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THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY EVENTS IN PRESERVING IDENTITY IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL CHANGE: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF THE WORLD COAL CARRYING CHAMPIONSHIPS

RITA CARMOUCHE, THOMAS FLETCHER,  AND RHODRI THOMAS, 

School of Events, Tourism and Hospitality Management, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, UK

This article examines the role community events can play in negotiating forms of community and place identity against a backdrop of social, economic, and urban change. Our contention is that in the context of globalization and deindustrialization, forms of working-class community may be expressed and re-created through maintaining traditions and practices established in place-based community events. The article is based on an ethnographic study of the World Coal Carrying Championships (WCCC), which involved undertaking in-depth interviews, volunteering, focus groups, observations, and archival analysis. The findings show how the WCCC is invested with powerful symbols and invented traditions that are activated through the event. By reconstructing and remobilizing shared pasts in the present, the WCCC permits community members to create an affective sense of community in the contemporary context, in spite of the destabilizing loss of other aspects of their industrial lives.

Key words: Class; Coal carrying; Community; Community event; Mining; Place attachment

Introduction

This article examines the role planned community events can play in preserving community identity during times of social, economic, and urban change. More specifically, its aim is to establish the role of the World Coal Carrying Championship (WCCC) in negotiating a form of community, social class, and place identity. We argue that, to date, commentators have tended to use “community” to

focus almost exclusively on place and geographical location, or for groups with a common interest that enable members to recognize similarity and difference in relation to boundaries of inclusion and exclusion (see Stone, 2023). We suggest that the literature on community events might be extended by embracing wider notions of community. We argue that in the context of globalization and deindustrialization, forms of working-class community may be expressed and recreated by maintaining traditions

Address correspondence to Thomas Fletcher, School of Events, Tourism and Hospitality Management, Leeds, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, UK. E-mail: t.e.fletcher@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

and practices established in place-based community events. Indeed, in the face of social, economic, and urban change, individuals and groups may seek to preserve and re-create community identity through an attachment to place and imaginings of communities of the past.

Our contention is informed and supported by ethnographic research undertaken in the context of the World Coal Carrying Championship (WCCC, discussed below). The study provides qualitative insights into the importance of community events in re-creating and maintaining cultural identity and place attachment in the face of wider societal changes. The WCCC was created in the early 1960s by local miners and others in the working-class mining village of Gawthorpe, West Yorkshire, UK. The event's challenge is to carry a sack of coal around a predetermined route (mostly uphill) for 1 mile. The WCCC is a particularly interesting case because the event has continued long after the closure of most mines in Yorkshire, during the 1980s and early 1990s, with the consequential changes to the structure of the economy and regional demography. The methodological approach adopted for this study and its findings are discussed following a review of relevant community and events literature.

Literature Review

Understanding the Concept of Community

The concept of community is fiercely contested across a range of fields, including sociology, geography, and leisure studies. Attempts to make sense of the concept have led to a range of competing paradigms within these fields (Bell & Newby, 2021; Blackshaw, 2010; Day, 2006). What people have in common, what binds them together and gives them a sense of belonging, is the classic way of understanding community (Day, 2006). Sociologically, ideas of community have often been based upon small groups, such as neighborhoods, the small town, or a spatially bounded locality (Bell & Newby, 2021; Delanty, 2018). These ideas place proximity, stability, and continuity at the heart of community ties. The clearly romanticized notions of community probably never existed, but they contribute to a situation where, in a variety of ways, people strive to re-create a particular perspective of

the present that is influenced by perceptions of the past (Cohen, 1985; Walker, 2021). Place-based definitions of community also tend to imply a homogeneous collection of people who share more than a common geographical location. While community may be rooted in notions of place, it can also be used to express emotions and feelings of belonging and attachment (Scott & Fletcher, 2023). In order to advance our understanding of the role and potential of community events, the notion of community itself needs to be problematized. Doing so helps provide a more conceptual approach to understanding how community may be represented through community events.

Although acknowledging the polyphony of conceptualizations of "community" we find Cohen's (1985) conceptualization of community as a symbolic construction particularly illuminating. For Cohen (1985), while community continues to be both practically and ideologically significant to most people, its importance is not in what it means, or how it is defined, but in how it is *used*. He rejects the idea of communities based solely, or even primarily, on locality or structures, arguing that "people construct community symbolically as a system of values, norms and moral codes which provide a sense of identity within a bounded whole to its members" (p. 118). Here Cohen distances himself from the intrinsic merits of being in a community, focusing rather on the shared meanings that bind people together. These shared meanings are also what set communities apart, as an ability to successfully decode these shared meanings often defines belonging. Symbols are also crucial to Cohen's conceptualization because symbols bind people around collective meaning. Crucially, the exchanging of symbols and construction of meaning within Cohen's thesis is subjective and negotiable: "Symbols do not so much express meaning as give us the capacity to make meaning" (Cohen, 1985, p. 15). Thus, rather than focusing his attention on defining the characteristics of community per se, Cohen prefers to explore their imagery, boundary marking processes, customs, habits, and rituals. Crucially, the communication of these can be achieved through symbols, such as events.

The construction and use of symbols are central to Cohen's (1985) idea of community, as they underpin the way in which people are able to

express belonging. He argued that social groups define themselves by the significance they attach to certain symbols and what they come to signify. Symbols may be projected through rituals or ceremonies, and an individual's ability to relate to, and understand, these symbols is central to signifying their membership of the community. Symbols underpin many community events, allowing the community to project an image of unity, both to insiders and outsiders (Walker, 2021; Walters et al., 2021). Some community events are occasions for the display and celebration of a particular conception of community, which brings people together in a spirit of mutual recognition, whereby an aspect of identity is exhibited—for example, Caribbean Carnivals and St Patrick's Day parades (Devine & Devine, 2022). At the same time, this may include hiding aspects of the community that are not palatable to tourists (e.g., violence and/or drunkenness). Cohen (1985) contended, therefore, that boundaries symbolize the community to its members in two quite different ways. First, the way community is perceived by outsiders, and second, how members' lives are routinely inflected by the practices of the community. Precisely because boundaries are known and shared among the community's members means they are influential in how individuals construct their identities.

Notwithstanding the merits, Cohen's conceptualizations have been criticized. Day (2006), for instance, argued that approaching community as if it is entirely symbolic or imagined risks losing sight of the objective grounding of meanings in our actual everyday lives. In other words, if we uncritically embrace these conceptualizations, we effectively overlook the materiality of community as lived experience. Meanings are constructed symbolically, but they also have real consequences in day-to-day life, in terms of social practices and behaviors. As Day (2006) argued, "the setting of boundaries between groups, whilst marked by symbolic means, has real and lasting effects." (p. 180). For Cohen, the construction of community is an attempt to create and mobilize particular kinds of social relations, but this cannot be achieved through symbols and imagination alone. We contend that community events can play a significant role in helping people to preserve, and cherish, practices of bygone times.

The Role of Community Events in Preserving Local Cultures, Tradition, and Practices

Community events are invariably held by, and in, local communities that have distinctive histories, traditions, and practices, and it is from those that scholars deduce the presence of local cultures (Bradley, 2015; Brewster, 2020; A. Clarke & Jepson, 2011). Local cultures and practices help differentiate and distinguish places and communities from others, foster local identities and strengthen belonging and place attachment among people who live there (Abdykadyrova, 2022; A. Clarke & Jepson, 2011; Son et al., 2022). However, it is not always clear what constitutes "local" and, by extension, the "community" in accounts of community events. Implicit in this notion of local is a reference to people living within a geographical location. Yet, the interconnectedness of communities via global communication and travel networks has altered the way we view our localities and thus the local. Localities are increasingly viewed in symbolic terms, being detached from physical spaces (Cohen, 1985), instead dovetailing into related ideas about belonging and identity (Anderson, 1983).

The opportunity to not only cement local values and traditions, but also to share these with visitors is an important aspect of many events (Getz, 2013). Local traditions and practices often relate to some significant aspect of a place's past or history, and community events allow for these to be celebrated and, often, commemorated (Frost & Laing, 2017; Viol et al., 2024). Often, the overarching theme of these events is nostalgia. Nostalgia refers to a sentimental longing for a past that is forever gone. It is often identified as an emotional response brought on by a dissatisfaction or detachment in the present, and an anxiety for the future (Gammon & Ramshaw, 2021). As a result, a seemingly superior, familiar, and stable past is sought that is comprised of happier times, which may generate mixed feelings of both joy and loss (Wong et al., 2020). Such longing may serve to link community events with a historical past that is imagined or, at the very least, socially constructed. Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) call these "invented traditions" (p. 1), defined as sets of practices governed by overt or tacit rules of a symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior through repetition.

Invented traditions, which are essentially articulated as unifying narratives, can be commodified in the form of events to present an acceptable historical past (or myths of the past). It is important to uncover these invented traditions and to assess the role they play both in the event and the community (Walker, 2021). This article explores the extent to which a sense of community can be constructed, maintained, and reimagined through shared narratives and invented traditions illuminated through the WCCC.

It is all too commonly purported that events bring people and communities together, helping to create a sense of shared identity and belonging. We do not dispute that claim; however, we would offer some caution because all events—community events included—have the potential to exclude and marginalize as much as they include (Walters & Jepson, 2022; Walters et al., 2021). Indeed, rather than being sites of harmonious social relationships, events may also represent important sites of resistance and contestation over both meaning and purpose. Community events have been studied mainly for their role in affirming both group and place identity (Wong et al., 2020). Community events that reflect local cultures and traditions may serve to strengthen local identities (Walters et al., 2021). In his study of cheese rolling, Bradley (2015), for example, argued that local events are an important part of how people relate to their local area. This argument is supported by Quinn (2013), who suggested that people's sense of their own identity is closely bound up with their attachment to place. Thus, there is a certain level of acceptance that community events are significant to local communities, and that they can play an important role in maintaining and reproducing myths, traditions, and distinctiveness.

While we accept that people who live in the same place might share a connection, this does not constitute a collective identity. This is certainly the case with postindustrial places that, to understand, we would contend, requires an engagement with how these communities construct identities around a sense of shared or common industrial past, particularly in areas that have struggled to adapt to the loss of community-defining industries (Walker, 2021). Mining and pit communities are a case in point because, as Hareven and Langenbach (1978) argued, the demolition of the mines has subjected entire communities to:

What amounts to social amnesia as a result of massive clearance or alteration of the physical setting. The demolition of . . . factory buildings wipes out a significant chapter of the history of the place. . . . Such destruction deprives people of tangible manifestations of their identity. (cited in Pantazatos & Silverman, 2019, p. 120)

We share Emery (2020), Pantazatos and Silverman (2019), and Walker's (2021) views that community events are not only important for memorializing the past but are a fundamental component of how communities are constructed and understood in the present, not to mention how such communities envision their futures. Indeed, in their examination of the "heritagization" of The Durham Miner's Gala, Pantazatos and Silverman (2019) argued that participation generates "intense feelings of community solidarity, village identity, personal identification with one's family history and collective memory of the pit village past" (p. 124).

To date, however, studies of community events have lacked a consistent conceptual basis for showing how such collective identities may be formed, maintained, challenged, or changed. Perhaps more importantly, limited research exists on the role of community events in recovering community identities within the context of community loss. We address this by offering insights from a longstanding community event, the WCCC.

The Magical Recovery of Northern Coal Mining Communities Through a Community Event

Coal mining communities are considered to have exhibited a high degree of solidarity among their members, facilitated by their physical isolation and lack of social mobility, which in turn helped to foster feelings of rootedness (Bell & Newby, 2021; Pantazatos & Silverman, 2019; Walker, 2021). In this context, the community played a key role in fostering social class identity and shared experiences. A subsequent reassessment of these communities has revealed notable differences between industries (e.g., mining and steel) and also within industries, between coal mining practices in County Durham and Yorkshire in the UK, for instance (Pantazatos & Silverman, 2019). Despite these variations, mining communities did display aspects of commonality (Skeggs, 2010). Warwick and Littlejohn

(1992), in their study of a postmining community, identified the importance of family, kin, and friendship groups, as well as how well-established social networks were important in providing support and emotional security in a context of limited possibilities. Ample evidence (e.g., Emery, 2020; Pantazatos & Silverman, 2019; Walker, 2021) exists to show that these communities developed their own distinctive cultures, leisure practices and interests.

Despite its self-defined position as the “World” Coal Carrying Championships, the event is rooted in the northern English County of Yorkshire. Northern England arguably evokes a greater sense of identity than any other region in the country (Rawnsley, 2000). Constructions of “northernness” have emerged out of specific historical, social and economic conditions that distinguish it from other parts of the country—notably contrasted with “southernness” (Fletcher & Swain, 2016). For Ehland (2007), northern England was the heartland of the Industrial Revolution and thus associations that come most readily to mind are of industrial landscapes. The importance and productiveness of these landscapes are largely overshadowed by negative connotations—“it’s grim up north”—readily contrasted with the idyllic national character of the south (Fletcher & Swain, 2016). According to Bramham and Wagg (2009) such mythologies of the north are outdated, as many of its towns and cities have entered a state of transformation. Despite the speed of social change within the region, we argue that there remains a nostalgic longing for that past that is maintained through community events, such as the WCCC.

Since the 1970s the traditional industries that were so important in the evolution of northern English identity have been in decline. The steel works in Sheffield, textile mills in Bradford, not to mention the ubiquitous coal mines have all petered out into melancholic insignificance. This had a dramatic effect on how northern English communities perceived themselves and others. Although living in a different time and in a different place, J. Clarke’s (1976) discussion of skinhead subcultures offers a useful conceptual basis. Clarke’s work examined the skinheads as a working class (masculine) subculture and argued that identification with the subculture allowed the skinheads to challenge their exclusion in postwar Britain. Clarke

cited the usual antagonisms between the skinheads and institutions of authority, such as the workplace and school. From Clarke’s perspective, resistance exists in the symbolic use of culture by male youth, as a source of collective struggle against institutions of authority and rival (or unwanted) community groups (Fletcher, 2011). As Hughson (1997) has previously argued, Clarke’s interpretation of community lends itself well to Anderson’s (1983) notion of the “imagined community” because the skinhead “imagines” himself to be the proprietor of a particular way of life—a way of life that was threatened by the “social readjustment” brought on by postwar capitalism in the UK (Hughson, 1997, p. 240). The conceptualization of the “magical recovery of community” places an emphasis on symbolic territorial defensiveness. Clarke argued how, when one’s community identity is under threat, community members may attempt to re-create, through symbolic manifestations (i.e., community events), a sense of their traditional cultural identities, as a substitution for its “real” decline. Thus, a “real” notion of community relies on the principle of solidarity, and Clarke argued that working class solidarity was lost in the postwar period. Instead of being part of a community literally, the skinheads were forced to live out an “image” of the community, and rediscover their relationships through performativity and “stylistic ensembles” (J. Clarke, 1976). The WCCC can be considered one such stylistic ensemble in the way it exemplifies how local people maintain, through recreation, links with an industrial (working class masculinity) past in the face of wider changes.

Research Design and Methodology

A qualitative, ethnographic approach was adopted in the fieldwork (Cassell, 2012). Qualitative research was appropriate to uncover the meanings and values individuals attached to the WCCC and to find out if the WCCC played a role in their conceptions of community and personal identity. The research was granted ethical clearance from Leeds Beckett University. Carmouche attended the WCCC on three occasions, undertook periods of observation, and conducted conversations with both spectators and competitors. Visits to the race were as a nonparticipating observer. Carmouche took the opportunity

to engage in informal conversations with spectators and participants, and to walk the course of the race. As part of observations, Carmouche photographed the crowds in particular parts of the village to explore (at a later date) who attended the race, the “feel” of the crowd, and whether there was any significance attached to where people viewed the race. Data were also collected from a focus group with the race committee to aid our understanding of their perceptions of the community and the history and context of the race. Additionally, all copies of the annual race brochure since its inception in 1963 were analyzed to help understand how the event has evolved. This involved examining how the race was articulated to participants and spectators, who was sponsoring the race, and who the winners were over time. Frequent visits were made to local libraries and to the National Coal Mining Museum for England to find any references to the WCCC for the same purpose. Finally, 32 in-depth interviews were undertaken with local residents and members of local businesses, the race committee, and competitors from inside and outside of Gawthorpe.¹ The aim of these interviews was to explore participants’ connection to Gawthorpe, their connection to the race, and the symbiotic relationship between these. The sample of participants can be summarized as follows: 21 females and 15 males; 29 participants lived in the area while 7 lived outside. The age range of the participants was from 18 to 75 years. The socioeconomic composition of the group was mixed between unskilled, skilled manual, clerical, and professional occupations, as classified using the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) classification scale (Office for National Statistics, 2021). All participants were white, reflective of the whiteness of the event. All interviews lasted between 1 and 2 hr, were recorded using an encrypted mobile phone, and transcribed by Carmouche. Data from interviews and focus groups are focused on in this article.

The data were analyzed thematically. Thematic analysis offered a valuable means of presenting the stories and experiences voiced by participants as accurately as possible (Guest et al., 2012). Braun and Clarke’s (2006) approach to thematic analysis was utilized. In line with their recommendations, we started by reading through the transcripts (three times) to become familiar with the data. This was

followed by noting all of the statements made in relation to the interview questions, which at this stage was surface level analysis. This was followed by a process of an initial categorization of the data and generating codes, which were applied across the whole data set. In doing so, features of the data set that were relevant to the research emerged. For example, the prevalence of the use of phrases such as “pride in place” and “value of knowing one’s neighbors.” Initially, every item in the data was coded, which generated over 75 codes. After collating the data relevant to each code, overlaps were identified that enabled the 75 codes to be reduced to 21. These were further reduced into six “super themes.” Our focus in this article is on three of these—1) The WCCC as community event; 2) the WCCC, community pride, and cultural reproduction; and 3) the WCCC, tradition, and loss—all of which help to articulate the role and influence of the WCCC in helping to preserve community identity during times of profound social change. In order to put responses into context, it is important to appreciate the history and significance of the event.

The World Coal Carrying Championships

Held each year on Easter Monday, in a former mining village, Gawthorpe, in West Yorkshire, UK, the WCCC (men’s race) has been held consecutively since 1963. The woman’s race has been held since 1992. The event was paused in 2021 due the COVID-19 pandemic. The WCCC involves competitors carrying a sack of coal uphill for 1 mile to secure the best time. The race is an endurance event as the coal is heavy and most of the route is uphill. During the early years of the event’s development, local miners and coal merchants were the main competitors. Indeed, during informal conversations with those present at the time, Author A was told how miners would come straight from their shift at the mine, collect the coal from the lorry, and run the race. Competitors got to keep the coal even if they did not complete the race, which, in addition to the prize money, was a significant reason for competing.

The longevity of this event, it has been held consecutively for 60 years, is unusual (Getz, 2009). It is particularly surprising, perhaps, that this (mining) community event has been sustained long after the mines were closed. The village has changed

physically and demographically because of the decline of mining and the restructuring of the local and regional economy. The origins of the WCCC can be traced to a bet that took place in a local public house between a local coal merchant and the chairperson of the Maypole Committee.² This account of the bet is well known to villagers perhaps because it is printed in the yearly race brochure:

At the century-old Beehive Inn, situated in Gawthorpe, the following incident took place one day in 1963. Reggie Sedgewick and one Amos Clapham, a local coal merchant and current president of the Maypole Committee, were enjoying some well-earned liquid refreshment whilst stood at the bar lost in their own thoughts, when in bursts one Lewis Hartley in a somewhat exuberant mood. On seeing the other two, he said to Reggie, “Ba gum lad tha’ looks buggered!” slapping Reggie heartily on the back. Whether because of the force of the blow or because of the words that accompanied it, Reggie was just a little put out. “Ah’m as fit as thee” he told Lewis, “an’ if tha’ dun’t believe me gerra a bagga coil on thi back an ‘ah’ll get one on mine an ‘ah’ll race thee to t’ top o’ t’ wood!” (Coil, let me explain is Yorkshire speak for coal). While Lewis digested the implications of this challenge, a Mr. Fred Hirst, Secretary of the Gawthorpe Maypole Committee (and not a man to let a good idea go to waste) raised a cautioning hand. “‘Owd on a minute,” said Fred, and there was something in his voice that made them all listen. “‘Aven’t we been looking fer some’at to do on Easter Monday? If we’re gonna ‘ave a race let’s ‘ave it then. Let’s ‘ave a coil race from Barracks t’ Maypole.” (The Barracks being the more common name given by the locals to The Royal Oak Public House). Thus, was born The World Coal Carrying Championships! (www.gawthorpemaypole.org.uk).

The story of the origins of the race are also recounted in a poem, compiled using a Yorkshire dialect. It is written by Fred Hirst, Chair of the Maypole committee:

It began at the “Beehive” a long time ago the argument started as beer began to flow

Reggie Sedgewick, to Louis Hartley did say “I am a much better man than thee any day

At carrying coal, I am surely the best all tha’ wants to do is have a rest.

Amos Clapham was there and he said”, I can beat both of you stood on my head”

Horace Crouch said, “for 10 pounds I will back Reggie to be first with the sack”

Louis Hartley was not to be outdone “that 10 pounds is mine it can easily be won”.

“O’wd on a minute is what I said, “better introduce myself, my name is Fred. There must be something we can do with this, it’s a great opportunity to good to miss.

Let’s have a coal carrying race, on Easter Monday let it take place.

It all started as a bit of fun, but surely the hardest race to run

Proudly after thirty-four years we present a truly great British event. (Hirst, 1988, personal communication)

The WCCC is recorded in the Guinness Book of World Records, with the current male world record being 4 min and 6 s, while the current world record for the women’s race is 4 min and 25 s. The winner of the race gains the title of “King or Queen of the Coil Humpers” (coal carriers). Gawthorpe was the first place to hold a coal-carrying race, and from the outset, the race gained the distinction of bearing the name of the *World Coal Carrying Championships*. There is only one other coal-carrying race—the “Scottish Coal Race”—which is based in Kelty, Central Fife, Scotland. Having provided a brief history of the event, we now discuss our findings.

Discussion of Findings

The WCCC as a Community Event

This section explores how a community event, such as the WCCC, may represent a way in which local people can express and re-create a form of community and identity within their own social context. We were concerned with exploring if participants subscribe to a local identity and if they held any sentiments about Gawthorpe as a community, and if either of these was a factor in their support for the race. To that end, participants were asked about their motivations for attending the event and if the event meant anything to them beyond, for example, being a day out. Motivations for attending the race, for the majority of

those interviewed, were emphatically characterized by an ensemble of themes related to conviviality, enjoyment, and togetherness. Attending the race on an annual basis was part of some participants' leisure calendar, and in some cases, local people tended to return year on year. Attending the event was discussed as an opportunity for consolidating bonds with family and friends (Fletcher, 2022; Greenwood & Fletcher, 2021). This appeared to be confirmed by observational data; participants (competitors and spectators) often stated that they looked out for people they did not see outside the event. An interview with local resident Jenny (40, employed in secretarial work) and Laura (late 30s, clerical worker) were typical:

Interviewer: Who have you come to the race with today?

Jenny: I have come with my little boy and like, my dad and his wife and my sister came up. They live in Mirfield, so they came up because their girls ran the race as well. It's just nice. What else would you do on Easter Monday?

Laura: I have been to the race about 12 times. I usually come with my family and friends. Yeah, the race is a day out with family and friends, supporting local events and individuals' raising money for charity.

For many local residents, the race was anticipated with pleasure, as an opportunity to have fun and support the community. This was described by Harry (70s, local retired miner) and Rebecca (early 30s, local unskilled worker):

Interviewer: What does the race mean to you?

Harry: To me, it's the start of the spring/summer. It's the start of the good weather as well as being holiday time. It's the first holiday of the year; either you go off to the coast, or for myself, I come to the Coal Race.

Rebecca: I think it brings people together because we all sort of talk about it and say who is going to be in it this year and you are looking out for them. When the race comes, you egg them on and I always get really excited with the men especially, because it's so heavy and you can see their legs buckling and you just want to cheer them on and say "keep going you're nearly there" . . . It's brilliant!

The WCCC was frequently cited as an opportunity to bring the community together, while similarly maintaining familial and community togetherness. These qualities chime strongly with Cohen's (1985) conceptualization of community; that of a system of values, norms, and moral codes that provide a sense of identity within a bounded whole to its members. Emily, (late 50s) had lived in Gawthorpe for over 40 years, expressed the importance of the race for maintaining familial and friendship bonds:

You see, coal carrying is a tradition. Because of the get together, and you know, you can go from one year to another and not see some people, but you know they are going to be there and the year after, and so it continues. People head back to the village.

This view was shared by Mary (70, retired clerical worker) who was born and had grown up in the village:

The coal race has expanded. I think it's nice to get people together. People come up who you have not seen for years. I mean, one of the village lads, he's run three races this time, you see his family has been involved in it for years and years. I mean, you always want to be in for coal carrying, you always want to be home for it.

It is clear from these testimonies that the WCCC served to cement a sense of community, and this was often intergenerational, whereby multiple generations of the same family would reunite around the event. The below excerpt from the focus group discussion with the race organizing committee is illustrative. The Chair gave his view of why people get involved in the race:

The race is something anybody can take part in and relate to. On the day, it's got its own band of brothers and band of sisters. Often, the same people come back year after year, whilst we get new people, you know, every year, some people come back year after year. You know, they have an affinity with it and an affinity with the people; seeing the people again and saying, "hello, how are you doing?"

The Chair expresses how the WCCC is important for maintaining social networks and, in some cases, allowing these to be renewed on an annual

basis—a magical recovery of friendship if you like (see J. Clarke, 1976). That people return to the place of the race is also significant in showing how the race is inextricably rooted to that locality and, in so being, residents of Gawthorpe become powerfully connected to the race. Moreover, in further reinforcing Cohen's (1985) belief that community is less about physical place, and more about shared meanings that bind people together, people's affiliation with the race continues, even when they leave Gawthorpe, thereby illustrating the social and cultural importance that the race holds in the minds of the "community," both in and beyond the locality.

To further uncover the importance of the race to the community, participants were asked how they would feel if the race was to stop. In recent years, the race had grappled with financial precarity, and there were genuine concerns that it would not happen. The majority of people used this question to talk about the importance of the race. Lee (40, employed in the pub industry) was a case in point:

I think a lot of people would be sad (if the race did not continue) to be fair, because it's quite a big part of Gawthorpe. I think more of the village would be sad than the people who come from outside the village, cos to them, it's just a one-off event, they would always find something else to do. Whereas if you live in Gawthorpe it's keeping the community together.

Similarly, Linda (45, unskilled worker) had run the women's race four times and had been a spectator on numerous occasions, said:

You see, the race is for the community. People go because it's on our doorstep. It's a good day out and everybody cheers and gets behind the runners. If it were not to continue, well it would leave a big hole in the community. It's a tradition here.

Linda's reference to the way the WCCC allows for traditions to be maintained is significant. The race does link the community to the past and, despite the fact that the mines closed over three decades earlier, there still remains a link to the history of the village and its mining identity, which the race helps to keep alive (J. Clarke, 1976). Equally important was how the WCCC was thought to contribute to community identity. This was illustrated by Alice (55, professional worker) who said:

What we do is part of us and our identity. So, people see it (the race) like that. It's part of people's identity who live here. It would be a loss if the race was not to continue. They would miss it; it's what people identify with.

The race organizers further articulated the prominent role the WCCC plays in keeping community identity alive—both literally and imagined (J. Clarke, 1976; Cohen, 1985)—in the face of social and economic transformation:

We want to keep that community event and keep that community spirit going. You lose that in most villages. It is part of where you live, part of what you grew up with. The coal race is for families that are dispersed now, and they actually come back together as a family. The race becomes the very fabric of the community. It is a landmark in the year when you get together at the coal race, they open their homes up for their family and friends. . . . The coal race is run by the community for the community.

The people who organize the race felt that the race continues to play an important role in maintaining a community spirit in the face of wider changes, suggesting that "You lose that in most villages" (Race committee focus group). Moreover, the race connects people to the local area and has come to represent who people are, since it is "what they grew up with." The race contributes to maintaining a form of shared cultural practice that has become established as a tradition that local people (some of whom now live elsewhere) want to preserve. A parallel can be drawn here with Clarke's notion of the "magical recovery of community." For J. Clarke (1976), "skinhead culture selectively reaffirms certain core values of traditional working-class culture" (p. 99). Moreover, the skinheads are seen as engaged in a "recreation of community," which, beyond the level of social identity they create, is a lost cause, because the community they seek no longer exists. The way of life described variously by participants in this section is arguably less relevant now because the community they refer to no longer exists—or at least, has evolved into something different. The irony is that the community they are attempting to recover becomes evermore irrelevant each time it is re-created.

Our overarching argument, therefore, is that community is a multifaceted and, ultimately,

symbolic construct. And yet, it remains powerful in everyday parlance, both in terms of how people articulate their identities and understand the places and settlements in which they live, and the quality of the relationships therein (Jenkins, 2014). What is incontestable, however, is that, for people involved in this research, the WCCC offers a vital social milieu for the articulation of *their* community and, imagined or not, feels very real in that moment.

The WCCC, Community Pride, and Cultural Reproduction

It was common for participants to refer to the WCCC as a source of pride for the community. Pride in the race was illustrated by the fact that local people were able to stage an event that uniquely captured local heritage, which attracted people from outside the community, including international competitors, and received international media coverage. The media coverage was important for putting Gawthorpe on the map, helping to communicate local traditions with others, and supporting place attachment among local people. Linda, (30, employed in unskilled work), reflected a common view:

Interviewer: How do you feel when you see the race featured in the media?

Linda: Oh, proud. Very proud. Gawthorpe is only a little place, yet we can put on the WCCC . . . yeah, really proud!

These sentiments were shared by Joe (45, self-employed) who had been born and brought up in Gawthorpe:

That's Gawthorpe, that's Gawthorpe's Coal Carrying Championships . . . and that's where I am from. Because it's the World Coal Carrying Championships, it makes you feel proud. The two people who originally did it (started the race) were my dad's friends as well, so I know the race's traditions, and it makes you feel proud. And it reflects the old village life . . . we have still got something different. (original emphasis)

For many participants, the WCCC was something to be proud of in the face of wider changes, notably, the decline in mining. The decline in mining,

irrespective of when it happened, arguably led to a devaluation of local people's social position. As a result, they now find value within their own culture and community. Preserving the WCCC is therefore important to a community that now lacks forms of identification and attachment that were previously available (Price, 2020). As articulated by Joe (45, self-employed), who highlighted the recognition local runners receive:

I run the race because it's tradition here. And I just love the attention. When you come up the hill, because I am a local lad and everybody sees me, hearing them shout, it just gives me a buzz, and afterwards everybody shakes your hand, pats you on the back. It's a good thing; it's competitive, but it's not competitive if you know what I mean? You know it does not matter if you come first or last, you get a cheer 'cos it's local as well.

Communities are often formed through the inculcation of norms and values from the family (Fletcher, 2020, 2021, 2022). Therefore, the family is important in transmitting cultural values and dispositions, and is thus important for cultural reproduction (Shannon, 2022). A key theme that was excavated in the interviews was intergenerational involvement in the race. We spoke to many local people who had generations of family members involved in the race, and this had been typically transmitted to succeeding generations. For some local participants, the race was clearly a family affair, as Linda (40s, unskilled worker) and Nikki (30, self-employed) affirm:

Linda: My hubby ran it first . . . and then later on I thought I'd run it for my 40th. I've done it four times now. My son ran it for the first time this year.

Nikki: I come from a big family and every one of us has run the race. It's like a family tradition. My mum did it 11 times, came last! My sister ran with my mum and our (daughter) and our (son) ran it with my mum, and my brother, he has run with my mum.

Henry (60, skilled worker), who had lived in the community for over 35 years, recalled similarly:

For me the (race) evokes fond memories from my own family, from being a lad coming up here,

when I was 15–16 watching my brother taking part in it. Then, my own family, all being born and growing up around here . . . and then to see my daughter taking part and making such huge difference to the coal race, it's fond memories is that.

Intergenerational involvement was considered important for maintaining the race, as well as for communicating traditions and nostalgia around a community, and way(s) of life that, for a variety of reasons, were in decline. Joe (45, self-employed) expresses his commitment to the race, which he hoped will remain in his family for years to come:

I used to run it with my dad. He's got dementia now, so now I run it with my two daughters. My son is too young to run, but he will when he gets older . . . we will always run the race and keep it going. The kids are happy to run it . . . it's for their grandad.

For many people living in postindustrial towns and cities in northern England, their community identity is an important marker of who they are, because in many cases being from that place is one of the only stable aspects of their lives. Evidence from our research shows that harking back to one's community or regional identity is a common practice of living in a globalized world, as local identities and sureties have become disembedded from their local landscape (Nayak, 2003). Indeed, in spite of social, cultural, political, industrial, and urban changes transforming our communities, we contend that community events continue to have the capacity to generate a sense of rootedness and belonging (J. Clarke, 1976).

The WCCC, Tradition, and Loss

As we have argued up this this point, events are often used to re-create a past way of life (Pantazatos & Silverman, 2019). The overarching theme emerging from these events is that of nostalgia, and invented tradition within the context of wider transformation, change, and loss. In essence, these events come to embody the “symbols” of a certain type of community. This is what Cohen (1985) conceived of in his argument that communities are symbolically constructed. The value of the WCCC, in preserving local traditions against a backdrop of change, was frequently mentioned

in the interviews. For Emily (late 50s, semiskilled work), her understanding of tradition relates to a way of life she would like to see preserved:

To me, the coal race is part of our life here. We have seen it grow. I have been involved with the coal race family . . . I set the children's races going because there was nothing for the children to do on coal race day. I suggested we do something . . . kid's races, and it sort of moved on from there. Now lots of kids run it . . . you see, the coal race is a tradition that I think should really be kept going.

Here, Emily, like others in this research, uses the term “tradition” to refer to a way of life that has been normalized in the village. The WCCC may be linked to the mining industry of Gawthorpe, but it has gone beyond that history and is now part of the folklore of the community. Therefore, the race is a poignant symbol of both community—as place—and community—as values, heritage, and habitus (Wacquant, 2014; Xie et al., 2023). In this excerpt from Richard (35, professional occupation), the idea of tradition is expressed in how things are done and normalized in the community. In discussing the importance of the race, he stated:

I think the race is a nice way for everyone to say “we are still together.” It keeps with tradition, so around these parts it just re-establishes what is already in place in this sort of area.

Richard seems to be suggesting that the race helps to maintain practices already found in the community and, similar to Emily, he is making reference to an accepted—arguably bygone—way of life (J. Clarke, 1976). These links with the past were further exemplified in the continuing of specific practices, such as the use of the pigeon clock to time the race. In the focus group discussion with the race organizing committee, it was argued that the use of the pigeon clock should continue because it served to preserve a link between the race and the community's history and heritage:

We use the pigeon clock to time the race, well, because of tradition . . . that's what they had available to them at the time, that's what was important to them in the village. The racing pigeon fraternity . . . they used what they had, you know . . . coal man, bag of coal, how we going to time it? Pigeon clock. You could not do it better could you?

According to J. Clarke (1976) and Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) traditions are maintained through myths and stories that serve to maintain a collective shared history. The pigeon clock is an important symbol of a strong community. During informal discussions with local people on race days, and visits to the community, and in interviews with participants, the origin of the race—a bet between two local residents—was often cited. The fact that the two people who made the bet never actually ran the race is irrelevant. People do not have to believe the story for it to be passed on to others. The story of the bet is displayed on the wall of the local public house and, moreover, the story is repeated in the yearly race brochure. This serves to show that the WCCC is firmly linked to Gawthorpe communities of the past, as well as reinvigorate that community in the present. This extract from Henry (55 skilled worker), who has lived in Gawthorpe for over 40 years, illustrates the importance of continuity surrounding the race, in helping to sustain community identity:

Literally when we first came up here, you'd turn up, grab the sack off the back of the wagon . . . which still particularly hasn't changed. Some things they continue to do to keep the quiriness. Things like the timings. They have got all this fancy equipment that would be readily available. We are involved in the Wakefield Hospice and we have just done the 10k. All of the runners would have been tagged from start to finish, so they know exactly what time they have done, it's on the computer. But they insist on using the pigeon clock . . . and part of me finds it really amusing . . . and I know why they are doing it. They could easily change it, but then it would have lost its tradition.

While Henry is self-deprecating in his statement, he accepts the idea that preserving traditions is important to the race and the community, while also serving to reinforce continuity with the past.

There was wider acknowledgment too that these shared values and leisure practices, imbued in and by the WCCC may not be shared by people outside the community and may be mocked by outsiders. Fletcher and Dashper (2013) noted that mocking can be a form of class distinction work. They argue that class-orientated ideas continue to assail the production of forms of culture, places, and people, especially when they veer away from current orthodoxies, or when they can be stereotyped as archaic,

local, of lower class, or excessive. This is often expressed through mockery. Grace (40, unskilled worker) expresses how people outside the community may view the race:

I can't see anybody from Leeds making a day of it. I don't think they would get it, unless they were going to enter it . . . I think they would think, "weirdos running about wi coal on their back." . . . It's a quirky event, one of a kind, its one of those, like rolling cheese down a hill. . . . I mean why would you?

Against this backdrop of celebrating tradition was the acknowledgment that a community that existed when the race was first established had long been lost. Therefore, while the WCCC was a vital setting for cultural reproduction, it was also a symbol loss, and is an outward expression of a communal longing for times past (Walker, 2021). Crucial to helping our understanding of this phenomena is in learning to look beneath the habits and practices that lie at the heart of these traditions, to see the lived realities of ordinary people. Certainly, many community events are predicated upon invented traditions, and we must accept them as socially constructed. But they are also grounded in the ways people live their lives. In the face of social, economic, and urban change, mining communities, like Gawthorpe, are increasingly reliant on their myths and invented traditions to provide any semblance of stability and coherence in the present.

Conclusion

This article has shown how the WCCC is a powerful conduit for the expression of identity, community and place attachment, by maintaining and preserving cultural practices, rooted in a former mining community. The idea that community events allow for the expression of collective meanings has been discussed in the literature, yet insufficient attention has been paid to how collective meanings evolve, how shared values and identities may be formed or shaped and, perhaps most importantly, how these values and identities are preserved during period of change, transformation, and loss (Emery, 2020; Walker, 2021). This article has argued that community events are socially and culturally significant to the people who engage in

them, as they provide a mechanism through which forms of community and identity can be expressed, maintained and recreated. By reconstructing and remobilising shared pasts in the present, the WCCC permits community members to create an affective sense of community in the contemporary context, in spite of the destabilising loss of other aspects of their industrial lives. This is an important contribution to events research.

Local identities were important to those who contributed to the research. Most of the participants attached localism to forms of sociability, mutuality, and recognition, which underpinned feelings of belonging. The WCCC allowed these to be articulated, and the race was important, both to maintaining and activating a sense of community. For the majority of participants, the race continues to be imbued with shared cultural values and cultural dispositions about community, and participating in the WCCC is a way in which ideas of the past and community are not only expressed but re-created. As Coser (1992) stated: “through participation in commemorative meetings with group members of the current generation we can recreate through imaginatively reenacting a past that would otherwise slowly disappear with the haze of time” (cited in Walker, 2021, p. 2).

The WCCC, therefore, allows the people of Gawthorpe to celebrate a version of community previously untouched by social change. For the participants, the race was closely tied up with their identity and to lose the event would have a deleterious effect on local peoples’ sense of community and identity. In this context, the WCCC provides the means to recreate community and, moreover, represents a way in which people create meaning within their own social context. The WCCC is clearly linked to the history and folklore of this former mining community. As Wacquant (2014) reminded us, while the habitus is individually owned, it is a collective experience. Therefore, how people respond to the event and the cultural values and practices that people espouse in their views of the race is influenced by a series of locally embedded, historical practices and invented traditions (Shannon, 2022; Wise & Harris, 2020).

The WCCC draws upon the history of folklore of this northern, former working class mining community. As such, how people respond to the event, and the cultural values and practices

that people espoused in their views of the race are influenced by a locally embedded working class habitus. Indeed, the meanings that are attached to events may be created through shared practices and understandings of a certain place and individuals can form attachments to places that are important to their sense of belonging. As the WCCC is synonymous with Gawthorpe, the event plays an important role in forming both images of, and attachment to, place. These reconstructions of community are not, however, simply about longing for an imagined past, but instead “illustrate ideas of continuity, and what community is, as much as a performance of what it was” (Walker, 2021, p. 3). This is not a large-scale event that attracts a tremendous number of tourists, nor is it supported by local authorities or tourist organizations. However, the event is important to the people of this community, and despite its scale and reach, it represents a significant mechanism through which community, class and place identity are expressed and reproduced.



Through an innovative case study, this article offers significant originality through advancing our understanding of the role of community events in fostering and maintaining place attachment and community identity during times of significant social change. There are, however, a number of ways we would suggest to develop this research further. The WCCC is held in an essentially white working class community. While the community of Gawthorpe is predominantly white, surrounding communities are not. The absence of ethnically diverse groups, both as spectators and competitors, is therefore of interest. In this context, it would be relevant to investigate the extent to which symbolic boundaries and perceptions about communities operate to exclude certain groups. Moreover, while the WCCC includes a race for men, women, and also children, currently there is no specific event for disabled people. Further research on the possibility of developing an additional race is therefore warranted. Finally, although the WCCC was the first event of this type to be held, the event has formed the basis of another coal race, namely the Scottish Coal Race. A comparative analysis of the Scottish Coal Race would allow for an exploration of whether regional variations in community identity and place attachment are articulated through community events.

Notes

¹Space does not allow for a critique of what we conceive of as “local” in this article. Rather than theorize this, we provide an example from our data. The focus group revealed that people who no longer live in Gawthorpe return for the race. They would, more often than not, describe themselves as “local.” In contrast, people who lived in Gawthorpe, but who were not born in the village, would not self-ascribe as local. Therefore, for participants in this research, being “local” was symbolic of birthright and heritage, rather than any sense of fixed belonging.

²The Maypole procession is a community event held in Gawthorpe the week after the WCCC. This event has a longer history than the WCCC and there is evidence of a Maypole in the center of Gawthorpe since 1810. The Maypole event involves a procession through the streets of Gawthorpe, including maypole dancers (called plaiters), music and entertainment. Many local businesses, charities, the church, and the local school prepare and enter “floats” for the procession. The organizing committee for the Maypole and the WCCC contains many of the same people and the appointed Chair of the committee is the Chair of both the Maypole event and the WCCC.

ORCID

Thomas Fletcher:  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4618-5480>
Rhodri Thomas:  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2148-4265>

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