The "Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner" No More

Marathons and Social Worlds

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Abstract

This paper investigates how a group of novice marathon runners become immersed in the social world of a distance running community. A qualitative research design involved a combination of interviews and observations from within the social world of the distance running community. This fieldwork was undertaken in the traditional three month training period leading up to a major international marathon on the Gold Coast, in Queensland, Australia. Two groups were tracked using these methods: the first were runners who trained with a club while the second group were runners who trained individually. The findings suggest that novice runners who trained with a club progressively identified with the values and behaviors of the social world of the long distance runner.

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Introduction

"The loneliness of the long-distance runner" is a term used to describe marathon running as a solitary sport. The short story of the same name was written by Sillitoe (1959) and adapted for a 1962 film. The story focuses on Colin, a poor Nottingham teenager from a dismal home in a blue-collar area who has bleak prospects in life and few interests beyond petty crime. The boy turns to long-distance running as a means of achieving both an emotional and a physical escape from his situation. This story suggests that due to the gruelling nature of marathon or long-distance running, participants' exhibit a certain dedication to the sport that provides them with a means of separation from other aspects of life. The escape is achieved through many months of training and preparation before the actual race is held.

It is perhaps inevitable, therefore, that through this dedication and physical effort, marathon runners may develop a strong identification with this type of activity. Such identification may help them to shape the way they define themselves as individuals and their resultant social identities (Axelsen & Robinson, 2009; McCarville, 2007; Shipway & Jones, 2007). Indeed, research by Shipway and Jones (2007) illustrated this point when they concluded that many marathon runners highly identify with this sport and share a unique ethos and social world.

This dedication to the sport and the unique identity that marathon runners acquire, are what Stebbins (1982) first described as serious leisure. This descriptor denoted the systematic pursuit of a leisure activity (whether amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer) by participants who find it so substantial and interesting that sometimes they launch themselves into a "career" that is centered on acquiring and expressing its special skills, knowledge, and experience (Stebbins, 1992, 1997, 2007).

For many serious leisure participants, their involvement in marathon running becomes so fundamental that it creates new experiences and challenges, social interaction, image enhancement and the creation of further knowledge. Thus, by using the concept of Stebbins' serious leisure, and its link with the social world construct (Unruh, 1979; 1980), this study explores and explains the sociocultural dimensions (norms, values, and social dynamics) that are associated with the worlds of marathon runners.

The key areas of research that will be considered are (a) exploring the strength of identification that participants have with the activity, (b) discovering the markers of identification for runners, and (c) improving our understanding of the process of entering the social world of this serious leisure pursuit.

Literature Review

Serious Leisure

Stebbins (1992) used the term serious leisure to describe people whose work and leisure merged together because of the need to engage in "…the steady pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or career volunteer activity that captivates its participants with its complexity and many challenges" (p. 53). Serious leisure is seen as a systematic pursuit, for deep satisfaction that participants find to be substantial and interesting; many devote a major part of their lives to acquiring and expressing the special skills, knowledge, and experiences of their serious leisure activity(Stebbins, 2000b). For many people, serious leisure gives them great pleasure and satisfaction as well as providing, "…personal expression, self-identity enhancement, and self-fulfilment" (Stebbins, 1992, p. 253). Integral to Stebbins' concept of serious leisure are six distinctive qualities, one of which is the production of a unique ethos and social world.

Social Worlds as an Integral Component of Serious Leisure

Unruh (1979, 1980) explained the nature of a social world, which included aspects of individual involvement, structural features, and different levels of analysis. In his research, he acknowledged the earlier works of Shibutani (1955, 1961) and Strauss (1961, 1978) who provided a theoretical basis for his understanding of the, "unique character of social worlds as a unit of social organization" (Unruh 1980, p. 276). He noted that social worlds occur without any powerful centralized authority structure, but included, "...an amorphous and diffuse constellation of actors, organizations, events, and practices which have coalesced into spheres of interest and involvement for participants" (Unruh 1979, p. 115).

The social worlds of serious leisure groups such as marathon runners are highly identifiable by their own unique and distinct set of norms, values, beliefs, behaviors, styles, communication mediums, moral principles, performance standards, and language (Green & Jones, 2005; Hastings, Kurth, Schloder & Cyr, 1995; Kane & Zink, 2004). As a result, there exists a distinct association between the distinguishable characteristics found in serious leisure and the unique ethos of a social world (Jones & Symon, 2001). To further diversify social worlds, numerous subgroups or subworlds have been found to exist within any social world, which may also have their own unique ethos (Hastings et al., 1995; Kyle & Chick, 2002).

Unruh (1980) described a social world as consisting of four different levels: actors, events, practices, and formal organisations. *Actors* are people who belong to a variety of social worlds that exist in a fluid, evolving process over their lifetime. Within social worlds, there are four kinds of social actors, each identified by its relative closeness to the activities and knowledge vital to the continuance of the social world. Closest in proximity are *insiders* who organise the activities and hold the knowledge central to their social world. Nearby to insiders are *regulars* who are the consistent participants committed to the continuation of their social world. Next are the *tourists* who limit their involvement in the social world to entertainment, profit, and diversion. Finally, *strangers* influence some aspect of the social world yet, they are not directly involved in the interests of the social world itself (Unruh, 1979).

Events are seen as personal occurrences important to people who are involved in a social world. They can be planned events that are organized to attract members of specific social worlds, such as the X Games, which focus on extreme sport participants. Practices relate to when members of social worlds meet, participate in clubs, correspond, travel to events, and/or buy and sell items of value. There is also a symbolic and ritualistic dimension to social worlds, including signs of membership and status, and prescribed or desired ways of speaking and doing things. The last level, formal organisations play a role in shaping social worlds and facilitating networks among members. These organizations include governing bodies and associations that are often hierarchical in nature; events that cater to special interests, and publications focused on special interests.

Participation in the social world of a specific leisure activity is often influenced by the actors' social circle that may include workmates, family, and friends (Burch, 2009), which offer opportunities to interact, socialize, and compete in an environment based on mutual interests. As a result, new friendships are formed and serious leisure often extends into the everyday lives of participants and becomes part of each other's social world (Kim & Heo, 2009). Characteristics of this phenomenon include a strong sense of commitment and identification with the leisure activity, and a sense of belonging to a social group that recognizes and rewards efforts of its participants (Raisborough, 2006). Indeed, a serious leisure activity can become so central to participants' lives that it forms the basis for their personal and collective identity (Getz & Andersson, 2010).

The social world perspective has provided the basis for exploring the nature of adult participation in a number of serious leisure activities. Bryan (1977, 1979) argued that recreationalists can be, "arranged along a continuum of experience and commitment to the sport from the beginning recreationalist to the specialist, that distinctively different preferences attend sportsmen at different levels" (1979, p. 31). That is, he developed a recreationalist typology based on the degree of involvement. Scott and Godbey (1992, 1994) also examined specialization as it related to the social world of contract bridge players. These authors found that bridge players used terms such as "social" or "serious" as a frame of reference in defining what constitutes legitimate bridge activity, and in determining what type of people are acceptable to play bridge. The authors concluded that social and serious sub-worlds differed in terms of each having highly developed culture areas with their own practices, sanctions, and recruitment processes. These separate paths loosely conform to the dichotomy of "serious" and "unserious" leisure as proposed by Stebbins (1992).

Marathon Runners as a Unique Social World

Marathon runners are part of a number of social worlds of participants who compete as a form of serious leisure, which is often based on personal dedication and physical effort. Many voluntarily expose themselves to physical suffering through rigorous training, demanding schedules, and careful diets that extend well beyond that required for general health and fitness. Agreeing to meet these many demands may open participants to a unique ethos and a particular social world.

Participation in marathon running has increased considerably over the last two decades. For example, when the Honolulu Marathon began in 1973, it attracted 167 participants. By 2006, the participation rate increased exponentially to 28,637; and by 2012, the entry field had further increased to reach 30,898 entries, of which 16,067 were from Japan. Race result data from other international marathons supports this trend with typically between 10% and 20% of the field made up of international competitors from countries other than where the event was staged (Funk & Bruun, 2006; Olbering & Jisha, 2005). The 2012 Honolulu Marathon had the second largest number of entrants in 15 years, and the second largest in America for 2012, only exceeded by the Chicago Marathon (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honolulu_Marathon).

Several researchers have studied marathon runners from a social-psychological perspective. Murray (1985) was one of the first to describe the marathon as a social event and to point out that long-distance runners commonly identified with a unique group that were common in sport tourism. Motivational segmentation was used by Chalip and McGuirty (2004), to identify four segments of the entrants for Gold Coast Marathon that they named: (1) dedicated runners, (2) running tourists, (3) active runners, and (4) runners who shop. The segments developed by Ogles and Masters (2003) were centered more on the factors that motivate people to train for, and compete in a marathon. From their study of participants in a Midwestern marathon in the United States, Ogles and Masters (2003) described distance runners as participating for their health, social, and psychological (self-esteem), as well as for personal achievement.

An auto-ethnographic account by McCarville (2007) used serious leisure as the framework for describing his running trajectory and career and the personal meanings for triathletes. He discussed different social worlds in the triathlon community and developed a "social map" to make sense of the community, describing the key players, locations of events, and how to function as a community member. Shipway and Jones (2007) employed a quasi-ethnographic methodology to explore experiences and related meanings of participants in a running event and

concluded that participants took a serious, almost professional approach to the event as shown by their training, attitude, and preparation. Although running occurred mainly in isolation, the event provided access to a "social environment of like-minded people" (p. 377), and by traveling to this event, runners were able to "undergo an identity transformation …and become serious, almost professional runners" (p. 378). In these environments, runners were able to "zone out," or have what Turner (1969) termed as having a liminal experience, whereby they crossed a threshold from an everyday reality into a realm where an identity temporarily takes on that of a like-minded community, or *communitas.*

Shipway et al. (2007) advocated the need for qualitative research to address the need for a greater understanding of the training and preparation routines, as well as the lived experiences of participants in the months leading up to a marathon event. Consequently, their paper challenged the dominant forms of quantitative leisure and sport representations (Henderson, 2011) through the use of an ethnographic examination of marathon runners training for, and ultimately participating in the 2008 Gold Coast Marathon. In adopting a qualitative approach, this study has helped to provide an understanding and explanation of marathoners' experiences and their behavior patterns.

In summary, a social world provides opportunities to interact, to socialize, to form new friendships, and to develop a strong sense of dedication and physical effort based on the mutual interests and identification with a sport. Among those training for a marathon, motives relate to improving the runner's health, social, and psychological feelings (such as increased self-esteem), as well as to help increase their level of personal achievement. Although these studies have identified some of their motives for participation, there is a need for further studies that provide a deeper understanding of marathoners' training and preparation schedules before and during the actual race.

Methods

This study builds on the work of Shipway (2008), Shipway and Jones (2007), and Shipway and Holloway (2010) by further exploring and explaining the sociocultural dimensions associated with the serious leisure pursuit of marathon running and the related social worlds of its participants. Similar to the research methodology of Shipway (2008) and Shipway and Jones (2007), ethnographic methods were used in this study. That is, a qualitative approach was used to explore the way that "…people make sense of their social worlds" (Deacon, Pickering, Golding, & Murdoch, 1999, p. 6), and to understand social reality from the perspective of the participants who were training for a marathon. Observing the research participants in a natural setting and engaging with the serious leisure and social world phenomena under investigation helps to better understand the culture and meaning that underpins them (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). This enabled the researchers to enter the runners' experience and systematically document the moment-to-moment details of this serious leisure activity within a cultural context and, through immersion, to explore the meanings that participants' gave to their cultural environment (Collinson, 2008; Collinson & Hockey, 2007).

The marathoners of focus were novice runners training for, and ultimately completing the 2008 Gold Coast Marathon. The inaugural Gold Coast Marathon, which was first staged in 1979, attracted 124 starters (Funk & Bruun, 2006); however, by 2012, the 42.2km event drew a record 5,749 participants, of whom 5,094 completed the race, breaking Australia's record for the most participants finishing a marathon which was set in Melbourne two years previously (http://www.goldcoast.com.au/article/2012/07/02/428525_gold-coast-marathon.html). As such, the Gold

Coast Marathon is an attractive event for first-time marathoners residing in the Australian state of Queensland as well as novices from northern New South Wales.

The primary research method adopted for the study was an ethnographic participant-as-observer field role. This is distinct from participant observation, because the researcher is accepted as an "emic" member of the community, is on more equal terms with the research participants and results in greater accuracy and objectivity (Babchuk, 1962). This approach has been used in previous studies in the field of serious leisure (see Scott et al., 1992, p. 52) and particularly benefits from the emic position of the researcher (i.e., a description of behavior or a belief in terms which is meaningful to the actor, and comes from a person within the culture). Hence, the participant-as-observer perspective has benefits not realised by participant observation, or what auto-ethnographic research provides (see McCarville, 2007; Collinson, 2008; Collinson & Hockey, 2007).

Research Participants

Six research participants were recruited and purposively sampled via the authors' sporting networks. Each was given a pseudonym for the purposes of reporting the study. Three research participants were part of an organized running group; a married couple in their early 40s (Jacob and Karen), and a middle-aged man (Paul) in his early 50s (Table 1). Jacob and Karen were both active sportspeople but had never previously attempted long-distance running. About five years before this study, Paul had run a marathon without training properly resulting in an "unrewarding and unpleasant experience." These participants were recruited via their association with a regular group run that was organised by the social club arm of a runners' store, which the participants, and hence researchers, referred to as "the shop." These three participants will be called the "group runners." Data were collected by a researcher who trained with, and ultimately completed the Gold Coast Marathon (GCM) with this group.

Alternatively, three research participants who were not training with a group were recruited. They consisted of a middle-aged man in his mid-40s (Gary), who trained alone, and two young men (Simon and Charles) who were in their late 20s and early 30s, respectively, who lived in the same area and often trained together though from time to time they ran individually. Like the group runners, Gary, Simon, and Charles all had social sporting backgrounds; Simon and Charles in particular had been enthusiastic triathletes in the past. They are referred to as "individual runners." Data were collected by another researcher, who through injury was unable to train for the GCM, but who immersed herself in the training regime of the "individual runners" by joining them on their runs and riding alongside on a bicycle.

Methods of Data Collection

Two methods of qualitative data collection were used; field work participant-as-observer via immersion and recorded as field note journals and periodic semi-structured in-depth interviews. The researchers achieved this by being actively engaged in training with research participants, and by participating in the 2008 Gold Coast Marathon as a participant and spectator respectively. Such active involvement allowed the two researchers an emic perspective and to be at the center of what Morgan and Watson (2007) described as an "extraordinary experience." These were experiences that simply cannot be replicated by passively observing the event, and therefore making them uniquely distinctive and incredibly intense. The choice of this method is justified for the researchers' situation, as they were both runners who participated in distance running and numerous other sporting activities on a regular basis, and as serious leisure participants. Table 2 provides an overview of the time frame and themes explored for each study.

Table 1

Research Participants

	Group Runners	**Individual Runners**
Pseudonym **(Gender/Approx. age)**	Paul (M/50)	Simon (M/30)
	Karen (F/40)	Gary (M/45)
	Jacob (M/40)	Charles (M/30)

Table 2

Outline of Research Methods and Timeline

Method **Timeframe**	**Participant observation and reflective field notes (immersion)**	**Semi-structured interviews (key probing themes)**
April	Training begins	Motivations
May	Training intensifies	Attitude and behavioral changes
June	Training tapers	Anticipation
July (6th)	Race day	Nil
July	Post-race	Reflections

The predominant research method adopted was participant-as-observer and immersion. Fieldwork occurred at training sessions and social events, beginning from recruitment that co-incided with the beginning of the 12-week traditional marathon training program, and continued until race day and the recovery sessions post-race. The researchers adopted the roles of the "insider" and joined their nominated groups during training sessions, as well as at the beginning of the actual marathon event. This participant observation, which totalled from up to 30 in-the-field contacts between researchers and participants over the study timeline, also involved rapport building and informal dialogue. This approach resulted in a reflective collection of narratives and an analysis of participant behaviors and experiences, which were later recorded in field note journals. The journals were supplemented with other opportunistic communications such as by emails, blog entries, telephone conversations, social events and chance meetings with the six runners.

To complement the field work observations, and to increase the dependability and trust-worthiness of the data (Henderson, 2006, 2011), semi-structured in-depth interviews were also conducted with the research participants at several points during their preparation for the GCM. These interviews explored themes identified from the observations and were conducted eight weeks before the event, four weeks before the event, in the week prior to the event, and directly

after the event. Each interview ranged in length from 35 to 90 minutes. An important aim of the interviews was to shed light on and explain differences that may be occurring in the participants' behavior and attitudes at different points in the preparation for the marathon event. As the interviews were designed to build on the field work observation method, a standard interview protocol was developed before the interviews took place. These interview protocols were developed from themes identified from two sources: (a) from the researchers' observations of participant behaviors during the training sessions, and; (b) the literature.

Literature sources were used for ensuring that the themes explored in this study were able to expand on findings from previous studies. To further enhance the credibility, dependability and trustworthiness of the data, the researchers met regularly during the study to discuss the performance of the interview protocol, to ensure consistency and to review the structure and meaning of questions as the training schedule and the study matured (Henderson, 2006). To add to these issues of validity and reliability, the passive author supervised the management and analysis of the data which will be described in the next section. Table 3 provides a snapshot of the interview protocol.

Table 3

Interview Protocol

Key Theme	Sample Questions
Reasons for Running	• What are your reasons for running? • How has your training changed over the course of training?
Clothing/Equipment	• Have you purchased items specifically in preparation for the marathon? • How many shoes do you own/run in? • What do you plan to wear on race day?
Dedication	• How do you feel when you miss a training session? • What have you sacrificed for training to achieve the goal of completing a marathon? • Have you taken up memberships associated with running?
Health Management	• Are you becoming more conscious about your diet and nutrition choices? • Are sleep patterns changing? • Do you take time to stretch?
Competitiveness	• Do you feel competitive towards other people you train with? • When you run in races, do you feel competitive?
Post-race goals	• After the marathon what are your sporting or leisure goals?

Themes of interest such as "identification as a runner" and "identification with group norms and behaviors" were not directly asked but rather probed for in the semi-structured interviews. For example, the researchers probed for how the participant gained credibility from other runners as well as from the researchers, behaviors that defined the participants as long distance runners or to "gain membership" and language that was adopted. A critical aspect of the interviews was to use a consistent protocol so that changes in attitude and behaviour over the 12 weeks of

training and preparation could be recorded. It was reasoned that the group runners would reveal attitudes and behaviors that would be indicative of a range of socialization processes or social worlds of long distance runners, while for the individual runners socialization would be less apparent.

Data Analysis

Immediately following the last post-race interviews and the final entries into the field note journals all of the data sources were collated. The first phase of the field note journaling analysis was based on Strauss and Corbin's (1998), and Corbin and Strauss's (2008) three stages of analysis. This "open" stage of coding and analysis was manifest in the handwritten notes, memos, and other communication records ascribed to each of the six research participants as they were committed to the journal. Subsequently, the interview data totalled 470 pages of double-spaced dialogue. Given the huge quantity of data, NVIVO® was used to manage these sources.

Following the open stage, "axial" coding was conducted (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The axial coding began with identification of keywords from the literature, which had informed the interview protocol. Other key words were identified from the prompts and key concepts used as themes and probes during the interviews. Additional ones were identified during this software-facilitated analysis. In the final step of the analysis "selective" coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), key themes relating to the research problem were distilled. During this deductive and iterative process, themes were interpreted and reinterpreted by moving from the literature, to the field notes to the interview transcripts. Finally, these themes were interpreted using Unruh's (1979; 1980) "social world levels" framework.

Reported in the next section are the findings that are based on the interview protocol (see Table 3). In particular, comparisons between the group runners and the individual runners are presented. More complete analysis, using Unruh's (1979; 1980) four-level social actors framework has been provided in the discussion section. Across many of the research questions there were differences between the groups, but there were also a number of similarities. Moreover, changes in attitudes and behaviors were apparent across the period of the study, both in terms of commitment to the GCM event and also regarding immersion into their social world.

Results

This section reports the results of the study in terms of the sociocultural dimensions of the social world of the marathoner, and in particular how the two groups evolved over the 12-week study period. For the purposes of comparison, an (I) was placed in brackets for the comments made by runners who ran individually, and a (G) beside the comments from group runners. Four major themes were identified and we simply labelled them as: (1) Belongingness, (2) Artefacts, (3) Training, and (4) Health.

Belongingness

A pervasive theme in the study was a gradual process of taking on the identity of a marathon runner, or a sense of belonging, which was ultimately requited at the GCM. Early in the study, novices such as Gary (I) happily shunned running groups because, "I prefer probably running on my own…probably the last thing I feel like doing is having a pleasant chat to somebody!" Questions about ability created disquiet around acceptance when joining a group. "I just want to run within my own limits," said Karen (G). Over the course of the 12-week training period, however, the novices increasingly discovered new benefits from joining in the group or train-

ing in pairs. "I think there's an anxiety level that was for me about performance…I knew that I wouldn't be able to run as fast as a lot of people, but in a reality, it's just a big spectrum of people that run and where you fit doesn't really matter," remarked Paul (G).

A sense of camaraderie soon developed, which manifested itself at training, at races and in other social activities. Jacob (G) stated that, "I love the atmosphere…all the people." Cheering others on, even strangers, at training also enhanced this sense of belonging and community. In particular, Paul (G) developed a strong allegiance with Karen: "She helped me early on in the year when we're doing some runs…and she would always wait for me." Camaraderie extended beyond training to race days. At an official half-marathon the group ran as part of their preparation for the GCM, the researcher immersed himself in the group, and often ran with Paul (G) and Karen (G) at training because he "chose to run with Karen [as she] was struggling" toward the end of the race, despite the "exhilaration of running past folk [runners] at this stage."

Training sessions were often followed by a ritual coffee at a café. A movie night was organised to see the release of the cult comedy, *Run Fat Boy, Run,* and a pre-race carbo-loading pasta night was also popular. These events formed the basis of many of the participants' social lives. Paul (G) elaborated on the social dimension when he stated, "So our night-out equivalent is a Sunday morning breakfast after a long run. That's our social event of the weekend, you know." Simon (I) and Charles (I), the non-group runners, soon forged a dependent relationship. Simon (I) admitted that he was not "well organised," and depended on his training partner to train regularly, and to focus on his running despite many other competing sporting priorities. This suggests that although Simon and Charles mainly saw themselves as individual runners in the beginning, they soon developed a dependent relationship (a dyad) that for both of them was beneficial and powerful.

On the GCM race day, the researcher joined the research participants and the other club runners who had become close during the training program, at both the shop's tent and in the marshalling area moments before the starting gun sounded. It was a mutual relief to all that we were there to support each other before the race began. Paul (G) explained, "It was a grounding thing, about finding some familiar faces…home base, somewhere to put the bag, feel comfortable and relaxed." At the end of the race, unique spaces served as markers for belonging. Jacob (G) recalls, "as soon as you got out of that [post-race finishing] area, you kinda miss it, so you come back in… they're the people that can really relate to what you've just done and because you've done the training…you've been through a lot as well with them…it would've been a lot different to not had anybody over that finish line, to just get over there myself."

Completion of the GCM cauterized their identity: "I always classify myself as a runner, an injured runner," revealed Paul (G) after the event, obviously in discomfort. Karen (G) elatedly boasted, "I'll have to say I am a runner. I've done a marathon," Belongingness to the group was ultimately translated into belongingness, articulated through identify, to a larger community of long distance runners of whom they now felt a part.

Artefacts

Membership was mobilised by the embracing of the physical artefacts of the running social world and the values they embodied. This was a pervasive theme that was identified in the analysis. Interestingly, the body itself was seen as an artefact. Males especially, ostentatiously performed pre- and post-training stretches, rolling around theatrically on towels and baring limbs in extended poses. Visceral artefacts such as sweat and even tears, were accepted as part of the runner's world landscape. Simon (I) experienced a teary outburst after completing the GCM but

this drew little attention. Liniments, sprays, and carbohydrate gels were ubiquitous at training and events. The researcher was even offered a lubricant to ease the chaffing of his nipples from Paul (G). Clothing was chosen to accentuate and reveal the "runner's body." Jacob stated, "When I played footy we used to laugh at those wankers [runners] in tight short shorts."

Clothing was a revelatory theme. Dress codes changed over the course of the 12-week training program. Early in the training program, Gary shared, "On this morning's run, I actually wore a shirt that I usually go fishing in." However, after a couple weeks into their training schedule, both Jacob (G) and Karen (G) noted, "We saw people who run in their skins[1], because we just bought them too." Membership articulated on race day to the shop as well. Paul, Jacob, and Karen decided to wear the shop club singlets the night before the GCM. Paul (G) commented on his decision to wear a singlet, "I'm happy that it's on in this finishing photo, it's the club."

Initially, the marathon novices were not particularly mindful of the apparel and where they purchased their shoes and accessories. The researcher observed that at the beginning of the season there was much mixed apparel and the tri-athletes could be distinguished from the women who wore the gym and aerobic lycra outfits, etc. while the bonafide runners wore the "trophies"of past events – most notably t-shirts from other marathons or ultra-marathons, such as the South African iconic event, "Comrades." Gradually, more of the group runners adopted the normative apparel of the running group. Paul remarked, almost caustically, "This is the first time I've seen you in club colours, mate," to the researcher toward the end of the training regime. Here is evident the conditionality of membership to a social world. All the runners (both individual and group) understood the value of having their shoes fitted by a specialist by the end of the season and increasingly patronised the shop to which the social running club was attached.

There were also idiosyncratic in-group attitudes toward running accessories. Heart rate monitors and global positioning satellites became a fad for the group runners during this period, and toward the end of the 12-week training program, many of the group runners wore them and shared personal race data via the shop's online portal, which was established to link together the group runners. Interestingly, Charles and Simon, who through their previous exposure to the triathlete community, did not typically use these when training together. On the other hand, the wearing of ipods and earphones, although popular with recreational runners, was stigmatised during training and even during races by both individual and group runners.

Dedication

Endurance events intrinsically demand dedication and sacrifices. Typically, the group runners began the program with the knowledge that they did not really have to think about their training programs. For the group runners, a 12-week training schedule was set by the social runners club attached to the shop. The group runners strictly adhered to training schedules and could recite their distances and times. This provided the group runners with the security of only having to focus on their running. On the other hand, the individual runners initially articulated detailed and demanding schedules such as, "I'll do that up to December… we will continue to build on endurance and speed work," related Charles (I). Simon (I), Charles' training partner, illustrated that the rhetoric about planning was probably mostly bravado. "I don't really follow schedules so much." Nonetheless, all the runners demonstrated a strong commitment to their training regimes.

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[1] Skins are a lycra-based fitted sports apparel with supposed therapeutic properties that were becoming a fashionable athlete's choice at the time.

The atmosphere of training sessions began to change as the race day approached. Simon (I) illustrated this shift in intensity toward training, beginning from the first few sessions, "When we ran along chatting, telling jokes and stuff like that" to just two weeks before the race when the training really increased in its intensity, "I'm getting excited. I was looking at the race maps [online] today." Paul (G) added, "I think there's an incremental motivation with the group activity which is good. It's incrementally easier…that other people are doing it as well." All of the participants mentioned sacrifices in the context of personal relationships, with both significant others and parents. Simon (I) stated, "It's hard. You have to have a pretty good understanding with your partner, or whatever," while Gary (I) admitted that, "What I sacrificed was I guess doing certain things…with family or friends." These sacrifices were tempered by the support of family and significant others. "Dad was fantastic…he just turned up [at GCM] out of the blue", recalls Karen (G). These sacrifices helped to mitigate the risk: "I don't ever have that contemplation that I'm going to stop," stated Paul (G). Otherwise, one of the runners expressed his commitment by his recruiting of strangers. "I'm now talking to a guy who runs; he's actually a solicitor and also a personal friend of ours… he's now starting to run with us on Thursday mornings," recalled Paul (G).

However, the individual runners were reticent to sacrifice other leisure pursuits despite acknowledging the personal risks. Gary (I) stated, "I played indoor soccer last Sunday…that really wasn't the best thing to do in the world…but it's all part of my social life." As the GCM event approached, the sacrifices seemed distant. All of the runners eagerly anticipated the event with statements such as, "Yeah. I just don't want it to be over but I just want it to be here," stated Karen (G). Charles (I) reported "a sense of euphoria" and many of the participants spoke of "highs," "adrenaline," and "endorphins." These emotions and physiological expressions no doubt compensated for the sacrifices that they made.

The participants generally became increasingly competitive over the course of the program. Runners became obsessed with their personal bests (PBs). The couple, Karen (G) and Jacob (G) had always planned to run together as "we have always done the first one together", they said, referring to other sporting pursuits like bicycle races. An interesting dimension was the target race times that the runners set for themselves. Initially, some runners set very ambitious goals, "I'll probably go three hours 20 or 25 minutes," said Charles (I), which was a reasonably fast time for a novice runner. Other runners were far more modest and accurate about their targets as it transpired. Karen (G) suggested, "If I do anything under four hours 30, I'd still be really happy!" Some even set post-race goals. Paul (G) felt confident that "When the kids are a little bit older…I will target an international marathon and do it as a bit of a holiday thing…I think a famous one like, I don't know, New York," one you don't need to qualify for," he chuckled. Regardless, commitment, expressed as goal setting and targets was found to increase throughout the program.

Health

General health and well-being was a key motivator for deciding to run a marathon for most of the participants. However, aspects of health and well-being became increasingly more obsessive during the course of the training regime: "I still would like to get four or five kilos off before the marathon." Paul (G) added that, "Recently I have an annual health check…I've lost eight centimetres off my waist measurement and 10 kilograms overall," One of the researchers who became immersed with the group runners also noted that on occasions, overweight runners were derided as "slappers," suggesting that there was a stigma attached to being overweight, or "untidy," within the running community, which may have driven the obsessions noted here. Alcohol was also seen as a taboo; the researcher sensed judgemental glances at a runners' social

event when he ordered a second glass of red wine. This revealed a certain censure regarding acceptable behaviors when in the social world of the runner.

All participants demonstrated sound nutritional knowledge which improved even further as the GCM date approached. They became increasingly reliant on various resources for nutritional information, such as runner magazines and online running websites. The group runners actually attended a nutritional seminar, organised by the social running club's host shop. Attendance at this seminar inspired Karen (G) to "jump onto a website…they've got a fantastic resource on nutrition." The runners began to start counting kilojoules, and this became a point of discussion at the post-training breakfasts. Karen enthused, "you have to eat within 30 minutes of sustained exercise." In the days before the GCM race day, carbo loading was the dominant mantra, with runners sharing with each other the various quantities of pasta or rice that they had consumed. This was something of a paradox when compared to the frugal diets the participants adopted at the beginning of their training program.

On the other hand, all runners were acutely aware of the risk of injury and its impact on their training. Participants spoke authoritatively, sometimes boastfully as if they were "badges of honour," about various ailments from the "plantar fascia" to a "very high foot arch," "shin splints," "hamstrings," "bursitis," and "spurs." Interestingly, some injury management strategies seemed to be superficial. For instance, after the group runners trained, "…everyone walked over to that fence and started doing some stretches, but it didn't seem to me that they were really stretches," reflected Jacob (G). Injury anxiety really escalated during the week before the race. Simon (I) added, "I mean, even if I do get injured, I'd still run the race anyway." This type of bravado statement expressed the anxiety associated with not being able to race, which indirectly perhaps, distanced the injured runner from his/her social world. As a result, the group runners increasingly gravitated toward the shop so as to consult professionals in regard to their injuries. Paul (G) stated that as a precaution before the race, "I was actually in the shop yesterday just getting some [running shoe] inserts," As Paul continued, "I think the shop is obviously very commercial," which raised an interesting point that shall be picked up in the following discussion.

Discussion

A serious leisure activity such as marathon running can become so central to the participants' lives that it forms the basis for their personal and collective identity (Getz & Andersson, 2010), or as described by Unruh (1980) as their unique social world. Unruh (1980) described a social world as consisting of four different levels—actors, events, practices, and formal organisations, which will be further discussed in the section below based on the data collected from the novice runners. These social world levels provide the basis for exploring the nature of marathon runners in this study as a serious leisure activity. Our analysis focuses on a trend that was emerging from the findings that belongingness and its marker artefacts, and commitment which was often expressed via a health and well-being consciousness, evolved over the course of the 12-week training program, as the runners became immersed, as members of the social world of the serious leisure pursuit of marathon running.

Actors

Actors are people who belong to a variety of social worlds that exist in a fluid, evolving process over their lifetime (Unruh, 1979). Implicit in these statements is that ability, unlike Scott and Godbey's (1992) study of bridge players, initially served as a perceived barrier for gaining group membership, but over the course of the training program, the ability to complete a marathon

became far more important than the time and/or performances at training and lead-up races. This was not to say that the novices did not set targets, or were competitive, but that it was the regularity of participation, rather than the quality that gained them entry into the social world. Unruh (1979) describes four types of actors. Clearly, the group runners were *regulars,* but none spoke of themselves, or described others as *insiders*. Indeed, only indirect reference was made to *insiders*, in terms of them setting the norms and values of the group, for example they established acceptable dress codes and running protocol, such as not running with iPods on. There was a group ethos evident, manifest in strong camaraderie, and a shared loyalty value system that developed after a few months that reflected previous leisure (Kyle & Chick, 2002), and long-distance running research (Shipway & Jones, 2007). The group runners adopted the artefacts of the social world and their membership to the social world was galvanised via their completion of the GCM.

On the other hand it is difficult to characterize the individual runners as wholly *regulars* although it is clear they are not *insiders*. One could argue that they occupy a space somewhere between *regulars* and *tourists*—that is, actors who seek diversion and entertainment, perhaps even "social" profit, and regulars. They clearly did behave like the *regulars*, participating without inhibition at lead-up races and on race day, in the procurement of various artefacts and through information-gathering behaviors. The litmus test is that the broader social world of the marathon runner would be far more difficult to maintain, certainly on the scale that this paper describes in the context of a major marathon, without the regular participation of the individual runners, whether those in this study or similar runners in the community who aspire to compete in a major event.

Significant others and family marks those individuals, some of whom had attended the GCM as *strangers*. This relates to Burch's (2009) findings that socialisation and support by parents and others is an important determinant of adult leisure styles. Finally, while individuals were not directly identified, employees from the shop could be considered to be *tourists*, since their agenda was to intersect with the fringes of the social world for commercial purposes. In this sense, social worlds for serious leisure participants cannot be conceived as insular and impermeable from other social dynamics, and indeed, as identified by Chalip and McGuirty (2004), an understanding of the role of actors has commercial implications.

Events

Events are seen as personal occurrences that are important to people who are involved in a social world (Unruh, 1979). Of greater interest, and perhaps illuminating the roles of the actors are the myriad events within which members of the extended social world coalesce. The pivotal event in this study was the GCM, which for novice runners was the "holy grail," the focal point of their ambition, the driver and catalyst for their commitment and dedication and indeed, the raison d'être for entering into the orbit of the marathon runners social world (see Shipway & Jones, 2008), and only completion of the event helped to cauterise their identity (Getz & Andersson, 2010) as "marathon runners." Using Bryan's (1979, 1980) typology of specialization, we observed the sequential development of these runners who have moved from the novice or beginner category, to become more specialized displaying extensive commitment, while noting impediments (Scott & Shafer, 2001) and by so doing reaching their pre-established goal or "pinnacle" of finally running a marathon.

Actors immersed themselves to different extents in the race weekend, with members of the group staying in paid accommodations on the Gold Coast the night before and after the GCM, and brought with them both friends and relatives who spent the day as spectators at

the event, while the individual runners day-tripped with some accompanied by their partners. The club and the shop set up a tent for its members to use as a meeting point and to leave their bags. Thus, the race itself brought together the referential *insiders*, the group and individual runners as *regulars*, *tourists*, and various *strangers* (Unruh, 1979), who all contributed to the events' *communitas* (Turner, 1969). The group runners described liminal spaces (Chalip, 2006) at the GCM, as demarcated places that various actors might consider themselves to be at ease. Otherwise regular races, used as lead-ups to the GCM, were where the social worlds of the participants in this study were fused together.

For all runners, training was the most common occurrence. This provided the platform for the "social training" (see Green & Jones, 2005) required to develop the normative behaviors and practices that defined the distinctiveness of their social world. As evidenced by the camaraderie and encouragement, strong bonds were developed between the group runners (Raisborough, 2006). A commitment to the training regime mitigated the social risk associated with possible failure (Murray, 1985), and also lessened the physical risk (Collinson & Hockey, 2007), as evidenced by the almost obsessive concerns about their health and well-being that evolved over their demanding program of training. Interestingly, injury was a condition that befell two of the individual runners, Charles, who withdrew on race day, and Simon who persevered. Regardless, neither faced the prospect of social sanctions as they did not belong to a group.

Practices

Practices relate to when members of different social worlds meet, participate in clubs, correspond, travel to events, and/or buy and sell items of value (Unruh, 1979). This involves a range of practices for those that engender belongingness, to the adoption of the artefacts that mark the social world of the runner (or rejection of others), to various expressions of dedication and commitment, for instance, health and well-being which were apparent in the study.

While it has been postulated that a motivation for undertaking long-distance running was mainly for health and well-being (Axelsen & Robinson, 2009; Ogles & Masters, 2003), this study suggests that these values are shaped during immersion into the social world, and many behaviors are learnt during immersion into the social world and performed in accordance with its norms. For example, while there was initially an obsession with weight loss from some of the participants as highlighted by kilojoule counting-type behaviors towards the end of the program, and the dietary focus shifting toward "fuelling-the-athlete" behaviors, for instance carbo-loading.

Apparently, some practices are only acceptable within the environs of the social world. Bodily affects, as Waitt and Frazer (2012) described, are performative emotions that allow members of a social world to better understand and to develop relationships. The extended discourses related to injury, nutrition, diet, and general health within the context of running "performance" serve as dialogical examples but with a tolerance of various bodily visceral dimensions such as contact between sweaty bodies, and the sharing of lubricants, amplify the evolving intimacies inherent to sharing in the social world of a marathon runner. Moreover, the various emotional highs, like Charles' "euphoria," and anxieties, for example the risk of injury shared amongst the participants and researchers,were indicative of emotive practices that evolved during socialization into the world of the runner. Mobilizing various artefacts, whether medicinal or dietary, relieved anxieties, such as those associated with treating injury (Shipway & Holloway, 2010).

Previous research suggests that idiosyncratic behaviors were significantly shaped across the period of immersion into a single event (Shipway & Jones, 2007), but this study highlights the process of them being "learnt" via the training program. These practices became conditioned, for example, stretching routines often provided opportunities to chat and destress after working

out. So, too. was the conformity associated with adopting the "dress code" of the social world, the process of acquiring specialized equipment, whether running shoes or personalised electronic gadgets, and the rejection of artefacts that do not align with social world practices. Thus, these practices were functional in terms of the norms that denoted membership. Practices were embraced that are commensurate with increased dedication. The personal sacrifices made along the way, particularly in respect to personal relationships (Baldwin & Ellis, 1999), were compensated for by closer interpersonal relationships with members of the social world, manifest in camaraderie—a value of loyalty to the group. The training sessions in particular provided the framework for "key encounters" (McCarville, 2007) and to shape the participants' understanding of social world practices. However, several examples serve to illustrate that *regular* status comes with costs as well as benefits. For instance the benefits of a regular training regime are tempered by the necessity of being there, even on cold and rainy mornings, or withstanding that sideways glance when indulging in a second glass of wine at a social event.

Formal Organizations

Formal organizations play a role in shaping the runner's social world and to facilitate networks among its members (Unruh, 1979). These organizations include governing bodies and associations that are often hierarchical in nature; events that cater to special interests, and publications focused on special interests. Various small organizations play key roles in shaping the runners' social world, even if indirectly. Organizations from online entities to publishers of running magazines, even manufacturers of various artefacts, as discussed previously, impacted on the social world of the participants and their immersion into it. As recognized in the literature, various media channels performed an important function not just for the dissemination of information, but also in facilitating contact within the social world between events (Stebbins, 2007).

Formal events [such as the GCM] are usually managed by organizations, and these are generally respected in the social world community. Much depends on the organisers of these hallmark events in terms of shaping and maintaining of these social worlds. The GCM, as an organization, was at the very epicenter of the social world of the study's participants. Participation in the GCM was the target they strived for; the catalyst for their emergent belongingness; the reason for their dedication, which was expressed through some obsessive behaviors; and their adoption of the artefacts of the marathon running serious leisure pursuit.

The group runners in particular increasingly gravitated toward particular organizations, for example, retailers and clinics, marking them as key elements of their social world. This introduces an interesting finding from this study, although not one completely alien to the literature (see Chalip & McGuirty, 2004). While other studies have conceived of the running club as a hub organization for long-distance runners (see Shipway, Holloway, & Jones, 2012) this study indicates that a commercial entity within which a social running club is nested, can blur the boundaries between marathon running as a serious leisure activity and commerce. Specifically the store's role was to facilitate the group runners' activities which helped to legitimize tourists becoming insiders. Secondly, it provided several related and pivotel roles such as arranging events, and providing artefacts. This finding added a localized dimension to the political intrigue revealed in other marathon studies (Sudgen, 2007). Indeed, the shop was continually considering ways that it could provide additional services to the community, such as coaching clinics and sessions for beginners, school-age children, and even for social world members who wanted to compete in triathlons. These diversification strategies inevitably drew sectors of the community into the serious commerce of serious leisure.

Conclusion

This study uses the social world and serious leisure theoretical concepts, and by applying a qualitative mixed-method approach, specifically an ethnographic participant-as-observer field role utilizing personal interviews, observations, and ad hoc communications, to gain a deeper insight into the experiences and social worlds of a set of novice runners who were preparing to run a marathon. In particular, this study has sought to identify, utilizing Unruh's (1979, 1980) four levels of social worlds, markers that help to further develop our understanding of the process of socialization and acceptance into the social world of the marathon runner, through the club and as individual runners. This was observed through a range of behavioral and attitudinal characteristics, or practices, which broadly fitted Stebbins' (1992, 1997, 2007) conceptualisation of serious leisure. These have been discussed in the paper but in summary, several points of salience have emerged from the analysis.

Perhaps most evident is a confirmation of Unruh's (1979, 1980) conceptualization, with the analysis suggesting a fluid and multidirectional movement between actors and organizations and at specific events. All the research participants were in the formative stages of their serious leisure running careers, yet clearly immersion into the social world for group runners accelerated their career trajectory (McCarville, 2007). Identity, or belongingness, harnessed a range of practices, artefacts, and organizational influences and were manifest at an array of different training programs and events. Sustained contact over the 12-week training period with these various markers of the social world resulted in at least regular status for actors in the social world, regardless of ability, which had previously been a presumed asset in gaining membership (Scott & Godbey, 1992). Resultant are a range of durable benefits derived for the runners, including self-fulfilment and self-development (Shipway, Holloway, & Jones, 2012), as evidenced in their comments, which were made after completing the GCM. The dedication required to prepare for a marathon is an intriguing paradox that shows itself through self-obsession, sacrifice, yet at the same time extreme loyalty to the group, and belongingness that assists in diffusing the social (Murray, 1985), physical (Collinson & Hockey, 2007) and psychological risks (Shipway & Jones, 2007). This diffusion of risk however, is not without is costs, as is membership to any group.

Moreover, events such as the GCM, which can also be classified as an organization, facilitated transformative experiences for all participants at different levels, and not just the club members. The initial transformation is that the target event became the catalyst for engagement with the social world. Gradual immersion into the social world transformed the attitudes and behaviors of the participants such that they adopted the practices, norms, values, and resources, for instance, the physical artefacts and bodily affects (Waitt & Frazer, 2012) of the social world. Finally, at the event itself, identity transformation is fulfilled, as completion of the marathon vindicates bonafide membership. Participants indulged in this hard-earned membership by symbolically crossing and recrossing various thresholds—in the starting shute, crossing the finish line, or stepping in and out of the recovery area for instance, these being temporarily defined as liminoid spaces (Chalip, 2006). The coalescing of the serious leisure actors, their practices at events as facilitated by organizations help to mobilize peak experiences and self- and social world identity.

An intriguing revelation of this study and a suggested area of future research is the commercialization of the group running club members' experiences via its associated shop. Clearly, organizations play an important role in maintaining the financial sustainability of events (Funk & Bruun, 2007; Chalip & McGuirty, 2004), and hence provide a forum for the articulation of so-

cial worlds. However, they also can become an agent in not only infiltrating, but also constructing the social worlds of serious leisure pursuits. By adopting a number of mechanisms, such as to establish social clubs, clinics, or sponsoring events, commercial entities might be able to draw serious leisure actors and aspirants into their orbit. It raises interesting questions as to who is in control of leisure experiences—individuals or institutions—and the power nexus generated by their respective interlocking roles. This blurring of the boundaries between the social and the commercial might also result in some interesting consequences, for example militating against the democratization of leisure. Arguably, this has occurred in the world of triathlon, where the pecuniary cost of entry that McCarville (2007) alludes to is prohibitive to some. This begs the question as to how one might separate motives of leisure for pleasure's sake from motives of self-gratuitous conspicuous consumption of social capital.

To conclude, in contrast to Scott and Godbey (1992), this study did not access intensely serious and committed serious leisure participants but instead focuses on novice and less serious amateur runners. While this paper draws on a large body of data collected in a variety of methods across a 12-week period, it is limited by its sample size and exploration of a single serious leisure pursuit. Nonetheless, by investigating the experiences of novice marathon runners through the prism of social worlds an intriguing paradox remains. While Paul was still in post-race euphoria, he admitted that his social world experience in pursuit of a serious leisure goal is what "you build your life around," yet he contrarily confirmed that solitude is the very essence of long distance running, saying, "Yeah, it's the loneliness of the long distance runner."

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