

Jographies

I'm a Running Researcher: Una McGahern



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Who are you?

Hi! I'm Una McGahern and I'm a Senior Lecturer in Politics at Newcastle University, UK. I teach the Middle East politics but my research which is interdisciplinary and ethnographic in nature focuses mainly on issues relating to mobility, security and space in Israel-Palestine.

What is your background?

Quite eclectic! I have a BA in Intercultural Studies and Applied Languages from Dublin City University. After that, I undertook a year of independent graduate studies at Ben Gurion University of the Negev in Israel before starting a 1+3 ESRC funded PhD which focused on the experiences of Palestinian Christians in Israel at Durham University. After that, I secured a Leverhulme postdoctoral fellowship on protest-policing in Israel which I spent partly at Durham and partly at Newcastle where I remain today.

How long have you been researching running?

Since 2017 or 2018, so not long.

How did you get into researching running?

I started looking into it quite accidentally only after discovering a wonderful running community in Israel-Palestine called Right to Movement which I joined for runs over the years while I was doing research on other topics in Haifa, Jaffa, Jerusalem and Bethlehem. I was trying to find ways to stay fit and was struggling to find places to run on my own so someone I knew mentioned the group to me. I'm so glad they did!

What running research have you done?

I have written a paper focusing on the [Right to Movement running community in Jerusalem which was published in the journal of Mobilities back in 2019](#). In it I looked at the different running routes the runners used, the different strategies they used to exercise their right to move in them, and the effects that running regularly together in this deeply divided and fragmented city had on their sense of belonging and place in the city. The short title of the paper, 'Making Space on the Run', gives a sense of the creative possibilities and politics of running that these runners seek to channel.

How do you research running?

I used ethnographic methods, specifically a 'run-along' method which I developed based on wider work on mobile methods. The participatory nature of this method is particularly well attuned to capturing the spatial and embodied experiences of running in a non-pressured and non-pressurising way, recalibrating the traditional dynamic between 'researcher' and 'informant' in a novel and deeply rewarding way.

What is the most significant, important, surprising, interesting, unusual, or favourite finding emerging from your research?

It's hard to pick one but I think one of the most significant and inspiring take-aways of this research for me were the runners themselves. Their desire and efforts to run – to exercise

their basic right to move in their cities which, of course, hinges upon access to a whole host of other rights (a right to space, to urban infrastructure, to public transport, to time) which are obstructed or denied to them, but that even so, they move, they innovate, and come together to find ways to exercise their basic rights to move in their cities, on the run, together. It's a fantastically subtle and creative strategy that reveals the politics of everyday life and the power and transformative potential of ordinary movement in action.

Do you run?

Yes, I love running though I'm not running as much or as regularly as I should these days. I was an avid parkrunner before Covid hit but am happy running solo too. I prefer slightly longer distances at an easier pace – 10ks to half-marathon distances (my knees don't cope very well with longer distances!). Trail runs are ideal! I also love going for runs in towns or cities I'm visiting for the first time, even for short trips. It's such a fun way to discover a place and feel grounded at the same time.

Where can I find out more?

You can find me on Twitter [@unamcgahern](https://twitter.com/unamcgahern) or on the Newcastle University webpage here: <https://www.ncl.ac.uk/gps/staff/profile/unamcgahern.html>

If you'd like to read my paper on running in Jerusalem you can find it here:

[McGahern, Una. 2019. 'Making Space on the Run: Exercising the Right to Move in Jerusalem', *Mobilities* 14 \(6\): 890-905](#)



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