Exploring the Social World of Distance Runners: An Auto–Ethnographic Study

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Inception

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A Runner's Narrative

On an early fall morning, I was racing fast down a street. My level of excitement was higher than usual because I was participating in the Winnipeg Services Fire Paramedic Service Half-Marathon. I turned down the final curve and, aided by the crowd roaring all around me, with an extra burst of momentum, I crossed the finish line. With the race over, and my body exhausted and sore all over, it seemed an opportune time to think about myself as a runner within the community that I have become a part of. I asked myself: "Why do I continue to do this?" And, looking around at the other agonized runners finishing the race: "Why do others do the same?" More specifically, I wanted to understand how social relations are formed between the individual and other runners and how the self and community are related. These thoughts motivated me to begin an ethnographic study on social running groups.

My personal history as a runner weighed heavily on my decision to focus my ethnography on runners, and the details shed light on the approach I took. I started running six years ago after a few friends began running and entering events. It was not easy at first, as I encountered failure in my training. Eventually, I found enough confidence to enter the 21-kilometre half marathon event at the 2011

Manitoba Marathon. My discipline and training resulted in an above average finishing time. The following year, I entered the 42-kilometre full marathon at the same event. This time, it was a whole different experience: I finished, but hurt myself in the process. Clearly, I was not ready. Learning from these mistakes, I trained and prepared for the next year. In 2013, I returned to the full marathon event at the Manitoba Marathon and finished 32 minutes ahead of my previous finish time. I finally understood the importance of training and self-discipline. Although I learned these lessons about individual perseverance, I soon found out there was more about running that I still needed to know. The one constant in my training was running by myself, and that aspect was about to change.

The following ethnographic study examines a cohort of distance runners ranging in age, from 25 to 70, who meet and train out of City Park Runners. I ran with the group over three outings and observed various social interactions. This data, along with information compiled from several interviews, allowed for the exploration of the social relationship between the construction of a runner's identity and the community in which they participate. As an experienced runner, I had the advantage of already being able to run long distances. This factor made it easier for me to enter the group and keep up with the experienced runners. Furthermore, I entered the study already in the position of an experienced runner with the situated knowledge of the runners' language and other characteristics unique to the sub-culture. However, I was new to the idea of running with others in a group setting since it is much smaller than an event. For this reason, I was able to distance myself from the group while I conducted my observations, and I also experienced the social aspects of running with others for the first time.

Methodology

Symbolic Interaction

My research examines how runners construct and maintain a sense of self while also contributing to a larger communal identity. This essay considers this question by exploring the influence of different social relations and interactions in the construction of self and group. It does so by employing symbolic interactionism as an interpretative perspective. This approach, as argued by Collinson and Hockey (2007), emphasizes the social process of identity formation developed through interaction between social actors (p. 383). With respect to a runner's conception of identity, symbolic interactionism provides a conceptual tool to interpret the identities runners achieve as participants alongside the strong social bonds they develop in forming a community. As a theoretical tool employed ethnographically, symbolic interactionism allows for the identification of the salient features that comprise identity formation.

Auto-ethnography and Participant Observation

In order to conduct an in-depth examination of the subculture of social running groups, an auto-ethnographic approach was selected as the most appropriate method in recording and analyzing subjective participation. According to Wolcott (2008), auto-ethnography is carried out from within the participant group with an attempt to recreate the view those under study hold for themselves (p. 211). In practice, this method combined the views and opinions of the runners with my personal experience gained within the field. However, since I conducted this research through participant observation, I am also within the cultural setting under study. As I was studying those around me, I was also observing my own feelings towards the group and community.

My position in relation to the group was both as an outsider and an insider. This meant that as a participant observer, I could engage in

running culture through personal experience and focus on the events as they occurred. Typically, observations were made and then complemented with outside material pertaining to the subject. In this manner, I was able to escape my personal standpoint and practice a certain level of objectivity, while being subjective in my interpretations, since I had the intention of eliminating any biases while gathering and analyzing data. Therefore, I was partially immersed in the culture while maintaining a balanced and subjective voice in creating a narrative from my field notes.

Field Work

In conducting and interpreting my data, I practiced a form of reflexivity presented by Paul Willis as "emphasizing the importance of maintaining a sense of the investigator's history, subjectivity and theoretical positioning as a vital resource for the understanding of, and respect for, those under the study" (2000, p. 113). Willis's notion of reflexivity enhanced my fieldwork into the social activity of running and the role it plays in the lives of the people I was studying, while at the same time underscored my role as researcher. Using reflexivity, I provided a basis for the type of fieldwork required to record and interpret the social interactions and other visible or nonvisible markers comprising a runner's identity.

My observations were recorded after I would finish running with the group. Interviews were conducted to compliment my direct involvement with the group and the informants under study. Semi-structured interviews, typically in the form of casual conversations, were also held during the runs. These were used to build a rapport with my informants and were recorded afterward through email correspondence. Ron Kaethler, Tracy Whalen, and Krystee Van Den Bosch were key informants who together comprised a major source of information. By excluding other runners in the group, I was able to spend more time compiling detailed field work in other areas. However, comments from

other participants during my time running with the group formed a part of my observations while conducting field work.

A unique aspect of my research relates to the construction of an ethnographic field. As defined by Madden (2010, pp. 38–39) an ethnographic field allows for the ethnographer to examine the socialization of a portion of space by creating a socially or geographically mapped area inhabited by the study group. One field, the City Park Runners store, is a social space constructed to represent the runners' community, a space providing the proper equipment and meeting place for interaction to occur. The other fields within my research are the running routes, which are both physical paths through the city and socio-spatial constructions created within the subculture through the act of running in groups. These areas are not only ethnographically constructed by me but are also socially constructed by the runners themselves.

The Study

City Park Runners

City Park Runners is located at 2091 Portage Avenue. It is a store that supplies runners with all their needs such as shoes, shirts, and tights. The business is locally-owned and also committed to providing support for local charities and organizations. Running gels of various flavours (chocolate, grape, orange) are also present, providing the user with a bit more energy when ingested. A treadmill is also available for anyone who wants to practice running in a pair of shoes before they purchase them. The staff will gladly help anyone who attempts to use the device. The store also has pamphlets on how to avoid injury and where to seek help if injured, and other information on upcoming events. One pamphlet lists training clinics offered during select evenings. A dozen or so running magazines are also on display representing the reach of the culture spreading across the country and globe.

The store is where most runners start constructing their identity through the support of various running gear and through participation in numerous running clinics and events. A running store, as described by Altheide and Pfuhl (1980, p. 134), is the environment where a person is transformed through socialization into a social actor within the running world, where they subsequently build an identity through participation. City Park Runners grants new members the proper tools that are essential in building this identity. For experienced runners, identity is maintained by purchasing proper footwear and other clothes to replace or update old equipment. Running shoes tend to degrade because of the amount of mileage they experience. As a past customer, I have bought numerous articles of running clothing and shoes. Just like the runners in my study, over the years, I have constructed an identity and maintained it through social interaction with the store. For that matter, I have manifested an identity through the continued purchasing of new running gear.

The staff at the store is important to the construction of a runner's identity within the community. Erick Oland, the owner of the store, and Krystee Van Den Bosch, an employee, are the people I interacted with. They are both knowledgeable and friendly in helping their customers for running advice or for developing a training program. When I bought a pair Brooks shoes, Krystee helped me by providing insight and advice. I was in need of a pair because of excessive degradation from running. We were able to bond over our shared knowledge of running. Moreover, I was able to understand the terminology Krystee used to better explain my selection of running shoes. In relation to my experience, Krystee explained how she is able to communicate with runners of all experience levels by inquiring into their running careers, and not just relying on her own knowledge. She builds a rapport with each customer who comes into the store. In this manner, runners of all experience levels can buy the appropriate running shoes to meet their specific needs.

The store has a running group that meets Thursdays and Saturdays. These dates are maintained through the individual participation of the runners, their enthusiasm for the sport, and the group act of being together. Routes are constructed and agreed upon through the runners' involvement. Runners can go the full distance or turn at various points during the course, creating their own unique paths tailored to their own strengths and weaknesses. The key here is self-improvement and not to race or become better than your fellow runners, although no one is stopping you if that is your goal. If you cannot run the whole way you are encouraged to modify the route. Avoiding injury is important when running these routes. The group wants everyone to come back for a return visit. Over the course of this study, I ran with the group over three outings, making many key observations into the social construction of the runner's identity within the community that they partake in shaping. I have organized these into specific themes.

Benefits of Running

In my past experiences, I have come to realize that the benefits of running extend from aspects of physical health into features of mental health. I believe that this is due to a stronger connection that is established to one's self and place in society which is then mediated through participation within running groups. For many individuals, the act of running "is perceived as a contributor to significant changes in attitudes toward self, most commonly in terms of a newly 'discovered' situational self but sometimes in terms of one's substantial self, i.e., the totality of self-evaluation" (Altheide et al. 1980, pp. 131–132). Based on my ethnographic interviews, runners also run to increase their self-image of themselves and return to their routes to maintain that image. Ron Kaethler, a runner of ten years, started running to improve his cardiovascular health and now says it has also helped him feel more relaxed and less stressed. Others, such as Krystee, started running to quit smoking. In the end, she reports, "eventually[,] running won out." In addition to the activity's physical attributes, Krystee also runs to deal with some mental health issues she has struggled with in the past,

remarking how running is one "of the elements that keeps [her] balanced and on track—it's medicine for [her] spirit." As shown in Ron and Krystee's accounts, an increase in general wellbeing is strengthened and maintained through the act of running, becoming the social cure needed to improve the body and the mind.

Safety

Along with health aspects, another positive aspect of running in a social group is the safety that it brings. Running together allows the runners to become one community able to look out for its members. Runners are less harassed when together and may be able to run in areas or certain hours of the day they normally would not. According to Hockey and Collinson, when in public, the identity of a runner changes into that of an 'open person' who may be subjected to harassment and, in some occasions, assault (2006, p. 77). However, in my observations I did not witness any negative public reactions. Instead, at several occasions during the study, we were greeted by waves and smiles. In the past I have even witnessed the occasional thumbs up. Nonetheless, it is important to note that men and women experience different social interactions with the public. While running, a few women shared brief stories of being 'cat called' and indicated that these instances are almost eliminated when with others. Therefore, running in groups blocks unwanted attention from bystanders by creating a safe space for the participants.

Safety is a concern during the cold and icy winter months in Winnipeg. Temperatures can drop to minus 40 degrees; it is dark out in the evenings, and roads can be covered in barely visible ice. Tracy Whalen, an experienced runner of three years, recalled running behind a fellow runner and having to trace her exact footsteps for ten miles in order to avoid slipping or falling. I witnessed a similar interaction when I was out with the group one morning. Tracy, and a few other runners and I ran behind people who, from time to time, were avoiding the occasional path of ice. Shouts of 'ice' and 'watch out' also helped that cold

Saturday morning. Generally, runners feel safe with others when the surface conditions are not ideal because runners watch out for each other. On a dark evening in the woods of Assiniboine Park, I witnessed one runner quickly grab another as he slipped on a patch of ice. The monitoring of each other's space fosters a safe atmosphere during these dark cold months.

Injury

Injury disrupts the individual identity of a runner and removes them from the group for a certain amount of time. A salient aspect of distance running confirmed by my observations is that narratives of injury constitute one of the dominant discourses (Hockey & Collinson 2006, p. 77). An injury is difficult to overcome. A runner loses a sense of connection to the group and the activity that has become a part of identity construction. Without being able to run, a runner slowly loses their sense of self as a runner, and as time goes on, it becomes increasingly difficult to get back into running shape, both physically and mentally.

When I started talking to the runners, I quickly realized that almost everyone has dealt with an injury. These stories reflected how vulnerable everyone becomes when they run. From my own experience, I know the difficulties that come with injury and having to remove oneself from the activity that has become an essential part of life. Running injuries are also hard to heal since walking is a part of daily routine. I remember having trouble even walking up a flight of stairs. Tracy shared a story of how injury removed her from the act of running and in turn affected her identity as a runner. Initially, she felt a blow to her identity and training goals. At the time, she was beginning to be known in the community as a 'strong' runner and her body was accustomed to the rigours of Tuesday/Thursday/Saturday outings with fellow runners. During this time, Tracy states more and more runners were "coming out of the woodwork" while her running friends were "continuing to train for the race [she] had hoped to run." As reflected in

Tracy's narrative, injuries remove people from the community since the runner is no longer able to participate in the action that binds them together.

Performance

The knowledge built from running specific training routes extends from the previous notion of a safe space into the enhancement of one's performance. According to Collinson, "such knowledge of routes or sections of routes often circulates informally between distance runners and may even become common knowledge—shared by members of athletic clubs generally via clubs runs" (2008, p. 46). The routes enjoyed by the social running groups are shared and run over again and again. As a result, the routes are socially constructed through group mediation because they have proven to be successful in training people. Runners are encouraged while running these routes by the camaraderie that has developed over numerous outings. The routes tend to avoid any dangerous areas to provide for a generally safe run, which in turn enhances the general wellbeing of those who run with the group.

Dress

The most visible aspect of identity construction is the runners' clothing or, in group parlance, their "gear." Outfits including shoes, tights, and shirts are identifiable markers of a runners' projected self. Runners' dress functions to mark their establishment or maintenance of self through group identification (Collinson & Hockey, 2007, p. 391). For example, Ron was easily identifiable during the annual Police Half-Marathon because he wears a Mexican luchador wrestling mask. The story of his run in the mask is shared by many runners at City Park Runners and has added some humour to the event. The fans love the mask too. Unfortunately no luchador masks were present in the runners I observed, as they were dressed in the same clothes for each outing. After a few runs, it was easy to remember who certain people were due

to specific articles of clothing. Since it was winter, people were dressed in jackets made especially for running and used tights, gloves, neck and face guards, toques and headbands to keep themselves warm. For this activity, runners need to be warm enough to run but not too warm so as to overheat. Conversations were held during the runs about various problems we have all experienced while wearing face guards and ski goggles to protect our faces. A general consensus was that although they are good for the face, they are not fun to run in. Runners enjoy maintaining a balance of aesthetic appeal and athletic improvement in their clothing.

A runner's dress also acts as a social marker, signalling to other runners or bystanders which events you have participated in. Running T-shirts or medals are awarded to runners who have participated in certain events and provide a visual image for past accomplishments. These can act as a token of talent. I know from past experiences that it is difficult to keep up with people wearing shirts marked 'Iron Man' or 'Triathlon Team.' Unfortunately, due to the weather, there were no signs of past events completed because everyone was dressed for warmth and obscuring any social markers of accomplishment. However, runners still stood out from one another through their choices in constructing a visual marker of their identity based on their selection of winter running gear. Hence, winter gear allows for a choice of multiple colours among many articles of clothing.

Language

In a similar fashion to other sub-cultures, runners employ a unique jargon, which they use to identify each other or specific experiences. These personal identities are performed regularly in the "form of identity talk, a powerful medium in the construction of personal identity" (Collinson & Hockey, 2007, p. 392). Certain words are only understood by runners because they have the past experiences to attach significance to the word. Runners call other participants 'good' and

'strong' when describing their or another's athletic prowess. 'PR' and 'PB' are abbreviated terms for personal record and personal best and are applied to finishing times on the same route and distance. Runners speak proudly of their records while also being respectful and proud of other people's times. According to Krystee, "hitting the wall," "blowing out," and "bonking out" are representative terms for struggling. These words immediately recall a past experience, good or bad.

Narratives of "hitting the wall" are common among runners. Usually, after running a long distance within an event, and after a participant has exhausted their available calories, an intense feeling of wanting to quit overtakes your body. The goal is to push through this wall and finish the race. These narratives and other unique words attached to the running sub-culture allow distance runners to construct narratives of failure and success measured by the significance attached to stories of injury and triumph. A runner constructs an identity through the exchange of these narratives with others in the community, which in turn solidifies their position as a long-distance runner.

Running Events and Community

Distance runners participate in running events throughout the calendar year. These events are usually named after the cities, organizations, or charities they represent. Most of them are non-profits who donate money to charity or various social organizations. In effect, a runner's participation in these events aids in providing funding and in increasing better opportunities for those who may be less fortunate. By running these events, a runner also reinforces and increases their confidence because they are timed, allowing for a time comparison between events. Participation provides the runner with an increase in a positive sense of self-identity while simultaneously allowing them to learn and celebrate the values and norms of the sub-culture and to connect with others within the community at large (Shipway, Holloway, & Jones, 2012, p. 273). Tracy and Krystee shared their experiences of running

events, which reflected the importance of community in building a runner's identity. Both have run the Twin Cities Marathon, and Krystee described how the large crowds were invigorating, making her smile the whole time. The fan support along the course positively affected Tracy causing her to feel "like a rock star." For Krystee, a moment near the end of the race where two other runners pushed her to finish hard with the group created a moment "that connected [those] three individual runners in unity." Even when Tracy was not running, she was standing on the sidelines cheering on the larger community. Runners, whether participating or not, play an influential part in the process of identity formation at the various running events held through the year.

Family Relations

A runner's identity when formed through the social running group has positive effects back at home with the family. The family provides an outlet of support by attaching meaning to a participant's continued decision to run, and they are also there at the finish line waiting to offer congratulations. Over time, family members come to represent some of the runners' biggest fans. Before starting the Twin Cities Marathon, Tracy remarked how her daughter, who thinks her mom talks about running too much, sent her a supportive text, wishing her luck by saying "that no matter how [her mom] did, [she] could say [she] ran a f*ckin marathon which is more than most people can say." Moreover, Tracy has run with her stepdaughter, who is a skier and athlete, in an event, and they crossed the finish line together to earn second place amongst all women participants. Families often provide extra support, adding to what the community and friends already express. I am still fond of all the memories I have of my mom waiting at the finish line even during a winter half marathon when it was minus 32. It is the familial connection that resonates with family members and is further felt in the running community who are in a way an extended family.

Conclusion

Throughout my study, I observed a great sense of community among the runners at City Park Runners. Runners strengthened their self-identity through the encouragement from other group members. Some overcame mental and physical health issues while others gained a stronger sense of self. As a community, the group can maintain social bonds through the continued act of running since everyone looks out for each other such as issues like training. Furthermore, runners also helped with personal issues since friendships were built based on a love of running. Personally, I felt welcomed each time I ran with the group. Remembering their warm attitude makes me want to go back and become a regular member, which is what I plan to do. Overall, this study provides, although within a small scope, thematic details for the self-identity constructed by individuals within the City Park Runners group.

Future Considerations

If I had to change one thing about this study, it would be to have more time. I would be able to forge relationships with other members who were complete strangers and build a rapport with more members. This would afford more data and observations for interpretation, and more themes may emerge. I may also have had the opportunity to interview a runner who became an injured person and was forced to remove themself from running the routes. Furthermore, if I had extra time, I could monitor how runners change their attitudes through the seasons. This study was done in the month of November so I was only able to monitor the first few weeks of winter. A longer study would allow for a closer monitoring of the changes in training routes and the sense of communal help in training for upcoming events.

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