Watchful Indifference and managing the Bubble: An examination of physical activity norms and code making during a global pandemic

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Introduction

Whilst many of us have become accustomed to 'watching' others to learn, adapt and create our own sense of safety during COVID-19, 'watchful indifference' is a social phenomena that has shaped collective and individual behaviours in public and organised spaces with differing levels of [mis]management. COVID-19 had a catastrophic impact on our ability to socialise, interact and form groups, this was no truer than within the context of physical activity. Overnight and without warning social interaction and group activity became illegal, as lockdown restrictions continued, social norms evolved with rules and guidelines in mind, all areas of physical and social activity changed. Watchful indifference, as the lens applied to the COVID-19 context in this chapter, is defined as a social process that develops various interpretations of compliance, coercion that constructs sets of social and behavioural codes that can be called upon in specific scenarios (Amit, 2020). For example, compliance with mask wearing in public, following social distancing requests in supermarkets and the interpretation of essential travel have been shaped through watching others, following social cues, and constructing individual standpoints based on collective behaviours. The concept of watchful indifference, as it relates to the social catastrophes constructed through COVID-19 restrictions, are exposed and heightened through the participation of physical activity and new ways of participating in community-based sport.

The conceptual framing of this chapter draws on Amit's exploration of the social workings of urban public spaces; in particular, the art of 'staying apart together' and managing the modalities for sharing public and social space. Here, Amit's

conceptualisation of 'watchful indifference' orientates the nuanced process of 'staying apart together' through everyday watchfulness overtime (Amit, 2020, p. 63). The notion of watchful indifference centres on a threshold of behaviours that subverts confrontation, tolerates tension, and develops sets of norms in the absence of direct personal interaction. In essence, there is no need for explicit proclamation, collaboration nor connection entailed to joint commitment. Instead, the joint commitment is the all too familiar, yet essential, 'social distancing', 'lockdown' and the creation of support 'bubbles'.

Sharing space alongside, as opposed to with one another, took on a new conscious form during the pandemic when bubble making, and national instructions tested both staying apart and togetherness like never before. Physical activity has been a particularly disrupted area of social interaction throughout the national lockdowns, and a source of social catastrophe that has represented wider social fragility. People have been forced to [re]imagine how to exercise with friends, train in team sports and rethink running routes, all to manage their 'bubble' and their varying commitments to social and civic responsibilities.

On this basis, physical activity provided an ideal lens in which to explore watchful indifference 'in action' during the pandemic, while also revealing how social modalities and indifference shaped social codes and constructed, as well as questionably exposed, social boundaries within community public spaces. Accordingly, physical activity, physical education and sport have occupied a complex space of contestation throughout the pandemic, it is through the lens of watchful indifference that the codes of being active during a pandemic are explored. Applying an anthropological tone to examine social adaptation and strategies of compliance, this chapters considers the tensions and contestations of watchfulness as a social tool for [mis]managing individual and collective behaviours in the context of physical activity. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced people to navigate modalities and social codes for sharing public spaces as well as the contentiously named, 'organised spaces'.

Certainly, the focus of physical activity during the pandemic, in relation to social disruption and the lasting legacies of wider social participation, may seem superfluous; however, research suggests that the consequences of lockdowns and abrupt endings to

group physical activities and sport has had significant negative effects on mental well-being, physical health and social satisfaction (Ammar et al., 2021). Research has also reported that home confinement and social isolation has resulted in a decrease in all levels of physical activities and approximately 28% increase in daily sitting time (Neto et al., 2020). Imposed enforcement of stay-at-home orders posed a challenge to the ritual of physical fitness, the experience of lone or adapted physical activities, and restricted social communication that has led to both uncertainty and helplessness. This feeds into the intensity of watchful indifference as the dynamics of social intimacy and resistance to enforced new codes of practice required developing new sets of social skills and thought (Varshney et al., 2020). Ultimately individuals and communities had to learn how to behave and share space both from national instructions and from each other. The evolving picture of the consequences of disrupted normalised physical activity and sport related social cultures, highlights the intensity and social importance of the windows of opportunities to re-engage and reimagine physical activity during this period. Managing communal exercise and sport bubbles and participating in approved 1-hour outdoor exercise pursuits are used in the following sections to explore social reorganisation, community structures and collective compliance. Notably, specific consideration is given to examining how physical activity served to expose social fragility as well as creating social boundaries and factions within community spaces.

Watchful Indifference and the [de]construction of community

The concept of watchful indifference (Amit, 2020) presents a unique opportunity to describe urban community behaviour and social interaction as it emerged at the start of what would prove to be a year exemplified by it. COVID-19 restrictions effected all parts of daily life, as people stayed at home and parks and green space took on new responsibilities as the focus of singular daily outings. As restrictions involving social interaction became tighter and community anxiety grew, the observations of living 'apart-together' became, and continues to be, a concept instilled in the wider community. Applying a community lens or considering community as a concept 'to think with' acts a useful analytical tool (Amit, 2010). The conceptual framing of community *thinking* and *doing* is important here; not only to consider how watchful indifference has shaped physical activity cultures during the COVID-19 pandemic but

also to interrogate how watchful indifference, at this time, has exposed questionable social collaboration and differing levels of individual and collective compliance.

The notion of community in relation to watchful indifference is important. Barth (1969) considered community as a form of boundary construction and suggested that communities are formed on difference, whilst Anderson (1983) positioned community as a form of symbolic social intimacy. Watchful indifference has a relationship with both of these standpoints, recognising that those who occupy space often adopt watchfulness to create affinity with others, distinguish themselves from some and create social intimacy as a social tactic. As Amit and Rapport (2002) warn, 'expressions of community require sceptical investigation, rather than providing a ready-made social unit upon which to hang analysis' (2002, p14). Watchful indifference as a trait of social organisation and culture building, lends itself to sceptical investigation in this context. Scepticism in this case leads us to question how individuals and groups in community spaces retained social intimacy as part of the community ideal while also [mis]managing social boundaries within a pandemic environment.

Ultimately, Barth (1969) teaches us that communities are structured on boundaries between groups and individuals, they represent difference as opposed to homogeneity. This is a trait shared within the physical activity and sporting context. Individuals and groups distinguish themselves through participation in a wide range of physical pursuits [bootcamps, yoga, exercise classes, running], games [invasion, ball, team, individual, raquet] and more recreational forms of physical activity [kite flying, dog walking, Pokémon finding on android devices]. Communities and cultures of physical activity, in their various forms, were disbanded and frozen during periods of national lockdowns. It is through the lens of watchful indifference that we question how these communities were reformed and re-produced overtime. We argue that it is through the act of watchfulness that individuals and communities developed new cultures and managed their bubbles but with differing interpretations and levels of compliance.

The complexities of managing physical activity spaces during phases of social disruption or catastrophe intersects with the symbolic relationship community has with space. Watchful indifference is explicitly interested with individual or collective mobilisation within specific spaces, be it the street, the park or the city. In De Certeau's,

The Practice of Everyday Life (2011), space is positioned as both scientifically and politically functioning. A named space is seen as a site of transformations and the object of various kinds of interference that is constantly exposed to new attributes. Space provides a way of conceiving and constructing social codes and patterns on the basis of a number of stable, isolatable, and interconnected properties. Importantly, De Certeau's insightful contribution to philosophical interactions with social representation and modes of social behaviour, within named spaces, highlights the strategies and tactics available to individuals and collaborators to reclaim agency in the face of pervasive forces. The concept of strategy and tactics within public spaces became an exceptionally important social and political indicator during the pandemic and continues to be in a time of social and economic recovery. In so doing, physical activity and pandemic community sport cultures provides a set of performances and a lens in which to question social strategies that resist or align to new sets of social codes and sub-communities based on social and political standpoints. It is the 'bubble' and those that sit within it which highlights watchful indifference in action.

Now people are more aware of keeping 'apart' the dynamic of participation in and through sport, which demands such high level of interaction, has changed. Through lived experiences over the course of the national and regional lockdowns, as well as the proceeding restrictions, the following sections offer a commentary on sport and physical activity through the lens of watchful indifference as we come to terms with the new codes of interaction. These sections offer insight into how sport and physical activity has changed as well as how the personal awareness of space and the concept of watchful indifference within urban environments has been reimagined and manipulated. The following sections are semi-ethnographic and describe scenarios within community spaces. These observations were conducted throughout the third lockdown in the United Kingdom from 6th January 2021- 19th July 2021.

Navigating running routes and joint commitment

> *A large stretch of two-meter-wide concrete cuts through green grass lined with trees, in a pre-COVID-19 world, this would be full of runners, walkers and families all jostling for space. Frequently, these runners would stray onto the parks grass to overtake a slower runner and walkers or to avoid brushes with*

others coming from the opposite direction. A natural or inherent sense of social rhythm, politeness, giving way and head nods of acknowledgment framed the codes for how to interact with this space. Dogs and children often created obstacles and unpredictable disruptions to the pattern of individual strides, but this was often negotiated through widen the running lane into the grass or mud or an occasional hurdle in good jest. There was no right of way or system, just watchfulness of others in order to complete a chosen route. Watching each other's rhythm and methods of utilising the makeshift running, yet multipurpose, path demonstrated how watchful indifference produces social cues and cultures. However, this pre pandemic rhythm evolved quite naturally without instructions and spoken or written rules, this was about to dramatically change.

During periods of lockdown running became a viable option for socially safe and accepted isolated exercise, it was an attractive option for novices with new motivations to improve health and wellbeing and a sense of relief to the running community (Guardian News & Media Limited, 2021). When people were observed using this long expanse of concrete during the lockdowns, it was clear that awareness of the 'social distancing' rules effected the rhythm and the emotion of the space. New social rules required new running rules that fitted the needs of this space and met the heightened emotional experience of staying apart in shared spaces. However, quite quickly, and without signage for direction or any spoken word, a one-way system came into operation.

From the intersection of the path, we watched as people would enter from either side of the park. Runners would look up and down the straight length of concrete, acknowledge those who pounded the concrete with differing paces and rhythms and join the direction of the movement. In many cases, the one-way system created by the runners represented the joint commitment to exercise safely apart.

This 'joint commitment' (Gilbert, 1994) towards a 'common' goal – of keeping socially distanced – within a communal space is a social phenomenon that pre-pandemic was not obvious within this community space. The dilemma of co-presence and physical participation in a socially restricted environment highlighted the issue of indifference

in relation to tolerance. Whilst a one-way system proved a socially desirable modality to run collectively alone, lockdowns bought new runners to the space, and this was challenging.

> *Runners watched and identified who the novices were and who were rhythmically astute. The novices were prone to interval pacing where they would run then walk and run then walk, this disrupted the patterns of social distancing in motion and forced the experienced runners to adapt or run wider to create their own harmonies.*

Crucially, within this example of running routes, the commitment is born out of a need to collaborate within a distinct public space. Yet, even with a high level of social creativity to manage the running bubble, tolerance is a source of social contestation.

In this case, social contestation was managed, overtime, in line with the collective joint commitment of running safely together apart. Overtime, the concrete was assigned for walkers, and, much like a swimming pool, lanes of movement on the grass appeared for the runners. All runners were spaced approximately a body width on the grass and eventually to the tree line on either side. This direction of movement stayed consistent throughout the lockdown restrictions. Gradually overtime, the runners' marked new paths into the grass, stipulating the running lane for each calibre of runner. Those who were new to the space or lacked the watchfulness skills were often guided into their lanes with some gentle mentoring and advice. The need to stay apart but yet *do* activities within the same space created a togetherness that encouraged bounded conformity and tolerance in public urban green spaces.

Park-life and claiming space

Walking through public parks during lockdown became an enticing pursuit for social anthropologists like the ones writing this chapter, the same spaces existed but they took on new meaning, seduced new users and became a site for new forms of participation.

> *The physical activities associated with park life were still visible, jumpers for goal posts and children playing football, young and old doing yoga and*

stretching, runners and dog walkers all moving around within the boundaries of the park. Previously these activities would have been enacted at random, the couple doing yoga would have set up on the grass wherever their energy took them, the football pitch itself would have no defined boundaries and young people would have run wherever the ball and their opponents took them, the runners would have tested their agility weaving through the various spaces, while the dog walkers attempted to control their dog from not stealing the football.

The social dynamics of the park are well defined by what Amit (2020) considered everyday improvisation and the dynamic and complex interaction between social and familiar conventions. The social complexities of sharing a dynamic and physically charged space is complex but lockdown confronted these challenges and heightened social claiming of space. The intensified use of props like cones, blankets and sporting materials to mark territory for example, or the acts of resistance against such claims of space by purposively ignoring such behaviours and walking through the self-created boundaries.

During lockdown periods, new norms were constructed within parks, and behaviours changed to ensure that space was claimed and protected for physical and social activities. It was vital people knew what space was '*theirs*'.

During one afternoon in spring the researchers observed the new protocols for physical activity park life. A dad who brought his sons to the park carried with him a ball and cones. As they entered the park, they watched the activities around them as they made their way to the centre of the grassy area. Once a free space was identified the cones were arranged to mark a small playing area and two goals, now their game had limits, but it was necessary in order to make sure everyone knew it was their space. Another group of 7 teenage boys entered the park a short while after. They did not have cones, but they had clearly planned for an afternoon of football, with 2 of the boys carrying footballs under their arms and most wearing football shirts. They also walked towards the centre of the park but set up their drink's bottles and rucksacks 20 metres to the left of the young family playing in their small, conned area. The boys used their

bottles and bags to mark out 2 goals, the space between was undefined but they rarely moved beyond the immediate area of their belongings. The boys were improvising whilst following the example of the those around them.

As people entered the park, they followed a ritual of finding a space that suited their needs and claimed space using improvised materials. The ritual of claiming space was both a literal representation of strategy and a symbolic process of creating boundaries and ownership of public space. While Barth's (1969) concept of bounded communities aligns to the physical activity sub-cultures and meta communities appearing through the need to be apart together, lockdown forced this process to transition from symbolic to literal, and from meaning to strategy. What was once assumed to be a single community sharing public space through the pursuit of a number of physical activities, the park now represented citizens who were physically and symbolically divided. Separated into individual and defined spaces and activities, never merging or communicating but still watchful of each other in order to maintain the compliance that is required. Previous literature has suggested that urban interactions between people unknown to each other evolves through a combination of formal regulations (Amin, 2008; Neal et al., 2015) – in this case lockdown restrictions – and tacit conversation (Wilson, 2011). The interplay between the need to abide by regulation and conform to the unspoken word of the communal space was evident within parks at a time when social interaction was not allowed.

Being active in a bubble

As restrictions began to ease and community sports returned to the weekly routine of many, new challenges, social expectations, and rules effected the watchfully indifferent sportsmen. Community sport could start again but with new instructions: training had to be outside, social bubbles needed to be constructed and maintained, contact [rugby tackling for example] was not allowed, and regular handwashing and sanitising had to be implemented within the sessions.

Observing early evening rugby training in the park was an insightful entry point into the evolving physical activity landscape. The group was too big to train together and so the coach arranged the players into two 'bubbles' within the

same section of the park. The players were compliant but the space between the bubbles was not always obvious. On the opposite side of the same park there was a hockey session taking place, they all momentarily paused as they entered the park to scan the space. There were not as many hockey players, so they trained together, they were all part of a single 'bubble'. Cricketers also claimed an area on the field, another sports 'bubble' but this one did not need to be concerned with restrictive organisation. Cricket was able to operate free from bubbles due to the lack of proximity to one another and the lack of contact. After a long time without live sport the new modalities of training together was a welcomed strike to the senses. The energy, noise, pace and movement within the park took a new form, with dog walkers and lockdown park alumi managing new routes within occupied sport spaces.

For anthropologists committed to exploring sporting cultures and using sport as a fieldwork tool to explore social cultures, the sporting occupation within public spaces was captivating. This was the point that physical activity bubbles tested the social codes that had been produced throughout lockdowns, and the compliance and tolerance that had been negotiated overtime.

As community sports teams continued to train in public spaces, the ritual and organisation was constantly challenged (Durkheim, 1914). Bubbles would burst with COVID-19 cases confirmed amongst individual team members and others would have to make decisions based on the risk of participation and posing a risk to home bubbles and family members. Reliance on bubble members and empathy of individual circumstances was constantly challenged. This sense of trust was not exclusive to community sports teams but openly managed within public spaces, and that is the unique lens physical activity and sport provides. As restrictions on sport began to ease the park abruptly filled with others who wanted to play recreational games and pursue group recreational activities, such as, frisbee throwing in groups, exercise bootcamps and dog agility classes. The space became a precious commodity: space was claimed and games adapted. Sport participants, runners, spectators, families and everyday park users of the park needed to be aware of how space was being managed and socially policed. COVID-19 restrictions forced people to be hyper-aware of their social choices and the requirements of their own sport and physical activity communities. Importantly,

this forced community members to openly show where their well-drawn boundaries laid. The bubble effect succeeded in bringing communities back together, in the quest for physical enjoyment just as much as they have kept people watchfully apart.

Positive code making and watchful indifference – separate but together

Before COVID-19, stepping off a narrow concrete path to allow someone past was considered polite. Using another area of the park for a football game when people were already there (so not to interrupt other games) was part of sharing space for physical activity. COVID-19 forced people to socially recalibrate as the demand of the urban park significantly increased. More people *learnt* to be watchfully indifferent as part for their strategy to be physically active and socially engage safely. However, the construction or reimaging of community participation within public space, and the boundaries created by watchful indifference within 'communal' or 'common' space, both forced and tested social compliance, tolerance, and joint commitments.

Here, social disruption and constriction exposed the complexities and modalities of being apart together, reinforcing how watchful indifference operates within extreme and or catastrophic environments. Sport and physical activity throughout the pandemic were conditional on following social rules and dependent upon social compliance. The social rewards and benefits of physical activity during this time came with additional caveats and restrictions to ensure people were kept apart. Individual exercise was never completely restricted, it was within the community sport context that new rules had to be socially constructed, new norms established, and people had to utilise watchfulness to fit into the new fabric of physical activity cultures. Overwhelmingly, physical activity within public spaces was a positive example of joint commitment and social compliance. However, rules in the form of social control, which are politically driven, inevitably produce opportunities for resistance, activism, and defiance. The following section explores a new framing of watchful indifference in the form of watchful defiance, in literal terms, the opposing social outcome of watchfulness as a strategy for joint commitment.

Bending codes and breaking rules

Within heavily populated urban areas the parks and green spaces are at a premium, the challenge of staying apart within these spaces requiring certain forms of 'code bending'. This bending of codes in order to accommodate everyone, including the people choosing not to adopt the social conventions, tests everyone's ability to be watchfully indifferent. Previous explanations of indifference have portrayed the concept as a social enterprise whereby space is shared by a multitude of activities for the common goal of physical activity and social pleasure. At times, these activities overlap and become part of each other. Regularly the outfield of some games will be borrowed for another activity, all facilitated by watchful indifference. Within a COVID-19 environment, watchful indifference assumed a new role: now, the skill was keeping and *defining* a space, no longer was it possible to *share* a space. It was important to be watchful (assume the role of the spectator) (Amit, 2020) to identify where your activity might fit. The challenge of avoiding others brings with it the disruption to a person's normal routine. This inconvenience again leads to code breaking and disruption. Code breaking, distinct from rule breaking, can be exemplified in many facets of the lockdown restrictions. Codes are socially constructed, for example, the expectation to pick up one's litter, walking around an informal game of football or avoiding a runners path. Running against the tide of a one-way system within a park would be seen as code breaking, socially constructed and enforced by social compliance. Whereas, playing contact rugby in the park would be interpreted as rule breaking as stated by national instruction.

The concept of joint commitment through social compliance has united people throughout multiple lockdowns and pandemic restrictions, but this has not been universally applied nor experienced. Conflicting social agendas and political viewpoints have shaped and affected both community participation as well as the meta communities formed within bubbles. Amit (2020) acknowledges that efforts to enforce the principles of the joint commitment may challenge the connection that members have to the meta community if they challenge or dispute the validity of the commitment. This aligns to Turner's (1974 & 2017) concept of 'Communitas'. Turner (1982) states that communitas exists more in contrast than in active opposition to social structure, as an alternative and more "liberated" way of being socially human, away both from being detached from social structure and also of a "distanced" or "marginal" person' (pg. 50-5). It is the act of opposition, intolerance or defiance seen through the lens of physical

activity that provides a counter narrative to the watchful indifference that is evident through compliant runners and the joint commitment sport bubbles.

A middle-aged woman in the park with a brightly coloured sun visor caught the attention of our observing eyes. Her eyes were not visible, but her headphones reinforced her desires to be alone, seemingly shut off from the rhythms around her she entered the park with purpose. It is mid-morning on a weekend and the park is starting to fulfil its lockdown purpose. There were children running through the middle of the park as their family members threw out their picnic blanket, they were claiming their space. The woman wearing a visor was running towards the family as they decide what space to claim, she side steps around the children and adjusts her running stride to navigate the picnic blanket. The woman is not running with the many others that are enjoying the socially defined route around the park in a one-way system. Without acknowledging her run against the tide, she continued to dodge and weave, ignoring the angry head turns and raised eyebrows as she passed others along the way. She was not breaking the rules but she was bending the new social ways of doing. Arguably, she may have lacked the social skills associated with watchfulness, or simply she trusted her way of navigating herself within this social milieu.

Pre-pandemic, the actions of this woman would not have looked out of place; in fact, they may have been applauded for showing such control and consideration for the children and the family picnic. The pandemic redefined what people portrayed as socially acceptable indifference, and in turn challenged what compliance to social codes requires of individuals. The extreme environment of COVID-19 has created a population of urbanities that are hyper-aware of their space and the space that others occupy; a community that no longer feels comfortable living as one interconnected community but instead builds boundaries that define *communitas* or "the bubble". Hyper-awareness has confined physical activity and thus led to inevitable infringements. With this said, observations have also been made of more purposeful infringements while preforming physical activity within the COVID-19 environment. We should view these frequent infringements and acts of bursting bubbles as windows in which to sceptically explore counter community expression.

Interpreting new rules and restrictions is a challenge. People will not always agree with what is allowed and what is not. This offers a challenge for watchful indifference as prior to social restrictions people relied on a normalised consensus of what is acceptable. New rules and social and political [in]differences have led to the bending or breaking of social codes which have become a much more complex multifaceted concept. Within the following section we explore the extents of this code bending and rule breaking and consider how it effects the harmony of watchful indifference.

Infringements and Code Breaking

Held within the concept of a watchfully indifferent society there is an acceptance that 'occasional infringements' (Amit, 2020, p.63) are part of embodying indifference. The presence of occasional infringements can be rationalised as the coming together of two different groups of urbanites, personal mismanagement and the misjudgement of space. Or, in this case, from a lack of control in the sporting and physical context. However, within extraordinary environments, such as that created by COVID-19, there are observations of more frequent and intentional infringements that suggest a purposeful bending of socially constructed codes (Amit, 2020, p.59). This also highlights the presence of 'self-protective nonchalance' within times of heightened awareness and in extreme environments, urbanites using municipal space are protective of their bubble and display a more rigid form of these 'self-protective' mannerisms. Additionally, the lack of nonchalance is exacerbated by a hyper-awareness of the space and people that are around you, as people contest and protect space in a heightened and extroverted way.

> *Code breaking was no more obvious than through the observations of youth community sport. On an early Saturday morning 2 separate children's football teams were preparing for their pre-season training sessions. The children sprinted to their coaches from their parents grasp and huddled together with high pitched sounds of enthusiasm. Both makeshift pitches occupied equal amounts of space but were claimed quite differently. Whilst both pitches had training goals and cones, one pitch had an additional roped off section. It was not obvious at first what the purpose of the rope was for until parents started to*

gather to spectate. One teams coach instructed parents to stand behind the rope which was positioned approximately 5 metres from the children's pitch, the other team allowed parents to congregate along the pitch boundaries and paid little attention to their movements or interactions. The team who provided boundaries for spectators also stopped play intermittently for team hand sanitising. It was a well-managed endeavour that adopted clear COVID-19 safety protocols. The parents on both pitches maintained their energies throughout the children's sessions but the aesthetics, messaging and social protocols were very different. One team complied with national instructions and protocols and the other followed a non-mandated approach. On both sides of the pitches parents exercised their own interpretations and management of their bubbles, some socialised with a sense of nostalgia whilst others kept their distance, some wore masks whilst others embraced with a hug. Saturday mornings became a visual representation of code making, code bending and code breaking.

Rules, which are not policed, are often open to societal interpretation in order to judge what is allowed. Equally, there is, within society, 'acceptable' levels of non-compliance. Friends exercising together, but staying apart, or sports teams training together without physical contact. These are accepted inactions, on the edge of the rules but also displaying respect for the social codes of the park. In contrast to the inaction at each end of the compliance continuum, convenience-inaction is embodied by people that endeavour to be watchfully indifferent but deem some risk as acceptable, thus straying outside societal norms. Equally, unlike convenient-inaction, both self-inaction and activism are at risk of commonly drawing objection from other park users. As a result of this objection, both extremes of inaction were catalysts for isolation and disagreement. Throughout nationally imposed restrictions, the increase in different social group formations was observed. As team sports stopped, urban communities changed as different groups and meta-communities were forced to get to know, or share space with each other. Social interaction did not stop during COVID-19, but it did change the focus people had, bringing to prominence a hyper-awareness within social situations.

The consequence of bending codes

As the pandemic progressed the social reorganisation of groups within a community manifested its results through the observations and information gained through their watchfully indifferent self, in a society of hyper-awareness, your perspective on society could dictate your friendships. As a result, communities adopted 'meta communities'. Those within them employed watchfulness to act as the spectator, interpreting the rules and observing who was aligned to their social codes. This formed communities that were able to become watchfully indifferent around each other. Such compliance was focused through social pressure and the burden of social isolation. People displaying regular examples of so-called infringements soon found them a casualty of social isolation or forming internal sub-groupings. For example, parents who were compliant to social distancing and supportive of stringent protocols often shared space *apart* together, parents who did not follow protocols often formed their own groups, sharing space together with a higher level of spatial and social intimacy.

The politics of bending codes and the activism of breaking rules

Social restrictions and staying apart together has become a highly politicised enterprise. For some, obvious and direct rule breaking, or, code bending, was not performed in order to fit around others, nor did it involve them sticking to their old routines. Individual, group, team, coach, spectator driven code bending was a form of activism seen through the lens of physical activity. Through increased community participation physical activity became a focal point for political activism and the activation of social modalities. As a result of exercise being one of the only times people were allowed out of their houses, many used exercise and physical activity to display their displeasure at being forced to stay in. Physical activity became the public performance of compliance and defiance in differing measures.

During a period of hype-awareness and watchfulness, actions of political defiance were open and performed to others in the community. Conflict and social contestation became a source of public unrest, with certain cases making national headlines. In January 2021, two women were surrounded by police whilst walking in a socially distanced manner. The police issued a fine as their walking located them outside of their 'local' area, with their intentions being outside of the 'spirit' of the lifted

restrictions on public exercise (BBC, 2021). Such incidents created divided levels of public sympathy, where, under long periods of lockdown, a sense of empathy towards those who were bending codes or stepping [literally] outside of the rules coming under scrutiny. The nexus of social, political, and physical cultures created a kaleidoscope of social philosophies and modalities. The intersecting and overlapping behaviours and performances of compliance, collaboration, [in]tolerance and defiance highlighted the complexities of social isolation, social restriction, and social instruction.

Discussion

Lockdown restrictions had many consequences to everyday life; however, physical activity and exercise is a legacy of this time. Due to the enforced social isolation that came from the restrictions, the parks fell quiet, despite the increased participation within the space. Only the few pairs of subtle whispers were audible. No longer were the shouts of a football game heard, no more could you hear the dull thud of a ball as its propelled down the pitch. The most premiant noise was the patter of running shoes on the concrete path. Physical activity and exercise throughout COVID-19 became an exclusively individual endeavour for some time.

Physical activity became a watchful tool for the anthropologists who wrote this chapter. It was through the lens of physical activity and sport participation that social codes were observed and the evolving practice of bending codes and breaking rules were performed within the park setting. Park life was a complicated pursuit during lockdowns, the drive for physical activity as a source of wellbeing and restricted social opportunity fulfilled a social craving felt by many. The examples of COVID-19 runners demonstrate the high levels of joint commitment and collaboration, showing how individuals navigated watchfulness with strategy. However, over time, and likely as people's stamina and sensitivity for social restriction and protocols began to lessen, communities and meta communities pursued their individual interpretations of watchful indifference.

The social necessity and art of bending codes and relaxing levels of social intimacy provided insights into differing levels of compliance and resistance against the social stagnation. As urban community settings became increasingly hyper-watchful and indifferent to fractured social stances, the performance of staying apart together

exposed the [mis]management of bubbles and social deviations with varying political alignments. Diverse levels of compliance also highlighted the emotional entanglement of watchful indifference and social tolerance. The parents in the park created sub-group affiliations and sets of codes that ranged from compliant to resistant, each week new spectators needed to watch and pick their group. Compliance and tolerance were two conceptual markers of joint commitment, the lockdown runners created inclusive one-way systems and constructed a social system that allowed space for multiple rhythms and harmonies.

While it is true that watchful indifference is a human preoccupation that all urbanities employ in order to socially engage and interact within public spaces, in the context of physical activity during the COVID-19 pandemic, we also need to acknowledge that there is a persistent hyper watchfulness that shaped social modalities for staying apart together. As communities and the concept of *communitas* evolved, the process of jostling for and claiming space exposed the complexities of forming and maintaining social bubbles. This was a highly emotive and personal process that told a story of fear, frustration, and social fragility. In many ways physical activity has exposed the social fragility of communities facing catastrophe. During our observations we felt the pressures of compliance, the test of tolerance and the waves of resistance. The result was a highly fractured social landscape with clear social boundaries, ties and differing joint commitments. It was team sports that often highlighted these tensions, as the participation numbers increased so too did the pressures of social interaction and intimacy. It was a process of unlearning and resetting individual and group dynamics. If one team member broke rules or mismanaged their role within a bubble this created risk for others. There was a sense of social reliance that provoked new forms of emotional tension. Even if strategies were well defined it still required compliance to sustain the social privilege of sport and physical activity. Nothing in this context felt stable nor safe.

To date, the art and social rhythm of watchful indifference within extreme environments has not been explored with empirical grounding. As a result, the literature has not explored the effect that an environment such as COVID-19 has had on collective and collaborative social behaviour. Throughout the observations within the park setting, compliance and tolerance became important and meaningful analytical cues. This

extends the current scope of watchful indifference in its traditional frame. Accordingly, while compliance and tolerance connect closely with the social strategies theorised by De Certeau, there remains the opportunity to apply watchful indifference and social strategy as a sympathetically layered approach to exploring social interacts and modalities in public spaces.

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