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Lost and Found: *parkrun*, work and identity

Abstract

This article develops new understandings of the weekly mass participation running event, *parkrun*. The popularity of *parkrun* has been understood in terms of counteracting sedentary lives and obesity and offering mental-health benefits. However, in view of critical accounts of running in general, a more nuanced inquiry was pursued through examining *parkrun* in the broader context of runners' lives, particularly their occupations. Managers and professionals formed an exemplifying occupational group. Changes in managers' and professionals' work have brought to the fore characteristics of contemporary work more generally such as performativity and insecurity. Data was generated from *parkrunners* through an artefact prompted conversational method and as the inquiry was insider-research, so the auto-ethnographic influences on the research are critically examined. Visual and narrative findings from *parkrunners* are presented and interpreted through a social-constructionist identity lens. The distinctive theoretical contribution of this inquiry is to provide a more detailed discussion of identity than is the norm in the field, and to show how running, like work, could structurally regulate identities but how running also offered scope for agentic identity-work. The results show that a desired sense-of-self was unlikely to be derived from occupations whereas *parkrun* provided an additional identity dimension and enabled the construction of a more positive and satisfying sense-of-self.

Keywords

parkrun; running-and-work; running-benefits; identity; identity-work

Introduction: *parkrun*, work and identity

parkrun originated as a weekly 5 km time trial in Bushy Park, London. The idea soon took off and new *parkruns* were added, although slowly at first. *parkrun* has though seen rapid growth in recent years. There are now over 2,000 such five km runs taking place every Saturday in twenty-two countries (*parkrun* 2020). *parkrun* attracts an average of a quarter of a million runners each week with over five million runners registered in total (Reece *et al.* 2019). Even during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic while *parkruns* worldwide were suspended, several hundred new members were registering each week (*parkrun* 2020). *parkrun* has thus become a major mass participation sporting phenomenon and embraces participants whose timings range from those of elite-athletes to those of gentle joggers and walkers. Runs are free and are carefully stewarded within parks to ensure safety. While the emphasis on community means that *parkrun* shares some characteristics with widely occurring social running groups (Tulle 2007), *parkrun* is a unique phenomenon. The uniqueness lies first in the distinct philosophy of inclusiveness, wellbeing and community, second in runners feeling no obligation to others to participate regularly and third in runs being timed and therefore enabling runners to compete both against themselves over time and against others (*parkrun* 2020).

Just as the popularity of *parkrun* has exploded, so too academic research into *parkrun* has flourished. This research predominantly reports beneficial outcomes for participants. First, physical health benefits are most widely reported and found to be unequivocal (*e.g.* Grunseit, *et al.* 2020; Hindley 2018; Wiltshire *et al.* 2018). Benefits in this category include weight control, prevention of cardio-vascular diseases and off-setting the effects of ageing. Second, mental health and wellbeing benefits are widely reported, such as decreased anxiety and improved work-life-balance (*e.g.* Morris and Scott 2019; Stevens *et al.* 2019; Stevinson *et al.*

2015). Third, psychological or character benefits are also strongly evident. Such benefits include feeling a sense of achievement, of self-improvement, of enhanced confidence and self-esteem and of finding meaning in life (*e.g.* Grunseit *et al.* 2018; Hindley 2018). Based on these findings, clinicians are prescribing *parkrun* to their patients for a range of physical and mental health maladies (Reece *et al.* 2019; Tobin 2018)

Although a few studies of *parkrun* have adopted a circumspect stance (*e.g.* Wiltshire *et al.* 2018), research has tended to focus simply on the self-evident benefits of *parkrun*. This suggested a need for closer scrutiny to explain why *parkrun* has recently become so popular. In particular, it was felt that an examination of the broader context of runners' lives might provide fresh insights. We were particularly curious about the interplay of *parkrun* and work as the *parkrun* literature has shown how a key benefit of *parkrun* is that it acts as a coping mechanism, countering the pressures of work (*e.g.* Wiltshire and Stevinson 2018). However, certain studies (*e.g.* Abbas 2004; Costas *et al.* 2016; Stebbins 1982) show that running brings its own pressures. We therefore concluded that a more nuanced analysis was needed of the interplay of *parkrun* and work and our initial research question was, how can the popularity of *parkrun* be understood in terms of this interplay?

To examine the interplay between *parkrun* and work, the inquiry focused on professional and managerial workers. The diversity and inclusivity accomplishments of *parkrun* are impressive. However, middle-class runners, such as professional and managerial workers are over-represented at *parkrun* (Hindley 2018). While the terms 'manager' and 'professional' include a diverse range of roles, traditionally there have been shared characteristics of their work, making managers and professionals a distinct occupational group (Graeber 2018). However, this occupational group has in recent years experienced significant change in the

nature of their work. Characteristics of work that are the norm for most workers, such as control of work processes and outputs, have only recently appeared in professional and managerial occupations (Yeoman 2019). Therefore, examining professionals and managers brings into focus contemporary work in general and makes workers in these occupations ideal for examining the interplay of *parkrun* and work.

To thoroughly explore and examine this broader context of *parkrun* the research was construed in social-constructionist terms and built upon a subjectivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology. A qualitative methodology was therefore adopted and was operationalised through an artefact prompted conversational (APC) method. As the research was insider research, data generated from the APC method was supplemented by auto-ethnographic understanding of the research problem. Researcher reflexivity was therefore required to discern the researchers' influence on the results (Black and Warhurst 2019). Wiltshire and Stevinson (2018) noted the neglect of theorization in understanding *parkrun*. While our initial stance was inductive, our awareness of the importance of theorizing in general and of identity theorizing in particular prompted an examination of the utility of social-constructionist identity theorizing to better understand *parkrun*. The identity perspective has been widely used to understand running (*e.g.* Robinson *et al.* 2014; Shipway and Holloway 2016). However, the distinctive theoretical contribution of this paper is to apply this theorization to the interplay of *parkrun* and work and to thereby develop a more circumspect understanding of the phenomenon.

This theoretical lens gave particular traction in light of the findings that, as for many occupations, managerial and professional work traditionally provided a basis for an individual's identity or sense-of-self (Watson 2009). However, the changes in the

characteristics and organization of work detailed earlier have corroded the secure and valued sense-of-self deriving from paid employment (Driver 2018). A further research question therefore emerged during the data analysis which was to examine the utility of identity theory in understanding the popularity of *parkrun*. The article is now structured as follows. First, the theoretical foundations are built. Second, the methods of data generation are detailed. Third, results are presented and interpreted theoretically. Finally, conclusions are drawn as to the interplay of *parkrun* and work.

Conceptual framework

It is well established that running in general and *parkrun* in particular can benefit individuals in multiple ways. Leisure and sports studies research has found that sports including running, benefit individuals through providing a sense of mastery and confidence and thereby enhance individuals' agency (Thing *et al.* 2019; Wiltshire *et al.* 2018). Hockey and Collinson (2007) thus asserted that running is not merely a leisure activity but the ability to claim a particularly strong and valued identity (see also, Devonport *et al.* 2019; Smith 1998). By contrast, critical management studies research has examined running in relation to work and depicted it less favourably, as an activity that extends the disciplinary forces of work and that regulates and restricts identities (*e.g.* Costas *et al.* 2016). The distinctive theoretical contribution of this paper is to bridge these two perspectives on identity and running to show that while participation in *parkrun* in particular can structurally regulate identity it also offers scope for agency, for creating a more autonomous and favourable sense-of-self.

However, there is a need to precisely conceptualize identity as the field has become formidable with diverse and distinct theoretical approaches underpinned by contrasting ontological traditions (Corlett *et al.* 2017; Våland and Georg 2018). The paper follows a

broadly post-structuralist, social constructionist identity tradition (see, Alvesson and Robertson 2016). Identity is understood as subjectively constructed and involving individuals reflexively answering the question ‘who am I’ (Brown 2014). Identity is also seen as a search for meaning and as a drive to achieve a sense-of-self as distinctive, coherent and authentic (Alvesson, 2010). Identity is thus a project that is fluid, never finished, always provisional and a work in progress often involving a struggle to construct a desired sense-of-self (Clarke *et al.* 2009).

In the social constructionist conceptualization, identity is narrated into existence through language (Huber and Brown 2016). Identity is thus understood as an individual’s ability to sustain a particular narrative about her or himself such that what we are is, in essence, a story (Giddens 1991; McGannon and Spence 2010). Such identity stories can be colonised by hegemonic organisational discourses and in managerial and professional contexts ‘achievement’ and ‘performance’ are such discourses. These discourses often become a basis for individuals’ identity narratives even if individuals know they are not particularly good at achieving or performing occupationally (Walker and Caprar 2020). Identity narratives grounded in performance and achievement construe identity as a continuous, unfulfilled and thereby unsettling, personal project (Driver 2018; Kuhn 2006).

However, identities are not only regulated through work but also through leisure activities. While running, might, as will be seen, enable the construction of more desirable and autonomous identities, these identities can be ever more disciplined and regulated such that running becomes a ‘technique of governance’ (Wiest *et al.* 2015: 24). *parkrun*’s emphasis on the timing and recording of runs and on amassing runs so as to celebrate notable completions, potentially further fosters a performance driven and competitive ideology. Runners might

thus be encouraged to engage in self-discipline through self-surveillance by judging and comparing their performances. Identity becomes an instrumentalised project to be managed and worked-on to achieve continuous self-improvement (Abbas 2004; Tulle 2007). In encouraging individuals to be tough, resilient, reliable and responsible, running thereby aligns with the requirements of managerial and professional work in the neo-liberal order (Holmqvist and Maravelias 2018). A sense-of-self anchored in performance and achievement is particularly vulnerable when, for example, illness or age erode individuals' capacity to succeed in these ways (Walker and Caprar 2020).

However, research and theorizing reveal a dialectical relationship between structural identity-regulation and agentic identity-work. Individuals are generally aware of a multiplicity of discourses with which to define themselves (Black and Warhurst 2019). Therefore, there is scope for resistance and agentic choice. Through manoeuvring between discursive regimes and through the reflexive appropriation of preferred discourses, individuals have agency to construct desired identity narratives (Brown and Lewis 2011; Watson 2009).

The implication of conceptualizing identity as prone to regulation, as generally insecure and as an in-progress project, is that identity-work is not only possible but necessary and continuous. Identity-work is defined as individuals' efforts to create, strengthen, sustain, and, if necessary, repair or revise a coherent, positive, distinct and differentiated sense-of-self (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003). Individuals aspire to identities that are ideal versions of themselves, selecting discourses and narrating themselves accordingly (Thornborrow and Brown 2009). *parkrun* might, thereby, offer discourses and other resources for identity-work; for narrating an alternative, desired and independent sense-of-self. Such an identity

could compensate for the failure of identities grounded in organizations and occupations and could, thereby, better fulfil the need for self-esteem (Walker and Caprar 2020).

Identities are not, though, solo accomplishments. Individuals are made by societies and there is no pre-social self (Brown 2014). Social groups provide distinctive discourses and sustain particular narratives. Individuals appropriate the discourses and narratives of favoured groups into their own identity-work and acceptance within a new group provides a fresh resource for identity-work (Khun 2006; Stevens *et al.* 2019). Moreover, through social interactions, individuals' identity-work is validated. Therefore, membership of a favoured community, such as *parkrun*, can provide a liminal, enabling, space to explore or experiment with the construction of alternative, possible and preferred identities and to thereby contest those identities associated with occupations or organizations (Toyoki and Brown 2014; Hindley *et al.* 2018; Thing *et al.* 2019). However, despite individuals' identity-work to achieve coherence, identities are typically multiple (Huber and Brown 2016). A running identity may not displace an occupational identity but, rather, the two may coexist albeit with a fitness practice such as *parkrun* offering a valued additional dimension to identity (McGannon *et al.* 2017). The paper now turns to examine the interplay of the conceptual understanding developed within this section and our empirical investigation of *parkrun*.

Methodology: Researching *parkrun*

The empirical inquiry adopted a qualitative approach grounded upon social-constructionist and interpretivist ontological and epistemological foundations. This approach was taken so as to reveal the richness and complexity of what *parkrun* meant for participants in relation to their working lives (Hitchings and Latham 2017). A social-constructionist ontology assumes

no single, fixed, reality rather, that the social world is in ‘a continuous process of creation and recreation by its participants’ (Bryman 2008: 84). Realities are intersubjectively constructed through social interactions in specific places at particular times. An interpretivist epistemology assumes a subjectivist stance, acknowledging the multiplicity of individuals’ lived realities and the complexity, fluidity and diversity of the meanings and interpretations attributed to those realities (Bryman 2008; Nilsen 2008; Saunders *et al.* 2019). There can be no theory neutral research (Bryman 2008) and the study was influenced initially by published research findings showing benefits associated with *parkrun*. However, we attempted to align with the inductive principles of interpretivist inquiry and remained open to the diversity and complexity of meaning within the data before proceeding to examine the data theoretically.

Interpretivism accepts and reflexively examines the interaction of researchers with research participants in creating emergent realities and this inquiry was explicitly insider research. Both researchers were *parkrunners* and were also, clearly, professionals. The inquiry was therefore to some extent auto-ethnographic, as our personal understandings both of *parkrun* and of contemporary professional work could not be excluded (Black and Warhurst 2019; Mills and Hoerber 2013). Our affinity and rapport with participants potentially generated richer data than could be obtained by outsider researchers (Esmonde 2019). For example, it was unnecessary for participants to explain features of *parkrun* which thereby enabled deeper discussion of the meaning of *parkrun* for them. However, we were critically reflexive in considering how we were influencing the emerging social realities (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000) to ensure that participants’ meanings were prioritised over our own. Critical distance was achieved as the two researchers held contrasting views, favourable and less favourable, of the value of *parkrun*. Moreover, being conscious that methods produce meanings, we

recognised that research interviews alone could be a forum for participants' impression management and therefore the research method detailed below was adopted.

Permission for the inquiry was granted by the *parkrun* Research Board and clearance given by our institution's ethics committee. To ensure interpretive depth, a small sample was deemed most suitable (Robinson *et. al.* 2014) and recruitment flyers were distributed at one well-established *parkrun* in a northern English city. The recruitment criteria used were those of self-defining as a manager or professional and having completed ten or more *parkruns* in the past year. While pragmatic considerations such as mutual availability and location influenced the selection of participants, a mix of ages, genders and *parkrun* experiences was secured. Eight female and eleven male *parkrunners* participated and these participants held a diversity of roles including clinician, teacher, professor, pharmacist, landscape-architect, information-technologist and middle-manager. Participants worked in both private and not-for-profit enterprises. Participants had completed between 39 and 242 *parkruns* and could be classified as 'runners' rather than 'joggers' or 'athletes' (Smith 1998) in that most did additional running each week, but few were 'athletes' defined, for example, by a runner representing a club in competitive events. Nineteen participants were judged to be sufficient as on-going data analysis revealed that a point of data saturation had been reached whereby no significantly new themes were arising (Wiltshire and Stevinson 2018).

Based on our aim to examine the meaning *parkrun* held for participants in relation to their work, we sought a method that would generate narratives. A participant driven artefact prompted conversational (APC) method was deployed that built on the tradition of visual and artefact methods in social research (Black and Warhurst 2015; Harper 2002). Participants were invited to bring up to five artefacts or images to our conversation to help them answer

the question ‘what does *parkrun* mean to you as a professional or manager?’ Running shoes, *parkrun* t-shirts and celebratory *parkrun* run cakes were typical artefacts, and photographs of *parkrun* course maps and of route challenges such as mud were typical images. These artefacts and images prompted reflective and reflexive conversations on participants’ *parkrunning* and their work. The artefacts were not a source of data *per se*. However, the artefacts facilitated the generation of data (Mills and Hoerber 2013) and potentially enabled participants to articulate less-conscious feelings where words alone were not enough (Pink, 2007). The focus on participants’ artefacts appeared, as Mills and Hoerber (2013) suggested, to promote engagement and rapport and foster a more equal relationship with the researchers. Our conversations with participants felt more natural than the typically contrived and frequently prompted conversations of traditional research interviews and perhaps also, thereby, minimized participants’ impression management. Therefore, extensive and rich narrative data emerged, typically in the form of stories, and without the need for a detailed interview schedule. [A sample of images of participants’ artefacts and participants own images are presented in the results that follow. Each image supports the related area of participant discourse and the researchers’ interpretive narrative. However, the images also provide a parallel way of seeing by evidencing participants’ intuitive, embodied and felt experiences of parkrun that might, typically, have been beyond words.](#)

Conversations took place in summer 2019 and lasted between forty-five and ninety minutes. All conversations were recorded and transcribed. A total of 59 artefacts and images were presented. This APC method raised the ethical risk of participants or others being identifiable in publication. However, this risk was managed through the participant briefing sheet stating that if images were presented, they should avoid featuring faces and that permission would be sought if we wished to use an image in publications. More generally,

that the method was, as noted, participant driven, minimised ethical concerns by redressing any power imbalance between the researchers and participants.

As noted, data analysis focussed on participants' narrative accounts. An abductive approach was adopted (Saunders *et al.* 2019) with the analysis moving back and forth between the narrative data and theoretical concepts (Crevani 2019). While the data generated was influenced but not constrained by our discursive understanding of identity, the APC method particularly facilitated the emergence of the intangible construct of identity. For instance, evidence can be discerned in most of the participants' narratives that 'continuous improvement' was important. However, that certain participants presented images of their *parkrun* timings from Strava and spoke at length and with passion about these images served to evidence this construct of continuous improvement more directly and more strongly. However, an initial inductive and descriptive coding process was undertaken whereby attitudes and feelings about work and about *parkrun* were discerned and subsequently categorized. The analysis proceeded to an interpretive stage by establishing links between the inductively defined categories and themes from established research findings and from theoretical concepts. We then returned to the data with the research informed and theoretical codes and found that these refined codes provided significant traction in understanding the interplay of *parkrun* and work. In devising the final codes, the two researchers, from their contrasting perspectives, acted as critical friends to each other, reflexively challenging each-others' construction of knowledge (Devonport *et.al.* 2019) through comparing each-others' independently derived codes and agreeing a set of working codes. Subsequently, in the application of these codes to transcripts and images the researchers regularly reviewed each-others' coding to ensure consistency and trustworthiness in the interpretation of the data. The

article now turns to present the results of the analysis of participants' experiences of the interplay of *parkrun* and their work using the theorization of identity developed earlier.

Results and Discussion

Contemporary work

Professionals and managers are subject to increasing controls over both their expected outputs and their work processes. Demands from senior managers and stakeholders for ever higher outputs (Graeber 2018) is evident in participants' accounts, for example:

'Everyone is working later and longer hours, our workload has gone up and expectations are skyrocketing. It is all about pressure to complete tasks and deliver projects to unrealistic deadlines. This is now a very stressful job that's been taking over and consuming everything else in my life such that I have had to drop back on leisure and sports' [Sabrina].

In terms of control over work processes, these once responsible jobs are now found to offer less autonomy and are subject to standardisation (Cohen 2018), findings that are echoed by participants:

'Tasks are now precisely specified, and I ask myself, 'how many times can you get satisfaction from solving the same problems?' ... There are now more disappointments and frustrations from work with very little sense of achievement and to be honest I am a bit saturated and kind of stuck' [Mo].

Traditionally, many workers experienced an 'intense connection with their work' and defined themselves by referencing their work or their organization (Brown and Coupland 2015).

However, for managers and professionals in particular, work no longer provides the meaning and aspirational sense-of-self that it once did (Alvesson and Robertson 2016) such that a process of identity threat and loss is noted (Walker and Caprar 2020). That work was perhaps a weak source of identity for our participants was evident in commonly occurring reports of a lack of positive feedback and of recognition within workplaces:

‘If you do a perfect job here no one notices and it’s rare that a manager says anything like “I was really pleased with that” ... in fact the only feedback you get is negative when something goes wrong’ [Freddie].

Increasing individualism and the emphasis on individual accountability and performance targets serves to weaken communities, isolate workers and erodes the opportunities for social identity building within managerial and professional communities (Walker and Caprar 2020). Many of our participants certainly felt this way. Natalia reported that the reason she was a *parkrun* volunteer and runner was to compensate for ‘the lack of belonging in our workplace’ where, while supposedly a team member, Natalia found that her colleagues and herself were ‘on our own all day’.

Clearly professional and managerial work was not providing the satisfaction or sense-of-self that it might once have done. From analysing participants’ accounts, four processes were discerned for understanding the interaction of *parkrun* and work and we label these using a four ‘C’s framework. *parkrun* was enabling participants to ‘cope’ with their work and while *parkrun* was to some extent ‘constraining’ it was ‘contributing’ strongly to desired identities through the *parkrun* ‘community’. Each of these ‘C’s is now examined.

Coping with work

That running enables workers to cope better with the pressures of contemporary work is widely noted. Running helps workers cope with the sedentary nature of work (*e.g.* Thing *et al.* 2019), it clears the mind to enable relaxation and positive thinking (*e.g.* Cregan-Reid 2017) and offers a sense of escape (*e.g.* McGannon and Spence 2010). However, for participants in this study, *parkrun* provided a way of coping that involved displacing a dissatisfying sense-of-self associated with their work with a more positive sense-of-self associated with *parkrun*. Allan was typical in noting how *parkrun* enabled him to develop a physical self in opposition to his usual, emasculated, managerial self:

‘I am shackled to a computer all day long in this job and it’s so easy to slip into snacking throughout the day to relieve some of the boredom. I was getting concerned about my health and wanted to feel as though I was fit again’.

Displacement of a work identity by a *parkrun* identity was particularly evident in some accounts. Max felt that *parkrun*:

‘Certainly relaxes me and calms me down. I can leave behind work problems and stop worrying about them because when you are running you can’t concentrate on anything else – work goes out of the window’ [Max].

parkrun could even replace work as source of self:

‘A lot of professionals let work take over, whereas I’ve resisted that through things like *parkrun* and I realise that I am becoming more of a work to live person rather than the live to work person that I was’ [Emanuel].

Coherence and security are important in achieving a satisfying sense-of-self (Brown 2019) and *parkrun* enabled participants to cope with the uncertainties of contemporary work. Julia captured the stories of many participants in stating succinctly, ‘it’s always there’.

Constraining the self

However, as discussed earlier, identities are readily regulated (Alvesson and Robertson 2016). Individuals unwittingly appropriate organizational discourses such as those of resilience, performance and competitiveness in defining themselves, such that these discourses become oppressive technologies of the self (Brown and Coupland 2015). These same discourses featured in narratives of *parkrun*, and *parkrun* might therefore be seen as creating exactly the sort of managers and professionals needed for organizational purposes. Participants often identified themselves as resilient people and attributed this to *parkrun*:

‘Being around like minded, highly motivated people ... I am now better at ... getting on with things just as you do if you get a bad time one Saturday. I suppose therefore it’s developed my resilience and certainly I’m better able now to keep going at work when I’m having a bad day’ [Pat].

While *parkrun* emphasised participation over performance (Stevinson *et al.* 2015), performance is nonetheless a matter of record and performance comparisons are inevitable. Nadia’s narrative was not untypical in revealing how, through *parkrun* she was becoming a more competitive person:

‘You can’t help comparing yourself to others, can you? I cannot not be competitive, I like to push myself to win, to beat other people and in the final kilometre I can completely empty the tank. It sort-of brings out the worst in me and I know that this competitiveness can be dangerous, but I can’t help myself and I feel like I am letting myself down if I don’t give it my all’.

Participants often expressed related sentiments such as ‘I can’t miss a *parkrun* ... it’s an addiction’ [Flora].

Could *parkrun*, therefore, be subtly pressuring individuals to cultivate a sense of themselves in terms of reliability, performance and, most significantly, as Nadia's case illustrated, competitiveness and ambition all of which align strongly with corporate requirements for the ideal worker (Costas *et al.* 2016)? Leisure might thus, like work, have become labour.

As the body ages or gets injured so failure becomes more common than success in measured, competitive sports such as running. Therefore, anchoring a sense-of-self to *parkrun* achievements could be dangerous. Whereas failures associated with work can be tolerated through disidentification (Alvesson and Robertson 2016), the failure of an identity constructed from personally preferred discourses of fitness is deeply damaging of a desired identity. Many participants were aware of this danger:

'Injury is just the worst thing for me. When my body can't comply, I get quite low. And as I am getting older, so I need more days to recover. I posted this picture of me [*pointing to an image*] towards the end of a *parkrun* and somebody asked, 'is this you after 23 miles?'. I asked myself "do I really look that bad?"'

[Megan]

A healthier, sustainable stance might lie in self-acceptance and in embracing vulnerability and the inevitability of human frailty and decline as Saffi reflected, 'I enjoy running but there's always something missing and, perhaps stupidly, I'm still searching for that'.

Contributing to an alternative sense-of-self

While *parkrun* has the potential to regulate and constrain identities, for reflective individuals such as Saffi, *parkrun* could provide an opportunity for identity-work. *parkrun* provided a set of discursive resources enabling counter narratives to the dominating narratives associated with occupations (Driver 2018) and thereby enabled agency and the construction of new,

more acceptable, distinctive and desired ways of being (Brown and Coupland 2015). For most participants, *parkrun* was providing such agency and enabling identity-work on the construction of a more favourable sense-of-self:

‘Everyone wants to achieve, don’t they? But in work, it is rare to have objective measures of success and even where there are it is very rare that your successes are noted. Even if you do a perfect job, nobody will notice. Now, with *parkrun* although I was absolutely terrible at first and was asking myself, ‘why are you doing this’, and even though I am only kinda average now, it gives a more tangible form of achievement and success. It is all about how you have done personally and everyone kinda bigs you up and recognises your achievement. Also, with *parkrun*, and, again, in contrast to work, it sort-of pushes you and you can challenge yourself and get a sense of bettering yourself and bringing out the best in yourself. This one point in the week, sets me up for the whole week’
[Nyeem].

parkrun was providing Nyeem with a sense of achievement, enabling feelings of progress and thereby engendering a healthier, more coherent identity than that available through his work as a production-engineer.

Running and sport in general generate feelings of self-worth that are unavailable from employment (Morris and Scott 2019; Robinson *et al.* 2014). *parkrun* was enabling participants to recognize the limits of work identities, to bypass these identities (Alvesson and Robertson 2016) and establish alternative, altogether more acceptable, ways of being:

‘Through running I have realised I am good at something. I am finding myself. I like people to know that I do *parkrun* and to be seen as a runner. It makes me feel better about myself, makes me feel different. It has improved my self-

confidence as a result. It is almost like being an actor, I am becoming a different type of person; it's given me a new identity, here [pointing to his well-worn running shoes] I'm not Dave the teacher but Dave the runner' [Dave].

For Dave, *parkrun* was clearly offering a new, alternative and more positive sense-of-self and *parkrunning* was generally become essential to participants' identities.

Opportunities for the verification and celebration of new ways of being are important (Brown and Toyoki 2013) and *parkrun* provided such opportunities through, for example, the public recognition of landmark *parkruns* at the weekly run briefings and the award of milestone t-shirts. Lorca went further in marking her 100th *parkrun* with a celebratory cake (Image One) shared with her *parkrun* friends signifying her achievement of a new way of being.

Insert Image One: *Verification*

The *parkrun* 100 cake (Image One) provided Lorca with a tangible and fixed sense of achieving and of socially verifying a more secure sense-of-self than was available through her managerial role in social-care. The cake can also be interpreted in corporeal terms as encompassing fulfilment in its making and enjoyment in its consumption, feelings which might have been missing in Lorca's work.

Identities are found to be often ambiguous, conflicted and even contradictory with different facets coming to the fore in different contexts (Clarke *et al.* 2009). This phenomenon was notable among participants, with *parkrun* evoking both a positive sense-of-self but also, often for the same individual at the same time, a discomfiting sense-of-self.

‘I need to get out into the fresh air and just move about. Sometimes when the weather is absolutely terrible, I ask myself ‘what am I doing this for’ but it’s rare that you don’t feel better after *parkrun*. It just gives a positive feeling, that’s hard to describe. Despite the discomfort or even pain, it’s just enjoyable and gives you a bit of a high’ [Theo].

The discomfort appeared to be necessary to validate the new positive sense-of-self, particularly in conversation with us as researchers who were fellow runners: the new identity needed to be shown to be hard-won.

Many participants presented pictures that were similar to Chris’ picture ([Image Two](#)) and one even brought a breakfast muffin with her to the research conversations explaining that muffins were her typical reward for the discomfort of *parkrun*.

Insert Image Two: *Pain but pleasure*

While typical artefacts that were presented, such crumpled *parkrun* barcode slips and sweaty wrist-bands, betrayed the discomfort of the run, the elaborate post-run breakfasts or cakes demonstrated the value of enduring the pain [not merely for the temporary pleasure of the breakfast treat but](#) to establish the desired identity. The pain associated with *parkrun* evidenced that to escape a constraining work identity was worth some discomfort.

Community for reinventing the self

Established research shows that *parkrunners* emphasise the value of *parkrun* in connecting and becoming members of an accepting and mutually supportive community that enables them to extend their circle of friends and feel a sense of camaraderie and belonging (Denton

and Aranda 2019; Hindley 2018; Morris and Scott 2019; Reece *et al.* 2019; Stevinson *et al.* 2015). This sense of belonging crucially supports the process of identity transformation. Societies make people and as discussed earlier identity is deeply social (Watson 2009). Membership of a new social group provides a space for resisting dominating organizational and occupational identities. A new group is a space for experimenting with alternative discourses and narrating different ways of being and for such new identity claims to be negotiated and socially validated (Driver 2018). Moreover, social categories are an important source of identity (Alvesson 2010).

Participants were able to build social capital (Wiltshire and Stevinson 2018) and develop through social interaction in their new *parkrun* group, a sense-of-self that was not tied to their work:

‘What I like about *parkrun* is just the atmosphere, it is really, really sociable, very friendly ... it feels like a fraternity and gives a nice sense of belonging that I certainly don’t get at work. As you can see in this picture taken at *parkrun* [presents social-media image], it looks like a family photo. We are even all wearing our *parkrun* shirts. Certainly, it’s a supportive community that gets me out of bed whatever the weather and even if I don’t run well I know I am beating all those people who just stay in bed on a Saturday morning’ [Charlie].

Charlie’s reflections demonstrate how an individual’s sense-of-self derives to some extent from their membership of one group (*parkrunners*) and their non-membership of another group (those who stay in bed). The use of particular forms of language and wearing distinctive clothing such as Charlie and her friends’ *parkrun* t-shirts, act as signifiers of community membership (Devonport *et.al.* 2019). Colin spoke of how the shared adversity of

a winter *parkrun* along muddy tracks shown in one of his pictures (Image Three), enabled his friends and himself to develop a sense-of-self as being a distinctive and different from others, of being tough in the normal soft and clean world:

Insert Image Three: *The Self through Others*

An individual's *parkrun* fraternity certainly supported and sustained participants' new, desired identity:

'If I go running on my own, I just pootle around, but being among like-minded people helps me push myself and get the best out of myself. And when you do achieve something, everyone bigs you up and you get the recognition that is rare in work. And if you don't achieve, the others make you realise it's worth the effort. I think that they now see me as runner and here among 'this lot' [*smiling and pointing to a picture of her group at parkrun*] I am pleased that I am no longer just 'Dianne the doctor' [Dianne].

Dianne's reflection here not only illustrates how the community enables and sustains an alternative, desired, identity but also usefully, returns this results section to our starting point, that is, to revealing some of the deficiencies in contemporary professional and managerial work and to how workers wish to be more than their job.

Conclusions

In the context of the continued growth of the remarkable fitness and social phenomenon that is *parkrun*, and the burgeoning but largely laudatory accounts of *parkrun*'s benefits, this article has pursued a circumspect examination of this phenomenon. In particular, the article has examined the broader context of runners' lives more than has traditionally been the case.

Our initial research question was, to understand the popularity of *parkrun* by examining the interplay of *parkrun* and paid work. A further research question emerged during the data analysis stage and this was to examine the utility of identity theory in understanding the popularity. In answering the research questions, the article makes both methodological and theoretical contributions.

Methodologically, the inquiry demonstrated that the APC method brings several advantages. First, the method facilitated an initially inductive approach enabling participants' experiences to emerge with only minimal researcher structuring. Second, the approach promoted participant engagement and both rapport and less inequality between the researchers and the researched. Third, the artefacts and pictures enabled an exploration of what was initially, at least, beyond words (Rose 2007). The effectiveness of the method in eliciting rich narrative accounts was, though, undoubtedly enhanced by the inquiry being insider-research with both researchers being *parkrunners*. Thanem and Knights (2019) noted how the most effective social research is typically that which is prompted by researchers' own experiences and auto-ethnographic understanding influenced this inquiry. However, as noted, that the two researchers began with contrasting views as to the efficacy of *parkrun*, so the inquiry was conducted with rigor and balance and the veracity of the results were assured.

While the inquiry generated rich narratives and the evocative data presented earlier, the key substantive contributions of the research lie not in the empirical results *per se* but in the theoretical insights that these results support. Although initially an inductive approach was adopted, it became clear in the early stages of the inquiry that identity theorizing offered particular insights into the data. While others have used an identity lens to examine, *inter alia*, the motivations of athletes and runners (*e.g.* Allen, Collinson and Hockey 2007;

Devonport *et al.* 2019), the distinctive theoretical contribution of this article has been to develop an approach to identity theorizing that provides a more nuanced understanding of *parkrun* in particular and is likely to be of relevance in understanding structured, social running more generally.

A social constructionist identity approach was adopted whereby identity was construed as how individuals narrate themselves using available discursive resources to answer the questions ‘who am I’ and, particularly, ‘who do I want to be’ (Brown 2014). Traditionally, the occupational roles of manager and professional provided satisfactory answers to these questions and occupations were therefore important sources of identity (Alvesson and Robertson 2016; Watson 2009). However, the results showed that participants, who were all managers or professionals, felt that their work was increasingly controlled by senior managers and external stakeholders, lacking in meaning and increasingly individualised. The consequence was that participants’ identities were constrained and unsettled and that work had ceased to offer a satisfactory identity in itself. The results showed that satisfactory identities could, though, be derived from *parkrun*.

As the analysis progressed, identity theorizing suggested a ‘4 Cs’ framework for answering the research question of understanding the interplay of *parkrun* and work. While *parkrun* clearly provided a ‘coping mechanism’ for the pressures and ennui of contemporary work as established research has shown (Hindley 2018; Wiltshire *et al.* 2018), the identity lens extended this understanding. *parkrun* provided a resource for coping by enabling the construction of a coherent and secure sense-of-self to replace the fragmented and often threatened identities built around work. However, identity theorizing suggested how *parkrun* could readily constrain runners. Certain hegemonic discourses associated with *parkrun* such

‘personal bests’ and certain *parkrun* artefacts such as landmark t-shirts might have worked to insidiously align identity construction ever more closely with the needs of work organizations (Brown and Lewis 2011). *parkrun* might thus have been an identity-regulating, performative technology-of-the-self that disciplined and subjugated runners through prompting self-surveillance and self-exploitation (Costas and Kärreman 2016; Esmode 2019). While certain participants complained about the routinization of their work, there is some irony in their running and valuing *parkrun* given the totally predictable nature of the weekly event. Identities built around *parkrun* might thus be just as instrumentalised and as performance and achievement orientated as identities built upon managerial and professional occupations given the constraining ways that these occupations are now typically defined under neo-liberalism.

However, the results revealed that *parkrun* was more likely to provide new discursive and symbolic resources for identity reconstruction. These resources enabled reflexive resistance to structurally imposed or implied occupational identities, and supported agency in constructing a positive sense-of-self. Individuals were thereby enabled to escape constrained, colonised and regulated identities narrated using the ‘empty modes of language ... imposed upon us by modern capitalist society’ (Cohen 2018, 6). Quite simply, identity-work was enabled through the counter-narrative of *parkrun*. This counter-narrative resulted in the creation, presentation, strengthening and sustaining (Brown 2014) of more autonomous, distinctive and desired identities unrelated to occupations.

The results showed how crucial the *parkrun* community was in establishing and sustaining these alternative identities. The positive social atmosphere of *parkrun* has been widely reported (*e.g.* Hindley 2018; Wiltshire and Stevinson 2018) and identity theorizing unlocks

the importance of this finding. The *parkrun* community specifically contributed to individuals' identity transformation through providing a supportive space in which to contest dominant occupational identities and to experiment with contrasting and desired ways of being (Corlett *et al.* 2016). The *parkrun* community provided distinct discursive resources that were completely unrelated to work and that enabled the emergence of new identity narratives. In turn, membership of the *parkrun* community sustained desired identities through association (Alvesson 2010) and through the community's validation (Driver 2018): individuals were runners and not managers or professionals.

While *parkrun* therefore offered alternative identities and opportunities to dis-identify from dominating occupational identities (Alvesson and Robertson 2016), the results do not support an assertion that such alternatives totally usurped identities grounded in occupations. It needs to be recognised that, as the results showed, identities are multiple, interleaved and potentially conflicted (Brown and Coupland 2015). Therefore, it is likely that individuals might identify both as a professional or manager and as a *parkrunner*, influenced to some extent by social context. This phenomenon will require further research. Nonetheless, the key contribution of the inquiry is how *parkrun* provided an extra dimension to participants' identities and a supplement to their established, and less satisfying, occupational identities. While *parkrun* potentially provided some compensation for the loss of meaning and of identity in contemporary work, many workers undoubtedly lack the prerequisite sound physical health or endure demands over and above those of their work and family responsibilities. However, as the results show, for those who can run, *parkrun* is one way to recover the meaning lost from work and to find a new, more satisfying, sense-of-self.

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Image one: Verification



Image two: Pain but Pleasure



Image three: Self through Others

