

The use and meanings of prayer by recreational marathon runners

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Abstract:

Leisure time has been shown to be conducive to many aspects of well-being, including spiritual well-being. Furthermore, prayer may be one behavior performed during leisure that enhances spiritual wellness. The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of the use and meanings of prayer by recreational marathon runners. Interviews were conducted with 10 marathoners representing 3 religions. Results revealed 5 themes: long-distance running as a space for the use of prayer, prayer to change one's thoughts or outlook, requests to aid in physical performances, prayer for appreciation and thanks, and the effects of prayer on interactions with others in a running setting. These findings expand upon existing research, support previous suggestions regarding the spiritual aspect of leisure activities, and provide new directions for future research regarding prayer and leisure activities.

Keywords: Running | spirituality | prayer | leisure | qualitative

Article:

Work demands, social pressures, stress, and sedentary lifestyles are common factors contributing to poor mental and physical health in today's society (Iso-Ahola & Mannell, 2004; Mannell, 2007). Leisure activities, defined as those behaviors performed outside of work and other obligations, have the potential to combat these negative influences on health by promoting well-being (Iso-Ahola & Mannell, 2004). For example, social leisure activities can enhance social support and reduce stress, and satisfaction with leisure activities has been associated with less burnout and emotional exhaustion (Iso-Ahola & Mannell, 2004). The benefits of physically active leisure are well known and include a reduced risk of cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes, improved psychological well-being (Warburton, Nicol, & Bredin, 2006), and improved cognition (Ratey & Loehr, 2011). Importantly, however, not all leisure activities are conducive to optimal health (e.g., sedentary television watching; Iso-Ahola & Mannell, 2004). Furthermore, leisure time is considered the lifestyle domain in which individuals have the greatest control (Iso-

Ahola & Mannell, 2004; Mannell, 2007); therefore, it is of value to understand leisure activities that facilitate holistic well-being to better encourage the personal choice of such behaviors.

One aspect of well-being that has received attention in the field of leisure studies is that of spiritual well-being (Heintzman & Coleman, 2010). In an earlier cross-sectional study, Ragheb (1993) found that leisure satisfaction and leisure participation were related to five components of perceived wellness, including spiritual wellness. Heintzman and Mannell (2003) also surveyed individuals and found that those who were more motivated to engage in leisure were more likely to use their leisure for spiritual functions, such as nurturing spirituality, and those more likely to use leisure for spiritual functions had higher ratings of spiritual well-being.

Qualitative research has also investigated the relationship between spirituality and leisure. Outdoor experiences can connect individuals to a higher purpose and provide spiritual inspiration through nature (Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Loeffler, 2004). Likewise, park visitation may facilitate spirituality through certain recreational features and the outdoor setting, allowing one to escape everyday life stressors (Heintzman, 2013). Challenging activities performed during leisure, such as backpacking or canoeing, offer a feeling of spiritual empowerment (Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999), and other less physically active pastimes (e.g., reading, meditation) have been reported as being spiritual as well, as they provide opportunities for growth, freedom, and awareness (Schmidt & Little, 2007). Finally, conceptual models connecting leisure and spirituality have been put forth suggesting that leisure time may allow one to commune with God, to find meaning in life through a peaceful “contemplative state of mind” (Karlis, Grafanaki, & Abbas, 2002, p. 211), or to spiritually cope with stress (Heintzman, 2008). In addition, components of leisure style may provide contexts through which processes such as grounding (i.e., reducing a heightened sense of spiritual emergency) or resacralization (i.e., returning to a spiritual state) shift individuals toward spiritual wellness (Heintzman, 2002). Together, these findings and theoretical positions point to the spiritual benefits of leisure.

As mentioned, certain health benefits of physically active leisure pursuits are well documented. The qualitative findings discussed in the preceding indicate that physically active leisure can also facilitate spiritual wellness. Moreover, Ragheb (1993) found a significant positive relationship between self-reported spiritual wellness and sport participation, and anecdotal information suggests that some athletes use religion in sport to stay morally sound, to give meaning to participation in sport, and to put sport participation into perspective (Coakley, 2015). Although the term *religion* is used here, these purposes can also be perceived as *spiritual*, given the interrelated meanings between religion and spirituality (Schmidt & Little, 2007). Somewhat contradicting these conclusions, Heintzman and Mannell (2003) found that individuals less active in sport were more likely to use leisure for spiritual functions, and other research has documented no significant correlations between spiritual well-being and sport activities (see Heintzman & Patriquin, 2012). Nevertheless, active leisure seems to have the potential to enhance physical, psychological, and spiritual wellness.

Prayer has been suggested as one specific way in which individuals create the attitude (Doohan, 1990) or “state of mind” necessary for spiritual leisure (Karlis et al., 2002). Although research on prayer has not been extensively pursued in the leisure field, qualitative findings suggest that leisure provides a place to pray and that incorporating prayer into one’s leisure

improves spiritual well-being (Heintzman, 2000). Given that prayer may increase spiritual wellness and that active leisure is conducive to several components of well-being, an investigation of prayer use in active leisure is warranted.

Past research has investigated the uses, experiences, and perceptions of prayer in subsets of athletes (Bleak & Frederick, 1998; Czech & Bullet, 2007; Czech, Wrisberg, Fisher, Thompson, & Hayes, 2004); however, these samples included higher-level athletes (e.g., NCAA Division I collegiate teams) and therefore are not representative of all individuals who engage in physical activity during their leisure time. An important avenue of exploration is the use and meanings of prayer by recreational athletes, specifically recreational marathon runners. These runners arguably spend large amounts of time alone in their leisure pursuit, and solitude has been identified as enhancing spiritual well-being (Heintzman, 2000). Being in nature during one's leisure has also been associated with spiritual well-being (Heintzman, 2000), and marathons are typically run outdoors. Finally, it is likely that prayer is used differently within different leisure contexts, as specific activities may be more or less encouraging of spiritual well-being for different people (Heintzman, 2000). Thus, rather than exploring the prayer use of individuals engaged in different types of active leisure activities, this study focuses on one: marathoning.

Studies conducted with runners have demonstrated that prayer is indeed incorporated into this recreational activity. For example, Acevedo, Dzewaltowski, Gill, and Noble (1992) reported that ultramarathoners use prayer to draw upon divine strength during performances, and others have found that some marathoners use prayer to cope with difficulties during races (Buman, Omli, Giacobbi, & Brewer, 2008). However, an investigation of prayer in active leisure was not the purpose of these studies; the former explored the cognitive orientations of ultramarathoners, and the latter asked marathoners about their experiences of and responses to sudden losses of energy. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences and perceptions of prayer of recreational marathon runners using qualitative methods. The study of lived experiences focuses on how individuals come to know their world as active participants in this world (Glesne, 2016; Lavery, 2003). Through interviews, the primary investigator sought to explore and interpret runners' perceptions to uncover the deeper meanings behind their prayer use. This research was positioned within an interpretive paradigm (Glesne, 2016); as such, no a priori theory guided this study, as these lived experiences are socially constructed, "complex and ever changing," and may not adhere to norms or models (Glesne, 2016, p. 9; Ponterotto, 2005). By understanding how recreational marathon runners personally experience their prayer, the role of prayer within the leisure and spirituality context can be better articulated.

Methods

Participants

Ten recreational marathon runners (four female and six male) were recruited to participate in this study. Each was required to be 18 years or older and to be considered a recreational marathoner. A recreational marathoner was defined as a person who has completed at least two full marathons, does not receive sponsorships or monetary rewards for running marathons, and is not affiliated with a running team that formally competes in racing events against other organized groups. This definition intended to capture the idea that these runners practice marathon running

during their discretionary time for their own reasons rather than for reasons associated with work-like pressures. Indeed, it was the authors' assumption that external pressures of rewards or group expectations would create a more obligatory environment, detracting from the intrinsic reasons these runners choose to engage in the activity and therefore not being as indicative of "leisure" (Haworth & Lewis, 2005). Furthermore, the runners were required to have used prayer for their running and to be affiliated with a religion and/or consider themselves to be religious; runners from all religious affiliations were welcome to participate. Prayer, although not predefined for the participants, is often connected with religion (Holl, 1998). Considering oneself as religious was an inclusion criterion put forth to provide contextual background for the origins and development of the participants' prayer, as well as to illuminate similarities and differences among religions. Importantly though, individuals may consider themselves both religious and spiritual, with the latter encompassing, overlapping, or developing from the former (Marler & Hadaway, 2002). As will be shown, the participants of this study seemed to fall into this category as they spoke to both constructs throughout their interviews.

Demographic information is presented in Table 1. The participants were given the option to either select their own pseudonyms or have the primary investigator choose one for them. Lexi's Dad (a self-chosen name to pay tribute to his pet Lexi), Harvey, Paula, Kip, Lucy, Esther, William, Doug, Jerry, and Beast all agreed to interview for this study. Nine of the participants identified as White/Caucasian, and one identified as Middle Eastern. Seven identified as Christian, two as Jewish, and one as Muslim. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 52 years ($M = 36.70$, $SD = 12.62$), had been running marathons for two to 30 years, and had run two to 20 marathons ($M = 6.30$, $SD = 6.20$).

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Race	Religious affiliation	Number of marathons
Beast	Female	34	Caucasian	Christian	3
Doug	Male	52	Caucasian	Christian	20
Esther	Female	26	Caucasian	Christian	2
Harvey	Male	35	Middle Eastern	Muslim	3
Jerry	Male	23	Caucasian	Jewish	4
Kip	Male	23	Caucasian	Christian	6
Lexi's Dad	Male	52	Caucasian	Jewish	15
Lucy	Female	24	Caucasian	Christian	2
Paula	Female	50	Caucasian	Christian	2
William	Male	48	Caucasian	Christian	6

Procedure

The participants were recruited through convenience sampling and snowball sampling (Glesne, 2016). Specifically, seven runners were recruited through snowball sampling after the primary investigator contacted acquaintances she knew personally who were involved in running. On one occasion, after asking whether a contact knew of anyone who would be willing to be interviewed, the contact requested to be a part of the study himself. The study was conducted in a region of the United States where the religious affiliation was predominantly Christian (Pew Research Center, 2014). As it became apparent that snowball sampling was not

producing a diverse sample, a social media recruitment strategy was implemented. This strategy resulted in two additional participants of different religions who offered to interview for the study after reading the study information posted on running-related Facebook pages. Although several marathon administrators were contacted and asked to disseminate study information to marathon registrants, no participants were recruited from this method. All participants signed a consent form informing them that their participation in the study interview was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time, and that the interview would be audio-recorded; after consenting, they provided demographic information through self-report. Interview questions were developed prior to recruitment and piloted with two connections, one Christian yoga enthusiast and one Jewish gymnast. Although neither was a marathon runner, the purpose of this piloting was to ensure the questions were thorough and made sense to a religious audience. One question was added after these two pilot sessions, and the following final set of questions guided the semistructured interviews in the study:

1. You mentioned you are _____. Tell me about what it means to pray in your religion.
Probes: For what reasons do you pray in your religion?
2. Tell me about your use of prayer as it connects to being a marathon runner.
Probes: When do you use prayer? How long have you been using prayer? What do you pray about? How do you use prayer as a runner? For what reasons do you pray?
3. How does your use of prayer affect you as a runner mentally?
Probes: How does praying affect your emotions as a runner? How does running affect your thoughts as a runner?
4. How does your use of prayer affect you as a runner physically?
Probes: How does it affect your behavior? How does using prayer change the experience of running for you?
5. How has your use of prayer evolved?
6. Tell me about differences you experience when you use prayer while/before/after running as opposed to when you run without praying.
7. Tell me about any differences between your use of prayer in races and your use of prayer during other runs.
8. How does your use of prayer affect your experiences with others?
Probes: How does prayer affect your interactions with other runners? How does it affect your perceptions of other runners? How does it affect your interactions with race spectators? How does it affect your perceptions of race spectators?
9. Given that I'm interested in marathon runners' use of prayer, is there anything else you'd like to tell me that I might not have thought to ask?

Interviews were conducted over the telephone, in person, or with Google Hangouts, a video chat technology. Following the interview, participants were contacted for an optional member check. The sample size was capped at 10 participants as data saturation had been reached after these interviews; in other words, no new information was coming forth from the final few interviews, and further analysis was deemed unnecessary (Fusch & Ness, 2015). This study was approved by the university institutional review board.

Data analysis

During the interview process, the primary investigator kept notes referring to main points, potential additional questions, and body language when applicable to aid in the analysis. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim within two weeks of recording and were listened to again while reading the transcriptions to ensure accuracy. During the initial coding phase, codes were manually attributed to condense the data and to link similar ideas (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996), and analytic memos (Glesne, 2016) offered time for reflection during the coding process (e.g., “not all interviews must have all similar codes,” analytic memo, November 30, 2016). Although it is natural to search for “repetitive patterns” and “consistencies in human affairs” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 5), exploring discrepancies was also necessary in this analysis. Interviews were coded a second time in a different order to guard against any unintentional influencing of codes; once the data were indexed with codes, the primary investigator created a codebook to group these codes into overarching categories (Saldaña, 2009). Each category was given a section in the codebook with short descriptions of how participants contributed to it. Through thematic analysis (Glesne, 2016), the primary investigator searched for patterns within and between the categories to identify themes regarding the use and meanings of prayer. After reflecting upon the categories initially identified, most became themes by themselves. Table 2 provides examples of raw data, the codes attributed to the data, the original categories, and the final themes.

Table 2. Data analysis examples.

Raw data example	Code	Category	Theme
“Or if I'm really like, you know, trying to break a PR, and I'm, I'm struggling, you know, just a quick thought like, ‘Oh, I could really use some help right now.’”	Request	Running-related requests	Requests to aid in physical performances
“And, you know, it’s, we share that struggle of loving, loving people who are not lovable, lovable. And so that’s a lot of times what we pray about.”	Support	Others and the effect of prayer	The effects of prayer on interactions with others in a running setting
“And um, realizing that the, you know, things that are bringing me stress, you know, at work or, or wherever else are, you know, small potatoes to, to um, what so many people are dealing with.”	Perspective	Mental aspects	Prayer to change one’s thoughts or outlook
“I feel like I'm repenting, I'm admitting guilt, and I'm telling, I'm, I'm just that it's—discovering my shortfalls, and now it's time for me to fix it, to think differently, to stay more positive.”	Reset	Mental aspects	Prayer to change one’s thoughts or outlook
“And ask for love, and ask for wisdom and guidance.”	Request	Non-running-related requests	Prayer to change one’s thoughts or outlook
“Every time my thoughts shifted to like how much, I dunno, my knee hurt or how hot it was or—just tried to keep my mind sort of generally on the things that they had said that they wanted first.”	Dissociate	Mental aspects	Prayer to change one’s thoughts or outlook

Note. PR: acronym commonly used by runners to mean “personal record.”

As the primary researcher conducted the analysis independently, an explanation of her personal biases is warranted. The investigator identifies as Christian but did not perceive that this identity per se resulted in any noticeable biases during the interviews or data analysis. However, the investigator’s personal definition of prayer did have an influence on the study. The investigator perceives prayer as a conversation with (the Christian) God, usually involving a request or an

expression of thankfulness, and uses prayer in her running as an attempt to enhance physical performances or to appreciate the completion of personally acceptable runs. Admittedly, the investigator struggled with conceptualizing and discussing alternate definitions of prayer. To counter this bias, the investigator consistently made notes to use as reminders of the specific individuals' meanings of prayer throughout the conversations. Furthermore, many of the participants used prayer for much more altruistic reasons, and the investigator recognized the tendency to feel compelled to explore these seemingly more "positive" uses to a greater extent, as compared to more self-serving uses. The investigator went back to question participants regarding topics that were stated but not fully explored and attempted to portray each theme adequately and honestly, without emphasizing one over the others.

After describing the findings, a draft was sent to the participants to read through as a member check (Glesne, 2016). Participants were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the interpretations of their words to ensure trustworthiness of the data; none requested any edits.

Results

Through the analysis of these 10 interviews with recreational marathoners, five themes emerged: long-distance running as a space for the use of prayer, prayer to change one's thoughts or outlook, requests to aid in physical performances, prayer for appreciation and thanks, and the effects of prayer on interactions with others in a running setting. This section will begin with an overview of the participants' use of prayer, including their personal definitions, and then will provide a detailed description of the themes that emerged. This section will also touch upon the discrepancies in opinions regarding differences between races and training runs that materialized through the interviews.

Prayer: An overview

The definition of prayer was clearly very personal to the participants. "What is prayer? Is what I'm doing prayer? ... Religion is a deeply personal frame that you have to develop on your own. I don't think it has meaning [until] it has meaning to you personally." Lexi's Dad's words capture the essence of the participants' experience and understanding of their own prayer development. Many spoke of their prayer having evolved throughout their life, shifting from prayer that was not serving them to their more meaningful prayer use today, defined in their own terms. Differences in definitions did arise between the religions, which may be of interest to note. For many of the Christian participants, prayer was defined as a conversation with God that allowed for the sense of a deeper relationship. For example, Esther defined prayer in the following way: "For me, what prayer is—it's a sense of having communication with the God that created us, you know, the universe." Likewise, Doug stated that "you're always communicating with God ... I would say the marathon running makes my connection, my prayer connection, stronger and more direct." The perceived "connection" comforts the runners, and they feel as if they can honestly disclose their emotions, ask for assistance, and reflect upon and be grateful for many aspects of their lives. The two Jewish runners differed in their prayer use; one's definition of prayer paralleled that of the Christian participants, while the other perceived prayer as a means of meditation and appreciation and as an act of mindfulness:

I grew up with kind of formal prayer. Being Jewish, a lot of it's Hebrew, a lot of it's translation. I think the meaning of that to me changed over time. I think now, more when I think of praying ... I think more of being mindful and appreciative.

The Muslim participant noted the following:

[Prayer] is supposed to make you feel better because you're always reaching out to that superpower that in the back of your mind makes you feel safe, makes you feel secure ... Running itself became to me a form of prayer because every time I do those long runs, and I finish that run, I don't know what it is, but I feel like I am flying on clouds.

Although the participants' characterizations of prayer differed in some ways, their stories and explanations shared commonalities, thus unearthing the five themes.

Theme 1: Long-distance running as a space for the use of prayer

The act of long-distance running provides a specific space and context for the participants to pray, and this was evident when they spoke of training runs as well as full marathon races. Regarding the former, long training runs carve out alone time in the day to "think without interruption" and possibly receive divinely inspired thought. Both William and Lucy provided examples in which they explained that God may "[pop] in your head" while running, praying, and contemplating life, and Doug insisted that marathon running strengthens his connection due to the ease with which he can communicate with God while running. Harvey added to this when he stated that "long-distance running is what creates that time in my head [to] ask questions and try to seek answers." Furthermore, running, as opposed to other modes of transportation, allows one to connect with God's creation and nature in a different way, thus motivating prayers of appreciation and wonder. According to Beast, "[you] see so many more things that you would otherwise miss—the beautiful colors, the smells, the many different trees, depending on where you are, or buildings, or just life that may be passed by in a faster vehicle." These longer runs also provoke other prayers, such as those for assistance, since at times these outings are challenging and boast a high level of physical difficulty. Esther spoke more to this idea when she revealed that the demanding space that long-distance running creates allows her to grow with God as it presents a challenge to her faith:

[It's] really easy for me to love an activity that I'm really good at and that doesn't challenge me, but it's really hard to love an activity and to still participate in an activity that is really, really hard. Physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, [long-distance running] is very difficult ... I feel more in tune with my faith because I have to continuously ask for help and ask for guidance.

Racing a marathon also supplies a space for prayer, albeit slightly differently than when running for training. Lucy and Lexi's Dad use the 26 miles of a marathon quite deliberately; they practice what Lucy termed "prayer miles," in which they devote one mile of the race to an individual who has had an impact on or added meaning to their lives. Lucy loops rubber bands or hair ties around her wrist with her chosen names, while Lexi's Dad writes the initials on his forearm as a reminder, and they are able to glance down at each mile marker to focus their prayer.

What was interesting was that the participants were adamant that the longer miles afforded this prayer space. Shorter amounts of miles, such as 5 K (3.1 mile) races, were described as being more about “fitness.” Lucy mentioned that she only uses her prayer miles in full marathons, as shorter races “for some reason ... just didn’t seem like as big of a ... deal as a marathon.” Beast described her initial shorter runs as “quick [bursts] of exercise” that she would hastily squeeze into her day, emphasizing the necessary time that long-distance running provides for the use of prayer and reflection. In fact, for some, it was not until they started increasing their endurance and running these longer distances that they began to incorporate prayer into their running and saw how the two could combine into a spiritual practice.

Theme 2: Prayer to change one’s thoughts or outlook

All 10 of the runners mentioned using prayer in their running to adjust their mind-sets. Several use prayer to dissociate from the physical discomfort felt while running. Paula, Esther, and Lucy all use prayer to reroute their mind from focusing on aspects of the run, such as swinging ponytails and blisters, to “something outside” and “bigger” than themselves. Doug finds that his communication with God while running makes him happy and thus encourages him to interact with others. He recounted a notoriously mountainous race where he managed to detach from any physical pain and run through a section of the course he would normally walk due to his engagement with both God and a fellow runner.

Similarly, prayer is employed to refresh or renew one’s attitude during a run and to keep this recreational activity in perspective. This ritual gives refocus to the activity, combats pessimistic thoughts, and reminds the participants of the reality of their situations. Esther uses prayer as mental guidance to avoid negative self-talk. She observed that her prayer gives her clarity and reminds her that she is loved, and she is no longer burdened by the outcome of her race. This feeling is then embodied when she picks her head up, corrects her posture, and carries on running. Kip described his prayer as humbling; he retrospectively assesses his training, which “puts [the outcome of the race] off of [God] and puts it back onto” himself:

I could’ve done a lot of things, you know, could have done a lot of things better in my training [laughs]. You know, you begin to kind of see yourself, and none of us are perfect, and so you kind of ... you understand your flaws, your weaknesses, but He still gives you the ability to go on a run.

Lexi’s Dad also uses his prayer to refocus and modify his perspective when it comes to injury. He admitted to oftentimes becoming frustrated due to physical setbacks that would prohibit him from running as he would have liked. However, in one instance, by remembering his inspiration, specifically wounded veterans, he “realized that a calf injury is really not that big of a deal,” and he was able to enjoy his race, regardless of his performance.

Throughout the interview, William recognized the ability of prayer and running to provide a restorative environment and to push away the worries of life: “To me, running is cleansing ... It uproots all the hurt and the pain and the disappointment ... and running is a therapy.” William discussed a spiritual song of forgiveness, healing, and peace that he reflects upon during his

running. Several of the other marathoners also use prayer to mend their outlook regarding their lives outside of running. Beast echoed William's sentiment, describing running as "much more therapeutic with prayer involved," and she and others see running with prayer as a stress reliever. When discussing the refreshing aspect of running, Paula maintained that "being able to bring the focus away from me and into prayer just helps tremendously." As a breast cancer survivor, she recalled her time during radiation treatment when she would leave to run and pray as a means of alleviating anxiety:

I just need to be by myself for just a little bit. And so then [running] was where I escaped and did that, and I would pray ... trying really hard to focus on anything else because the only thing people talked to me about was cancer.

Through further developing their relationship with their God or through being appreciative, the runners perceived that they were able to shift their focus from life's nagging, stressful thoughts to a much more pleasing interest.

Furthermore, Harvey uses running as a time of personal confession and to refocus his lifestyle with a hope to "do things differently and better" going forward; he is "hungry for that feeling [and] the spiritual benefit" of running, so he returns to this activity again and again. Jerry commented that the combination of a good run and a good prayer sets the tone for the day, allowing him to feel more connected and "purposeful," and Doug also believes "from a spirituality standpoint" that a morning run in which he feels that connection to God helps him to remain focused during the hours afterward. To these marathoners, running with prayer provides noticeable mental benefits, both in and out of their activity.

Theme 3: Requests to aid in physical performances

In addition to regulating their own thoughts or current perspectives, the participants pray for other specific requests. About half of the marathoners disclosed prayers for aspects that may physically aid in their running. Many pray for strength, endurance, and to "keep putting one foot in front of the other." When William was first starting to run, he prayed to be able to cover more distance each day. For Jerry and Kip, their prayers for physical ability have changed over the years. Both began their running admittedly asking for "unrealistic expectations" and desiring to hit specific time goals. Now, as Jerry said,

I'm not asking for a miracle. I'm not asking for any magic shoes that are going to make me faster than I'm able to be. But I think it's just really asking to let me bring out that potential that I know I have inside of myself ... to bring out the best in yourself.

Beast admitted that strength-related prayers can transform throughout a competition to those more safety related. She remembered a race on a remarkably hot day when her "goal changed from a certain time finishing to 'do not check into a medical tent,'" as dehydration was a serious concern, and she was praying "just to get ... through it." Others also pray for safety, specifically for the awareness of motorists on the road and to avoid injury, and these prayers are for themselves as well as for other runners.

A frequent request for “help” resounded throughout the interviews. Jerry provided detail about races where rabbis line the courses with Tefillin, Jewish items used in prayer, to pray with runners if they desire to stop. When asked what he thought about race participants stopping midrace to pray, Jerry responded, “It made sense! ... [You’re] doing your hardest and best, and somebody asks you if you want to say a prayer ... I’ll take all the help I can get.” While some of the runners did not see God as a “micromanager,” or as one who would intervene with material gifts related to marathon running, these prayers for support and assistance were undoubtedly important to others.

Theme 4: Prayer for appreciation and thanks

“I think that the whole situation [of being on a run] just brings me to a different level of appreciation.” Beast was not the only runner to mention appreciation. These thankful prayers are common throughout many of the participants’ running, and in line with their uses of prayer for cognitive purposes, these prayers focus on both running- and non-running-related aspects.

Many of the participants are thankful for their ability to run, and they recognize the “gift” that they have received in the form of running. To this, Beast affirmed, “[My] physical ability is something that I am very happy with, very proud of ... and I definitely feel like that’s God-given, so my relationship and my prayer definitely play a role in that.” The marathoners are especially grateful for their health; Paula, a nurse, works with those who do not share her physical capabilities, and she suggested that at times, “people take it for granted to be able to run and walk without pain.” Similarly, Kip noted,

It’s really understanding and grasping the grace that He’s given me to have a healthy body and a mind-set to be able to do something like this ... Knowing that I can go ... finish a marathon is just a huge gift ... [Going] back into prayer this morning [when running], it’s just thanking Him really. For the gift.

The participants demonstrate their understanding of the fragility of their talent and the value they possess for running through their prayer.

The experience of running a marathon in general prompts appreciative prayers as well. From crossing the finish line and achieving a goal once considered unattainable to expressing gratitude toward volunteers and spectators, the runners use their prayer to articulate their thanks. Specifically, the final miles of a marathon elicit thankfulness when one is, as Kip put it, “digging at the bottom of the tank to draw up what you can.” Rather than question God, “Why are you doing this to me?” when he is feeling the discomfort of the last stretch of the race, he instead concentrates on his appreciation of “getting to succeed in what [he loves].” Furthermore, with many possible factors affecting race day, including injuries, illnesses, or other unforeseen circumstances, the participants consider actually enjoying a race as another reason for demonstrating their thanks through prayer. Beast reminisced about her Boston Qualifying race: “It was almost unreal how great I felt the whole race, so [my prayer] was very thankful, just appreciating every moment.”

As marathon running is a predominately outdoor activity, the runners are often surrounded by nature, another topic of their prayers of gratitude. Paula admires God's "creativity" and the color "pallet He uses in nature," and others offer prayers of thanks for the beauty of their running environment, including safe neighborhoods and pleasant race-day temperatures. Thus, through their running and their prayer, these runners are able to show thanks for many facets of their lives.

Theme 5: The effects of prayer on interactions with others in a running setting

Another theme that emerged throughout the interviews involved the effects of prayer and the influence they had with regard to interacting with others in a running setting. Many of the runners in the study implied in some way that their use of prayer or effects brought on by prayer flow over into these relationships.

Several of the participants are members of running groups or have running partners of the same religion, and they admitted that they enjoy running and conversing with individuals of similar beliefs and values. As mentioned,

[My running group prays] before our runs each time we go out, so I definitely feel like prayer brings us closer together. And I would say that's probably how, for those that I'm praying with that are on the run, it definitely brings—it makes that bond stronger between me and my group of running friends ... [We] thank God for our ability but also the fellowship that we're able to share as runners.

Esther also feels this cohesion after praying with her group, as prayer "allows [the group] to recognize who else is out there with us this morning [during the run]." She believes that fellow runners understand each other, "bound in that mind-set" of running and says the same applies for fellow Christians; therefore, "when it's both of those things together," Esther said, "it puts you down into the nitty gritty of somebody's life," and prayer with another runner establishes valued community. Moreover, prayer use in Kip's marathon running teaches him patience, which he then practices when running with others. For example, in a relay endurance event consisting of six male runners, this learned patience helped Kip remember to "give grace" to his teammates while competing.

Using running as his prayer, Harvey has admittedly become more accepting and less judgmental of those around him. The happiness he feels through the refreshing and cleansing act of running has allowed him to connect with friends and act as a support system and motivator to other runners. "Running activated [a] feeling of humanity" for him, and he has created a Facebook page, partly devoted to the promotion of running, where he displays others' accomplishments and provides inspirational information. Regarding his running-related encouragement, Harvey stated, "I don't want to promote it as only fitness. It's more spiritual, more of the feeling that comes after the running."

In the context of a marathon race, the participants also pray for others. As mentioned, they are thankful and give their appreciation to volunteers, race officials, and spectators. Fellow runners in the race receive prayers as well, especially if they are noticeably struggling.

During a race, the runners also offer prayers for those who are not present. Lucy's prayer miles were instigated by the wish that while running, she would be "spending [her] time wisely and not selfishly ... to make sure that those people knew that [she] was thinking of them." Likewise, Lexi's Dad's prayer miles are devoted to remembering those who have inspired him.

Paula concluded the interview with two examples pertaining to the importance of endorsing healthy lifestyles. In the first, she mentioned how she is "proud" that her daughter, after learning from her, is modeling beneficial exercise behavior for her granddaughter. In her second example, Paula expressed frustration when others are "judgmental" toward those who are overweight and exercising: "They're the ones who are out there. They're the ones who are running. So encourage them." The participants illustrated that while they use prayer in their own ways for personal mental and physical purposes, they also perceive prayer as fostering of relationships and use prayer to benefit others.

Differences in races versus training runs

Interestingly, the participants were generally split on their views regarding differences between marathon races and usual training runs, and this distinction was revealed by their prayer use. A few of the participants described the actual marathon as a larger feat as compared to a training run. Jerry noticed that his use of prayer becomes more "extensive" when he has an approaching race, and Lucy, due to her prayer mile commitments, is more "dedicated" to the marathon run. William posited that training runs are for "dealing with issues" as a form of catharsis, while marathon races are for celebrations. As such, he prays for healing and cleansing while training, whereas he demonstrates gratitude and thankfulness when racing. To these runners, running the marathon is viewed as a commemorative finale in which the profits of months of training are displayed and enjoyed.

However, the other participants in the study consider a marathon as "just another training run." Although their prayers of appreciation are expanded to include thankfulness for volunteers and spectators, they do not perceive great differences in their use of the behavior in this competitive setting. In fact, Doug and his running partners have a clear "attitude" about training: "People ask what we're training for. We say we're training for life ... to be better people, [and] we're also training forever ... so really, every race is [training]."

Caveats

These five themes were not the only motifs revealed throughout the interview process; for example, a few runners discussed the idea that running could produce "inspired thought" from a divine source. However, the potential theme of "inspired thought" was less developed than other ideas and so was ultimately considered to contribute to more pronounced themes. Likewise, the final themes do have overlapping pieces. One such case is the use of "prayer miles," which ended up supporting the majority of the themes, not just one. The theme of "prayer to change one's thoughts or outlook" contains instances of dissociation, or prayer to take one's mind off of pains and aches, which arguably could also be considered a "physical request." It was the way in which the participants spoke of this change as transcending the activity of running, as well as the

fact that this request pertained to mental focus rather than actual physical relief, that supported the decision as to how to code this response. Identifying these matters attempts to add to the trustworthiness of the study and a better understanding of how the themes were developed.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of the meanings of prayer use by recreational marathon runners. Through semistructured interviews with 10 runners, the five themes of long-distance running as a space for the use of prayer, prayer to change one's thoughts or outlook, requests to aid in physical performances, prayer for appreciation and thanks, and the effects of prayer on interactions with others in a running setting were unearthed.

Previous research has also identified leisure time as a space for spirituality (e.g., Heintzman, 2000; Schmidt & Little, 2007), and certain "triggers" presented within this time, such as nature, challenges, and the ritual-like character of some leisure activities, may instigate this spiritual experience (Schmidt & Little, 2007). For example, the awe-inspiring aspect of nature has been found to bring about a sense of connection with or awareness of a higher power, comparable to some of the marathoners' comments that running in nature motivates a relationship and conversation with God. In addition, a challenge during leisure time, such as a demanding or risky physical task, may prompt reflection and a calling upon God, and the marathoners in the present study use prayer during times of struggle and doubt while running and ask for help. Consistent with the notion that the planned, ritualistic characteristic of leisure activities can provide an opportunity for spirituality, many of the participants seemed to acknowledge that prayer and running were compatible as they were both behaviors the individuals commonly perform and could combine. Thus, one way these "triggers" may facilitate spiritual environments is through the incorporation of prayer.

The runners indicated that the longer distances were those that provided this space for prayer rather than shorter distances. Shorter runs, due to fewer miles accumulated, may not provide the time necessary to devote to prayer or to feel therapeutic, and the runners' minds may be directed elsewhere. Leisure activities during which one becomes "busy" may suppress spiritual well-being (Heintzman, 2000). Indeed, Heintzman (2000) found that while time was conducive to spiritual well-being, busyness and preoccupation detracted from it. Although speculative, perhaps during shorter, self-described "fitness" runs squeezed into their agendas, the marathoners perceive themselves as too "busy" to concentrate in a more spiritual way. Likewise, given that Schmidt and Little (2007) identified challenge as a potential facilitator of spiritual experiences, these runners may perceive shorter runs to be less challenging and thus not encouraging of the use of prayer.

Moreover, the participants mentioned that this space for prayer allows them to alter their thoughts and outlook while running. Heintzman (2008) defined *leisure-spiritual coping* as "coping with stress through spirituality within the context of an individual's leisure" (p. 58) and suggested that prayer incorporated into leisure activities may provide individuals with a way to manage hardships. In line with this proposition, many of the runners mentioned using prayer while running to reset, refresh, or renew themselves after dealing with stress in their everyday lives. Paula specifically discussed the idea of "escaping" with prayer, and others alluded to the

ability to “get away” from stressors and worries, echoing findings from other qualitative research that has investigated the spiritual nature of leisure (Heintzman, 2000).

Regarding their running specifically, the recreational marathoners use prayer to dissociate from physical discomfort and to keep the activity in perspective, which is similar to reports from other research and anecdotal information. For example, Buman et al. (2008) also referenced a marathoner’s use of prayer as a dissociation technique, and Coakley (2015) suggested that some individuals involved in sport “feel that religious beliefs enable them to transcend sports and bring balance back to their lives” (p. 529). This last sentiment was emphasized by claims of two of the runners in the current study that their use of prayer grounded them and enabled them to reframe their negative views of injury and poor race performances. Taken together, long-distance running may provide a space for prayer both purposefully, to cope with stress, as well as organically, as an outcome of the active leisure itself; prayer and recreational marathon running may then be mutually reinforcing, as one may choose to go running to pray but also pray as a result of certain aspects of the run (e.g., nature, the challenge).

An attitude of gratefulness is a key component of leisure that facilitates spirituality (Heintzman, 2000, 2009, 2016). Similar to nonrecreational athletes, the recreational marathoners of this study use prayer to show appreciation for the “gift” of the ability to take part in physical activity (Czech et al., 2004). However, the runners are also thankful for other aspects of their leisure apart from just their physical capabilities; specifically, many of the participants expressed appreciation for the outdoor settings in which they run. As mentioned, past qualitative work has noted that nature “sparks” spiritual leisure experiences for individuals in different ways (Heintzman, 2000; Schmidt & Little, 2007). For these runners, it appears as if nature brings about a spiritual environment through prayers of thankfulness.

Finally, the marathoners revealed that prayer impacts their relationships with others in a running setting. For some, individual prayer allows them to be more accepting and patient. For others, praying with fellow runners promotes togetherness and feelings of community. According to Karlis and colleagues’ (2002) model of leisure and spirituality, connecting with others during leisure can be a spiritual experience; the results of this study suggest that one way to encourage this experience is through prayer. Furthermore, it appeared from the participants’ interviews that these outcomes of prayer establish more meaningful relationships. Previous research has indicated that close relationships with others in one’s chosen leisure activity strengthen decisions to remain engaged in the activity (Burch, 2009; Kyle & Chick, 2004). Therefore, the use of prayer in recreational running may support not only camaraderie but also continued running through these relational bonds.

Implications and future directions

The results of the study suggest that the incorporation of prayer into running may provide mental and spiritual benefits for recreational marathoners. The participants spoke of feeling refreshed after a long run, some use running with prayer as a time to handle adversity in life, and others implied that an early run with a connection to a higher power could lead to a more productive and successful day. Individuals today are plagued by burnout, stress, and sedentary behaviors that negatively contribute to their well-being (Iso-Ahola & Mannell, 2004; Mannell, 2007).

According to the current findings, praying during one's active leisure may be an effective way to offset these influences on mental, physical, and spiritual health. However, it also appears as though the time commitment of long-distance running and the perceived difficulty of running these longer distances are two characteristics that convert running into a unique space for prayer. As not everyone is physically prepared to run marathons, perceives they have the time to commit to running marathons (Iso-Ahola & Mannell, 2004), or desires to engage in running as their choice of leisure, future research should investigate the use of prayer in other physically active leisure pursuits. Given the spiritual benefits prayer seems to provide during running, similar findings for other activities may help encourage the adoption of a holistically healthy lifestyle (Henderson & Bialeschki, 2005).

An intriguing finding of the current study was that some of the runners viewed the marathon as a larger feat to which they felt more dedicated than they did to their training runs and used prayer differently, while others did not. Runners also differed regarding their views on prayer for physical performances. Future research should investigate whether qualitative differences in prayer use reflect quantitative differences in spiritual well-being.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning the construct of mindfulness. Specifically, Lexi's Dad considered his prayer to be mindful appreciation used to reframe his perspective. Gim (2009) suggested that mindfulness can enhance one's leisure experience, and Carruthers and Hood (2011) indicated that leisure provides an informal setting for practicing mindfulness. However, although Carruthers and Hood (2011) listed yoga, walking, tai chi, and Pilates as examples of movement-based meditative practices, activities that cultivate mindfulness have been described as "relaxed" and "goal-less," which might seem to preclude marathon training runs and races as activities in which mindfulness would be relevant (Gim, 2009, p. 109). Because marathon running is an activity that is often less relaxed than those previously mentioned, and many marathoners—even recreational ones—likely have goals connected to the activity, understanding mindfulness more specifically in this context would be another interesting future research direction.

Conclusion

The findings of this investigation regarding recreational marathoners' uses and meanings of prayer support the results of other studies regarding the spiritual aspect of leisure. Recreational marathoners see long-distance running as an intentional space for the use of prayer and use prayer while running to cope with stressful events in their lives. They use prayer to show their thanks, they pray for physical assistance, and they use this behavior to adjust their mind-sets when it comes to performance. Finally, the use of prayer while running can influence relationships with others in a running setting. Interpreting the subjective experiences of prayer within the context of recreational running, this study adds to the current literature by suggesting the potential benefits of and reasons for prayer, as well as highlighting future areas of inquiry.

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