

Running into trouble • Exploring the negotiation of public space between running groups and other users

Academic Essays

ABSTRACT

This paper looks to investigate how running groups function in public space, both in how they find their way and how they interact with other users. It builds on theories of wayfinding and the study of mobilities to examine how different spaces change how group running occurs. The research is based on the use of head-mounted video footage of group runs to provide insight to the practice and experience of collective running in the city. In this way, this paper seeks to engage with efforts to utilise more mobile methodologies within ethnography.

keywords: running, groups, way-finding, social interaction, public space

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Jumping, pausing, sidestepping. An easy evening run with friends after class was quickly turning into an obstacle course. Nor was this the first time I had experienced the challenge of running with others along Edinburgh's busy streets. As many as 10.5 million people (Sports Insight, 2014) are estimated to run regularly in the UK, often in groups and often along similarly busy streets to my own. Reflecting on this, it seemed a wonder so many people manage to use public space in this dynamic way without mass collisions or the complete breakdown of the running experience.

This project is an attempt to delve a little into how group running functions in crowded and contested spaces through the analysis of video footage taken of running groups in Edinburgh. By exploring how runners co-manage potential conflicts with other users, the project seeks to contribute to the better design of public space. Improved design of public space then offers the opportunity to increase recreational activity and its benefits for public health and sustainability.

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Running into trouble :

Scholars generally divide running participants into three categories: the athlete, the runner, and the jogger. These categories are often contentious, particularly with the status of joggers seen as lacking in 'status and prestige' (Smith, 1998, p.190). This paper seeks to adopt a participatory approach to the sport by using the term 'runner' as a catch-all for the full range of different speeds, time-commitments and meanings invested into the practice by different people.

I attempted to conduct this research in a reflexive way, acknowledging the biases and experiences that I bring to the position of researcher. My own background in running stretches for more than a decade, covering a range of distances from 800 m track meets to 50 km trail runs. Given this, I would consider myself well-versed in the knowledge of running and well positioned to engage with people's own experiences of their running at a level of mutual understanding.

Theoretical foundation

Past researchers have put forward several differing concepts of wayfinding, the process of moving between places, with differing theories suggesting the use of a mental map (Tolman, 1946) or navigational techniques akin to seafaring (Gell, 1985). This paper builds on the more recent work of Tim Ingold (2000, p.42), who argues that wayfinding is an ongoing, interactive process with an environment that is 'continually taking shape around the traveller'. It uses Ingold's theory to consider how the specific dynamics of group running affect the experience and process of wayfinding.

This research also looks to build on the existing literature on running as a

mobile practice. Much of this has currently focussed on the meanings attached by runners to the practice, such as for competition (Vettenniemi, 2012) or as a form of work on the body (Bale, 2012). Other research into running, meanwhile, has



Figure 1: the head-mounted camera used for the film work in this paper, and jacket with hood to make the camera less obtrusive. (photograph by author)

delved into how runners interact with different users of public space, adjusting to perceived social norms and learning to read the movement patterns of pedestrians and dog walkers (Cook, 2016).

This paper also looks to build on the work of Allen-Collinson (2008) into 'co-running', analysing how two runners interact with each other during the practice. The analysis presented here seeks to expand upon the work of Allen-Collinson by moving beyond pairs to examine groups of runners.

Lastly, this research adds to debates over how running challenges 'the legitimate and appropriate users and uses

of public space' (Bergamaschi et al., 2014, p.10). Runners often perceive themselves as 'liminal agents' (Cook, 2016) in public places yet can be seen by others as taking over and blocking shared



Figure 2: runners spreading to fill out the space on the wider pavement (photograph by author)

spaces (WalesOnline, 2011; McKenzie, 2013). These perceptions have tangible impacts on the practical interactions between runners and pedestrians, drivers and others.

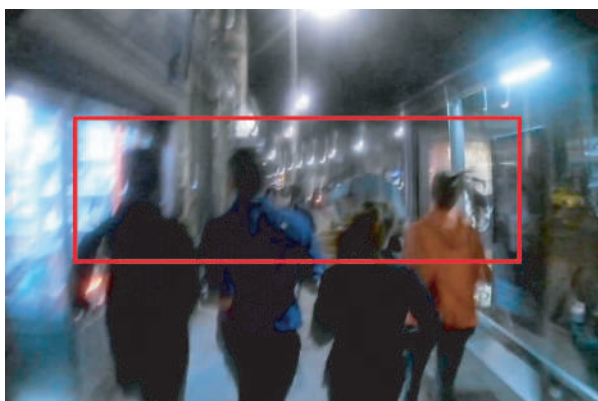


Figure 3: runners bunch together as they find their way past a bus stop. (photograph by author)

Moving as a group

Running as a group requires specific strategies for adjusting to the fixed environment. Each runner within the group

must respond to the movements of the other runners around them, as well as the physical environment as it is presented to



Figure 4: one runner drops behind another as they approach a narrow section of pavement. (photograph by author)

them. This differentiates the experience of wayfinding within a running group from that of an individual runner.

Where space allows, the group will expand across the path and utilise the full amount of space available. Figure 2 presents one example of this tendency, where the runners have stretched across the pavement, running in a line of four with significant gaps in between each runner. This allows an ideal amount of space for the runner to move and adjust to any minor changes in surface or pace.

However, runners in a group must frequently adapt to a range of obstacles in

Running into trouble :



Figure 5: multiple runners drop into line to leave space for a pedestrian on their left. (photograph by author)

their environment which reduce the space in which they can continue along their path. Running groups exhibit a variety of different strategies to tackle these situations. In Figure 3, the runners have bunched together, making the gaps between each runner as small as possible to allow them to fit through the space between the shops to their left and bus stop to their right.

Figure 4 highlights an alternative strategy. Here, two runners are approaching a narrow section of pavement due to a building which juts into the path. In response to this, the runner on the left drops his pace and falls in behind the other runner, sacrificing the flow of his run so that his running partner can continue

Figure 7: the group leader turns her head to check the progress of the rest of the group. (photograph by author)

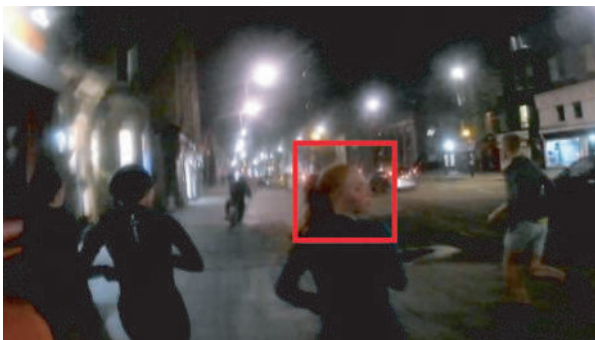


Figure 6: the running group splits as it approaches a bus stop (circled in yellow). (photograph by author)

uninterrupted. This strategy is of dropping behind is often reciprocated by people running together as they take turns to drop behind at various pinch points along their route.

A similar tendency of runners to reduce their pace rather than the space between them can be seen in Figure 5, where the runners have fallen into a line to leave space for a pedestrian to pass on their left in the opposite direction.

One final method frequently employed by runners is shown in Figure 6. The running group is approaching a large bus stop which includes several people waiting for the bus. This situation presents multiple potential complications for the runners. These include the physical struc-

Figure 8: the group leader attempts to indicate the route to those following her by pointing. (photograph by author)





Figure 9: Runners approaching multiple obstacles, including a rubbish bin (1), an oncoming pedestrian (2), a bus stop (3), and a dismantled cyclist (4). (photograph by author)

ture of the bus stop, the potential movement of waiting passengers, and the potential arrival and disembarking of passengers from a bus pulling into the stop. In the face of this added complexity, the unified nature of the group's movements breaks down as the runners split. A majority choose to pass on the left of the bus stop whilst two of the runners judge the situation independently and pass the bus stop along the roadside on its right.

Splits such as these tend to be avoided where possible by running

Figure 11: a series of tight pedestrian passing manoeuvres carried out by two runners along an 800m stretch of George IV Bridge, a busy street in the heart of Edinburgh's Old Town. (photograph by author)

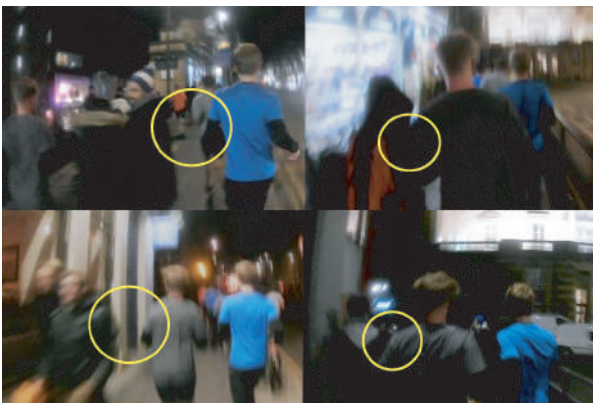


Figure 10: a close pass between the runner in orange and the pedestrian to her right. (photograph by author)

groups, as they can lead to runners being lost from the group in the confusion of separated routes through a section. One mechanism in which groups often minimise the chance of a split is through the presence of a designated group leader. In Figure 7, the group leader for this run is turning her head to check back on the progress of the rest of the group behind her. By assigning responsibility to an individual for leading the run, the remaining runners in the group are given a focal point through which they can base their wayfinding decisions. This can then help to produce more uniform decisions in complicated situations like in Figure 8, as the group follows the direction of the leader. For example, Figure 8 highlights the group leader pointing forwards down the path, gesturing to those around her how the route will develop from where they are.

Negotiating the pavement

Despite the wealth of obstacles that frequently face them, runners choose to use the pavement wherever possible, rather than resorting to the use of the road

Running into trouble :

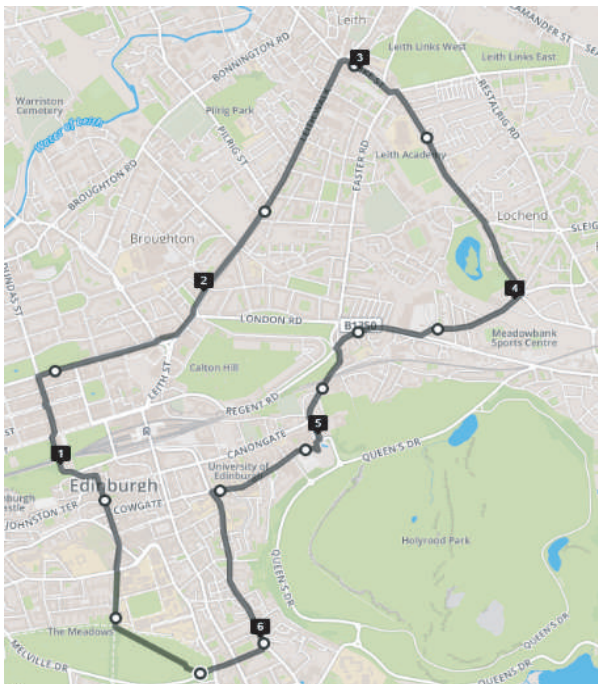


Figure 12: A map of one group run undertaken, including sections along Princes Street and the Royal Mile (map made courtesy of Strava).

as a potential alternative. In Figure 9, the runners are faced with numerous potential hazards (numbered in yellow). These combine fixed obstacles, such as the rubbish bin (1) and bus stop (3), with mobile (or potentially mobile) subjects, such as the oncoming pedestrian (2) and dismounted cyclist (4). In not choosing to use the road, the runners are left with a narrow and unpredictable space through which to avoid any collision. Group running further complicates this process as the runner must respond to the movements of others in the group and adjust to any additional space they take up on the runner's route.

Avoiding collisions in these circumstances requires a significant level of 'experiential expertise' (Collins, 2018) that is developed through the accumulated practice of running in public space. In Figure 10 below, the runner in the orange

jacket is attempting to pass a pedestrian on a busy walkway. With multiple other runners to her left, the group setting places additional pressure and difficulty on the individual runner in avoiding collisions.

The pedestrian, meanwhile, makes no attempt to adjust her position, unaware of the runners approaching her. This leaves responsibility for avoiding collision entirely with the runner who successfully passes the pedestrian by the smallest of margins (circled in yellow).

Tight passes are commonplace amongst runners' interactions with pedestrians (Figure 11), demonstrating a level of consistent judgement and skill that generally allows runners to manage a few dozen such passes on any city centre run. Runners' confidence and ability to negotiate their use of paths with pedestrians and other users further highlights this basis of skill.

The confidence of most runners in managing these interactions is evident from the routes they choose. The series of tight passes shown in Figure 11 are all taken from a group run with the Edinburgh University Hare & Hounds running club along the route shown in Figure 12. The running club organises group sessions every week and so the choice to use busy paths and areas of the city, despite the greater number of interactions that will have to be managed, demonstrates the relatively small issue that other users of space present to runners. The route taken in Figure 12 includes sections on Princes Street and the Royal Mile, the two busiest streets in Edinburgh (Edinburgh Football Index, 2017).

The running group increases the likelihood and potential risk of these instances as pedestrians get caught between mobile actors and can see no clear path away from the oncoming run-

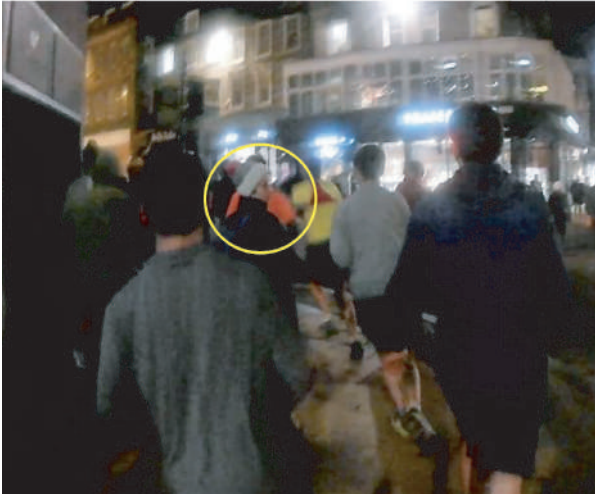


Figure 13: a woman is caught in the midst of a group of runners as they turn off Princes Street. (photograph by author)

ners. Figures 13 and 14 demonstrate two instances of walkers who react at short notice to the approach of a group of runners. In Figure 13, the woman is caught amid a large group of runners trying to turn the corner off Princes Street. The turn produces a bunching effect as runners slow down to pass, increasing congestion and further complicating the interaction with the pedestrian. Her reaction is to stop still, an action which greatly aids the runners in avoiding a collision as they can find their way through the small gaps around her.

Conversely, in Figure 14, the dog walker reacts to the oncoming runners by attempting to move himself out of the way of the oncoming runners. Though there is far more available space for both the walker and approaching runners in this scenario, the unpredictability of the walker's movement makes this situation more difficult for the runners in trying to avoid him. This serves to further highlight how the general success of runners in negotiating the pavement relies on their agency as the more mobile actor.



Figure 14: a dog walker attempts to move out of the way of oncoming runners. (photograph by author)

Cook (2016) questions the reasons why runners feel responsible for avoiding collisions and this question can in part be answered through practicality. Runners have accumulated experience of avoiding collisions where they have taken responsibility for adjusting away from the pedestrian and tend to use this to good effect. In contrast, situations like in Figure 14 where pedestrians attempt to take responsibility for their own movement can be counter-productive. The runner's passing manoeuvre is often jeopardised rather than helped.

Splitting the group

One aspect of the group that helps runners adapt to the potentially unpredictable movements of pedestrians is through splitting into pairs and threes. Figure 15 gives an example of how the larger group has split into a series of staggered pairs. Here, behind a leader at the front there is a series of three running pairs, as runners maintain parallel proximity with another and leave a space of a few metres in front.

Running into trouble :

Filtering into conversation pairs in this way helps to enhance the sociality of running as conversation is more easily maintained between runners in smaller sub-groups. The conversation pair also aids adjustment to pedestrians and other users as each runner pays attention to the movements of the other. In this way, the pair can adjust their pace and movement for each other to create space when passing other users. Due to the small gaps between each pair, each can act relatively independently from the group as a whole.

In Figure 16, two runners are approaching a potential obstacle. A pedestrian is passing close to a phone box as a separate walker moves towards the runners. The runner in blue looks to pass the pedestrian on his right in the gap between the phone box and him (1). However, the runner misjudges the space available and is forced to adjust to pass on the left at the last minute (2). Her running partner speeds up and adjusts to the left to then create a gap for the runner in blue to pass on the left (3), allowing her to move around the pedestrian and re-join her partner (4). This series of adjustments by both runners indicates how running in

Figure 15: A group of runners splits into conversation pairs. (photograph by author)



pairs can aid in negotiating obstructions on the pavement.

The runner on the left adjusts her pace to create space for her partner, whilst the gap between the pairs allows the runner in blue to slow as she diverts to pass on the left without interrupting the pace or direction of the pair of runners behind her.

Using the road

Another means by which runners attempt to manage their interactions with other people in public is through using the road as an alternative, and otherwise unused path.

Figure 17 presents two runners from a larger group running on the road in the face of passing and oncoming traffic. Here the presence of multiple runners on the road encourages others to follow suit in picking the line behind these two runners. This extends Cidell's (2014) analysis of the transgressive use of space where runners encourage each other to use spaces they would otherwise feel excluded from. Rather than this phenomenon being limited to the formal setting of the

Figure 16: a runner (red box) must adjust her pace whilst her partner (dashed red box) moves to the left to accommodate her as they pass a pedestrian (circled in yellow).. (photograph by author)





Figure 17: two runners (numbered in yellow) using the road despite one car passing and another approaching. (photograph by author)

running race, the group run provides a more flexible, everyday dynamic in which runners feel legitimate in their use of the road as a running path. Taking over the road space in this way allows runners to avoid potential hazards. Figure 17 is taken from a poorly lit street with narrow pavements, and so the runner may feel better able to see their route from the road. The road also offers more flexibility in adapting to obstacles as the runner can move to either side of the road rather than being limited to a single stretch of pavement.

Figure 18: runners straying onto the road to avoid the pedestrian waiting at the road crossing (circled in yellow). (photograph by author)

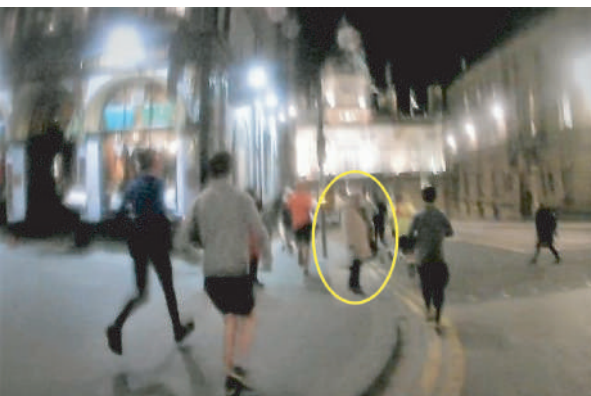


Figure 18 highlights another scenario in which the road has been used by runners to avoid potential obstacles. Here the use of the road allows runners to circumvent the pedestrian (circled in yellow) waiting at the crossing. Taking up the road as a path in this situation requires a significant combination of both in-the-moment environmental knowledge and previously accumulated knowledge of the location.

In choosing to utilise the road, the runner must be aware of potential car traffic, how they might re-join the pavement further on, and the change of traffic lights in order to judge whether the pedestrian is likely to move or remain still. On top of this, the runner uses prior understanding of the relative likelihood of traffic and the trustworthiness of the road surface for running on, based on factors from the weather and time of day to previous experience of traffic levels in that location.

The design of the street can often encourage the use of the road as a running path. In Figure 18, the ease of dismount from and re-entry to the pavement - thanks to its width and the low height differential to the road - makes it easier and faster for the runner to use the road.

Conversely, in Figure 19, the runners are encouraged make extended use of the road as they are prevented from re-joining the pavement by the railings separating the two. The group setting increases the use of the road through its collective momentum. Whilst the individual runner sets their own pace and so loses nothing from taking a diversion to avoid a railing such as this, the runner within a group must minimise diversions and disruptions to their pace in order to keep up with the group or to close any gaps. The collective pace of the group sets a

Running into trouble :

pressure to meet it. This leads to a greater use of roads as one example of a means in which distance can be shortened and the group's spatial proximity maintained.

Conclusion

This research has sought to explore how group running changes way-finding and interacting with other users of public space in the city, both as an experience and practice.

This study of group running offers support to Symonds et al.'s (2017, p.4) description of wayfinding as 'an interpretive craft' and 'a cognitive, social and corporeal process'. For example, runners' use of the road involves a re-interpretation of their role in space, taking temporary ownership of an area that is otherwise designated for the use of vehicles. Runners in a group consider multiple factors in their decision to use the road.

Figure 19: runners are prevented from rejoining the pavement by a roadside railing (circled in yellow). (photograph by author)



They bring prior knowledge of the specific road or place to gauge likely traffic and safety levels, combining this with audio-visual perception of traffic as well as the paths chosen by other runners in the group.

This paper has also explored how group running changes the interactions between runners and other users of public space. Runners consistently attempt to anticipate and manage their interactions with pedestrians, relying on their accumulated expertise (Collins, 2018) to navigate through tight situations and respond to multiple obstacles simultaneously. The potential for collision appears to greatly increase when pedestrians become aware of the runners. The pedestrian becomes an unpredictable figure, preventing the runners from taking control of the situation. This issue is exemplified by the incidents involving the dog walker on the Meadows and woman caught on the

corner of Princes Street.

This research has sought to engage with calls for more innovative, mobile methods in the study of mobilities (Heath & Hindmarsh, 2002; Buscher & Urry, 2009). The use of a head-mounted video camera enabled the capture of runners' movements in real time and opened up the possibility to study specific details of how runners adjust to each other and their environment. We often neglect the details in everyday practices of movement and adjusting to others, and this necessitates methods that capture the participants directly. Whilst running now has a significant basis of social science study, this has been almost entirely conducted through interviews and autoethnographic accounts (Bale, 2012; Little, 2017; Allen-Collinson, 2008). Expanding the use of video recording and analysis in the study of running therefore offers significant potential for further research.

By exploring how group running functions in public space, this research has shown that running groups can make it easier for participants to find their way through the city, especially when a group leader is present. The group also brings alternative meanings to the run, making it an opportunity for competition and social connection. Further research could profitably explore how the individual's relationship to running, in terms of self-image and confidence, affects their experience of running in a group and along busy streets. Additionally, more study could be conducted into the specific signals and markers, such as pace and arm movement, which allow runners to successfully adjust to each other.

Though group running can complicate interactions with other users of public space, the runners studied were able to avoid any issues caused by this

and adapt successfully to the people they encountered on route. This suggests that the busyness of city streets or parks need not be considered detrimental to the success of public health initiatives that involve using these spaces, such as parkrun, jogscotland and the Sweatshop running club. In light of this, the research presented here offers support for increasing investment in group running as a means of increasing exercise levels, such as the £3 million recently given to Parkrun by Sport England 'to enable it to set up runs in harder- to-reach communities' (The Guardian, 2019). In this way, I hope that a better understanding of how group running functions can make a small contribution to the continued growth of group running as a positive agent for social change, helping to combat rising inactivity and poor health by marrying exercise and social engagement.

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Running into trouble :

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