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Perspectives in Public Health 2010 130: 270 originally published online 26 August 2010

DOI: 10.1177/1757913910379191

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Running free: Embracing a healthy lifestyle through distance running

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Key words

healthy lifestyles; sport and exercise; physical activity; distance running; qualitative research; serious leisure

Abstract

Sport and leisure activity contribute to both health and quality of life. There is a dearth of qualitative studies on the lived experiences of active people, so the aim of this paper is to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences of one particular group of active leisure participants, distance runners, and to highlight the associated health and well-being benefits that result from participating in this increasingly popular form of active leisure. In doing so, this paper will briefly explore the potential opportunities and implications for sport and leisure policy and provision, and highlight examples of how distance running could positively contribute towards government objectives linked to tackling obesity levels, healthy living and physical well-being. It is suggested that similar benefits also exist across other forms of physical activity, exercise and sport. Qualitative methods of enquiry were adopted to understand the nature of the social world of long distance runners through interviews and observations, which were thematically analyzed. One of the key themes emerging from the data was the desire to embrace a healthy lifestyle, which then led to the emergence of four main sub-themes. The first was linked to the importance of seeking self-esteem and confirmation through running; second, an investigation of a selection of negative aspects associated with exercise addiction; third, the need to exercise among sport and leisure participants; and finally, an understanding of the concept of the 'running body'. Cautionary notes also identified negative aspects associated with exercise and physical activity. The findings highlight the potential role that distance running can play as an easily accessible and enjoyable leisure activity, one that can help facilitate increased participation in exercise and physical activity as an integral part of an active and healthy lifestyle.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the increasing popularity of distance running, exploring the experiences of those leisure participants engaging in physical activity and healthy living. In this paper, distance running, 'jogging' and recreational walking are explained as integral positive contributors towards achieving government objectives linked to tackling obesity levels, healthy living, physical and mental health and well-being, and increased leisure participation and recreational activity.¹ This topic is all the more important for public health agencies given that millions of amateurs currently run on a regular, casual basis.² It has even been suggested that the most visible leisure activity since the 1970s has been distance running.³ From its beginnings as an elite sport, distance running has now become open to all, and this ease of accessibility has become even more noticeable in the past few years.

The public perception of running as a health-promoting activity is important in many respects and distance runners are now accepted as a significant leisure interest group in society. Exercise has increasingly been seen as an important facet of a 'healthy society', with leisure and sport providing many of the activities through which it is hoped this can be achieved.⁴ This paper suggests that qualitative studies of leisure practices like distance running, and the knowledge that underpin them, can inform our understanding of the relationship between health promotion and physical activity. From a practitioner's perspective, a better understanding of the experiences of leisure participant experiences will allow sport and leisure organizations, government departments and other leisure and health promotion stakeholders to gain further knowledge and cater to the needs and wants of their clients. The reality is that not everyone will become an

Olympic standard athlete; however, a significant percentage of the general public could participate in activities such as recreational walking or running, at whatever level of ability, as a form of regular physical activity.

Major city marathons and international multi-day running events have changed the perception of distance running among the general public, and have led to an increase in demand for running-related leisure activity.⁵ For participants, distance running and participation in running events is an activity for ordinary but determined people. In fact, it was Bale who advocated that running is an almost spiritual, sensual and poetic experience which can enhance the participant's quality of life.⁶ Therefore, the relevance of this research lies in the observation that the health of the nation is an increasingly important issue in society and an area of interest to both leisure-based industry practitioners and stakeholders tasked with implementing successive government physical activity and healthy lifestyle initiatives. The contention here is that distance running, as a form of physical activity, can make a positive contribution towards addressing some of these issues.

OVERVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE AND THEORY

Sport and leisure roles contribute to health and to quality of life.³ Therefore, understanding the underlying experiences of the commitment to these roles continues to gain in importance. It is not immediately obvious why anyone would run on a regular basis, yet each year, participation in registered running events continues to increase.² The positive benefits of running have been indicated by Martinsen and Morgan⁷ who identified that there is sufficient evidence to support exercise as an antidepressant for many people. Both Raglin⁸ and Morris and Salmon⁹ have indicated that acute vigorous exercise can lead to reduction in anxiety, and that runners experience a decreased negative mood and an increased positive mood just after a run. However, in contrast, Leedy¹⁰ emphasizes the negative impacts of running that can result in negative

addiction, whereby distance runners use this regular form of physical activity to help them cope with daily stresses, just as some people turn to alcohol or drugs. It is suggested that some distance runners also experience withdrawal when they are unable to run.¹¹ In contrast, Nash¹² indicates that distance running and participation in running events is an eventful and rewarding experience for every runner, regardless of age, gender or level of ability. These running events are social gatherings. Nash argues that distance running provides a dual function – it promotes a person's health and also gives meaning to their lives. In modern society leisure time is compromised in busy lives, and running or walking can provide a simple way to participate in exercise or activities that can promote health. Several of the authors mentioned above advocate distance running and recreational walking as simple and healthy antidotes for the problems of everyday life.

Biddle and Mutrie,¹³ to name but one of many significant studies, emphasize the growing number of people who have sedentary jobs, do little work around the house or garden, and are largely sedentary in their leisure time. They argue that there is a growing recognition by health and medical authorities worldwide that exercise, running being one example, is critical to health and well-being. This has led to worldwide national policies and strategies to promote exercise among the general public. The potential of physical activity and exercise to contribute towards government activity targets has received much attention in the literature, where it has been argued that sport and leisure activities can contribute towards the health and well-being of the nation.¹

RESEARCH METHODS

Research for this paper was undertaken over a two-year period as part of a broader research project, using a variety of flexible qualitative methods of enquiry, most notably observation, participant observation and life history interviews. The sample comprised 25 distance runners: eight female and 17 male, age range 25–68. The key informants had all

participated in distance running for a minimum of five years, over distances ranging from 5km to the marathon event, and trained a minimum of five times a week. Stebbins¹⁴ would describe these runners as 'serious leisure' participants. As such, they reflect a rather distinct section of the distance running community, although it is suggested that the findings still have relevance and applicability to those who participate in distance running less often. Therefore, it is acknowledged that the ability to generalize outside this quite specific sample is limited; however, it is suggested that many of the ideas can be transferred to different sport and leisure samples and sites.

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, participant observation and observational studies. Participant observation focused on physical feelings, thoughts, emotions and emotional recall to try to understand the experience.¹⁵ This close engagement through regular in-depth interviewing permitted access to informants' feelings and perceptions.¹⁶ Extensive field notes were taken and subsequent data were coded, both in terms of open and axial coding, but also in terms of what Stebbins refers to as the six 'W's' (who, what, whom, when, where and – most importantly – why).^{17,18} Data were not quantified at any stage as the intention was to explore the issues of 'why' and 'how'. This methodological approach led to a personal, first-hand enquiry into the lived experience of the distance runners as leisure participants, and as such represented an interpretive approach rather than a more scientific or positivist stance. The areas then explored were those that seemed most important for the participants. In terms of validity, these findings reflect the aim of the study and its context: to develop an understanding of the experiences of distance runners, and reflect and represent the ideas and reality of the participants.

RESULTS

The findings in this paper reveal that the primary reason for participating in distance running as a leisure activity is related to health benefits. Linked to this,

Figure 1

A desire for a healthy lifestyle



four main sub-themes emerged (Figure 1), which are discussed below. In addition, other key themes such as the role of training and preparation, the importance of identity, and social aspects linked to distance running were identified. These areas, while not explored here, are documented in previously published studies outside the domain of public health.⁵

THE NEED TO EXERCISE

The participants interviewed for this study felt a strong and determined need to run on a daily basis and several struggled to adjust to everyday living without running. For some, not running presented challenges in maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Running was their route to maintaining a slim body form, and for Louise K, as for many others, an initial motivation to run was related to her lifestyle:

'I wanted to continue to eat and drink whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted. Exercise seemed a logical answer. My friends went on fad diets, but always ended up where they

started. I became convinced that exercise was the only genuine answer.'

Running provides the opportunity to enjoy the natural environment and is a means of escape from worry and anxiety. As Bale⁶ suggests, it operates on a wide range of levels – spirit, mind, body and soul.⁶ Emma G, for example, noted:

'A close relative of mine recently experienced a stress-related breakdown linked to work. Her sanctuary came from running – she could escape and reflect, away from everyday pressures.'

This observation indicates the desire among many participants for a healthy lifestyle, both in terms of mental and physical health. Participants indicated that running brought them more in touch with their own body, and they often therefore appreciated their body form for what it does rather than just what it looks like. Weight loss and weight control was an important motivator for several participants, both as an entry point into the distance running community and as a

stimulant to maintain their training routines. Colin C openly admitted that he had not weighed himself for over a decade for the simple reason that he ran almost every day and did not feel the need to watch his weight. Gavin D was typical in his account of running and weight control:

'Colleagues at work ask me when I'm going to start putting on some weight, and are envious because I'm so slim. I might be thin, but a period of inactivity will certainly pile the pounds back on, and I don't particularly want that.'

Staying healthy was an important motivation for Dennis M, following a bout of illness:

'In 1996 I was admitted to hospital with chest pains after a suspected heart attack. I realized that things had to change. I had an extremely poor diet and sedentary lifestyle. I decided to give myself a new start and began walking, and then running. It has truly changed my life, as I literally ran myself out of obesity.'

Linked to the theme of healthy lifestyles, the findings illustrated that distance running provides a coping mechanism that can contribute towards health, adaptability and stress resistance. Sharkey and Gaskill¹⁹ indicate that physical activity and active lifestyles have complementary themes that support and surround them, including simplicity, individual responsibility and challenge. In the context of this study, distance running provided coping strategies to help runners through the lows of everyday life, to regain confidence and establish new running goals. While family and friends can act as sources of support, distance running can provide discipline, challenge and a time for reflection. The findings highlight that distance running is not solely for the elite few performing at Olympic standards, but it is an activity that is accessible to every healthy person. It can assist with lowering weight, reducing the stress of daily life, reinvigorating and re-energizing, and, as Shipway and Jones⁵ suggest,

can provide participants with a strong sense of identity, community and belonging. The social aspects of distance running were important for many participants and while social identity, an integral theme of this two-year study, is only briefly mentioned here, it has wider relevance in the provision of sport and leisure activities.⁵

Despite the overwhelming positive comments on the benefits of running, the findings also revealed some negative aspects, one being an apparent addiction to running by participants, which often resulted in detrimental impacts on both their running performance and other aspects of daily life.

AN ADDICTION TO RUNNING

For many regular participants, distance running can be an addictive leisure activity.²⁰ This element of addiction can take on both positive and negative aspects, and bring both joy and despair. The emerging data from this study illustrated a darker side to running and supported the thoughts of Buckworth and Dishman²¹ who suggest that it is important to consider that there can be risks to mental health or social adjustment associated with extreme dedication to exercise or preoccupation with fitness. Within the distance running community, participants regularly developed an unhealthy obsession with achieving their running goals and targets, perhaps to the long-term detriment of their healthy body. Training for marathons in particular appeared to also lay the foundation for self-destructive behaviour and injury. Running can sometimes lead to the risk of disturbed mood among participants who often become jaded and tired from over-training, which can occasionally lead to increased tension, fatigue, appetite loss, insomnia and lower performance levels. The findings also encountered examples of what Buckworth and Dishman²¹ term 'compulsive exercise' or 'exercise dependence'. Some participants continued to exercise despite significant injury and experienced feelings of guilt and anxiety when prevented from running. Trevor G illustrated the importance of running:

'I have withdrawal symptoms if I don't get my run in. I'll be sitting at home, and actually feel guilty about not running. Inevitably, I will succumb to this guilt, and go for a run.'

It was McCarville²² who questioned at what point a healthy activity becomes self-destructive; when participants give themselves permission to stop; when succumbing to pain is permissible and when is it regrettable; and questioning the difference between determination and self-destruction. Similarly, Bryan²³ refers to the dark side of commitment, and discusses at what stage dedication to an activity like running will become an obsession. McCarville²² asks how participants can resist being drawn into extreme activity patterns and what happens to participants who fail in their attempt to complete distance running events such as a marathon. An observation by Alana W illustrates some of these negative aspects within distance running and the result of failure on her emotional well-being:

'I had to drop out of a marathon at half way. All my family and friends knew I was running, and I was raising money for charity, and I had to spend the next few weeks explaining how and why I didn't finish. I haven't entered a marathon since, and find it hard to consider doing another one, knowing that I failed to finish.'

In contrast, several runners used the very act of running to help them deal with problems in their everyday lives, often forgetting about these troubles while exercising. This high level of commitment to running can also lead to obsession with training, preparation, diet and nutrition, and other aspects of distance running. Martinsen and Morgan⁷ suggest that there is sufficient evidence to support exercise as an antidepressant, while Morris and Salmon⁸ determined that distance runners experience a decreased negative mood and an increased positive mood just after a run, and Raglin⁹ concludes that intense exercise can reduce levels of anxiety. One female runner interviewed suffered

from depression but now found solace in her running:

'I had very little self-worth, but after completing the marathon I felt much better. I'm still on the road to recovery, but the doctors seem to think that the running is playing a major positive part in my recovery.'

According to Bamber et al.,²⁴ the characteristics of an unhealthy preoccupation with exercise include the experience of withdrawal symptoms on cessation of exercise, disturbed psychological functioning, and interference with relationships. What emerged from this study were examples of runners who would go to extreme lengths to ensure that they were able to run on a regular basis, similar to the findings of Carmack and Martens.²⁵ Steve L revealed that he would often train at 10pm to ensure that he stuck to a designed training programme. Similarly to the findings of Bamber et al.,²⁴ this study observed some runners who appeared to have an all-consuming obsession with their training that transcended the considerations of their work and social life. For some, distance running was indeed the most salient activity in their life, sometimes disrupting personal relationships.

Morgan¹¹ gave evidence of runners who ignored stress fractures or other injuries, continuing to run despite medical advice to rest. In the present study, Robert G and Gavin D both openly admitted that at the time of interview they were running with quite severe injuries but did not feel able or willing to rest. There is a growing concern that many runners may fall into this 'training trap' and exercise too much. The consequences of this would appear to be a reversal of the positive benefits, with feelings of fatigue, muscle soreness and what Morgan¹¹ describes as negative psychological sequelae. There appears to be a contrast between the positive benefits of running, such as physical well-being, weight reduction and positive mood, and the negative aspects that were experienced by participants when a training run was missed, including guilt,

decreased energy levels and depression. In summary, distance running can provide a complex mix of positive and negative addiction qualities.

SEEKING SELF-ESTEEM AND CONFIRMATION

Distance running can be a useful method for mood control, providing a calming and relaxing activity to assist with dealing with some of the more stressful challenges of everyday life.²⁰ From a public health perspective, the strongest evidence for the positive effects of exercise on mental health is for self-esteem.²⁶ Leisure participants who have experienced running on a frequent basis will be aware of the post-run inner glow which often negates bad feelings and provides renewed enthusiasm to deal with the trials and tribulations of everyday life. Alison P found running provided feelings similar to euphoria and could only speculate that it must be the rhythmic motion that rids her of stress and anxiety. Trevor G observed:

'I find running to be a great distracter and a way of simply "thinking about nothing", and taking time out of my daily grind.'

Mark S found solace in running when he was made redundant from his job 10 years ago:

'I was down and depressed. I was on the dole and couldn't see any light at the end of the tunnel. I'm not claiming that running solved all my problems, but what I do know, is that my one-hour, daily run certainly helped take my mind off work issues.'

One runner claimed that she 'felt at peace' when running. Emma G indicated that if she could stay focused in a race and demonstrate persistence, then this resilience could be replicated when dealing with adversity in other areas of life. Sandra W suggested that running helped her to stay happy and her statement below was typical of many of those interviewed:

'I used to get a bit fed up at times, which I guess happens to us all.

However, when you experience the euphoria of completing a marathon or beating a close competitor in a local road race, you get this incredible natural high.'

One quite poignant story was told by Emma G:

'Having my second child was a real struggle for me, as I lost perspective. All my dark feelings and emotions were buried and hidden, and I was very depressed. One day, I decided to do something about it – I put on my running shoes again.'

The effects of positive self-esteem was a recurring theme emerging from the data, mostly involving a positive assessment of oneself rather than negative self-esteem, which has the potential to lead to depressed mood and negative behaviour.²¹ The negative aspects associated with distance running tended to occur when participants were unable to compete due to injury. Buckworth and Dishman²¹ suggest that there is good evidence that behaviour can affect self-esteem. For example, distance runners in this study tended to make more positive judgements and reflections on their experiences at running events and about the self after successfully completing a difficult task, such as finishing a marathon.⁵

Following on from the last quote, and associated with the concept of self-esteem, Emma G continued explaining how whenever she was feeling down, she went for a run and experienced the 'runner's high', returning home feeling invigorated by what she described as 'free therapy'. It is suggested by Noakes²⁷ and many others that running can produce feel-good chemicals and endorphins that are linked to areas of the brain associated with emotions.²⁷ Running can provide exercise-induced euphoria and Ewan F revealed these emotions on a regular basis during long runs:

'During my long runs, or intense training sessions, I'm "buzzing". I'm not sure if it's all in my head, and it could be more about actually completing the event rather than the effort I put in to do it.'

Results suggest that distance running is a prime way of experiencing confirmation, praise or recognition, and the act of distance running is an ideal vehicle for identity reinforcement. Running success is immediately recognizable and can be understood, where the standards of achievement can be seen by participants, family, work colleagues and other audiences. The distance running social world allows the recognition of significant achievement (be it completing a long run, undertaking a high-intensity training session or finishing a marathon) and with this recognition comes the development and reinforcement of a running identity.

UNDERSTANDING THE RUNNING BODY

The physical self, especially the physical body and the way in which the body is valued and judged, is an important part of society in general and the development of a 'running body' can have a significant impact on self-worth and self-esteem. Becoming a runner entails body work, whereby participants subject themselves to a regular, comprehensive training regime.²⁸ It is suggested that this is particularly pertinent in societies in which appearance is highly valued. For several participants, an important element of running was to assist with enhancing their own physical capital and attractiveness, in what amounted to an investment in their body. Runners often enter what Shilling²⁹ describes as a 'body project' to reshape both the body and the individual identity. Pauline F's comments were typical:

'I'm happier with my body since I have been running. OK, so I'm not particularly thin, but I feel comfortable and confident to wear clothes that I wouldn't have worn a few years back. This confidence also transfers across to when I go out in public, and I love it when friends comment on how well I look.'

Allen Collinson and Hockey³⁰ make reference to body image and running identity, establishing the link between functionality and aesthetics. They

mention the enjoyment that comes from the strength and light muscularity of the running body, the cardiovascular conditioning, the lightness afforded by a relatively lean body, and benefiting from what they term a certain physical capital that is the prestige that flows from 'bodily investments'. For some runners in this study, their bodies appeared to become what Smith³¹ refers to as projects to be worked at through conscious management, maintenance and moulding. The findings demonstrated that some participants linked their running with youthful appearance, but far more made a link to body weight. The majority took a simplistic approach to their running bodies, suggesting that the lighter they were, the less weight they had to carry while training or competing. Robin A recalled arriving at one club member's house prior to a training run and overhearing one of the neighbours comment: 'Oh my God, it's an invasion of the skinny people!' Tivers suggests that the cult of the body-perfect, or, at least, the body-more-acceptable, is very much at the root of motivations towards running as a leisure activity.³²

Much that counts as health and fitness is linked to bodily aesthetics.³³ Abbas⁴ draws on the work of Bourdieu³⁴ and argues that the slim and muscular working body is developed through engaging in activities like distance running, and suggests that the 'bodily capital' gained through leisure also has currency in the workplace. Abbas⁴ notes that a slender and increasingly muscular body features on the front cover of most running magazines, perhaps once again reinforcing the cult of the body-perfect to which Tivers refers.³² Ewan F found that the more often he ran, the better he felt mentally and he was able to accept his body for what it really was:

'I learned to love my body for what it could do for me. I started to see that my body and well-being was improving, and I was even starting to lose weight.'

The slim running body contrasts with the increasingly sedentary and overweight

society in which we live.¹ The thin and fit running body carries a symbolic value, representing a group of leisure participants who are dedicated, controlled, disciplined, culturally and economically invested in health and are self-responsible.³⁵

CONCLUSION

The key theme of this paper was linked to the participants' desire for a healthy lifestyle. This qualitative study of the experiences of distance runners has established that distance running provides a complex mix of both positive and negative experiences. The addictive qualities of leisure and sport participation were noted, along with the potential for distance running as a leisure activity to lay the foundations for self-destructive behaviour. In contrast, the paper also offers a view that distance running can provide an outlet for dealing with everyday problems and enhancing the self-esteem of the active leisure participant. A desire to embrace a healthy lifestyle and the subsequent sense of physical health and well-being were frequently observed. Similarly, this paper offers an insight into how distance running has the potential to play a role in supporting and developing healthy lifestyles, and helping achieve government targets on physical activity and exercise. In line with the findings of Pelican et al.,³⁶ from a public health perspective, individuals need to feel competent to adopt and maintain a healthy lifestyle, and they need to feel worthy of living it.

While only selected quotes have been included for illustrative purposes, most others are similar, and those used form a pattern among running participants. This paper suggests that distance running provides one potential route to a healthy lifestyle. However, on a cautionary note, the greatest public health challenge that requires attention, and is a possible limitation of this study's findings, is how to encourage and support the majority of the population, which is either sedentary or not achieving the suggested guidance for activity levels, to become more

active. It is in this domain that further research is required among the wider population.

Despite this limitation, it is still suggested that these findings do have relevance to leisure policy providers and practitioners responsible for the delivery of national policy associated with government health objectives linked to physical activity, exercise and health promotion. Activities such as running have the potential to contribute towards the development of interventions to promote improved physical and psychological well-being, healthy ageing and the reduction of obesity, if given higher priority within public and private sector leisure provision. First, through an exploration of distance running experiences, these findings illustrate there are specific benefits, both mental and physical, of distance running on a regular basis. Second, it is suggested that in parallel with walking activities, there is real value in local governments and public sector organizations promoting and facilitating both walking and distance running as a part of an active life, through practical measures such as providing pathways within local communities. This could also be facilitated through supporting the social networks that emerge around local running events, developing closer links with distance running clubs, and also through educational programmes concerned with wellness initiatives and the health benefits of exercise and physical activity.²⁰ These proposed initiatives could also be extended to urban towns and cities that, it could be argued, have a responsibility to provide access to leisure opportunities such as walking paths or cycle lanes. To conclude, these findings suggest that the resulting benefits of promoting and supporting distance running may help relieve the stress and challenges that we experience in modern society, and also assist with government targets of increasing physical activity and exercise among all sections of society, irrespective of social class, race or gender.

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HACCP in Practice

This course will concentrate on the practical application of HACCP in catering, manufacturing and retail situations, enabling delegates to move from a theoretical knowledge of HACCP to a full, practical understanding.



For more information about available dates, please contact the Conference and Events Officer on 020 3177 1600 or events@rsph.org.uk

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