

Indoor versus outdoor running: understanding how recreational exercise comes to inhabit environments through practitioner talk

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Abstract

Starting with a series of perspectives on why and where humans run, this paper considers how running comes to happen in some environments instead of others and how it is experienced thereafter. More specifically, we are interested in the processes by which contemporary recreational running has come to take place either indoors on treadmills or outside on pavements and paths. Running has been recently positioned as an obvious target for those hoping to encourage public health amongst increasingly time pressured populations and running outdoors can often lead to additional benefits. Yet how it is that runners and environments come to coalesce has yet to be examined in any great detail. This paper responds by drawing on theories of how embodied practices spread through society to further an emergent geographical interest in the speech patterns of everyday life. With reference to a project involving accompanied runs and interviews with groups of both indoor and outdoor recreational runners in London, we ask what the subtleties of their running talk tells us about how exercisers become attached to the environments they currently occupy and how they might feasibly be encouraged elsewhere.

Key words

Running, Environment, Practice, Interviews, Talk, London

1. Introduction

Though evidence suggests that outdoor exercise can often lead to additional health benefits, one striking recent trend seen across the western world has been the rise of indoor exercise within gyms, sports centres, and at home. Through a focus on recreational running in London, this paper responds to this trend by examining how some have come to run on treadmills indoors and others on pavements and paths outside. Recreational running has become increasingly popular in the UK, has been positioned as an obvious target for those hoping to promote public health to time pressured populations, and has only recently started happening inside. In view of all these features, we argue this is an excellent point at which to study how exercise becomes attached to certain environments and how it could feasibly be encouraged elsewhere.

In line with the disciplinary openness that characterises much geographical scholarship, our discussion starts with a series of relevant bodies of work to provide a fuller sense of the issue and pinpoint how the present study augments existing approaches. Taking cues from evolutionary anthropology, environmental psychology and fitness market research, we make the case for scrutinising the seemingly casual talk of recreational runners with reference to theories of embodied practice. Then we attempt to substantiate this argument with reference to a project involving accompanied runs and interviews with those in London who usually ran either indoors or out. Doing so, we argue, shows how an emerging geographical interest in everyday speech patterns can provide original insights for those hoping to encourage beneficial outdoor exercise.

2. Evolutionary inheritance and contemporary indifference

According to a series of studies (see Bramble and Lieberman, 2004 and Lieberman, 2013), around two and a half million years ago, after venturing away from the food and protection provided by trees, the forebears of the modern human embarked on a series of changes that made them peculiarly good at a form of ‘persistence hunting’ that involved chasing animals down until they eventually became exhausted (Liebenberg, 2006; Carrier, 1984). These included standing up on two feet, the arrival of more efficient sweating methods that were further aided by the gradual loss of fur, and a more mobile neck arrangement that made for an unwavering visual focus on moving targets (Raichlen

et al. 2011; Mattson, 2012). Some evolutionary anthropologists and biologists have gone so far as to suggest that gaining access to this hitherto unavaialbe protein source fuelled the development of the peculiarly large, energy hungry brains that modern humans now carry. In effect, their argument is that our ancestors ran towards the intelligence levels required by the complex societies of today (Lieberman, 2013).

Given the pace of evolutionary change, it is reasonable to assume the modern human is still partly hardwired for running (McDougall, 2010). The trouble, however, would seem to be that lifestyles are increasingly misaligned with this legacy. Many no longer have the opportunity or inclination to do the running that may have been our evolutionary engine. Though we cannot really expect contemporary societies to regularly run for hours like the persistence hunters we once were, evidence is nonetheless mounting to suggest the lifestyles typical of wealthy, urban, western societies have drifted too far from the conditions to which we remain physiologically adapted (Mattson, 2012). This at least is the central contention sustaining the ‘mismatch theory’ of human development (Malina and Little, 2008) that refers to the apparent irony of how our evolutionary success has left us with lifestyles that superficially seem easier but to which we are actually ill suited.

For those working in this field, even when people do run, this now often happens in less than optimal ways. One aspect relates to how commercial interests and comfort ideals have combined to encase running feet in specialist shoes that promise performance but may actually impede the establishment of effective technique (Jungers, 2010; Tam et al. 2013). Another relates to how modern runners might do well to remember how endurance running was originally associated with sporadic hunting bursts and not daily activity (Boullosa et al. 2013; O’Keefe et al. 2010). The aspect of particular interest to us in this paper relates to the ‘where’ of running since, as we will discuss, greater health benefits would seem to be accrued if running happens in certain outdoor environments. Again this may link to our evolutionary history of ancestors who were seemingly not only designed to run, but to run through certain landscapes and spaces (O’Keefe et al. 2011). For us, this begs the question of why it is that some have ended up on indoor treadmills whilst others remain in the apparently more ‘natural’ environments outside.

Our argument is that paying close attention to how exercise practices become entrenched provides a valuable window onto these processes and, in this respect, we do not shy away

from the very different scales of enquiry on which this paper draws. Though the march of human evolution and the establishment and unsettling of individual running habits are evidently very different things, the seeds of broader social change clearly lie in the detail of how modes of embodied action take hold of us today. Furthermore studying such processes of exercise entrenchment is also of particular merit because we do not know a great deal about how it is that contemporary people come to find themselves running in some environments instead of others. In order to substantiate this argument, we now turn to a second body of work concerned with the benefits of specific running environments and the extra rewards that seem to be associated with 'green exercise'.

3. Studying green exercise and accounting for cultural change

The most common means of evaluating the comparative benefits of indoor and outdoor exercise comes from environmental psychology. Here we find studies designed to examine the effects of outdoor activity in the presence of vegetation, a phenomenon that has since been dubbed 'green exercise' (Pretty et al. 2005; Gladwell et al. 2013; Mackay and Neill, 2010). These studies sometimes draw on the above evolutionary analysis to justify testing the hypothesis that exercise may be better for us if it happens in the company of plants and trees. One argument they have examined relates to how, since early humans inhabited grassland environments, their modern descendants should logically retain a particular affinity for exercising within vegetated spaces (Gladwell et al. 2013). And there is now another sizeable evidence base to support this. For example, either looking at or being in such green environments when running can seemingly augment the more general health benefits of exercise by improving mood and self-esteem (for example, Akers et al. 2012, Pretty et al. 2007) and even lowering blood pressure (for example, Pretty et al. 2005; Park et al. 2010). There may even be further synergistic benefits if people run for longer in green spaces because the meditative effect distracts from the monotony of the experience (Gladwell et al., 2013). In short, whilst running is good for us, running outside through areas of greenery seems even better.

In line with the positivistic ambitions of many in this field, these studies commonly involve the manipulation of identified features of the experience whilst others are held constant. One strategy has been to put people on indoor treadmills or exercise bikes before showing them different scenes, such as those depicting city streets or vegetated

parks, whilst they exercise (Pretty et al, 2005; Akers et al., 2012). If we buy into the suggestion of a universal human response (on this see Thompson Coon et al., 2011), such studies make a powerful case for furnishing city dwellers with environments that help them to enjoy ‘green exercise’. Yet what others do with this evidence is another matter altogether. Notwithstanding how our response to outdoor spaces is likely about more than only looking, such studies of the human response to landscape scenes can, for example, also be used to support an argument for creating virtual environments that immerse us in seemingly vegetated spaces indoors (Depledge et al. 2011). If ageing societies, for example, find real world equivalents difficult to negotiate physically, such technological innovations make a lot of public health sense. But such scenarios also point to the potential irony of how studies designed with a view to encouraging outdoor activity could feasibly have the opposite effect if they are used to justify the replication of indoor experiences that were originally merely part of the research design.

Arresting visions such as these encourage us to consider the cultural processes that will collectively shape the future of ‘green exercise’. In this field, we see glimpses of the pleasures associated with indoor exercise such that, though the outdoors may be ‘energising’, the indoors can be deemed more relaxing (Plante et al. 2006). Then there are social differences such that some on lower incomes, for example, find indoor exercise more appealing despite being less able to afford it (Burton et al. 2012). These studies point to the value of a more ‘transactional’ research approach in which potentially innate responses to green space are examined alongside the wider societal imperatives that may either impede or amplify them (Hartig, 1993). Yet, as it stands, and partly because of the statistical methods that continue to predominate in this field, this set of scholars has largely been reluctant to explore these imperatives with people. In other words, whilst this work provides valuable insights into what green environments do to us both, much less has been said here about whether various social groups will continue to avail themselves of these apparent benefits and why this is so (Hitchings, 2013).

This takes us to a group of qualitative social scientists who have argued for a more contextually sensitive examination of the running experience (Collinson, 2008; Shipway and Holloway 2010; Hockey, 2013). Yet the problem as we see it here is that, as was the case with a number of the psychological studies (Thompson Coon et al. 2011), they have so far largely focused on keen practitioners who undertake ‘performance running’ (Howe

and Morris, 2009) or belong to running clubs (see Shipway et al. 2013; Robinson et al. 2014). Whilst this may certainly be easier in terms of efficient respondent recruitment, a focus on the enthusiast leaves us with much less sense of the comparatively casual runner (see also Cook et al. 2015) when, as we now discuss, market research suggests they are exactly those on whom green exercise promoters may want to focus in the UK at least..

4. Societies in a rush and the rise of recreational running

It is notoriously problematic to infer a societal interest in exercise from sports kit sales figures because they are often little to do with planned activity and much more about communicating style and subculture through everyday wear. Nonetheless when people buy exercise footwear in the UK, the activity to which they now most commonly refer would seem to be running (MINTEL, 2013). We might therefore conclude that running has become the default exercise option here. This claim is also supported by widespread evidence that recreational running is happening more than ever before. In contradiction to some of the cultural change anxieties seen amongst the evolutionary anthropologists, between 1999 and 2009, an additional 10 per cent of the population expressed an interest in running (MINTEL, 2010). And many seem to have acted on this too. In 2012, the most popular fitness activity was running since, whilst many respondents shied away from the title of 'running' (preferring, for reasons to which we return, the reduced pressure of 'jogging'), almost 9 per cent of Britons claimed to run regularly (Keynote, 2013). Others have put this as high as 13 per cent (MINTEL, 2010). As such, and as England Athletics (2013) have been keen to point out, running could now be considered the natural starting point for those hoping to foster public health through regular exercise in the UK. With reference to wider worries about increasingly sedentary sedentary (Ng and Popkin, 2012), their response is to argue that, if Britons are already running more than ever, the task is merely one of amplifying an existing social trend.

In terms of outdoor running, a number of explanations have been offered for this. One of the most popular relates to the decline of collective schedules and the impact of this upon the amount of free time people feel they have (ONS, 2011, Henley Centre, 2005). Compared to running, many exercise options require co-ordination to ensure participants can play together and many Britons now seem doubtful about being able to co-ordinate. As such, the comparative beauty of running is that it can be more easily inserted into the

schedules of those who are no longer willing to commit to collective sporting activities (MINTEL, 2010; MINTEL, 2013). In this respect, running further benefits from being what some would call a 'doorstep' (MINTEL, 2010) or 'unstructured' (England Athletics, 2013) exercise option in the sense that it does not require travelling to a dedicated environment but can rather begin as soon as we venture outside. Alongside changes in time management, a broader shift has also been discerned from 'sport' to 'exercise' (MINTEL, 2010; Keynote, 2010) as the focus of exercising Britons has evolved from one of shared competition and camaraderie to one of personal health and fitness. Finally, there are more prosaic matters in which the democratic promise of running relates to how, compared to how sport often requires equipment, outdoor running is cheap (MINTEL, 2010) - perhaps especially so if many already have running shoes at hand.

Data on indoor running – generally involving treadmills, though some fitness centres boast indoor tracks – is harder to find. This is partly because doing so is often combined with other activities and partly because of an intriguing reluctance to classify indoor running as 'running' (Keynote, 2013). Nonetheless, if we broaden our terms, there has clearly been a massive growth in UK gym attendance (Keynote, 2013; MINTEL, 2010) as these facilities quickly morphed from the preserve of affluent elites and determined bodybuilders to a widespread means of working towards health and attractiveness (Keynote, 2010). The UK is now second only to the US in terms of likely gym membership (Keynote, 2013) with this almost doubling over four short years between 1998 and 2002. Though, as with the story of sports kit sales, membership does not always mean activity, in 2006 Britons said they were more likely to go to the gym than undertake sports (Keynote, 2010), with over 10 per cent of the population being a regular gym user (Keynote, 2010). And cardio-vascular (CV) machines such as the treadmill seem to be an important part of what they do there. In 2012, 6.6 per cent of people in the UK said they used these machines either occasionally or on a regular basis (Keynote, 2013). As a result some put the growth of the personal fitness equipment market down to how those now familiar with technologies like the treadmill in the gym have started to see the appeal of something similar at home (in 2009, 18 per cent of UK adults owned such equipment according to Keynote, 2010). In explanatory terms, many of the same accounts apply indoors as out: people no longer feel they can commit to group activities, preferring instead to find the most personally convenient ways of achieving 'fitness' rather than engaging in 'sport' (Keynote, 2010). In this regard, indoor

running is feasibly even better than ‘door step’ exercise if there is a gym downstairs at work or a treadmill waiting in another room at home.

In summary, recent market research suggests running may have become the obvious exercise choice for many Britons. This is particularly so for those who do not want to buy kit, are unsure about committing to scheduled activities, and more generally prize the efficient organisation of exercise over the social enjoyment of sport. It also tells us to look beyond the enthusiast since the recent rise of running is associated with those who simply want to become fit and attractive through the most efficient ways of inserting exercise into otherwise busy lives. Yet though Britons are now running in a range of environments, less is known about the processes by which they become attached to some instead of others. In view of the evolutionary perspectives and psychological findings presented above, our study sought to address this by enriching both bodies of work with an appreciation of the cultural processes involved. Our aim was to explore how recreational runners became attached to their current environments and, through these means, to understand how forms of exercise could be moving indoors when, as discussed earlier, outdoor exercise often appears more beneficial. We did this through accompanied runs and interviews with recreational runners in London.

5. Studying embodied exercise through practitioner talk

Our project began with theories of ‘social practice’ that focus on how individual modes of embodied action are interwoven with wider social systems. There is a longstanding tradition of examining these processes that winds through Mauss (1936) and Merleau-Ponty (1965) before Bourdieu (1977), Giddens (1984) and an array of others (see, for example, Shatzki et al. 2001). More recently these theories have been a particular source of inspiration for those interested in the resource use implications of changing lifestyles (Shove and Spurling 2013) and how public health promotion could be usefully reframed (Blue et al. 2016; Maller, 2015; Nettleton and Green, 2014). The core argument to this work as we understand it is that we need to examine how social change comes about through the rise, fall and more general transformation of recognisable activities. Within this field, one specific topic of interest has been the question of practice ‘recruitment’ (Shove and Pantzar. 2009), namely the processes through which certain modes of activity go about ‘capturing’ individuals who thereafter appear relatively happy to bow to the

demands of the practice as, as others would have it, particular ‘embodied dispositions’ become socially entrenched (Bourdieu, 1990a). As this terminology would suggest, a core ambition of this work has been to challenge the assumed primacy of personal volition that has bedevilled so many previous studies of social life in pursuit of a more sophisticated rendering of how and why people come to do as they do.

If we are aiming to challenge the misguided assumption that action follows intention, one question that immediately arises is whether it is wise for researchers to talk with those who carry out the practices that interest them. The problem, as Bourdieu (1990b) stressed, is in part epistemic since ordinary action does not operate under the same set of precepts as those of formal social science. To expect people to give accounts of their lives that map easily onto our conceptual concerns is therefore to fundamentally misunderstand the grounds of their action. As Sayer (2011: 14-15) contends, social scientists must be wary of ‘projecting their contemplative, discursive relation with the world onto actors who have a more practical relation.’ Moving to our own empirical focus, Bourdieu actually takes exercise as a case in point when discussing (1990b: 166) the ‘silence of sports people’. This relates to the basic observation that ‘sporting practices are practices in which understanding is bodily’ such that practitioners have little need to ground what they do within linguistic justifications or formalised styles of talk. Wacquant (2004), a keen student of Bourdieu, particularly develops this contention in his highly regarded boxing ethnography. The conclusion he draws is that styles of embodied exercise are often acquired through an entirely practical mode – becoming a boxer, it would seem, is all about the showing and the doing and very little about the telling.

Such arguments could easily be taken as an injunction for social scientists to eschew talk because active ‘thinking’ and ‘talking’ are not particularly central to the processes by which social practices become established. Yet we rather contend that they push us to examine talk in certain ways. This is partly because, on closer inspection, many of the above studies are actually reliant on it. Though, for example, Wacquant (2004) makes much of the corporeal aspects of boxing, a great deal of his analysis is clearly derived from the judicial study of speech, albeit of a form focused on practical action more than contemplative meaning. The point is rather that, whilst verbal interaction certainly does not offer direct access to the apparently coherent opinions and intentions of respondents, it does allow us to see how certain modes of expression are part and parcel

of how practices are sustained (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Much may therefore be learnt from paying attention to how people may have become sometimes unwittingly accustomed to speaking of their practices in ways that help these practices to persist.

It is in this respect that we see our paper as advancing recent geographical scholarship, namely with regard to a fledgling interest in how the interactional modes that people reach for in everyday life can illuminate a range of disciplinary concerns. Brickell (2013), for instance, has recently considered how the deployment of proverbs normalises certain gender relations in the Vietnamese home and Rogers (2010) shows how variation in the delivery of theatrical scripts says much about how ethnicity is negotiated. Bissell (2014) has also considered how the voicing of cliché can activate a more bearable experience of collective transport and Laurier and Brown (2008) have detailed how the discussion occasioned by maps shows how wayfinding practically proceeds. In some of our own earlier work, we too have examined how conversational laughter can help establish a shared normative stance on how plant life should be lived with at home (Hitchings, 2007). Though rarely stated as such, all these studies can be understood as a response to earlier calls to question the unthinking deployment of interviews as the standard methodological choice in cultural geography studies of everyday life (Latham, 2003). Rather than dismissing the spoken word out of hand (on this see Hitchings, 2012), in our understanding the argument they are making is about attending to the geographical implications of certain otherwise relatively unremarkable interactional modes.

This paper develops this argument through a focus on how and when topics are allowed to infiltrate the field of discursive interaction. More specifically, and drawing again on Bourdieu (1990), we are concerned with how people talk about what they do, how certain aspects of activity become 'speaking' and what can be inferred from 'what goes without saying.' For us, these topics encourage us to look closely at how our respondent conversations illuminate relevant theory and, in this regard, we also draw inspiration from other exercise studies. Nettleton and Green (2014), for example, illustrate how sensitive interviews show how injuries becomes 'unthinkable' and therefore unspeakable for the experienced fell runner. Crossley (2006) makes a comparable case for scrutinising the 'motive talk' associated with gym going since continued attendance is partly sustained by modes of casual justificatory speech that initially seem inconsequential. In both accounts, and that which now follows, the point is that talk does not offer any unfettered

access to the apparent prior reasoning of respondents but can rather, when judiciously examined with an eye to the circumstances surrounding it, help us to appreciate their attachment to certain modes and (of particular interest to us here) contexts of activity.

6. The indoor versus outdoor running project

We now turn to our talk with two groups of ten recreational runners in London. Both undertook runs of at least twenty minutes in duration at least three times per week. Though some took part in occasional races, both groups were happy to be called ‘recreational runners’. The central difference was that one group generally did so outside whilst the other was found on treadmills indoors.¹ These respondents were recruited informally through our existing social networks and, in line with the current demographic profile of those who run in the UK, most of them were from the middle classes. To avoid a study that was inadvertently about cost or the nearness of facilities, the outdoor runners were asked to state that they could easily afford gym membership and, were they to want to go there, had good access to a gym with treadmills. Also crucial was how we approached our respondents since, in view of the enthusiast focus of many previous studies, we were keen to talk with those who didn't necessarily see themselves in that way. Taking the time to reassure potential recruits was an important part of this. We were at pains to emphasise that we wanted to talk with those who simply ‘ran three times a week’ and that we didn’t necessarily want the ‘proper runners’ that potential respondents sometimes said would be better. Indeed how and why they distanced themselves from the ‘proper runner’ idea was actually part of our interest.

We began with accompanied runs, joining our respondents on what they deemed to be a ‘typical’ run and talking with them before, after, and as we ran together, about their ways of running. After that, we organised recorded interviews in which we discussed various aspects of their current running environment and the idea of running in other ways or

¹ In this regard, it could be argued that our sampling strategy makes running practices appear more locationally fixed than they are because we selected only those who generally ran in specific environments. In reality, it is likely that some recreational runners drift between indoor and outdoor sites – for example, in response to seasonal change or the arrival of weekends. However, because our objective was to compare the running accounts of those who largely did so in only one environment, such intriguing transitions were outside the scope of our enquiry.

places. In particular, we probed about inconsistencies between running ideals and what currently happens, attempted to examine their existing techniques in some depth, and considered how their current running would react to a range of hypothetical situations. These runs provided useful orientation and valuable background such that during the interviews we were not discussing running in general, but the detail of their running as we had seen it done, and as we had participated in doing (cf. Wacquant 2004).

We now detail three project findings. In line with the above arguments, our interest is in what respondents were more or less willing to speak about and how their modes of conversational response helped us understand the relationship between runner and environment. At the end of each section, the results are considered in light of relevant accounts of social practice and comparable cultural studies of exercise. Then we finish with our wider conclusions regarding the bodies of work we have already discussed.

(a) *Unthinking about amendments*

We are running with Charlie, a medical sales trainee, on adjacent treadmills at her workplace gym. The pace is fixed, she is faced determinedly forward, and her focus seems unwavering. Her eyes are trained on a point on the wall that, as revealed in our subsequent discussion, she just liked staring at. Then she turns to say she'll now 'see how she feels'. We are at mile three of the run. Buttons are pressed and speeds change – first faster, then slower in a seemingly erratic way. And then we stop. She takes a gulp of water from the bottle in the treadmill holster, looks across and smiles. We have been running for 45 minutes.

How is it that Charlie came to adopt this running pattern? After the accompanied run, we asked why the pace had changed at that point: what was she thinking? The answer was not much. Three miles had somehow become a milestone target that she was compelled to reach. On further reflection, she eventually identified how this intriguing three-mile threshold was born of how, when she took up running after quitting smoking some years previously, she ran three miles outside before being sick. Since then, she made sure she ran for at least that distance. Not getting there was not an option now.

We start our analysis with this vignette because it highlights the relatively serendipitous nature of how many respondent running routines, irrespective of environment, had arrived. Various objectives and approaches that were initially chosen more or less by chance or happenstance eventually became quite fixed. This was most clearly apparent when we asked about how respondents came to run in the ways that they did. The most common response was one of comparative bemusement. Here running was being positioned to us as a straightforward activity whose basic shape and form was so obvious that it made for a strange discussion topic. When we asked about 'learning' to run, school experiences were commonly reached for. This was, we think, partly because school was a time of more general learning and partly because this was when they were first exposed to the idea of exercise running. But it was clearly also about finding an answer in the exigency of the moment. Several respondents had been running for several years now and many spent significant amounts of time running. Yet despite this commitment, for all but a minority practical matters of technique went hitherto relatively untouched in terms of critical evaluation. Though runners of longstanding, the only point at which many had previously reflected on these details was in response to the arrival of injuries, on realising that running shoes were worn through, or when we asked about it.

And this was often part of the attraction. For many, their objective was akin to setting up a running 'system' that worked for them and then submitting to it. We saw this in Charlie's unwillingness to think about what she was doing until mile three. Similarly when talking with Rachel, one of the outdoor runners, about treadmills she was clear about her personal aversion. On following up on the reasoning for this, however, her response was telling. Her view was that they must be bad because she does not use them. The presumption here was that, at some point in the past, she must have made a good decision, though she had evidently forgotten about that process now. The interesting point for us, however, was that she was not interested in exploring whether this intuition was true. Rachel, and others, had decided, in effect, that their running practice knows best. It was therefore better not to subject it to much, if any, critical scrutiny.

Questioning certain aspects of their running with us was explicitly not what many wanted to do – a somewhat surprising finding in view of how, as volunteers for an interview study, they were presumably more amenable to this than most. Yet this is not to say they lacked immediate running goals. Rather it is to emphasise how these goals remained

within the parameters of their existing practice – running a little further, going a little faster. After introducing them through various means (Do you think you could run in this way? What would it be like to run in that environment?), our eventual conclusion was that significant changes were often off the cards because they didn't want to unsettle what they understood as a positive feature of their lives. A common response was to express some degree of exhaustion at the end of our interview. Joanna said she never wanted to think or talk about her running ever again! Though these two groups of respondents had volunteered because they were at least partly intrigued by such discussion, in actuality many found it surprisingly hard to talk about certain aspects. Or, perhaps more accurately, there were procedural aspects they preferred to leave alone.

In this regard, several responses were along the lines of 'this is working for me' or 'this suits me for the moment' in what we'd argue was an improvised attempt to close off certain lines of further enquiry. In this respect, both groups tended to frame the competing environment (the outdoor spaces for the indoor runners and vice versa) as likely to lead to unwanted levels of mental engagement. For the indoor runners, outdoor running was treated with some suspicion because it was taken to entail responding to various disruptions to do with weather and people and other environmental features. For the outdoor runners, treadmills could be taken to be so monotonous that runners might start thinking about what they were doing in a way that might risk unsettling the habit. In both cases, however, what these comparative assessments underscored was how active thought about certain features of their current running was unwelcome. These respondents had set up a positive practice and, because they did not want it subsequently destabilised, certain topics were best left untroubled by contemplation or conversation.

In her detailed gym ethnography, Sassatelli (2014) highlights the contradictions of how regular exercise is discussed. On the one hand, enthusiasts associate it with an idea of 'taking control' of your life by crafting a superior physique. Yet, on the other hand, they also allude to the difficulty of even thinking about stopping. In one sense they are clearly the masters of their exercise, but in another they are slaves to the gym. The question then is who or what is in charge of their activity? In a comparable balancing act, our study revealed a kind of deliberate 'outsourcing' of agency. This was not yet the exercise 'addiction' others have worried about with regard to running (Shipman and Holloway,

2014), but more like letting the running ‘take charge for now’. This takes us to wider discussions of consciousness and practice where one of the identified problems with a vision of stable group ‘dispositions’ is that the matter of technique transferral is often ignored (Noble and Watkins, 2003). In other words, those who carry out a practice often appear to have somehow magically acquired it. While this partly stems from a more general tendency to overplay the unconscious in this field (as a corrective to the previously assumed centrality of personal volition), our point is that it is not only the theorist who may have an interest in glossing over matters of technique. Our respondents did so too because, as seen in other empirical studies, runners often seem rather ambivalent about the idea of being aware of what they are doing (Nettleton, 2013). Hockey (2013), for example, describes committed runners with little to say afterwards about how their runs ‘went’. In our study, we saw their less experienced counterparts reveal themselves as equally reticent about analysis. Similarly Crossley (2006) argues the casual justificatory speech surrounding exercise says much about how commitment (to deploy a term that perhaps overplays intention) is sustained. So too, we would add, do the topics that exercisers are less willing to discuss since avoiding the associated thought helps a valued activity to persist.

(b) *Outdoors is ideal but saying so is risky*

On an indoor run with Daisy we are deciding which treadmill to choose. Some faced a wall with television screens playing music videos. The others looked through a window onto an expanse of trees and lawn. She preferred the second set because then she could ‘pretend’ she was running outside. Why did she want to do that? Her answer was that outside was where ‘the action’ really was.

In our second starting extract, Daisy displays an unease that was common amongst our treadmill runners. This related to the difference between where they ran and where running should happen. We asked all our respondents about their ideal London run and the outcome was various visions of running in parks with the right number of people around or along the river as shafts of sunlight pierced the tree leaves above. Even though that was exactly where half of our respondents were found, the ideal run was never indoors. We could partly explain this with reference to the above discussion of how, once established, respondents were reluctant to tinker with their existing running practice

even if they knew this might take them closer to their ideal. But it also related to how both groups were reluctant to discuss what they took to be a normatively charged topic. In other words, the question of where recreational running ideally happens encouraged both to grab at interactional strategies that helped diffuse a perceived social tension.

For the outdoor runner, the difficulty was partly about how they felt they should position themselves with regard to their indoor counterpart - were they doing something similar or different? The attraction of the former framing was that it sat well with their desire to be seen as non-judgemental advocates of the exercise they personally enjoyed. In line with this, and as a means of avoiding any implied condemnation, some went as far as to paint the indoor runner as even more impressive in so far as they kept going despite the imagined boredom of the treadmill. Others claimed that they had 'no idea' why they personally preferred running outdoors in a way that was partly about preventing further topic exploration but also somewhat surprising when it was also clear that they thought they were doing it in the superior environment – the place where, as Daisy said, 'real running' happened. Rachel, for example, performed some deft conversational repair work by initially stating 'I don't understand treadmill runners' before quickly adding 'but they are no different from me'. The outdoor runners were convinced their own environment was preferable, but wary about the implications of saying so.

The indoor runner meanwhile was certainly amenable to the outdoor run in principle and, as already discussed, would likely position the outdoors as where recreational running ideally happened. Yet still they stayed inside. As a means of exploring this contradiction, we tabled a number of explanatory options in our interviews. These variously included concerns about safety, dirt, pollution and unwanted personal appraisal when running through public spaces. Yet these seldom struck a chord with our indoor runners. Rather their concerns were more about personal control and predictable experience. In the case of Paul's lunchtime run, for example, though he recognised how, in principle, passing through the parks and other areas of relative greenery not far from his office might be more pleasant, in actuality the indoor run was somehow more 'relaxing'. On reflection, this was identified as being because he could guarantee the indoor run would end exactly when he wanted it to such that he could enjoy it untroubled by any worries about making it back to work on time. Were he to run outside, the weather might change or he might misjudge the time required by a particular

route. Such mental and physical distractions meant that he had ‘no time for naturalness’ during his lunchtime running as, in his conversation with us, he started to develop a narrative that prevented his own running environment from being positioned as inferior.

The bigger point, however, was that both groups did not really want to compare. In this regard, both drew on conversational strategies partly associated with the lack of prior thought discussed above, but also about steering the discussion away from unappealing topics. Both groups were asked whether they were ‘runners’ and both approached this mantle quite gingerly. This was partly explained by how they had little previous occasion to engage in any definitional work since, as described earlier, many had established a way of running that worked for them and thereafter simply kept going. It was therefore unsurprising to see them sidestep the evaluation by describing their experience as ‘just going for a run’, ‘going to do a run on the treadmill’ or, even more safely unspecific, ‘just going to work out at the gym.’ Yet this also belied a broader reluctance to consider the question of who was doing it right. In this regard, their answers were much more than simple statements of fact. Rather conversations were being controlled in the pressure of the moment so that context comparison was nudged off the agenda as running was reframed as a functional activity unworthy of particular reflection or discussion.

In this respect, our findings were consistent with how more enthusiastic runners can be reticent about comparative judgement because it undermines the enjoyable communion of shared participation in a positive activity (Nettleton, 2013; Smith, 2000). This leads us to ask whether recreational running should be understood as collective. Barnes (2001) suggests the difference between personal habit and collective practice is that practices can be performed well whereas habits are merely what individuals do. Shove et al (2012) make a similar argument in discussing how shared social practices draw strength from the ‘competence’ discussions that surround them. In other words, by talking about doing it better or worse, the practice itself becomes more established as a recognised activity. In our study, however, we saw good reason to shy away from any such conversation. Here it was better to live with a constellation of existing running habits than to engage in any talk about what kinds of running were more or less acceptable and desirable. If shared practices are sustained by the everyday ‘sayings’ (Schatzki, 1996) they occasion, our runners displayed an understandable disinclination to undertake certain evaluative

‘sayings’ that might unsettle individually valued exercise regimes. Encouraging all kinds of running was preferable - irrespective of whether it happened indoors or out.

(c) Change is possible but boring may be better

Hans, a German lawyer, runs three times a week in the area around his East London home. During a rainy run along a usual route, he was happy to talk as he went. We asked about the best features of that route. Though there were some scenic elements and a significant stretch along an attractive towpath, initially he had little to say. Some tentative opinions were offered about trees, traffic and views. Eventually, however, he admitted that this route does get boring. But, on reflection, he said he liked that it was reliable like that – he knew where he was going and how long it would take - and that reliability helped keep him running.

It may come as no surprise that our respondents were relatively attached to their current running routes and routines - they were, after all, often running and so significant conscious innovation would have been quite a challenge. A lot of them were also at pains to emphasise how they had many competing preoccupations in line with the wider market research finding that running suits the busy. This also made innovation less likely. Nonetheless we still sought to examine whether they might change how they ran, perhaps even where they ran. Yet on tabling the topic of their personal running futures, responses were again lacklustre. Joanna thought she might run ‘a bit further’. Saul didn't know what might happen next. Daisy wanted to reach the point when she no longer considered change because she had acquired the good habits to which she currently aspired. Irrespective of individual detail, we saw a distinct lack of conversational relish.

In terms of how their current environments could be improved, however, responses differed according to group. We might have imagined the outdoor runners would be more satisfied with their current running experience. Though, as described already, they had reason to be reticent about saying so, they clearly thought they occupied the better environment. Yet they actually had more to say about how these environments could be improved. Sometimes this was in terms of the volume of other people they encountered, with some clear opinions about the right number to provide interest without becoming a navigational problem. There were also weather issues and quite a bit of lively talk about

the experiential difference made by certain surfaces. For the indoor runners meanwhile improvements were harder to identify. Again this was partly because the point was precisely not to reflect too much. But it was also because the gym provided a near ideal environment for unthinking exercise. Gyms were good, as Ananya put it, for those not wanting to 'disturb things'. And so, rather counter intuitively, even though in principle the outdoor runners thought indoor running was boring and the indoor runners thought outdoor running was better, in practice the treadmill runners actually seemed more content in this regard.

Yet this was not to say they were trapped inside the gym. Indeed two of the indoor respondents reported trying the other running environment over the course of our study when none of their outdoor counterparts were tempted indoors. This was partly because summer was starting. But it was also partly a consequence of talking with us about where running ideally happened. Siobhan was an indoor runner who was clear in our first meeting about the difference between how she 'wanted' to run on the treadmill and what she 'should' ideally do. Yet, by the time of our second meeting, she had discovered that the outdoor environment allowed her to combine them both. Similarly, when we attempted a joke about this being a 'good day for a treadmill run' on a sunny day with Charlie at her workplace gym, her blank expression did not reassure us about rapport. At this point, outdoor running was too far removed from her current practice to register as a conversational candidate. Yet by the interview, she had also decided to try.

Part of the appeal of seeing everyday life as a battleground of competing social practices (Shove et al., 2012) is that it helps us to recognise that people are not always so in charge of their actions as we might otherwise assume. Following this logic, it is tempting to suggest the practice of recreational running has called forth the gym in the sense that a standardised environment further strengthens it by insulating those who exercise there from any thought of doing differently. Doing so also starts to explain why those who felt they ran in the inferior environment could also seem more content about doing so. Yet this was clearly only part of the story. What was also evident here was how our interview talk was enough to awaken some indoor runners to the idea of running outside. Practice reflexivity can evidently wax and wane for different groups (Chandler, 2013) since the truth of the matter lies somewhere between the suggestion that academics have it and everyday people are comparative automata (Sweetman, 2003). In this regard, as others

have shown, those hoping to sell specialist shoes to otherwise unthinking recreational runners sometimes struggle to incite any reflection on the mechanics involved (Gibson, 2012). Though never our intention, here we saw how our interviews tempted some outside. During the interview, they may have tended to steer talk away from certain forms of self-reflection for the various reasons already discussed. Yet what happened afterwards was another matter. Returning to Crossley's (2006) suggestion that exercisers can talk themselves into the gym, now we saw some of them also talk themselves out.

7. The geographical effects of patterns of practice talk

We started our paper with the suggestion that running may have helped make the modern human, how others have studied the comparative benefits of certain exercise environments, and recent trends in how often and where people run in the UK. Our aim in doing so was to make the case for our focus on recreational runner talk and its spatial implications at a point when recreational running is increasingly popular and happening in a range of environments. Our intention was to show how a certain cultural geography approach to practitioner talk has the potential to feed into all these relevant bodies of wider work. We also sought to understand how the advent of indoor treadmill running may be socially sustained when evidence would seem to suggest that outdoor running may often be better for us because of the greater likelihood of encountering greenery.

Returning briefly to the evolutionary perspective, what we found was rather perverse. For our indoor runners it was exactly because running may be experienced as something people naturally do that they find it so easy to stay on the treadmill. In other words, it is precisely because the action came so easily, that any ideas about locational amendment were soon put aside in a further ironic twist in the tale of how modern humans are living with their evolutionary legacy. Returning briefly to the psychological work, we saw how, in what might be understood as another perversity, though runners may be intuitively aware of the benefits associated with outdoor running, comparison was often off the cards because the point was partly to cede control to the practice. In other words, it was exactly because they wanted to keep going with their running that they didn't want to reflect on what environment was better and whether they were in the right one.

Returning briefly to the market research studies, though running may indeed be popular because it is easy to slot into otherwise busy schedules, we should also remember how

competing preoccupations leave little space for running reflection. In other words, it is precisely because many recreational runners are busy that otherwise rather reflective people seem both to persist with and enjoy a relatively unthinking exercise experience irrespective of where that happens.

We now turn to how 'green exercise' advocates might respond to our findings.

Throughout our study, interested parties have repeatedly asked us why our respondents chose their current running environments. As should now be clear, our response was that this was probably the wrong way of characterising the process. Though the idea that action follows intention is enshrined in so many accounts of social life, our respondents were rarely making conscious choices about how they wanted to run and, as we now discuss, this has implications for how our collective exercise futures are influenced. Our first empirical section suggests caution when meddling with what regular runners do since, if left alone, we may expect them to continue because they are happy to leave positive routines untroubled. So there are risks involved in tempting runners outside because practice amendment potentially means stopping altogether. Having said that, our second illustrated how, though recreational runners recognised the benefits of outdoor running, they also pushed comparison off the table because they did not want to engage in any evaluative judgement. Were we to promote outdoor running, enlisting the help of those who already enjoy it might therefore be difficult when they do not want to position their environment as better and those on the treadmill might be disinclined to listen anyway. Nonetheless, as our third observation made clear, when running reflection does happen this can sometimes entrain a process of practice refinement and potential relocation. What is less obvious, however, is whether and how this process may be more widely replicated. If this is an aim, it may be better to catch people at the start of their running careers since otherwise they will settle into whatever environment they have found themselves, and this may be especially easy if they find themselves inside the gym.

In this respect, our findings were entirely consistent with relevant conceptual accounts of social practice. Yet this is not to say there were no ways in which our study also extended them. For us, these are about attending to how consciousness and conversation combine to make modes of human activity happen in more or less comparable ways or places. Far from dismissing talk as a misguided means of exploring how identified practices come to colonise everyday life, there is much to learn about what our practices permit us to say

and what that does to how we act. More specifically, we would argue that the turns of phrase, patterns of topic embrace and avoidance, and the various evident eagernesses and anxieties occasioned by asking others to discuss activities they routinely undertake offers a valuable window onto how these activities are sustained and unsettled. Perhaps even more importantly they allow us to test out our theories rather than pushing them through the world without being entirely questioning about how well they explain individual human activities that should each logically have their own peculiarities. In this respect, rather than assuming our chosen concepts had it all sewn up at the start, the objective of our paper was to use practitioner talk to question whether contemporary recreational running is rightly understood as conscious, collective or changeable.

Such arguments about contextual nuance come naturally to geographers and it is here that we now end by returning to recent debate in the discipline about interview talk and everyday life. Though they may momentarily make interviews feel awkward, we argue the kinds of interaction on which we have focussed here warrant critical scrutiny more than a swift topic change in the field because respondent rapport suddenly seems under threat. Indeed the reasons for such passing discomforts are exactly why these interactions are interesting and, though our respondents found some of our questions quite challenging, clearly none of them took offence. In our paper, we developed this argument with reference to the case of indoor and outdoor running. But this approach could usefully shape many other studies of how activities and environments come to coalesce. Moving from asking whether people can talk about their practices to exploring how practices are themselves partly sustained by the patterns of talk that surround them could take us in various directions. The point, however, is that we could do worse than to examine the detail of how practitioners are inclined to speak about what they do and how they do it.

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