Running the City: Meaning, Movement, Experience

Academic Context

The ‘mobilities turn’ has challenged the ‘a-mobile’ nature of previous social science research (Sheller and Urry, 2006; Cresswell, 2006) with a clear importance now bestowed upon understanding movement and the affect moving has upon our relationships with spaces, places, time and others (Fincham et al, 2010). Subsequently scholars have investigated a wide range of mobile practices but running has hitherto eluded sustained study, despite it being undertaken by just over two million people a week (Sport England, 2013) and the recognition of running’s crucial role in promoting healthy lifestyles (Latham, 2013) and a range of other societal benefits. The project will also seek to interrogate the holistic mobility framework devised by Cresswell (2006) that attempts to overcome the chaotic nature of much mobility research. As such this project will attend to the three entangled facets of movement, meaning and experience.

Aims and Objectives

The aim of this project is broadly to improve the geographical understandings of running. The objectives to achieve this are:

1. To derive an indicative understanding of the ‘brute facts’ of road-running
2. To understand the meanings and representations of running
3. To explore the embodied experiences of running
4. To identify and analyse relationships between the facets of mobility and the politics that emerge accordingly

Methodology

Movement: Over a three month period, I intend to collect online running diaries from 50 participants. This will enable the collection of routes, dates, times, frequencies, speeds and durations that can be analysed using statistics as well as experimenting with GIS (Fig. 1)

Meaning: Understandings of participants’ representations of running will be derived from interviews undertaken with them and then compared to meanings constructed by other sources such as films, literature, advertising, policy documents etc.

Experience: I will employ both ‘go-along’ interviews (Anderson, 2004) and mobile video ethnography elicitation (Fig. 2) (Spinney, 2009) as tools to be on the move with runners and interrogate their experiences on the go. All audio will be transcribed and coded to develop discussions concerning the experience of running. These will also be informed through my own running and autoethnographic reflections.

References:

Potential Impact

This study will be of interest to stakeholders involved in the promotion of running by gaining a better understanding of the practice, thereby improving their ability to cater for differentiating needs. This could include urban planners seeking to develop ‘runable’ cities; running clubs seeking to boost membership; local governments seeking to encourage active lifestyles or advertising agencies seeking to sell products.

Academically, this project will address an important lacuna in the mobilities literature; interrogate its conceptualisations and methodologies as well as aiming to politically revalorise mobility. The project aims to contribute to wider debates in transport, cultural, social, health and urban geography as well.