Health & Place (xxxx) xxxx–xxxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Health & Place

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/healthplace

How 'social' is recreational running? Findings from a qualitative study in London and implications for public health promotion

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Running
exercise
Qualitative research
Public health
Practice
Sociality

ABSTRACT

Recreational running is increasingly widespread and could therefore be seen as the obvious target for those hoping to encourage greater public health through exercise. Existing qualitative research on this topic has, however, tended to focus on groups of highly committed runners. It is accordingly unclear whether their findings can be extrapolated to the much larger population of comparatively casual runners. This existing work has also tended to emphasise the social nature of the activity in particular ways. Whilst much recreational running happens alone, most commonly these studies have centred on the establishment of shared identities and group subcultures. Drawing on a study involving accompanied runs and interviews with recreational runners who do not belong to running clubs in London, this paper presents an alternative account. These respondents were relatively uninterested in the idea of proper running technique, ambivalent about the presence of others when running, and reticent about being pulled into a more committed collective practice. In view of how these more casual runners may be of particular interest to public health promoters, this finding suggests future campaigns might do well not to focus too greatly on the potential enjoyments of running community membership and start instead with a different set of social dynamics.

1. Introduction

This article explores whether and how we can understand recreational running as an explicitly 'social' activity. It is motivated by the potential of recreational running as a public health promotion target (UK Department of Health, 2004; Haskell et al., 2007; Lee, 2014; Schnohr, 2013). Running is an accessible form of exercise because it requires very little in terms of specialist equipment, expertise and experience (England Athletics, 2013). It is also an activity that can happen in a great range of environments and may therefore be easier to fit into the lives of those who otherwise feel they lack the free time to travel to dedicated exercise environments (MINTEL, 2010; Scheerder et al., 2015a). It is also an activity that is clearly growing in popularity in both the UK (Sport England, 2015) and elsewhere (Scheerder et al., 2015b). Finally and of particular interest to this paper, unlike many sports that require the co-presence of participants, running can happen alone. Our contention is that, if the aim is to encourage its further growth, a solid understanding of how recreational running is undertaken and understood by current practitioners should logically be of help.

Our specific contribution draws on a study of how comparatively casual recreational runners in London, UK make sense of their running. More specifically, we seek to show why we might want to move beyond framings that focus on personal and group identity. Much existing in-depth research work on popular fitness practices more generally, and on running in particular, has concerned itself with how continued participation may rest on enrolling people within a discernible sub-culture of relatively keen practitioners. Yet, for the casual runners described in the present study, running has a largely instrumental orientation. That is to say, it is undertaken for the direct, individual, benefits it produces. For these described in this paper, 'doing running' doesn't require becoming a 'runner'. Yet this is not to say running is asocial, but rather to draw attention to the detail of how exactly 'the social' features in the experience. By exploring these alternative 'socialities', we argue, alternative ideas about how to engage with recreational runners are revealed. These are ideas that are potentially important to how public health practitioners might work to encourage physical fitness activities.

2. Existing qualitative research and the apparent sociality of running

Modern life for many residents of high-income countries is largely sedentary. And many studies suggest that it is becoming increasingly so (Hallal et al., 2014; Ng and Popkin, 2012). This is concerning because physical inactivity is recognised to have substantial deleterious impacts

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2016.10.003
Received 13 May 2016; Received in revised form 9 October 2016; Accepted 27 October 2016
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on both morbidity and mortality (Knight, 2012; Moore et al., 2012). One positive sign, however, has been the remarkable growth in a range of exercise practices that seek to counter this inactivity. In the UK, though cycling has also seen a significant resurgence over recent years (Sport England, 2015), chief amongst them in terms of popularity would seem to be fitness running, a trend that has also been discerned elsewhere (Spiers et al., 2015; Scheerder et al., 2015a).

In order to understand this phenomenon, one obvious starting point would be with what existing qualitative studies tell us about those who run since these in-depth methods should be better at getting under the skin of runners and revealing what it is for them to run. If we took this approach, we would see that qualitative researchers have examined running in a range of different ways (Smith, 1998; Tulle, 2007; Shipway and Holloway, 2010; Nettleton, 2013, 2015). However, there are also certain discernable commonalities to this work. Of particular interest to us in this regard is how they have explored the apparently 'social' character of running. There are two aspects to this. The first involves the presumption of running being about the enrolment of those who run into a wider group culture or subculture. The argument here is that, as they run, runners come to recognise and learn certain right ways of participating in the activity. The individual exerciser does not just run. Rather through running they become part of an identifiable social group. The second is about how running is accordingly presumed to become a key element of the self-identity of its practitioners. This identity extends beyond immediate benefits such as body tone, weight loss, and overall fitness and comes to include a more intrinsic self-identification as a runner. So, they not only come to be subsumed into a recognisable subculture of running, they also come to see themselves as runners instead of simply people who exercise through running.

This situation is what one might perhaps expect from studies of very committed runners such as those examined by Nettleton (2013, 2015). After spending time with middle-aged and elderly fell runners in northern England she shows that through their on-going engagement with the practice of running on fells (mountainous semi-wild rural areas), through individual and organised runs and races, they are involved in the creation and reproduction of a distinctive form of 'existential capital'; an experience and bodily knowing that is only available to practitioners within the fell running community. Furthermore, they have a shared respect and camaraderie that, though sometimes unspoken, is born of the pleasures and pains of undertaking fell runs. This is to extend an argument developed by Tulle (2007, 2008) in her studies of veteran runners. As with fell runners, Tulle's veterans are highly committed. Faced with the prospect of ending their athletics careers the veteran runners worked together to create a new domain of ageing activity. They created new institutions, new training practices, new events all of which were oriented towards the ageing athletic body. Also drawing on Bourdieu (1984), Tulle argues that, as with fell running, the actions of these veteran runners worked to produce a distinctive field of 'sporting capital', understood as a shared set of performance goals and training techniques; one which subverted existing systems of athletic cultural and somatic capital. To be a veteran runner was to be someone who was part of a wider community of similar runners, and someone who would judge, evaluate, and make sense of themselves in relation to this community. Allen Collinson further emphasises ideas of identification (2005; 2008; Allen Collinson and Hockey, 2007) in her autoethnographic work. A competitive distance runner of two decades standings herself, she traces how this on-going engagement became a core part of her personal identity. This is an identity that is anchored and given sense in its relation not just to her own running, but to the running of others with comparable claims on the activity at her club, at races, during training sesssions and at other events. As with Nettleton's fell runners, and Tulle's veterans, Allen Collinson is not merely someone who runs, she is a *runner*.

Moving from such committed runners to less fully absorbed runners we might expect to find rather different narratives to emerge. This, however, is not by and large the case. Shipway and colleagues (Shipway and Jones, 2008; Shipway and Holloway, 2010; Shipway et al., 2013) in a series of studies of the 'social worlds' of distance runners also stress that amongst the practitioners they interviewed running has become a central part of their identity. Looking at a broad spectrum of running club participants, they argue that running should be understood as an example of what Stebbins (1992) has called 'serious leisure'. This is to draw on some different conceptual resources to those of Nettleton, Tulle and Allen Collinson. But like them it is to frame the practice of recreational running as an activity that pulls those doing it towards a distinctive running 'career', a career that is defined through relations to others involved in running and marked by incrementally increasing levels of commitment that are recognised with reference to others. Shipway and his colleagues recognise that there are different degrees of involvement in the 'social world' of recreational runners, and that many people who run for fitness may stand on the edge of the 'distance running social world' described in their research. However, they are not much interested in exploring these individuals, assuming that in time they will either be pulled into the world of distance running – developing a clear 'career' trajectory – or they drift away from it and simply stop running. Crucially, they also perpetuate the basic assumption that there is indeed a 'social world' in evidence here in the sense that running fundamentally figures as collective. This is an argument that echoes Smith's (1998) study of runners in South Wales. Summarising his key findings, Smith suggests the distance running community can be divided up into three distinct groups; athletes, runners, and joggers with joggers being characterised by their dilettantish and un-committed (and by implication temporary) relationship to running.[1] However, these go unexamined because he too chooses to focus on those who draw these distinctions from within the running community. We do not know how 'joggers' themselves would think of their actions.

To summarise, much existing qualitative work on recreational running suggests that the activity pulls people into distinctive running subcultures. These subcultures have their own distinct characteristics, and embody distinct ways of practising running and relating to the running body. Through their experience of running and their gradual immersion into its associated subcultures individuals would seem to develop distinct runner identities. This set of conclusions is then further amplified if we also include qualitative work on semi-professional and elite runners (see Bale, 2004; Howe and Morris, 2009). Though it was not always the intent of these researchers to inform health promotion policy, were we to follow the implications of their studies through towards such practical applications, they would seem to imply that public health initiatives should focus on ways of encouraging people to become enmeshed in such exercise subcultures. There are, however, a number of reasons to be skeptical about such an endeavour.

3. Some concerns with this vision

This emphasis on the social aspects of recreational running in the studies discussed above is common in qualitative studies of fitness activities more generally such as, to name but a few, Andrews et al.

[1] This article is concerned with people who run non-professionally as a recreational activity. For simplicity's sake the article uses the terms 'runners' or 'people who run' to refer to all those who run regularly in this capacity. As is explained as the article develops the practice of running encompasses a broad range of activities; running might be undertaken in wide variety of places, involving significant variations in intensity, variations in duration, and incorporate a diverse range of purposes that may reach beyond a narrow definition of fitness. Some studies (Smith, 1998; Cook et al., 2015) have sought to draw a distinction between 'running' and 'jogging', drawing a clear categorical separation between the two. We have not found this a helpful distinction. In this study we use recreational runners to refer to all those run for some form of leisure. The terms jogging and jogger have a long and complicated entomological history which has been explored elsewhere (see Fixx 1977; Latham, 2015).

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