# Organisations, practices, actors, and events: Exploring inside the distance running social world

Richard Shipway, Immy Holloway and Ian Jones

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# Organisations, practices, actors, and events: Exploring inside the distance running social world

**Richard Shipway**
Bournemouth University, UK

**Immy Holloway**
Bournemouth University, UK

**Ian Jones**
Bournemouth University, UK

## Abstract

This paper revisits Unruh's notions of social worlds, exploring the organisations, practices, events and actors involved within the culture of distance running, as an increasingly popular leisure activity. An ethnographic research design was utilised using a combination of interviews, observation and participant observation. Data was collected over a two-year period on a weekly basis at two local distance running clubs, and also at a series of international distance running events. This study examines the distance running world from the "emic" perspective of the twenty participants involved. The key findings illustrate how the distance running social world permits both development and confirmation of a running identity and, with it, social fulfilment. In addition to the four main components of a distance running social world, this paper highlights a paradox whereby individuals follow an individual pursuit within the social world of the distance running community – highlighting that the focus is on both the individual and the social, an area which sociologists have to date not extensively analysed within the context of sport.

## Keywords

distance running, ethnography, identity, social worlds

**Corresponding author:**
Richard Shipway, School of Tourism, Bournemouth University, Talbot Campus, Poole, Dorset BH12 5BB, UK.
Email: rshipway@bournemouth.ac.uk

## Introduction

One of the characteristics of any serious leisure activity is the social world that develops over time as a consequence of sustained participation by enthusiasts in that activity (Stebbins, 2001). This paper revisits Unruh's notion of social worlds within the context of distance running, and will cover four main areas central to social world phenomena. Firstly, there will be a brief overview of some sources central to the concept of social worlds and other associated literature; secondly, the major aspects of individual involvement which characterise participation in the distance running social world are examined; thirdly, some of the structural features of social worlds which distinguish the phenomenon as an important unit of social organisation are explored; and fourthly, some implications of adopting 'a social world perspective' (Strauss, 1978) for the study of social organisation are considered within the context of distance running. It is suggested that the boundaries of this particular leisure social world are largely determined by the interaction and communication that occurs both at distance running events and within the distance running club environment, which transcend the more formal and traditional delineators of organisation (Unruh, 1980).

## The social world of the distance runner

Unruh (1980), in his historical review of the emergence of "social worlds", recounts the academic discussions about the conceptions of the phenomenon and associated imagery, highlighting that the development has travelled under many names. These include *communities within communities* (Goode, 1957) and *invisible colleges* (Crane, 1972), along with other related concepts and developments such as those of *behavio[u]r systems* (Hollingshead, 1939), *activity systems* (Irwin, 1977), *social circles* (Kadushin, 1976) and *subcultures* (Cohen, 1955). Although these writers published long ago, they produced landmark studies which are still valid today. Unruh suggests that these phenomena share important structural and interactional characteristics which unite them as an important unit of social organisation. In the context of distance running, the definition identified above is closely associated with the ideas of community and subculture, as identified by Shipway and Jones (2007).

In addition to Unruh's exploration of social worlds, there are other competing or related concepts. These include Bourdieu's (1984) notion of the social field, where he discusses the idea of "fields" as the various social and institutional arenas in which people express and reproduce their dispositions. He suggests that all human actions take place within these social fields, which are arenas for the struggle for resources. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty (1968) highlights the notion of the concrete inter-subjectively constituted life-world of immediate experience, and advocates the foundational role that perception plays in understanding the world, as well as engaging with the world.

Aligned with the ideas of community, more recent discussions on the concept of "communities of practice" suggest that people establish communities of practice to enhance performance at work and at play. They are collectives whose members interact with each other often, and for a specific purpose. Shared values give focus to their activities, for which they feel commitment and passion (Wenger, 1998). The running

community is one such group which shares a common purpose and endeavour, and its members define their identity by their association with the running world. Wenger, one of the writers who developed this concept of community of practice, initially used it when talking of organisations in business, education and government, for instance; however, here it could also apply to membership of the distance running world.

Unruh (1980: 277) describes social worlds as 'amorphous and diffuse constellations of actors, organisations, events and practices which have coalesced into spheres of interest and involvement for participants'. He also uses the term "social world" to describe 'the notion that actors, events, practices, and formal organizations can coalesce into a meaningful and interactionally important unit of social organization for participants' (1980: 271). Unruh highlighted four primary features which best capture the distinct elements and are "typical" of involvement in social worlds. The first is *voluntary involvement*. Given that entry into and departure from social worlds is relatively free, accessible and occasionally unnoticed, involvement must largely be seen as voluntary. It is acknowledged that despite there often being a voluntary departure from social worlds, this can be painful or deleterious. In the context of distance running, Allen-Collinson and Hockey (2007) highlight the challenges that participants face when forced to withdraw from that world due to injury. According to Unruh, it is often the extent to which this entry into, involvement in, and departure from a social world is voluntary which tends to set social worlds apart from other units of organisation which are more formal.

A second feature typical of social world involvement occurs as a result of the diffuse nature of such groups. This is the idea of *partial involvement*, as any social actor can only be involved in a selection of the total events which take place. A third feature is *multiple identification.* With the complexity of 21st century life, it is likely that all actors, organisations, events and practices are involved in and support multiple social worlds. The fourth "typical" feature of involvement in any social world is *mediated interaction*. In a world of Twitter, Facebook, internet forums and 24-hour television coverage, such semi-formal mediated communication has an important role in both forming and maintaining the social world (Stebbins, 2001).

In examining social worlds, to allow important distinctions to be made amongst those who are "involved" in the activities and processes, Unruh (1980) offers four social types of involvement which differentiate actors in relation to their social proximity to activities and knowledge vital to the ongoing functioning of a social world. Unruh (1979) offers a general model of participation in social worlds, which he refers to as a "trans-situational" model. Thus, participation in a social world can be viewed as a series of concentric circles: as a participant in a social world, the closer one gets to the middle the more knowledge one has about it, and the more relevant that social world becomes to one's identity. In summary:

- *Strangers* are outsiders, detached from and naive to cultural meanings of the social world. They may have a role in ensuring that the activity may take place – for example, the local government officer who will have responsibility for closing roads to allow a race to happen.
- *Tourists* are curious about the social world but are transient and temporary members, staying only as long as the social world proves entertaining or provides a diversion or profit in some form.

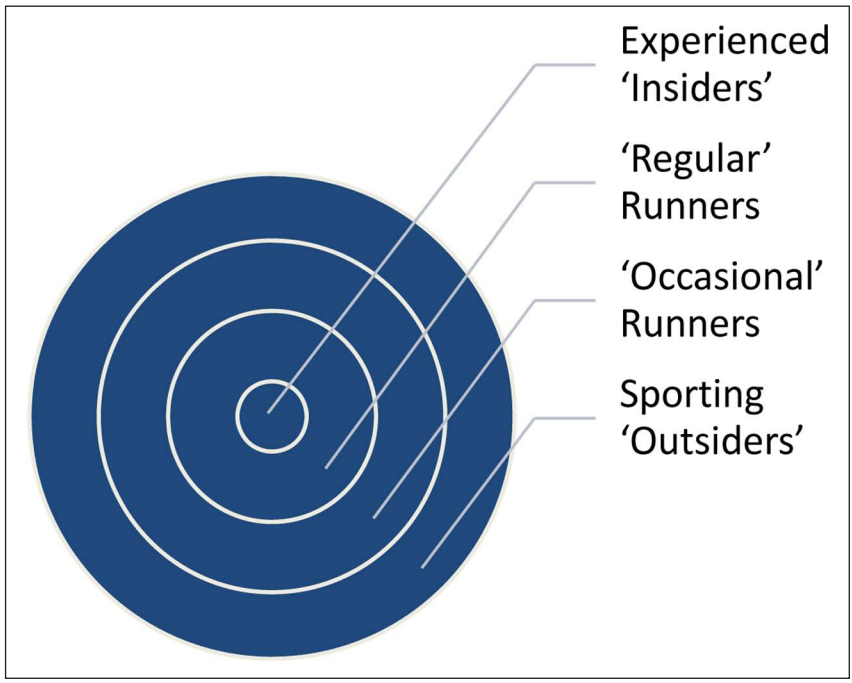


**Figure 1.** A typology of a distance running social world (Shipway, 2008).

- *Regulars* have integrated the social world into their lives; it has become a significant, valued and enduring part of their identity.
- *Insiders* know the inner workings of the social world. They are creators, developers and maintainers of the world itself, serving as the force that holds together current members and attracts new ones. They are what Stebbins (1992) would refer to as "devotees".

Unruh's world is that of "insiders", those who are deeply involved in a particular social world. Schutz (1972) adds another social dimension, expressed as the *other-orientation*, the social relationships that each individual experiences. He speaks of consociates (fellow-men [*sic*]) who directly experience the same world together. People experience the motives of other people as their own, interpret them, and think how they would act in similar situations. Schutz specifically talks of observing bodily movements, which could apply to distance runners. This links to the concept of intersubjectivity, which Schutz also discusses. Although the meaning of an action is subjective, people also have intersubjective understanding because of the meanings which they share, and the way they define situations in similar ways.

Within the context of sport, Shipway (2008) adapted Unruh's "trans-situational model" to the social world of the distance runner, and participation in distance running as a leisure activity, suggesting the "typology/model of the distance running social world" outlined in Figure 1. This model was based on a hybrid combination of the

**Table 1.** Characteristics and types of participation in a distance running social world (Shipway, 2008).

| | Outsiders | Occasional | Regulars | Insiders |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| ORIENTATION | Naiveté | Curiosity | Habituation | Identity |
| EXPERIENCES | Disorientation | Orientation | Integration | Creation |
| RELATIONSHIPS | Superficiality | Transiency | Familiarity | Intimacy |
| COMMITMENT | Detachment | Entertainment | Attachment | Recruitment |

different types of runners identified by Smith (1998) and their contrasting involvement and commitment to the activity of distance running as detailed by Shipway and Jones (2008).

The typology developed by Shipway (2008) highlighted four concentric circles which draw distance running participants closer to the inner core of the running social world, ranging from the generic sport "outsider" at one extreme to the experienced "insider" on the other.

- *Sporting "Outsiders"* have no particular interest in running specifically, but actively participate in alternative sporting activities. They are detached from and unaware of the nuances and cultural meanings of distance running.
- *"Occasional", Casual Participants* have a basic understanding of distance running, which might only be used sporadically as part of their general health and fitness. They would be comparable with Unruh's "tourists" – just passing through the activity, with limited commitment.
- *Regular, Recreational Runners* are a more regular, recreational participant, who might use the activity of running to complement other more primary forms of sport, exercise and/or physical activity. As such, as an activity, distance running is important for other reasons.
- *Experienced Long Distance Running "Insiders"* are normally a member of a distance running club and familiar with the rules and rituals of that distance running "community".

In an adaptation of Unruh's (1979) early exploration of social world types (Table 1); the characteristics and types of participation within the distance running social world were also examined by mapping the participants' degree of immersion within the distance running social world against their characteristics of running participation (Shipway, 2008). The characteristics of each type were organised around the orientations, experiences, relationships and commitments of each type within the distance running social world.

In the context of this paper, we will explore the extent to which distance runners, as members of a specific social world, are united in terms of their practices, procedures and perspectives, and examine the extent to which one of the fundamental attractions of both being a member of a distance running club and attending running events is the opportunity to pursue an interest in their chosen leisure activity, in association with others.

## Research methods

Qualitative research was chosen for this study as it focuses on the perceived reality of social actors (here, members of the running culture). The participants' point of view, and the way they make sense of their running activities and behaviour, provides the starting point of the study. Qualitative research not only centres on the inner world of participants and their individual view, but also on the social – the interaction of these participants in constructing their world together. The main purpose of this study was to explore the culture of distance runners and to examine the running world from their "emic" perspective as participants in the distance running world. As such, these runners were studied within the context of their physical and social environment, and their subculture. Sources of data collection in the study included participant observation and in-depth interviews as well as documents and research accounts from the relevant literature. Atkinson (2008) suggests that data derived from the process of participant observation at endurance events, such as marathons, are critical in developing a deeper understanding of the relational context in which endurance sports like distance running events occur, and within which sub-cultural techniques of endurance are embodied and represented. The lead researcher, a distance runner himself, actively participated in the natural setting of the running events where the interviews were conducted. A series of national and international events were observed and the research also developed within the context of two running clubs in the South of England.

Twenty participants of varying ages and both genders (twelve males and eight females between the ages of 29 and 68) were involved in this study. They had between six and 32 years of experience participating in distance running as their primary leisure activity. The participants were a heterogeneous group, and all seemed to share the particular perspectives discussed, in spite of differences in age, race and gender. Pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity.

As part of participant observation, unstructured interviews were also utilised, allowing the informants to express themselves in their own words and at their own pace. The inclusion criteria for this purposive sample included people with a minimum of five years' distance running experience at national and/or international level, who trained and ran at least five times a week and completed a minimum distance of five miles for each run.

During the analysis phase a systematic examination and interpretation of the data took place. The thematic analysis, ongoing throughout the study, involved data coding, categorisation and reduction. From this, themes were developed which seemed of significance to the informants and the social world of distance running. It must be stressed strongly, however, that our own data has primacy, rather than adopting themes *a priori*. After transcription of the interviews and ordering fieldnotes, they were coded and given appropriate labels. Codes were then collated, linked to those that were related and grouped into themes. The validity – or trustworthiness, as it is often called in qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) – was established through member checks, making sure that they truly presented the views of the people involved, and through within method triangulation (interviews and observation). The following discussion centres on the social world of the distance runner, the primary theme arising from the perspectives of the participants.

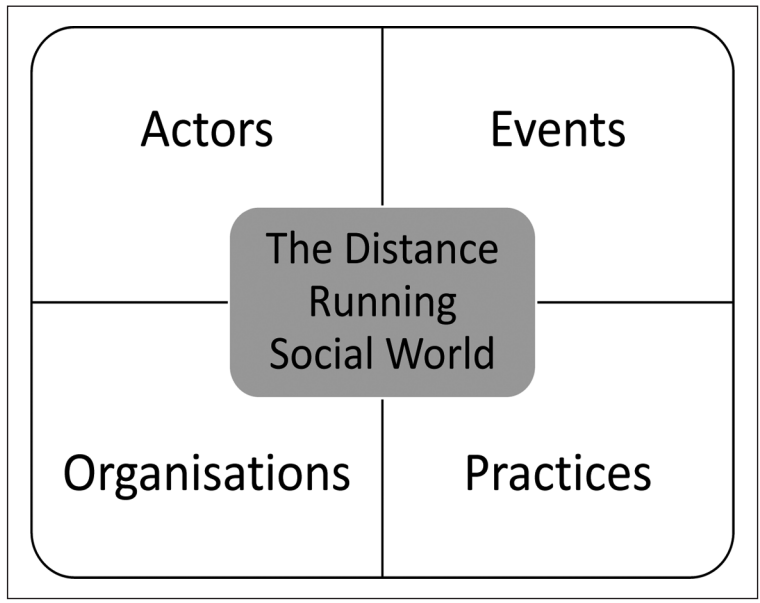


**Figure 2.** Understanding the social world of the distance runner.

## Findings

Drawing from the empirical data collected over a two-year period at both international running events and on a weekly basis within the confines of two distance running clubs, the unique character of social worlds as a unit of social organisation will now be illustrated. This analysis will be structured under four themes – identified in Figure 2 – which directly correlate with the major components of social worlds, as advocated by Unruh (1979, 1980): organisations, practices, actors, and events. The first component explored is the organisational aspects of the distance running social world.

These findings start to illustrate the important role of the running club and running event environments in fostering a sense of belonging, feelings of community and locations for the sharing of experiences. In doing so the running club environment and distance running event networks lead to both development and confirmation of a running identity and with it social fulfilment, whilst identifying the importance of taking part in exercise both on one's own and as an integral part of a social group, with the benefits that this association brings (Shipway and Jones, 2007).

## Organisational focus

The findings of this study highlight the importance of an organisational focus within distance running clubs and distance running events, suggesting that this focus (or foci) encompasses the activities and experiences which bring this particular social world

together. For many participants, the organisation, or running club, is central to the distance running experience. Developing any social identity, including within distance running, is generally more complex than just a sudden acquisition of that identity (Green and Jones, 2005), and some form of 'social training' is necessary. Results illustrate that this is often developed within the structure and organisation of the distance running club. The club is a site for social interaction, activity and learning about the activity of distance running. Whilst running is often a solo and individualistic activity, there are times when the very act of running in a group provides rewarding experiences. This is a point reinforced by Melvyn R:

> The people at our club all have different training goals during the year, but we help each other out. It's still important to have the club, especially when you start running, as it's a group of people who are on the same wavelength as me.

Mark P was typical in his assessment of the role of the club as a place to obtain knowledge and support:

> I can email people or call them to talk about my training and racing plans. The support and encouragement is great – in some ways, it acts as a safety blanket, having people that I can turn to, who are in the same position as myself.

This study has also illustrated that the distance running club can often form an extended family environment. Kara T attributes her consistent training and longevity to the group of people that she runs with, commenting:

> While the solitude of a solo run remains one of the great joys of my running, I find myself more motivated when I plug into my running club family.

In terms of organisational structures, the running club is a place where participants can meet for social interaction and to realise their distance running identity. Hogg (2001) stated that human groups lie at the heart of social life. Groups, such as distance running clubs, furnish the participant with an identity and a way of locating themselves in relation to other people. Social identity has been defined by Tajfel (1972) as the individual's knowledge that they belong to a certain social group (such as a running club), together with some emotional and value significance that is linked to that group membership. Observations suggest that distance runners display an emotional attachment to their running clubs and knowledge of the social standing of the group. They display elements of the collective self (social identity), which is associated with running club membership, group processes and intergroup behaviour, as Hogg suggests. Similarly, when attending running events, participants learn the context-specific group norms and display prototypical behaviour, particularly when that behaviour is publicly observed by an in-group audience of distance runners.

The data indicate that social interaction is an important aspect of the distance running social world, with structured and organised running club and running events constituting key venues for this interaction. Tulle (2007) suggests that running acts as a structure that takes precedence over other aspects of everyday life, where training can lead to an

enlargement of the dispositional kitbag (the urge to run) and greater levels of physical capital (running competence) and social capital (a wider running social network). For running participants, distance running clubs are vital communication centres to coordinate activities and interrelationships, acting as the 'hub', whilst organised running events provide the spatial sites and components to assist with understanding the structure of the social world.

## Participant practices

In its simplest form, to achieve running targets requires training and a level of preparation. For many participants involved in this study, the very practice of learning the intricacies and regimes of training and preparation was nurtured and developed within the social world of the distance runner (Shipway and Jones, 2008). Within this context, some key practices emerged from the data linked to training and preparing to run: firstly, the feelings of pain and suffering that are often associated with the act of running; and secondly, how participants dealt with injuries that are often associated with a physical activity that is notoriously high impact and places strain on the body, often caused by excessive training. Similarly, following extensive immersion in the distance running culture, it was apparent that distance running is an unpredictable activity. Despite months of training, the end result is not guaranteed – sometimes the participant will succeed and feel comfortable whilst running, while at other times the very act of running will cause suffering and extreme discomfort. Participants in this study came to accept that distance running is a painful practice and at times an emotional experience, and pain seems to be a precondition for this particular sporting activity. One memorable quote after one event came from Alison L:

> The worst part was finding the horrible mess that was lying in wait beneath my socks on Sunday evening, and having to scramble around on my bum all day on Monday. I'm walking downstairs backwards. All in all, it was an amazing experience.

According to Charmaz (1999), suffering has an unpleasant quality, and this appears to be the case with distance running. Bale (2004) suggests that the running experience, while painful and uncomfortable, is often still a positive one, providing intense feelings of enjoyment for the runner. These findings, and the dearth of existing studies in this area, indicate that we know very little about the mix of pain and pleasure practices within distance running – which, it could be suggested, demonstrates another paradox. Several studies, most notably Morgan (1979), explore the experience of pain whilst running, often linking it to the concept of 'dissociation' (Stevinson and Biddle, 1998). This includes diverting attention from possible sensations of pain and injury, which are often masked; with this the runner is placed at risk of a range of painful symptoms, from blisters, cramps or muscle strains to stress fractures and heat exhaustion. The majority of the distance runners who were involved in this study would ignore these early warning signs, dismiss the problems and invariably carry on running. Likewise, several of the runners indicated that when they felt pain and suffering during the marathon events which they were competing in, they managed to get through this discomfort through this process of dissociation by thinking about something else to distract them from the pain.

Atkinson (2008) explored pain and suffering narratives amongst 62 triathletes in Canada, introducing the suggestion that triathletes come together as a mutual recognised 'pain community' of likeminded actors, and learn to relish physical and mental suffering within that sport. Atkinson refers to Putnam's (1995) work which describes the ability to withstand and enjoy suffering as a form of 'bonding social capital' that members value as a marker of their collective identity. Post-event interviews with distance runners also illustrated the attraction to self-imposed agony in their sporting world that binds them together as a unique social group, one that Atkinson called the unique 'pain community'. In line with those triathlon findings, distance runners who came to enjoy intense physical and cognitive pain whilst running appear to share a socially learned personality structure that considers instances of voluntary suffering amongst the participants as exciting and personally significant. Indeed, these findings illustrate that this very practice merits further investigation within the context of a diverse range of endurance sporting activities, to study how this sense of belonging and community is established through the sharing of particular leisure experiences.

From the perceptions of health and well-being, runners constructed their own stories of pain and injury. They rarely mentioned the body when they felt well and healthy. Physical injury becomes a *natural part* of the runners' condition. Runners who suffered – and indeed enjoyed – physical agony shared "habitus", internalised orientations, perceptions and actions influenced by their social location. The choices they made depend on habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). Injury threatened the habitus of these distance runners, the physical capital which they have accumulated and try to maintain. However, they often put this in jeopardy through the very practices of training, as they see suffering pain as an inevitable part of achieving their goal of optimum performance. The stories of pain and injury are full of paradoxes and do not always follow the well-defined traditional lines of the health discourse as provided by social policies, medical guidelines or conventional perceptions of everyday life (Shipway and Holloway, 2010). The findings of this study suggest a tendency towards feelings of pain as being normal and routine, as almost an *occupational hazard* and the price that has to be paid to be competitive at sport. Pain and injury are an endemic part of the long distance running social world (Allen-Collinson and Hockey, 2007). Previous studies (Atkinson, 2008; McCarville, 2007) have also highlighted the central role of the sharing of experiences in relation to pain and suffering, and the extent to which this often acts as a "badge of honour" amongst endurance sport participants (Shipway and Jones, 2008). These pain experiences are shared and communicated during the running events, amongst fellow competitors/participants, but more extensively in the post-event periods. Stebbins (2001) notes that the unique norms and values within a social world, in this case the beliefs about pain, are one means by which insiders within a social world can be distinguished from strangers, tourists and regulars.

The experiences of distance runners uncover some of the values and norms of contemporary society. The participants mirror society's preoccupation with health and fitness, which is promoted by western governments in particular, who now see the protection of the public's health as an important task (Crawford, 2006). The concept of health has become the responsibility of the individual, however. These runners succeed in combining the language of health with pursuing individual running careers and achievement. Crawford suggests that 'both the conventionally understood means of achieving health

and the social state of being designated as healthy are qualities that define the self' (p.402), thereby confirming the runners' perceived identity. These perspectives are in line with the norms of self development in western culture.

A consistent theme that emerged from the data was the interrelated practices of dealing with running injuries, the importance of avoiding overtraining, and the apparent inability of participants to spot these early signs of overtraining. One common cause of injury was distance runners becoming impatient with their training and pushing themselves too far and too soon. Dennis H has experienced injury on a regular basis:

> I hate being injured – the time off from running means that I lose the fitness levels that I have spent so long building up. I also tend to rush back into running far too quickly and with the same level of intensity, which is a sure-fire way to become injured again. I often end up in a vicious circle of injury.

Overtraining appeared to be a serious problem for many participants in the distance running community. Running requires dedication and tenacity; however, this tenacity is a double edged sword for some runners, because it is easy to injure oneself through overtraining (Bassham, 2007). The result was that they often increased training beyond a level that their bodies could handle, resulting in injury. This partially illustrates a correlation between training and injury. Often, this unhealthy and obsessive practice appears to be counterproductive in terms of injury. In fact, injury prevention was a common subject of conversation amongst runners. One major problem was that runners who were injured tried to keep running whilst nursing that injury. Robin H was remarkably honest in his assessment of why he gets injured:

> The reason why I suffer from so many injuries is that I never rest and let the little injuries heal. Even when I get advice, I take it onboard for a few days and then just slip back into the same bad habits.

Findings suggest that possibly the most traumatic experience for the distance runner is coping with these periods of inactivity, when they are unable to train or compete at all; this can have a profound impact on their perceptions of themselves as distance runners, as they are unable to be physically active in the social world that is so important to them and central to their leisure identity. This can lead to a significant loss of running identity, which is referred to extensively in the work of Allen-Collinson and Hockey (2007), who also explore the disruption of identity caused by injury and how committed sports participants manage the social-psychological dimension of the injury during their enforced withdrawal from the habitual physical routines of their chosen leisure activity. Additionally, Sparkes (1998), Allen-Collinson (2005) and Allen-Collinson and Hockey (2001, 2007) have looked at the injured sporting self and the "disrupted body project". These studies also examined the importance of retaining social identities as runners in the eyes of fellow distance runners during periods of injury. As Allen-Collinson and Hockey (2007: 388) suggest, 'the praxis of distance running is intimately connected with endurance: tolerating fatigue, discomfort and pain constitute an integral part of everyday training routines'. Similarly, for additional insight Tulle (2008) rethinks the normativeness of ontology as mind/body congruence, whilst Shipway and Holloway (2010) offer

perspectives on understanding the running body, along with several cautionary notes identifying negative aspects associated with exercise and physical activity. In summary, the level of training involved in distance running is clearly beyond what is necessary to acquire the basic health benefits of regular exercise; Ogles and Masters (2003) suggest that few human activities have the magnitude of potential costs of distance running, with such uncertain outcomes. Yet many people engage in distance running on a regular basis. This paradox has generated a series of interesting questions, such as what motivates individuals to endure the apparent punishment of training for and participating in the practice of distance running.

## Distance running actors

The distance running identity, unlike identities such as race or gender, is not necessarily immediately identifiable as such, and hence the use of signifiers such as clothing and language can be seen as a consequence of the desire both to portray a certain social identity but also to conform to the role identity associated with that group. The findings of this study supported the suggestion by Shipway and Jones (2007) that distance running group members would accentuate their membership through both dress and language, especially where the social identity is not readily apparent. Both the dress and the language used was often specific to the distance running world. For example, competitors at some events spoke of *blowing up, hitting the wall* or getting *miles in your legs* while training. The use of language specific to runners was a regular occurrence. Emma P recalled:

> I turned into the type of person to avoid in the months leading up to the Marathon. I had only one topic of conversation and would waffle on about carb-loading, tapering and race day plans to anyone who had the misfortune to listen.

Findings demonstrate that runners participate in the activity for a diverse range of reasons. Some of the less competitive runners appeared to run to become fitter, lose weight or reduce stress, whilst the more competitive appeared to run to test themselves, take on personal challenges or win trophies. In observations and interviews for this study it became apparent that most distance runners did not run simply to lose weight or to get fit; they ran because they thoroughly enjoyed it. There is a degree of challenge involved in distance running – both a challenge against other runners and, more prevalent for these informants, a challenge against oneself. Many runners were on a journey of self discovery, and several runners interviewed for this study indicated that the most important challenge during running was self-challenge. For others, distance running was seen as a life changing experience and an opportunity to test the mind, body and soul, and realise the inner strength and determination that is often needed to complete some of the more arduous running events. Distance running events were the locations whereby runners found inner qualities they were unaware existed, and often provided a sense of real achievement. Indeed for many of these running actors, the racing and training often proved to be as stressful on the mind as it was on the body.

Stebbins (1992, 2001) notes that serious leisure participants are separated from non-participants through the unique behaviours, language and values related to the "social world" of the group. Within the context of the distance running world, these results would support this. Possessing a certain social identity indicates a sense of belonging to a certain group, seeing events from the runner's perspective and being like other members of the running group. This "group" based identity suggests a degree of synergy and common understanding amongst those within the distance running community. Hogg (2001) suggests that a key question remains as to why one social identity (for example as a distance runner) becomes more salient than another (as an employee or spouse). Whilst the answer to this remains unknown, the nature of the leisure activity may provide some clues. Running was often seen as the "exciting" element of participants' lives. As Colin A suggested, with reference to one specific event:

> Having completed the Great North Run (Newcastle) on six occasions, I have discovered that this half marathon is a unique experience. It can generate intense feelings of joy and pain, anticipation and uncertainty, despair and exhilaration.

It was during the socialisation stage (Levine and Moreland, 1995) that the running participants learnt about the distinct and unique social world of the runner and the unique ethos (Stebbins, 1992) that surrounds the leisure activity. This was reported at most of the events studied, where the participants (or running actors) retold their stories and experiences of running, and where appropriate behaviours were learned, unique features of running were exhibited, or the values of the running group were displayed. One example would be the stretching and post-race routines that many runners adopted, which might appear somewhat alien to those outside of the distance running group. Levine and Moreland suggest that during this period of socialisation, commitment to the activity should increase and sentiments towards the group are often positive. For example, many runners felt a sense of pride from participating in certain events and also a sense of accomplishment from finishing specific marathon events, which helped to illustrate their entry into the distance running community. What has been apparent from these findings is that identity confirmation, far from being an endpoint, is a continual process (Donnelly and Young, 1988). Distance runners continue to interact within the running social world, demonstrating not only their improved "skills" in running, but also their knowledge of the values and behaviours that exist amongst participants. Runners were clearly concerned with aligning themselves with this unique ethos and the distinct social world of the long distance runner (Shipway and Jones, 2007). Immersion within the social world of the distance runner allowed the participant the opportunity to explore the many "nooks and crannies" or "small pockets" (Unruh, 1980) which are not widely known, yet provided these distance running actors with a sense of meaning and involvement.

## Experiencing events

Key themes emerged from the data linked specifically to the importance of running events: most notably the experiential, authentic and "extraordinary" event experiences that make the activity unique and the conflicting emotions of "failure" and "glory" associated with distance running. Unlike most sporting events, on marathon race day the least

promising amateur can stand on the start line with an Olympic champion (Shipway and Jones, 2008). In big city events, this blend of professionals and amateurs helps to enhance the event experience for the participants. Louise was one active participant who found running through the streets of New York, whilst completing the annual New York City marathon, to be a surreal experience:

> It was a place I'd only ever seen on television. I felt pure adrenaline crossing Brooklyn Bridge with all the spectators and crowds shouting, waving and giving 'high fives'. When I turned into Central Park, I saw the finish line, and I slowed down a bit, so that I could really savour the moment.

One constant theme throughout this study was the importance and uniqueness that a distance runner feels whilst actually running. This leads to emotions and experiences that are often enhanced at both high profile major international events and smaller, localised community events. For many participants, the atmosphere of a race event is a major attraction in itself. Karen L's reflections on one event illustrated this:

> It was a day I will never forget. What helped me immensely to cross that finish line was the great organisation for the event, the atmosphere, but more than anything – the crowds that support the event. It didn't feel like 13.1 miles. This was probably due to the interactions with the people on the side of the road.

Gavin C's comments echoed this point:

> It was an emotionally charged day, observing the spirit between people that is so often said to have been lost in society today. This event shows what happens when everybody pulls together – runners, organisers, supporters and volunteers.

Distance running events served as a place for social gathering and the sharing of event experiences, as people were directly affected whilst running. One of the strongest themes and the most mentioned experience emerging from the data was the sense of euphoria that is experienced at the finish of an event, often illustrating the positive side of the human spirit. At the end of one marathon event, Alana M mentioned how important and influential the physical act of running had become in her life and the impact it has:

> Euphoric was how I would describe feeling at the finish. Since finishing, I have smiled so much my face aches more than my legs. I realised my body was capable of wonderful things. I felt elated and ecstatic at the end. You just feel amazing when you've crossed the line. Well, it is amazing. Running 42 kilometres is amazing.

Christine G also completed a marathon event, and felt similar experiences and emotions at the finish:

> For one day, the whole city became a single community, a cacophony of noise, a kaleidoscope of cultures. Today I have taken part in an amazing celebration of life and the human spirit. It was during the low points in the running experience that I began to appreciate the true human aspect of the Marathon. It was a truly humbling experience.

These findings have illustrated that distance running events can provide a diverse mix of both positive and negative experiences. Much of this is linked to the unpredictability of outcome involved with distance running events. This unpredictability is part of what makes distance running such a memorable experience, and such a distinct and authentic leisure activity. Similarly, event settings are prime locations for projecting identity (Green and Jones, 2005). As previously identified, distance runners are able to wear clothing and other displays of subcultural capital, and this acceptability of language, humour, social interactions and other behaviours combine to celebrate a runner's identity and place in the subculture. This liminoid event space and the resulting extraordinary and authentic event experiences are a popular venue for these celebrations (Morgan, 2007).

Whilst most distance runners participate for themselves, for many it was also important to gain recognition and respect from people that they train and socialise with on a weekly basis within the running club environment. For several participants, pride was a dominant emotion at many events. Reflection and pride were prevalent themes when the running events were completed. The end of an event was an opportunity to reflect on the experiences of the run and the challenges faced. For Andy W, one event was particularly emotional and illustrated the role that family and friends play within the life of a distance runner in the period before and after the event:

> After the race, my 11-year-old daughter told me she was really proud of me. That meant the absolute world to me.

Participation at distance running events provides a social identity that might otherwise be unavailable to the individual (Shipway and Jones, 2008). Green and Jones (2005) make reference to the liminoid nature of the experience, which can actually work to enhance the socialization process. In Jenkins' (1996) work on social identity, he advocates Bourdieu's (1984) contention that social interactions are vital ways to learn the values, norms and behaviours appropriate to membership in a subculture. It is suggested in these findings that distance running events are one appropriate outlet for this social interaction, where runners are in extended contact with other runners. Jenkins argues that social identity must be seen as both individual and collective, and shows how the work of major theorists from Mead to Bourdieu can illuminate the experience of identity in everyday life. These findings have demonstrated that at events, distance runners experience contact with experienced members of the distance running social world, and the actual event can often break down traditional barriers and facilitate a strong sense of running community. In fact, it was Jenkins who stated that without social identity, there is no society. It is the contention in this paper that participating in distance running events leads to an enhancement of the quality, quantity and importance of both interactions and the event experience. Running events are therefore able to offer the distance runner an intensive course in subcultural norms (Jenkins, 1996), and after attending running events, participants (or "actors") can emerge with a deeper, more authentic running identity. These findings highlight that participation in a distance running event is an opportunity for self-actualisation and self-expression, which are benefits that are not always found in everyday life.

In addition to the four main components of a distance running social world identified above, this paper suggests an emerging paradox, whereby individuals were observed following an individual pursuit within the social world of the distance running community, highlighting that the focus is on both the individual and the social – an area which sociologists such as Unruh (1980) and Strauss (1978) and academics within the leisure context have not yet analysed. This raises issues about the competing demands of the individual versus social worlds. For example, self expression and self-actualisation are in themselves largely individual aspirations and motivations. It is apparent that distance running is not a leisure activity like basketball, baseball or rugby, to name but three examples, in which every participant knows the place of the other. These are areas which merit further investigation within the leisure context.

## Conclusion

Using participant observation and unstructured interviews, this research studied runners in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, this phenomenon in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Through an analysis of the lived experiences of human actors (runners), this approach illustrates that qualitative research captures the true meanings of social processes and human activity which would remain hidden by other methods. In doing so, the findings contribute towards an understanding of one of the most important concerns in contemporary society: identity as a social construct.

Through an exploration of the four main components of a social world – organisations, practices, actors and events – the importance of experiencing identity through distance running has been illustrated. Firstly, the findings highlight that the distance running social world permits both development and confirmation of a running identity and, with it, social fulfilment. Secondly, they also identified the importance of taking part in exercise both alone and as an integral part of a social group, and the benefits that this association brings. Thirdly, it has been shown that the distance running social world can provide a time and place to interact with others who share a similar ethos, and also provide opportunities whereby runners can parade and celebrate a valued social identity. This shows that the individual self is related to the social self that these social actors co-construct with other members of their running community.

Distance running is a global phenomenon, and as such these connections of actors, organisations, events and practices which are spread over the globe can best be accomplished through mediated interaction in its various forms. The findings offer much evidence that distance running provides contrasting benefits to participants, irrespective of ability, frequency of participation, or level of performance. In summary, the findings from this study indicate that distance running "insiders" are characterised by their (1) *orientation* to the activity of distance running and a social world which is a major component in the creation of their running identity, (2) *experiences* within the social world; (3) *relationships* with fellow participants, which may be personal, with warm friendships developing; and (4) *commitment* to the ongoing distance running social world's activities.

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