

CHANGES IN RUNNERS' VOCABULARIES OF MOTIVE: PHYSICAL FITNESS AS RELIGION

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Reason is essentially a servant of the passions — it is the faculty of devising ways and means to secure what one desires. --Thomas Hobbes

VOCABULARIES OF MOTIVE

In an earlier study (Edgley et al 1982) we described how the physical fitness movement, as embodied in running and jogging, has taken on many trappings of religion. The movement draws on the same symbolic foundations as religion, such as conversion, evangelism, testimonials, disputes over dogma, and sacred texts. It also must construct a vocabulary of motives to justify its activities to members, skeptics, and detractors.

Mills' (1940) concept of *situated actions* and *vocabularies of motive* was formulated in the Scott and Lyman definition of accounts:

An account is a linguistic device employed whenever an action is subjected to valiative inquiry. Such devices are a crucial element in the social order since they prevent conflict eruption by verbally bridging the gap between action and expectation. (Brissett, Edgley, 1975 171)

HOW THIS STUDY WAS DONE

Since we were interested in changes in vocabularies over time, we extracted that portion of an earlier study (Edgley et al 1982), but it together with the Nash (1976) study which dealt with motives, and compared those accounts with those which we have observed and elicited in the last year. During 1983 we attended the New York Marathon, a gathering of over 17,000 runners, and the largest single running event in the world, the Dallas White Rock Marathon, where more than 8,000 were officially entered, and the Tulsa Run, the second largest 15 kilometer race in the world, attracting some 7,000 entrants. We attended events, participated in the scene and got a feel for each of them. In each case we attended accompanying seminars which brought together runners, prominent writers, gurus, nutritionists, cultural heroes, and leaders of the running movement to share observations with those in attendance.

In the course of watching and listening to runners talk, we often observed motive exchanges. And we challenged runners by

asking them, "Why do you do this?" The context of the question was usually startling because we asked it with something of an edge, implying that what they were doing might be more problematic than thought. Despite the fact that the environment was that generated by fellow runners, the question usually created discomfort. We recorded our observations about the changes in the nature and types of vocabularies of motive used by runners, and compared and classified them, excluding those where we disagreed among ourselves.

RUNNERS AND MOTIVES

We initially thought that at running events, questions of motive would rarely arise. We presumed that there existed a well-defined substratum of agreement about why people run. This proved not to be the case. Runners found the question. "Why?" very problematic. We suspect that this is due to two major circumstances which runners encounter as they engage in running:

- 1) There is pressure from others to explain why they do what they do. Regardless of the fact that running has become enormously popular, there remains a non-running majority who do not fully understand why people run. This includes spouses who may not appreciate the time demands that running and training place on the serious runner, as well as supervisors who are also skeptical, and non-runners who may be positively threatened by the alleged new competition in the arenas of appearance, energy, and sex appeal said to be posed by the converted runner.
- 2) There is lack of agreement among runners themselves about why they run. We were amazed to discover this in seminars held in conjunction with every major running event in the United States.

The seminars, usually held the day before the race, consist of nationally prominent figures in the running movement who give testimonials, inspirational speeches about

running, and reminisce on past glories. Rather than take for granted the vocabularies of motive which rationalize running activities, these speakers lace their talks with reference to why they run. The seminar phenomenon suggested an important feature of the symbolic interactionist-dramaturgical view of motives. Most people think of motives as antecedents to action. "People first have motives, and their motives *impel* them to act." But in fact, *motives enable people to act by giving them and others a sense of why they do what they do*. People act, by taking up running. Then in their relations with other runners they discover why they run. Obviously, the initial motives for doing something are only a starting point. People take up an act for one reason, keep it up for another, and abandon it for still another. Motives, then, are basic acts of communication, and are in a continuous process of developing the rationales which support an activity. They are usually not stable over time, for they change as shared situations change, and as the others change, toward whom motives are directed. Runners are persons on the move in terms of self-understanding, and so running, perhaps more than other activities, involves a transformation in every component of the self, including its justifying motives.

A LEXICON OF MOTIVES FOR RUNNING

What are the common motives used by runners to justify their activity to audiences with which they communicate? Through both studies we gathered material on the most frequent motives given the question: "Why run?" We found important and insightful changes in the kinds of motives given 5-10 years earlier and the kind most likely to be given now. First we list the more common motives given for running. They are not in any particular order.

1) Healthy Bodies. Most adherents believe running to be "good for me." Most have an almost fanatical devotion to the body, and largely through self-study, have become rather expert about the body as a physio-chemical machine. The use of this motive is coupled to an explicit denunciation of its opposite. Fat is bad — thin is good. High pulse rate is bad — low pulse rate is good. A preoccupation with circulation, strong hearts, healthy lungs, low cholesterol counts, and a high percentage of

high-density cholesterol plus the mechanisms for achieving such results, are all to be found in the rhetoric of runners and are implied in the use of the *healthy body* motive.

Runners almost never legitimize their running by this motive without reference to its opposite. Atrocity stories regularly encountered cite non-runners who had heart attacks, strokes, lung disease, and other cardiovascular and pulmonary problems are almost as couplets in statements about the health advantages of running. Not surprisingly, stories about runners who had heart attacks are played down. An interesting exception occurred in one seminar we attended in which one speaker was the radical diet impressario, Nathan Pritikin. He was there to promote his new book, *The Pritikin Promise*, and delivered to a packed ballroom a strident warning that if runners did not adopt his low fat diet they were courting heart attacks and strokes. He enumerated ten cases of dedicated runners who died while running.

2) Longer Life. Some runners motivate their running as *life-saving* rather than merely *life-enhancing*. Citing the many examples of tragedy in the cardiac society, these people assert that they are literally running for their lives. Some have previous coronary problems, but many simply feel that by running they are engaging in the preventive medicine which will lengthen their lives. They use the same examples as those who run to preserve their bodies, but explicitly claim that running will also make them live longer.

3) Transcendental Motives. This set of motives, sometimes associated with religious values, but often meant in a purely secular sense, pertains to the "spiritual" rather than simply to the "physical" side of running. Running is said to increase the quality of mental life, make a person "in touch" with him/herself, give the runner a *natural high*, and spiritually to "fulfill" the participant. The philosopher-guru of the movement, George Sheehan, in his best-selling existentialist tract, *Running and Being* (1979 119) says:

Every mile I run is my first. Every hour on the road a new beginning. Every day I put on my running clothes, I am born again. Seeing things as if for the first time, seeing the familiar as unfamiliar, the common as uncommon.

This is heady stuff for an activity that often

involves blisters, strained muscles, fallen arches, and an assortment of orthopedic problems, but such rationales are often found throughout the literature on fitness, and at meetings among runners one frequently hears references to *new consciousness, new awareness, and spiritual rebirth.*

4) Weight Control and Personal Appearance.

"Running is a way to lose weight and to look nice." this motive was articulated often by both women and men, and it went without saying that the transformation is positive and beneficial. While some runners actually *gain* weight from running, most are convinced that running is the most efficient way to control body weight. Since lean muscle weighs more than fat, a decrease in body fat without dieting can actually cause the weight to increase. It is important to note, however, that weight is merely one element in a more ambitious program of improved appearance:

After I got in shape my heart beat went down to 57 beats a minute, and that really excited my husband, but let me tell you the thing that excited me, because I am female through and through, was that I had dropped two dress sizes. I'd always been an eight at the top, but a 12 at the bottom. For the first time in my life, I could wear the same size dress all the way down.

Other testimonials from those in the movement speak of the revulsion they felt from being fat, the fear of rejection by others because of their weight, or as Harry Stack Sullivan might have said, the reflected appraisals of others would be just too devastating to bear.

In addition to these external appearances, there is also implied in much of the motive talk of runners a concern with certain "internal" appearances. In short, there appears to have emerged in the running movement a kind of hierarchy that has to do with appearances that are apparent only to those who understand the rhetoric of running itself. For example, various tests have emerged among runners which let other runners know the condition of their insides. Low heart rates are particularly good evidence that one's insides look good, and there are numerous wrist-worn high technology instruments which give an instant readout of this all-important information expressing a runner's inner appearance.

5) Appeals to the Self. It has been observed that society in the United States went through a fundamental change in the primary organizing activity of life, and that this change reached its apex during the decade of the 1960's. Instead of work being the prime organizer, consumption and preoccupation with issues of the self became more significant. This *culture of narcissism*, as Christopher Lasch called it, is characterized by a depth of concern with issues of the self which at other times would have been found wholly unreasonable. Suddenly, appeals to the self were the pre-eminent motive for justifying acts in question, and they could be found everywhere. Scott and Lyman note that what has more recently filtered to the middle classes was first seen among drug users and homosexuals (Brissett, Edgley 1975 177):

Drug user: The whole point in taking the stuff is self development. Acid expands consciousness. Mine eyes have seen the glory — can you say that?. I never knew what capacities I had until I went on acid.

Lesbian: Everyone has the right to happiness and love. I was married once. It was hell. But now I feel I have fulfilled myself as a person and as a woman.

What was good enough for acid heads and lesbians was surely good enough for the middle class runner being harranged about her/his obsession. Running may be an addiction, but suddenly it became a *positive* rather than a negative one. Self-fulfillment was its own motive and needed no other support. If the audience did not understand that, then too bad! But audiences *did* understand it, for the culture of narcissism was making the point on other fronts simultaneously.

CHANGE IN VOCABULARIES OF MOTIVE

Between our first and second studies we observed what we regard as significant changes in both the substance and style of motives used by runners to justify their activity before questioning audiences. While appeals to the body, to health, and to appearance, and to spiritual values can still be heard, appeals to the self now seem to be the predominant motive of the running community. It is important to remember that motives are not psychological constructs, but rather social constructs designed to communicate to

audiences a sense of why a person acts in a particular way. Thus, the shift of appeals from externals to appeals to internals is significant, for it means that society, in the form of validating audiences for the self has changed considerably in its views of self as a motivating force in life, acceptable now almost *sui generis*.

What seems to be a part of this change in the vocabularies of rationale which give meaning and substance to daily life is an emphasis on the consciousness of choice among the middle classes in the United States. Many Americans now have come to take for granted that they have virtually a constitutional right to choose their own style of living, even though the gymnastics necessary to pull off these choices can be formidable, given modern contingencies. There is a curious kind of individualism stemming from this consciousness of choice. Many Americans, recognizing the arbitrary nature of a society that is concerned more with style than with substance, have come to search for "reality" within their own personal lives, and almost in opposition to society, rather than in cooperation with it. What has resulted is the preoccupation with self that characterizes the motives of runners we observed. Tom Wolfe calls this preoccupation the *alchemical dream* of American society:

The old alchemical dream was changing base metals into gold. The new alchemical dream is changing one's personality ... remaking, remodeling, elevating and polishing one's very self ... and observing, studying and doting on it.

This self-refurbishing project, which we observed in many of the runners in our study, means that society is merely a resource with which to tap the hidden reservoirs of the self. Appeals to the self may be satisfying, but the implications for society have not gone unnoticed. For some observers, running has become the perfect symbol for the social and political malaise that besets society today. The premise for this rather negative view of running is grounded in the fact that during the last decade, many younger Americans have turned their backs on politics and social concerns. This new apolitical majority, troubled by events of the past two decades, and cynical about the changes of producing lasting changes through the political system, have

embraced aggressively a hedonism which, although a delight to merchandizers and media which cater to it, is the despair of others who feel that there is much that can and ought to be done about the problems which beset us (Schneider 1983 33).

From this point of view, running is the ultimate luxury: a socially approved vocabulary of motives for pouring energy and money into an activity that has as its sole purpose, the gratification to the self. The traditional motives for engaging in sport are suddenly subordinated. Few runners hope to win major or minor races because as amateurs, they can hardly expect to compete with the quasi professionals that even small races now attract. Glory? With fields of several thousand, that purpose makes little sense. The love of the sport of track and field? Almost all of the participants have come into running only recently, after it became fashionable. Schneider captures this duplicity in his attempt to answer the question, "Why has the marathon become so popular?"

Because it is the ideal narcissistic sport for our time. It is striking that virtually all of the runners assert that their only goal is to "finish the race." Of course, sporting their designer running outfits, cossetted by friends and crowds of bystanders, and scrutinized by television cameras, they have every reason to prolong their moment in the sun by finishing the race.

The New York Marathon, the world's most popular, winds its way through some of the most depressed and crime-ridden areas of the city. We asked several runners at that race, about what they thought of those areas. Their responses were best summarized by professional skier Jean-Claude Kiley, who entered the race "... to see if I can do it."

"I'll probably take \$10 with me on Sunday for a cab if I need it," he said, hoping to finish the 26.2 mile race.

"The subways are free for anyone with a number," interjected race director, Eliot Lebow.

"I'll never use the subways in New York," Kiley said. "You can get killed down there." (New York Times 1983 84)

When athletes run through neighborhoods that are afflicted with a wide range of problems, they seem to be successful in screening out almost everything except their own image.

CONCLUSION

Through the two studies we have constructed about modern running and fitness, it has become clear that while the movement has taken on many characteristics of religion, it is a religion based on an individual rather than a social ethic. First motivated for health reasons, then spiritualism and then personal appearance, running has culminated in the abandonment of most motives except a simple appeal to the self. Apolitical, uninvolved, non-participants in the usual concerns of social life, runners have found a vocabulary of motives that allows self-indulgence without guilt. While some observers complain that American society has become too much a spectator society engaged in the pursuit of vicarious pleasures, and involvement without commitment, running seems to offer involvement and participation with real commitment. On closer examination, however, it would seem that while the participation is real, and the commitment is also real, it is a commitment to the self alone and to nothing else.

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