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'The agenda is to have fun': exploring experiences of guided running in visually impaired and guide runners

Dona L. Hall , Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson  and Patricia C. Jackman 

School of Sport & Exercise Science, University of Lincoln, Lincoln, UK

ABSTRACT

The partnership between a visually impaired runner (VIR) and sighted guide runner (SGR) constitutes a unique sporting dyad. The quality of these partnerships may profoundly impact the sport and physical activity (PA) experiences of visually impaired (VI) people, yet little is known about the experiences of VIRs and SGRs. This study aimed to explore qualitatively the running experiences of VIRs and SGRs. Five VIRs and five SGRs took part in in-depth, semi-structured interviews (*M* length = 62 minutes) exploring their running journeys and perceptions of running-together. We analysed the dataset using reflexive thematic analysis. Four themes were generated, comprising: *becoming and being a running team*; *a multi-faceted intercorporeal experience*; *running-together promotes change*; and *disabling social interaction within running*. Participants were generally positive about their running experiences, highlighting a range of benefits derived from the activity. Nevertheless, some examples of barriers to participation were also identified. Although the positive experiences described by the runners suggest guided running holds promise to increase PA in VI people, our findings illustrate the importance of directing attention towards developing high-quality relationships between VIRs and guides, alongside reinforcing the need for further change to promote inclusivity.

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Introduction

Alongside improving the physical and psychosocial well-being of disabled people (e.g. Martin Ginis et al. 2021), engagement in physical activity (PA) holds the potential to increase disabled people's quality of life and functional independence (Sweet, Martin Ginis, and Tomasone 2013), develop social networks (Macpherson 2017), and promote positive affective states such as enjoyment and happiness (Aitchison et al. 2022). Despite the myriad potential benefits of PA, disabled people are significantly less active than non-disabled people (de Hollander and Proper 2018). With longstanding health disparities between disabled and non-disabled people (World Health Organisation 2011) and the number of disabled people set to rise dramatically internationally (World Health Organisation 2021a), addressing these inequalities and improving engagement in PA among disabled people is imperative (Smith et al. 2019).

Globally, it is estimated that at least 2.2 billion people have a vision impairment (World Health Organisation 2021b). In 2015, around 36 million of the world's population were estimated to be blind (expected to rise to 115 million by 2050); 216 million had a moderate-to-severe visual impairment, and 188.5 million had a mild vision impairment (Bourne et al. 2017). Compared to adults without a physical or sensory impairment, visually impaired (VI) people adhered less to the WHO PA

CONTACT Dona L. Hall  dohall@lincoln.ac.uk  School of Sport and Exercise Science, University of Lincoln, Lincoln, UK

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guidelines (i.e. 150 minutes of moderate intensity or 75 minutes of vigorous intensity PA per week) and engaged in lower moderate-to-vigorous PA (de Hollander and Proper 2018). Factors influencing PA in disabled people generally are well-documented (Martin Ginis et al. 2021). Among VI people, facilitators to PA include physical health benefits, accessible, equitable, and inclusive environments, and positive psychological experiences (Jaarsma et al. 2014; Phoenix, Griffin, and Smith 2015), with social contacts identified as important for initiating and maintaining sports participation (Jaarsma et al. 2014). However, VI people often cite barriers to engaging in PA, including: personal barriers, such as fear of falling (Nguyen et al. 2015); social barriers, such as lack of peers with whom to be active (Jaarsma et al. 2014), and negative perceptions of VI individuals' abilities to participate in sport/PA (British Blind Sport 2014); environmental barriers, such as lack of transport (e.g. British Blind Sport 2014; Jaarsma et al. 2014), built environment issues (e.g. problems with pavements/footpaths – Kirchner, Gerber, and Smith 2008; Phoenix, Griffin, and Smith 2015), and inadequate equipment and facilities (British Blind Sport 2014); and programme barriers, like insufficient funding (Phoenix, Griffin, and Smith 2015) and lack of information about PA opportunities (British Blind Sport 2014; Jaarsma et al. 2014).

Given the range of barriers to PA reported, it is important for sport and PA organisations to find ways to address such barriers and provide more inclusive PA opportunities for VI people. Furthermore, as there is potential for substantial variation in the nature of PA experiences in different activities and between disability groups, research that focuses on specific activities and disability groups, and thus produces domain-specific understanding of disability-specific experiences, is warranted (see for example, Powis 2019 regarding VI cricketers).

Guided running

One activity that has received limited scholarly attention, yet could provide valuable PA opportunities for VI people, is guided running. Running is among the most popular forms of recreational PA globally (Hulteen et al. 2017) and interest in VI running has grown in recent years, as demonstrated by the development of training courses for running guides, provided by national governing bodies (e.g. 'Sight Loss Awareness and Guide Running workshop' run by England Athletics), and dedicated, mass-participation races for VIRs. For instance, the UK's first-ever running race specifically for VIRs attracted over 10,000 runners in 2021 (British Blind Sport 2021). In contrast to sighted individuals, who can engage in running as a solo activity without much difficulty generally, for VI people, outdoors running can be challenging or highly constrained, without the support of a sighted guide runner (SGR). During guided running, VIRs are guided along the route via a hand-held 'tether' or via an 'elbow lead' with verbal instruction from their SGR (e.g. regarding direction or hazards). The VIR and SGR aim to synchronise their arm and leg movements to optimise co-running motion.

Human 'running-together' has been investigated vis-à-vis sighted runners who train together (e.g. Allen-Collinson 2007; Allen-Collinson, McNarry, and Evans 2021), while co-running with dogs has been explored in canicross (Merchant 2020) and among VI people who run with guide dogs (Lieberman et al. 2019). Importantly, the co-running partnership of VIRs and SGRs is likely to involve specific forms of 'togetherness'. Nevertheless, despite the key role of guided running partnerships for helping VI people to engage in running, and also for creating safer and more inclusive opportunities for PA participation, little is known about the specific running experiences of VIRs and SGRs as an interactional achievement. Indeed, a focus on SGRs here is important given that past research on PA experiences in disability groups has, understandably, tended to focus on disabled people (e.g. Jaarsma et al. 2014). Yet, in the context of guided running, this risks overlooking important insights into guided running experiences.

Our study aimed to explore qualitatively and in-depth the running experiences of VIRs and SGRs from a social-psychological perspective. The insights garnered have the potential to contribute new understandings to help inform how guided running initiatives might foster greater participation and inclusivity in VI sport and PA. With national governing bodies now

delivering training workshops for SGRs, the development of databases to connect VIRs and SGRs (e.g. 'Find a Guide'), and community-based running schemes (e.g. parkrun), exploring the experiences of VIR-SGR dyads is much-needed, to extend understanding of these runners' experiences. Furthermore, by doing so, this research could offer valuable empirical insight on a topic that has yet to be addressed in the disability sport literature, and that could potentially be applied in other dyadic VI-sport contexts. More broadly, the research is timely, given the publication of the first-ever national and international guidelines on PA for disabled adults (Smith et al. 2019; World Health Organisation 2020), and calls for more research on disability in PA and sport (Ives et al. 2021; Smith et al. 2021). Having contextualised the current study, we now delineate the methodological approach and methods utilised, before proceeding to explore the key findings.

Methodology

Philosophical position

An interpretivist paradigmatic stance was deemed appropriate, focusing upon the lived experiences of participants and how VIRs and SGRs interpreted their experiences of guided running. Accordingly, we approached this study from the perspectives of ontological relativism and epistemological subjectivism, acknowledging the existence of multiple, context-dependent, and socially constructed realities, and recognising that multiple interpretations can be generated (Tamminen and Poucher 2020). Consistent with our relativist ontological position, we adopted a non-foundational perspective towards quality, drawing on an evolving set of characterising traits rather than applying a list of universal criteria (Sparkes and Smith 2009). Specifically, the criteria germane to the research were the worthiness of the topic, methodological coherence and rigour of the research process, richness of data generated, and the significant contribution of the work.

The researchers

As non-disabled, sighted runners undertaking research with disabled people, reflecting critically on our interests, positionality, and reflexivity were key concerns (see Brighton 2015; MacBeth 2010). Dona, who led data collection and the initial analysis, is herself an experienced, licenced running guide, an interest that drew her to this area of research. Prior to commencing data collection, Dona engaged with members of a relevant organisation, British Blind Sport, offering an opportunity for them to suggest questions to be added, and seeking guidance on terminology and potential recruitment methods that would be suitable. Dona's experience as a guide helped to build rapport with participants before the interviews, when she shared her experiences as a runner and her engagement with VI running, both as a running guide and as a longstanding volunteer at a community-based running event (parkrun) that is inclusive of disabled and non-disabled people. Dona's lived experience of being a SGR also facilitated 'somatic empathy' (Allen-Collinson, Owton, and Crust 2017) with the multi-sensorial, inter-sensorial, and socio-psychological experiences described by participants. Nevertheless, as a non-disabled researcher, Dona's 'insider' position working with both VI and sighted people presented tensions, which became a focal point of Dona's regular reflexive, peer-debriefing conversations with Patricia, who worked with Dona throughout the study, and Jacquelyn, who joined the research team during the analytic stage. Most saliently, we recognised that it was not possible for us to know what it was like to run as a VIR (see Brighton 2015), and there was a need to acknowledge the limits to empathy so as to respect, and avoid any 'merger' with participants (Smith et al. 2009).

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Group	Pseudonym	Gender	Age (years)	Ethnicity	Years guided running	Longest race distance	Degree of vision impairment
Visually impaired runner (VIR)	VIR1	Female	54	White-British	7	Marathon	Registered blind, acquired
	VIR2	Male	44	White-British	6	Marathon	Registered blind, acquired
	VIR3	Male	61	White-Irish	7	Ultra-marathon	Registered blind, acquired
	VIR4	Male	50	White-British	8	Marathon	Registered blind, genetic
	VIR5	Female	44	White-British	4	Marathon	Registered blind, genetic
Sighted guide runner (SGR)	SGR1	Male	62	White-British	6	Marathon	
	SGR2	Male	53	White-British	3	10 kilometres	
	SGR3	Female	45	White-British	4	Marathon	
	SGR4	Female	51	White-British	5	Half-marathon	
	SGR5	Female	67	White-British	3	10 kilometres	

Participants

After gaining institutional ethical approval, we purposively sampled VIRs and SGRs. Individuals were eligible to take part if they were aged over-18 and had engaged in running for at least six months, either as a VIR or SGR. Individuals with various degrees of vision impairment were eligible. A recruitment poster and study information were posted on social media platforms used by VIRs and SGRs, with interested participants asked to contact Dona. Snowball sampling was used to supplement the initial group. Following these strategies, five VIRs and five SGRs residing in the UK were recruited (see Table 1). All participants were committed recreational runners and took part in distance races, ranging in length from five kilometres to ultra-marathons.

Data generation

Prospective participants who expressed an interest in taking part were sent information and invited to ask questions. After providing informed consent, each participant took part in an online, semi-structured interview with Dona via Microsoft Teams. After introductory, 'background' questions (e.g. events participated in, length of involvement), the interviewer sought to elicit participants' experiences of guided running, focusing on their participation as either a VIR or SGR from initial involvement to the present-day (e.g. 'Can you describe your guided running experience since you've been participating and how it has developed over time?'), as well as their perceptions of running-together (e.g. 'When you are running, what do you think about and how do you feel?'). Throughout the interviews, Dona posed curiosity-driven questions (Smith and Sparkes 2016), seeking to elicit further insight into points discussed (e.g. 'Can you tell me more about that?'). Before concluding the interview, participants were invited to add any further relevant information. Interviews lasted on average 62 minutes (range = 42–94 minutes) and were recorded. Moreover, to explore areas of interest in the analysis, Dona sent a summary of initial findings to all participants and asked if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview to discuss them and offer any additional thoughts (Smith and McGannon 2018). Seven participants took up this offer, and three did not respond. These member-reflections interviews (*M* length = 23 minutes) generated novel insights; for instance, one VIR described a recent example of exclusion (see Findings and Discussion). Data generated through the member-reflections process were included in our dataset and write-up.

Data analysis

Our analysis adopted a flexible version of reflexive thematic analysis that drew inspiration from the work of Braun and Clarke (2019) and Trainor and Bundon (2021). Accordingly, rather than being undertaken in a linear 'step-by-step' manner, the analysis involved frequent shifts back and forth between the phases of reflexive thematic analysis. After transcribing interview recordings, Dona read and re-read each transcript thoroughly to familiarise herself with the experiences recounted. She next engaged in inductive systematic coding of meaningful 'chunks' of text to generate initial codes concerning experiences of running, with this stage of the analysis adopting a semantic focus (i.e. description of experience at the explicit, manifest level – Braun and Clarke 2021). For example, the excerpt, 'The running community is so inclusive, it's so welcoming', was coded as 'running as inclusive'. At this stage, we collectively discussed the analysis, with Patricia (who had read the original transcripts) and Jacquelyn acting as 'critical friends' (Smith and McGannon 2018), including questioning some of the initial thoughts and analysis, drawing on insights from our different disciplinary backgrounds. Following further 'critical friends' meetings between Dona and Patricia, wherein Patricia continued to offer alternative and new interpretations, we developed sub-themes by organising similar codes into higher-order patterns. For example, the code 'running as inclusive' was integrated into a sub-theme labelled 'positive social changes'. To aid this process and to deepen our interpretations, we drew on relevant literature (e.g. Lieberman et al. 2019; Reeve 2014) to inform our analysis. Subsequently, the sub-themes were reviewed, so that similar sub-themes could be combined to form themes. During theme development, we repeatedly posed the following questions: (i) is there a discernible central organising concept for each theme?; and (ii) are there clear boundaries between each theme? (see Braun and Clarke 2021). In addressing these questions, four distinct themes were developed, refined and subsequently named (see below). As with qualitative research generally, we considered writing-up an integral part of data analysis, and sought to produce a compelling and logical account of our analysis, well-grounded in participants' recounted experiences. In presenting our analysis, we combine the findings and discussion to illustrate how our themes connected to one another and how our interpretations linked to existing literature. The analytic and interpretative story presented was further developed through the peer-review process, which encouraged further reflection on, and reflexivity towards our interpretations and links to relevant literature.

Findings and discussion

Through our analysis, we produced 10 sub-themes, which are represented by four primary themes: (i) *becoming and being a running team*, (ii) *a multi-faceted intercorporeal experience*, (iii) *running-together promotes change*, and (iv) *disabling social interaction within running*. We discuss the findings in relation to the extant literature, to enhance contextualisation.

Becoming and being a running team

This theme represented the various ways that participants described their passage into guided running. Within this theme, there were two sub-themes: *a partnership of equals: dyadic structure in guided running*; and *stepping into guided running*.

A partnership of equals: dyadic structure in guided running

When asked to describe their understanding of the VIR-SGR relationship, the participants portrayed the relationship as one of equals. Given the axiomatic differences in the responsibilities of the VIR and SGR in relation to some tasks, the potential for power imbalances was noted, but participants felt it more accurate to characterise power as equally distributed, as one guide outlined:

The relationship could be one of a sub-ordinate, and one [with one person] [pause] who's got more power and control. The relationship can be totally equal. It doesn't have to be dominated by the fact that one person is effectively doing the seeing. (SGR4)

Indeed, while VIRs recognised the crucial role of the guides in helping them to run safely, they also highlighted their own role in checking on their guide:

If I'm being guided by somebody, it's my duty also to look out for them, as well as them looking out for me . . . It's a two-way street, I think it's not just about one person, because you've got two people in the partnership so to speak, and it's about looking after them as well as them looking after you. (VIR4)

Drawing on wider understandings of athlete-athlete dyads in sport (Poczwardowski et al. 2020), our analysis suggests that the power dynamics between a VIR and their guide can be characterised by high levels of reciprocity and complementarity, albeit with qualitative differences in roles.

Stepping into guided running

Participants discussed varied entry routes into guided running. All guides were committed runners before commencing guiding, and reported a variety of motives for becoming a SGR, centring largely around a desire to help VI people engage in running and/or enrich their own running experiences. One guide explained commencing guiding after being diagnosed with an eye condition, which evoked angst about their ability to continue running:

Then it struck me - I couldn't run and that really was a big thing, the thought of that, it was like a black cloud hovering over me, and that was quite a depressing six months, that thought. I went to a parkrun and I saw a blind lady being guided and it was like the skies turned blue and the sun came out. All of a sudden, I realised that even with sight loss, it's still possible to carry on running. So, I went across and had a chat with them and I found out what I needed to do to become a guide runner. (SGR1)

Analogously, guided running demonstrations at running events were an important first step to becoming a guide for most. All the VIRs discovered running opportunities through friends, contacts, running clubs, or national organisations. Guide databases were generally well-received; however, for some a common VIR concern, when first approaching guides, included personal safety. While some VIRs reported initial trepidation, they expressed gratitude to the guides:

I just think it's great that people do it, do the guide running, because without those people [SGRs], we wouldn't be able to run, and I think it's okay to be appreciative of it, like I really am massively appreciative of it. (VIR5)

Although this sub-theme highlighted positive stories of beginning guided running, problematic issues for VIRs were also raised, and are portrayed below in 'disabling social interaction within running'.

A multi-faceted, intercorporeal experience

Our second theme centred on participants' descriptions of the multifaceted relationship between guide and VIRs. The various facets of this intercorporeal (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2017) relationship were represented by three subthemes: *thinking and moving as one*; *an emotional journey*; and *friendship and support that goes both ways*.

Thinking and moving as one

Running was described as a social, relational, and collaborative activity by the SGRs and VIRs, with harmonious relationships considered optimal for successful running:

Can you explain the quality of your partnership when you're running well together? (Interviewer)

You're just in sync. They know that you're going to be telling them well in advance everything they need to know, and they completely put their trust in you, because that's what it is, that trust. (SGR3)

Such ‘running synchrony’ as it has been termed (see Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2007) was not always easy to achieve, with contrasts in running styles and capabilities sometimes presenting challenges. Communication, coordination, and cooperation, key facets of teamwork (McEwan and Beauchamp 2014), were important for creating effective running relationships. Good communication between a guide and VIR was deemed fundamental to performance and safety, with a variety of senses utilised, including auditory, haptic, and visual (in the case of SGRs). SGR2 discussed the use of auditory instruction:

The obvious one is verbal communication. I’m the eyes for the person, and I can say, ‘okay we’ve got people coming towards us’ at whatever distance it happened to be, or ‘there’s other obstacles around’ or, it might be, ‘alright, there’s a pothole coming up ahead of you’. So, there’s the verbal, whatever information that they need. (SGR2)

Established guides and VIRs explained that shared intercorporeal understandings within their guided-running relationships were so well-developed that tether tension was often sufficient to transmit information and instruction:

The tether is very similar to her [guide dog] harness. She is giving me signals through the harness and that’s happening through the tether that I use with the guides. They’re doing the slightest thing and I’m feeling no end of information slightly to the left, slow down. If it gets a bit tighter, I know it’s safe to run. (VIR1)

All accounts supported previous research in suggesting the optimal co-running experience was grounded in a prolonged relationship, which helped to forge what has been termed ‘sensory attunement’ between partners (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2017). A physical connection was also considered important for providing reassurance to VIRs:

If I happen to let go of the tether, they freeze. The tether is like their comfort blanket. They know that I’m on the end of that tether. That is like real reassurance to them, it’s not just direction, it’s telling them that I’m there with them. (SGR1)

While running in harmony with one’s running partner was desirable, some participants described scenarios in which they had become so absorbed in the run and so accustomed to co-running that this had led to losses in concentration. VIR3, who is also involved in the training of running guides, explained:

We’ve run together so much, literally thousands of miles. And [sometimes] she says, ‘I forget that we’re tethered. We’re just running together, and I forget that we’ve got that tether, so yeah, I forget that I’m guiding sometimes’. And so things do go slightly awry, so, yeah, you do bump into things.

Retaining awareness of the co-running partnership is therefore paramount and ‘switching off’ in a run (Allen-Collinson 2003), a characteristic often associated with optimal experiences such as flow (Jackman et al. 2021), could have drawbacks in guided running.

An emotional journey

A kaleidoscope of emotions was described by participants, with guided running evoking feelings of fear, anxiety, guilt, happiness, relief, and enjoyment. In line with sociological and sociocultural perspectives, emotions were positioned as social, intersubjective, and embodied, contoured by the interactional context (Allen-Collinson 2005; Tamminen and Bennett 2017). Some runners likened their guided running experience to a ‘journey’, typically describing feelings of anxiety, and sometimes fear, in the early stages. The VIRs explained how their first guided running encounters often elicited negative emotions for various reasons, not least because of their concerns about safety and trusting another runner:

When I first was guided, I was terrified. I use a tether, which is a piece of rope, figure of eight. I hold one end with two fingers and the guide holds one end with two fingers, and it was *really* a scary thing, because I could trust my guide dog, but to trust a person and to put all your safety and I felt like *my life* into that person, was a massive step. It’s so terrifying to start with, but over time it gently got better and better and I started feeling more relaxed. (VIR1)

As evocatively described by this runner, after initial negative emotions in some cases, more positive emotional experiences followed, underpinned by relationships built on mutual trust, respect, and support. One VIR explained that despite the initial trepidation of their SGR, they have developed a longstanding partnership founded on the shared goal of enjoying their running:

I had a lady who started running with me and we met through Guide Running UK and she said, "I've never guide run," and I said, "do you know what? This is a journey for both of us, let's just enjoy it," and three years later we have, we do, and we still run together, and it's fun! And that's the thing, *enjoy yourselves*. (VIR3)

The experience of enjoyment is a message often overlooked in physical-activity messaging (Williams et al. 2018), including for disabled people (Smith and Wightman 2021), but as portrayed above, and more widely across the sample, running with a VIR or SGR could be a fun and enjoyable experience. Emphasising the social and intersubjective nature of emotions, together with the interpersonal dynamics of emotional exchanges (Meredith et al. 2019), for most VIRs, social interaction was regarded as a key component that could aid such positive affective states:

A huge part of running is the social interaction because you're outdoors with someone, enjoying that moment, enjoying that sort of feeling, that freedom, that ability to run. It's just a magical feeling. It's just something that if you could bottle it and give it to somebody, then I would. (VIR4)

Nevertheless, several SGRs also reported negative emotions, which were described as particularly intense after falls. A guide recounted one such experience from a race:

I was guiding a half marathon with a lady runner and we were [at] about mile 11. We were doing a really good time; she was on for a personal best easily and was going around a corner, and there's people shouting that she knew and she started waving, and I waved and I was looking at the people, and all of a sudden I was aware that my VI runner had gone down. She'd clipped the edge of the curb with one foot, and she'd tripped and fallen and she was lying on the floor and her knee was bleeding. I was devastated, and I saw her there and I could have cried. I could have panicked. I really didn't know what to do. I'd got a first aid kit with me, and I just wanted to be swallowed up, it was the worst thing in the world, I was responsible for her safety, and I'd failed her. (SGR1)

The runners also described how emotional intersubjectivity (Allen-Collinson 2005) was experienced by co-runners. Falls were reported by all VIRs and while it was acknowledged that these were likely to happen, such events were nonetheless described as negative emotional experiences, both for guides and VIRs:

I've had guides that fall with me, which shakes me up when the guide falls. I let go of the tether obviously and I don't fall on them, but it does shake me up with thinking, "oh God, I've done this to the guide", and then when I fall, it shakes the guides up at the same time. (VIR1)

Participants also described positively-valenced emotional intersubjectivity. Even though VIRs were regarded as the competitors in races, positive emotional experiences after races – especially successful races – were described as intersubjectively shared.

Friendship and support that goes both ways

For both SGRs and VIRs, participation in guided running and the development of supportive dyadic relationships helped to forge new friendships, as previously found in research on relationships between disabled students and volunteer supporters (Moola 2020). Consistent with existing conceptualisations of social support in sport (Rees and Hardy 2000), social support provided by the runners could include esteem support (e.g. receiving encouragement), informational support (e.g. information on races), tangible support (e.g. transport), and emotional support (e.g. helping fellow runner after fall). Running with a guide provided welcome reassurance and confidence for the VIRs, which some felt could be reciprocated within the partnership. These we interpreted as forms of relational efficacy, and specifically other-efficacy and relation-inferred self-efficacy (Lent and Lopez 2002). As one runner remarked: 'Being guided gives you confidence, because if you know that person is confident with you, then you're confident with them. You basically feed off each other. It's a two-

way thing' (VIR4). Running-together was also reported to offer both guides and runners opportunities for the provision, receipt, or reciprocation of emotional support, with the space to speak about life worries on a run likened by some to 'free therapy'. One VIR commented:

I discovered that what she likes is to have somebody to unload to and unburden to, so she describes me as like free counselling [laughs]. So, she's able to get it all out, like if she's had a stressful day at work, she will talk about all the people she works with, and she will talk about all the stressful things going on in her life, and she feels better for that. (VIR2)

Despite positive accounts of support within running pairs, participants also acknowledged the importance of signposting their running partner to other forms of support if required:

I think for the [VI] runner, it is emotional support as well. It did get at one point a little bit too much if I'm honest, where I had to say, 'look, I feel like I've become your friend through the running that we've been doing, but I really think you need to maybe speak to someone else about this because I can support you to a certain extent, but I can't be there to be the support all the time'. (SGR3)

While the supportive nature of these relationships was a core feature of most participants' experiences, some also discussed instances of conflict with their running partner. For instance, VIR4 discontinued his association with a guide/coach because he felt he had lost his autonomy, describing this as a 'control mindset', and was not enjoying his running.

Running-together promotes change

Benefits of engaging in guided running were widely discussed. This theme consisted of sub-themes: *becoming and staying active*, *experiencing enhanced health and wellbeing*, and *positive social changes*.

Becoming and staying active

All VIRs reported PA increases since beginning guided running, which appeared to be an important mechanism for diversifying VI participants' PA involvement. Improvements in VIRs' fitness and confidence in PA also encouraged them to attempt other sports:

I think I feel more confident as well. I've never done any VI sports or anything before, and I think now like since running, I have started cycling, so I've got a tandem, I've been rock climbing, I've started VI cricket. All those things were just never something that I'd have even considered before, ever. It's kind of opened up a whole new world to me. (VIR5)

In contrast to the VIRs, the guide runners were all committed to running, and some to other exercise activities, prior to becoming running guides. Nevertheless, many explained how guiding had given a new dimension to their running experiences, as SGR1 outlined:

It gives me a reason to go out running now and it's probably the best reason I've ever had, to give somebody else the joy of running, the gift of running, where they couldn't go by themselves. They'd probably do a little workout on a treadmill but to be there in the open running is a lovely sense of freedom and to be denied that, it must be awful. So, if I can give that, that's enough to motivate me to carry on being a guide, and if I can be a guide until I'm 80, then I'll do it.

Experiencing enhanced health and wellbeing

All participants explained how guided running made a positive contribution to their physical and mental wellbeing. Three VIRs reported significant weight-loss, and all described running as helpful for weight-management and/or increasing fitness. Several SGRs commented on the benefits of running – including guided running – for their personal wellness:

I started with the Couch-to-5k, so now I'm a comfortable parkrunner and a regular 10k runner and guiding came out of that. (SGR2)

Have you found that parkrun, or running generally, has brought you any personal benefits? (Interviewer)

Yes, mentally I'm in a far better state than I was five years ago. Physically, I have met so many amazing people from it, [visited] so many fantastic places, and I'm far more in the habit now of actually getting up and regularly taking exercise than I was before. (SGR2)

Runners across both groups reported mental wellbeing benefits, including a release from daily stresses. Reflecting on the benefits of guided running for their VI running partner, SGR4 said:

The key thing has been the running, because it's fun and because I think I've clued into quite how incredibly valuable that escapism has been for him. For him just to be able to guarantee he's got an hour, an hour and a half of just pure, leave that, leave everything else behind [gestures behind], and just go out and do this. (SGR4)

For VIRs, improvements in self-worth and self-confidence were attributed to guided running, further reinforcing the holistic benefits of physical activity for disabled people (Smith and Wightman 2021). Interactional difficulties can confront disabled people, and being avoided in social situations is a form of prejudice they often experience (Reeve 2013), but one VIR remarked on changes in interactional confidence since starting to run:

I've become more confident. It used to be when I was in a group of people, because people don't know how to deal with disability, with vision impairment, then you were left alone. You could stand in a crowded room and be alone, and that's normal for visual impairment, and that has completely transformed. So [it has gone from] being in a crowded room, [and] nobody's talking to me and I feel like I don't want to be here, to [being in] a crowded room and I feel like I belong, and I can socialise and interact with people. It's transformed almost every aspect of my life. (VIR3)

All but one VIR also described how their involvement in running positively impacted their family. For example, some discussed how running with a guide helped them feel like a role model for their children, while others felt it provided reassurance to their family vis-à-vis their running safety.

Positive social changes

Engaging in guided running helped to promote the formation of friendships among the VIRs and guides. Belongingness is considered a key component of quality Para-sport experiences (Blair Evans et al. 2018), and several VIRs discussed how joining the running community and community-based initiatives created opportunities for social encounters and community involvement. As one participant responded when asked, 'what do you like about running? Why do you participate in it?'

I mean people just might say that running it's for the physical side, but I would say it's the social side, it's the mental side, it's a community, it's the whole package. It's not just like I'm going for a run and that's it. But like, except for this year [2020], I'll go for a run and I'm social with people and have a cup of coffee and there's cakes, and just the way it makes me feel about myself. (VIR1)

Similarly, VIR3 shared how joining the running community helped him feel more socially-integrated and less isolated:

The running community is so inclusive, it's so welcoming. [It] doesn't matter what your ability is, or what your age is, your gender, what you dress like. It is so socially inclusive and that has made a huge difference to me as a visually impaired person. I have gone from being very alone, very secluded, feeling very left out, to being part of society effectively.

Most guides remarked on changes in their involvement in running and the VI sport community. Several now dedicated considerable amounts of time to promoting and managing VI and guiding activities, challenging disablism in sport, and raising awareness of VI sport more generally:

My husband and I's lives have completely changed now because we're so much focused on doing lots and lots of things and getting those VIs to have enjoyable lives and getting them to places, and joining in with them. (SGR5)

To date, research on Para-sport activism has focused on the experiences of current and/or former disabled athletes (e.g. Choi et al. 2020; Haslett and Smith 2019). Findings in our study also illustrate how non-disabled people who participate in disability sport can also be advocates for social change.

Disabling social interaction within running

While the experiences of the participants were described as overwhelmingly positive, they also shared examples of prejudice and negative attitudes towards VIRs. According to the social-relational model of disability, disablism is 'a form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional wellbeing' (Thomas 2007, 115). Thus, visual impairment is not only biologically-grounded, but also arises due to psycho-social and environmental reasons. For Reeve (2014) disablism can occur in two forms: direct psycho-emotional disablism (i.e. negative interactions between a disabled person and another), and indirect psycho-emotional disablism (i.e. effects of structural barriers on encounters). Drawing on these perspectives, this theme comprised two sub-themes: *exclusory messages in running circles*, and *disabling interactions with running personnel*.

Exclusory messages in running circles

Cohering around the concepts of structural disablism and indirect psycho-emotional disablism (Reeve 2014), the runners provided examples of exclusory messaging about 'belongingness' of VIRs. One runner explained that running club events could be a barrier to participation for VIRs, sharing a story of one runner who no longer attended due to safety concerns: 'There's a local VI runner that's complained that he doesn't go to the running club that he was a member of anymore, because the routes they were picking weren't safe for him' (SGR3). Moreover, racing could be problematic: VIRs reported difficulties with securing a race place for their guide (who had to enter separately at a cost), effectively denying them the opportunity to compete, and also discussed how increasing race entry costs, felt by both the VIRs and SGRs, were making it less financially feasible to participate in races. Raceorganisers could be reluctant to offer places to VIRs, while some VIRs described scenarios when sighted-runners did not allow adequate space for VIRs. Such experiences of psycho-emotional disablism can elicit negative emotional responses (Reeve 2014), leading disabled people to question whether or not they belong (Kitchin 1998). More positively, others reported that attitudes were improving: 'There wasn't that acceptance [of running] with guides to start with. They're getting better now. They're getting a lot better now, but they weren't accepting that you need a guide' (VIR1). Despite some examples of exclusory messages, participants stressed throughout the interviews and member reflections that most of their experiences were positive, although further areas for improvement were noted.

Disabling social interaction with runners

Participants described instances of direct psycho-emotional disablism, wherein they experienced or witnessed interactions between VIRs and able-bodied individuals with the potential to impact VIRs negatively (Reeve 2014). SGR3 recounted one experience of attending a beginner's running course as a guide for a VIR and witnessing a negative interactional encounter:

Their warm-ups and cool-downs, they were very visual, and nobody was coming and explaining to her [VIR] what she needed to do, and I felt that one week some of the other beginner runners were laughing at her because she couldn't do it, because she couldn't see to know how she had to do the exercise.

When asked towards the end of their member-reflection interview, 'Is there anything else that you'd like to comment on?', VIR4 recounted a conversation about running during the Covid-19 pandemic, with a runner at their local club:

I was having a conversation with somebody and they asked me the question, 'how have you been doing all your running?' I said, 'well, you know, I've been using a treadmill and I've been using it quite a lot because obviously I've had no other option'. And his remark was, [it] astounded me actually, because he said, 'well that's cheating!' I said, 'why? Why is that cheating? What grounds have you got to say that's cheating?' [the man said] 'Yes well, if you think about it, it's using the resistance of the belt, it's pulling you forward. It's doing this, that and the other,

you can't get the true conditions of being on the road'. So I said, 'yeah okay. I get your point. I get I where you're coming from,' I said, 'but the flipside of that ... imagine that you're a blind person, right? Imagine you've got no other means of running. You can't see. You need a guide.'

Whilst the words of the sighted runner did not explicitly refer to vision impairment or may not have been intended to cause harm, this interaction does, nonetheless, highlight the potential for such interactions – and a lack of regard for the lived experiences of VI people and their reliance on guides – to have a negative impact on VIRs.

Conclusions

This study was the first to explore experiences of guided running in VIRs and guide runners, providing detailed insights into participants' lived experiences. The findings hold implications for guided running. First, running clubs and race organisers should review their current practices for supporting VIRs and SGs within running activities. Although participants were generally positive about their experiences, some evidence was suggestive of disablism within these contexts. Running clubs and race organisers should strive to ensure the social inclusivity of the activities they run, including for disability groups. Furthermore, training courses that educate running coaches on how to interact with VIRs could also be beneficial. Second, given the potential utility of narratives to share information about PA (e.g. Smith et al. 2013, Williams, Lozano-Sufrategui, and Tomasone 2021), stories of guided-running experiences among VIRs and SGRs could be shared through the running community (e.g. parkrun and running clubs), local PA organisations, and national organisations responsible for the promotion of VI sport and PA, to encourage greater participation in guided running among VI and sighted people. Considering the worries and unpleasant emotional responses evoked in the early stages of guided running, and upon experiencing falls, it is important to consider how such messages could be produced to help address potential sources of apprehension for people contemplating participation. Third, the SGRs were recognised as being fundamental to quality running experiences. This reinforces the importance of education for SGRs to ensure they are effectively supported to run with VIRs.

Further research is warranted to advance understanding of VIRs' and SGRs' experiences in guided running. As our findings were drawn from accounts provided by committed VIRs and SGRs, future research could explore the experiences of VIRs and SGRs who give up running, to understand their withdrawal reasons and explore if and how their experiences in guided running shaped decisions to cease involvement. Participants in the current study were relatively homogenous ethnically and geographically, as well as residing in areas where specific training courses and databases for VIRs and SGRs are established. Given that such structural resources may not be in place elsewhere, future studies could seek cross-cultural insights into guided running. Beyond running, further explorations of the experiences of VI-sighted athlete dyads in other sports (e.g. cycling, skiing) is warranted to broaden domain-specific understanding of these partnerships, especially considering such partnerships could be beneficial in improving VI participation in sport and PA. The above findings also highlight the importance of broadening the focus of disability sport research beyond health outcomes, to adopt more holistic perspectives on the quality of people's experiences when physically active (see Tamminen and Bennett 2017; Williams et al. 2018). In the methodological domain, too, research that employs sensorially-contoured approaches, such as 'soundscape elicitation' (Powis 2019), is needed to highlight the 'sustained sensory work' required to achieve togetherness and intercorporeality generally in sport (Allen-Collinson, McNarry, and Evans 2021).

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributors

Dona L. Hall is currently a PhD student at the University of Lincoln, UK. Her research focuses on promoting physical activity in older adults and how game-based interventions may impact uptake and adherence. Other interests include disability sports and parkrun.

Patricia C. Jackman is a Senior Lecturer in Sport and Exercise Psychology at the University of Lincoln, UK. Her research in sport, exercise, and physical activity coheres around the areas of optimal psychological states, self-regulation, and goal setting. She has published quantitative, qualitative, and mixed method studies, as well as systematic reviews in these areas.

Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson is Professor Emerita in Sociology and Physical Cultures at the University of Lincoln, UK. Her research interests include the lived experience of endurance in sport and physical cultures, together with the sociology of the senses, weather, and identity work.

ORCID

Dona L. Hall  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1260-8729>
 Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2146-8000>
 Patricia C. Jackman  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5756-4494>

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