example of endurance running clearly shows that psychological processes should not be understood as linear stimulus-response chains or mere decisions but as figuratively composed acts in which tensions, atmospheres, memories, and movements organize themselves into their own psychological order.

The four basic features—unification, the world of hours, becoming, and shaping—show how heterogeneous moments of action give rise to a meaningful unity that is not merely a sequence of events but a Gestalt with its own dynamic. Supplemented by the six conditions of formative processes—such as metamorphosis, historicisation, or constitution—it becomes clear that each unit of action is both embedded in cultural and biographical structures and follows an inner figurative necessity. The metamorphosis of meanings, in particular, emphasises that running is not just about physical movement but about the transformation of psychological Gestalts—a change that takes place not additively but figuratively.

The added value of this approach lies in its ability to avoid fragmenting action and instead make it tangible as a holistic process. In contrast to action theory, Salber's (2009) perspective on the unit of action allows for a deep understanding of the psychological processes involved in the execution of an action—with all its transitions, condensations, breaks, and reorganisations. Endurance running is

thus not merely seen as a means to an end (e.g., to promote health) but as a psychological process in which life references, physical sensations, atmospheres, and self-relationships are bundled in a temporary world design Gestalt.

This results in a significant benefit, particularly for sport-psychological practice: the analysis of sporting actions as units of action opens up the possibility of not only observing individual forms of experience, psychological tensions, and processes of change but also of providing targeted support. Coaches and sport psychologists can learn to look not only at performance, personality, or technique but also at the psychological character formation within the action itself: What transition is the athlete going through? What wants to change? What transformation is emerging and can be predicted? What needs to be gone through for a character to become well-rounded? This not only allows resources to be identified in a more differentiated way but also enables performance, mistakes, upheavals, crises, or blockages to be understood as part of a necessary psychological process—not as a disturbance or isolated action but as an expression of a form that has not yet been fulfilled. Understanding the closure of the Gestalt also helps to understand where a transformation is driven by the necessity of the unit of action. The morphological perspective thus allows for psychologically deep, figuratively sensitive coaching that understands athletic performance in the context of emotional development.

Critical classification

The article shows that sporting activities such as endurance running can be described morphologically as structured units of action. Morphological psychology allows running to be understood not only as a physical performance but as a holistic, psychological transformative experience. This enables a differentiated analysis of the interaction between body, mind, and environment. Nevertheless, it remains unclear to what extent this theory can be methodologically operationalized. Salber's concept remains vague in places with regard to specific empirical analysis methods. A lack of clarity in the distinction between individual traits and conditions of the unit of action can also be critically noted. Translating this into the experience of endurance running is an attempt to make it easier to access and understand. However, this also shows that, depending on the emphasis placed on them, the feature of shaping and the condition of constitution refer to a formal constraint, or that both the feature of becoming and the metamorphosis of meanings draw attention to the logic of transformation in the unit of action. Potential redundancies cannot be ruled out. Furthermore, the connection between the traits and conditions cannot be clearly deduced: is it not sufficient to look at the four traits or the six conditions to understand units of action? In addition, the question arises as to the extent to which the approach can be extended to collective sporting activities. While endurance running can be understood

as an individual unit of action, it would be necessary to clarify how group processes in team sports can be analyzed morphologically.

Another open question concerns the variability of the metamorphosis of meaning. While some runners' experience endurance running as a challenge or proof of performance, for others it is a meditative or therapeutic process. The question of how strongly the individual meaning of an action influences the structure of the action unit itself requires further investigation.

From a morphological perspective, it would also be conceivable to expand sport psychology analyses to include not only biomechanical but also qualitative, Gestalt dimensions. This would also mean that training and diagnostics would have to be examined not only in terms of efficiency but also in terms of Gestalt qualities, imagery, and subjective coherence of athletic actions (Marlovits, 2000, p. 50).

An outlook: Transferring the "Gestalt" to sport

The application of Gestalt theory to sport tactics and strategy opens up further perspectives. For example, tactical situations in team sports can be understood as psychological Gestalts that are perceived and interpreted holistically (Memmert & Roth, 2007). Individual tactical actions and interactions within a game situation only gain meaning through their mutual coordination and interaction with the game as a whole. Pattern formation, figure-ground relationships, and strategic profiling are central Gestalt principles that are applied in sport, especially in team sports. Building on the presented approach to understanding the unit of action using the example of endurance running, it would be interesting to explore how team sports can also be understood through morphological psychology.

Summary

The article profiles Wilhelm Salber's concept of the unit of action (*Handlungseinheit*) as a morphological-Gestalt-psychological approach to "natural" process forms in everyday life, exemplified by sport. In contrast to classical action-psychological functional models (goal orientation, control-loop models, feedback), action is conceived as a tension-laden movement of form, aligned with core ideas from Gestalt psychology and Lewin's field theory. Theoretically, the four traits of the unit of action—Unification, *Stundenwelt* (a situated experiential "hour-world"), *Werdeform* (form-of-becoming), and *Durchformung* (pervasive shaping)—are elaborated and interwoven with the conditions of psychic form formation (metamorphosis of meanings, historization, practice/*Einübung*, organization, constitution/*Verfassung*, and the unit of action itself). Using endurance running as an example, the article shows how everyday stresses are transformed into a specific, present-oriented and immediate experience through the rhythmic figuration of the action of endurance running. This shows how transitions within units of action enable psychological self-regulation in everyday life, and how individual acts can be understood only with regard to the whole Gestalt. Methodologically, the article argues for descriptive-phenomenological procedures and discusses scope, operationalisability,

and transferability to collective contexts. For sport-psychological practice, the approach affords added value: transitions, crises, and reorganizations within unfolding units of action can be purposefully accompanied and shaped.

Keywords: units of action, sport psychology, endurance running, morphological psychology, Gestalt Psychology

Zusammenfassung

Der Artikel profiliert Wilhelm Salbers Konzept der Handlungseinheit als morphologisch-gestaltpsychologischen Zugang zu „natürlichen“ Ablaufgestalten im Alltag am Beispiel des Sports. Im Kontrast zu klassischen handlungspsychologischen Funktionsmodellen (Zielorientierung, Regelkreismodelle, Rückkopplung) wird Handeln als spannungsvolle Formbewegung gefasst und damit an konzeptuellen Gedanken der Gestaltpsychologie sowie Lewins Feldtheorie angesetzt. Theoretisch werden die vier Züge der Handlungseinheit nach Salber – Vereinheitlichung, Stundenwelt, Werdeform, Durchformung – entfaltet und mit den Bedingungen seelischer Formenbildung (Metamorphose der Bedeutungen, Historisierung, Einübung, Organisation, Verfassung sowie die Handlungseinheit selbst) verschränkt. Am Beispiel des Dauerlaufens wird deutlich, wie erfahrene Alltagsbelastungen über die rhythmische Figuration der Handlung des Dauerlaufens in ein bestimmtes gegenwartsbezogenes und unmittelbares Erleben transformiert werden. Darin zeigt sich, wie Übergänge in Handlungseinheiten dem Seelischen Selbstbehandlung im Alltag ermöglichen und Einzelhandlungen nur mit Blick auf die ganze Gestalt nachvollzogen werden können. Methodisch plädiert der Beitrag für beschreibend-phänomenologische Verfahren und diskutiert Reichweite, Operationalisierbarkeit und die Übertragbarkeit auf kollektive Kontexte. Für die sportpsychologische Praxis ergibt sich ein Mehrwert: Übergänge, Krisen und Re-Organisationen innerhalb sich entfaltender Handlungseinheiten können gezielt begleitet und beeinflusst werden.

Keywords in German: Handlungseinheiten, Sportpsychologie, Dauerlaufen, Morphologische Psychologie, Gestaltpsychologie

Methodological note:

The authors employed ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2025) as a linguistic, translational, and editorial assistant during the writing process—comparable to an interactive proofreading and reformulation tool. The model also supported preliminary literature searches. Several sections were shaped within an iterative exchange between the two authors and the model, in which linguistic formulation and translation served the clarification of conceptual and theoretical ideas. All substantive interpretations and theoretical developments originated from the authors' independent analysis.

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