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Laurendeau, Jason

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“Gendered Risk Regimes”: A Theoretical Consideration of Edgework and Gender

Jason Laurendeau
University of Lethbridge

Recently, a number of researchers have drawn on Lyng’s (1990) theorization of the concept of edgework in explorations of voluntary risk activities in late modernity. Unfortunately, a theoretical consideration of how these edgework activities are gendered is underdeveloped in the edgework literature. In this article I outline the theories that have dominated edgework literature, critique the general oversight of a nuanced theory of gender in edgework, and highlight a sample of evidence showing that participation in “risk sports” (as one example of edgework) is a gendered experience. I also outline the concept of a “gendered risk regime” as a tool for exploring risk and gender as ongoing and intersecting constructions.

Récemment, plusieurs chercheurs ont considéré le concept de « pratique limite » de Lyng (1990) dans leur exploration des activités volontairement risquées dans la modernité. Cependant, la considération de la façon dont ces pratiques sont infléchies par le genre est malheureusement restée sous-développée dans les écrits sur les pratiques limite. Dans le présent article, je décris les théories qui ont dominé les écrits sur les pratiques limite, je critique l’omission générale d’une théorie nuancée au sujet du genre et je présente un exemple d’évidence à l’effet que la pratique limite (ici, la participation dans un sport à risque) est une expérience infléchie par le genre. Je présente également le concept de « régime de risque infléchi par le genre » comme outil d’exploration du risque et du genre en tant que constructions entrecroisées.

In a seminal article on voluntary risk taking, Stephen Lyng (1990) develops the notion of edgework as an important conceptual framework to examine risk. Borrowing the term from gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson, Lyng employs it to theorize that practitioners engage in risk activities in large part because of the social–psychological benefits they receive as they explore the boundary between chaos and order in their chosen form of edgework. The edgework concept has had an undeniable influence on the study of voluntary risk. Researchers have used it in studies of such activities as rescue organization participation (Lois, 2001, 2005), unconventional academic practices (Hamm, 2005; Lyng, 1998), illegal activities
Laurendeau (Lyng, 1993, 2005), risk sport participation (Laurendeau, 2006; Laurendeau and Gibbs Van Brunschot, 2006; Miller and Frey, 1996), and many others.

What has remained underdeveloped in the edgework literature, unfortunately, is a theoretical elaboration to address the observation that participation in these activities is gendered. In this paper, I attempt to address this shortcoming by taking on three central tasks. First, I outline the theories that have dominated edgework literature and critique the general oversight of a nuanced theory of gender. Second, I highlight a sample of evidence that risk sport (one example of edgework) is gendered. Third, I draw on Connell’s (2002) notion of “gender regimes,” as well as Donnelly’s (2004) consideration of the “culture of risk” to sketch a theoretical framework for making explicit connections between risk and gender. In doing so, I suggest that risk and gender intersect to shape the ways both women and men “crowd the edge” (Lyng, 1990).

Edgework

The notion of edgework is, first and foremost, a way of conceptualizing certain kinds of voluntary risk activities. For Lyng (1990), some risk activities (e.g., risk sports, some types of crime) are characterized by a central preoccupation with hazard. It is not simply that danger is associated with the activity, but that practitioners have a particular interest in courting danger while still maintaining control over themselves, their equipment, their surroundings, and/or their sanity (see Laurendeau, 2006, for a recent elaboration). The “edge,” then, is that point at which risk takers are in peril of losing control. “Crowding the edge” (Lyng, 1990) involves taking progressively greater risks in the activity, such as jumping from lower or more technical objects in BASE jumping (see Martha & Griffet, 2006). Meanwhile, falling off the edge involves taking the activity beyond one’s ability to handle it (e.g., technically, physiologically, emotionally), and, as a result, failing to maintain control (for example, when a skydiver “goes in” trying to execute a “hook turn”—see Laurendeau). Researchers working with the notion of edgework often refer to these pursuits as edgework activities, and to practitioners as “edgeworkers” (e.g., Lois, 2001).

Initially, Lyng (1990) conceptualized edgework as an escape from the institutional constraints of modernity. He argued that in late modernity, individuals engage in risk activities to access their true selves in ways not open to them through the increasingly alienating avenue of paid labor (Lyng, 1990). More recently, Lyng has suggested that edgework might also be understood as part of the project of developing the skills and capacities needed to better function in the increasingly specialized and risk-conscious institutional environment of the postindustrial society (Lyng, 2005). He posits that the idea of being simultaneously “pushed and pulled to edgework practices by opposing institutional imperatives” might reflect “complexities in the contemporary experience of risk that we are just beginning to appreciate” (Lyng, 2005, p. 10).

The concept of edgework has proven influential in studies of voluntary risk-taking activities. Moreover, as more sociologists of sport consider risk sport, it might prove useful to employ the edgework concept (at least certain dimensions thereof). The edgework literature seems to hold some promise for explorations of
how participants in risk sports manage their emotions (see Lois, 2001, 2005), interpret their sporting activities as within their control (Laurendeau, 2006), and employ formal and informal mechanisms of social control as they “police the edge” (Laurendeau & Gibbs Van Brunschot, 2006), as well as for determining the different dimensions that might make particular activities examples of edgework (Milovanovic, 2005). This is not to suggest that all lifestyle sports (Wheaton, 2004) are necessarily forms of edgework. Many are, though, and it might prove useful to consider these various activities through a lens that might allow us to shed new light on issues of interest to sport sociologists.

Despite the potential outlined above, Lyng (2005) acknowledges that one of “the continuing critical responses to edgework research is that it has yielded conceptual models rooted in the unique experience of White, middle-class, adult males, whose edgework activities have been studied most extensively” (p. 11). Miller (1991) first articulated this critique after the publication of Lyng’s (1990) initial edgework article. In the years since, other researchers have raised similar criticisms of the edgework model, particularly in the field of criminology (e.g., Chan and Rigakos, 2002; Walklate, 1997). In a related criticism from the field of sport sociology, Donnelly (2004) argues that Lyng’s edgework model is too strongly rooted in one’s participation in the labor economy and overlooks the extent to which the social relations in a particular setting might affect one’s choice to engage in voluntary risk activities. These criticisms point to the need to consider more carefully the impacts of class and gender on the edgework experience.

There have been significant attempts at addressing the criticisms outlined above. For example, Jennifer Lois (2005) explores the impact of gender in the ways men and women manage intense emotions at different stages of the edgework experience in a volunteer rescue organization (see also Lois, 2001). She maintains that rescue workers engage not only in physical edgework as they engage in technically demanding rescues but also in emotional edgework as they manage the intense emotions associated with such visceral work. Further, she posits that these processes of emotional edgework are gender specific, with men and women in the organization drawing on different skills and techniques at each stage of the edgework experience (Lois, 2005).

Lois (2005) not only teases out nuances of different stages of the edgework experience but also suggests that men and women perceive edgework differently. This insight, however, only begins to address the general neglect of gender in writing about edgework. The acknowledgment that edgework might be experienced differently by men and women, young and old, gay and straight, etc., is a necessary step, but one that begs for further investigation. It is not simply that men and women might engage in different kinds of edgework and do so in different ways. Beyond this, men and women crowd the edge, or chose not to do so, within structures of gender relations (Walby and Doyle, 2007). Furthermore, they engage in edgework practices as part of the process of “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Moreover, the binary implicit in the language of women/men itself essentializes gender and glosses over the idea that there are multiple possible enactments of masculinities and femininities, a point I address in the following section. An acknowledgment that those privileged, as well as those “othered,” by various systems of alterity (Marshall, 2000) bring these institutional positions
with them to the edge (and construct, shore up, or challenge dominant relations while there), would go some way toward answering these criticisms.

**Gender, Sport, and Risk**

Many sport sociologists have made gender central in their analyses of sport, examining the ways gender is structured into different sporting contexts and institutions, and the impacts this has on the ways participants and observers negotiate masculinities and femininities in and through their relationship to sport (e.g., Anderson, 1999; Beal, 1996; Bricknell, 1999; Messner, Duncan, & Jensen, 1993; Price & Parker, 2003; Thorpe, 2005). Several of these researchers have specifically explored the nexus of sport, risk, and gender (e.g., Beal & Wilson, 2004; Kay & Laberge, 2004; Palmer, 2004; Robinson, 2004; Wheaton, 2000; Young, 1993). They suggest that the acceptance (even embracement) of risk is an integral part of the versions of masculinity that occupy hegemonic positions in sport. The willingness to place one’s body “in harm’s way” is one of the defining characteristics of many sports in one way or another and is one of the central ways in which sport acts as a proving ground for masculinity (Pringle, 2001; Young). White and Young (1999), for example, suggest that masculinity intersects with particular ways of engaging in sport, ways that embrace risk and adventure, downplay health concerns, and often result in serious physical injury. As Robinson suggests in the case of rock climbing, the relationship between various masculinities and the willingness to risk one’s body and/or the possibility of watching someone die needs further investigation.

Observers express considerable ambivalence about women who assume the kinds of risks described above (e.g., Theberge, 1997). Although these women might be esteemed for their bravery in some circles, they are sometimes severely criticized for their selfishness (Palmer, 2004). Palmer illustrates this ambivalence as she describes the experiences of two women who were elite mountaineers. Both became the subject of intense public scrutiny for their decisions to “shirk” their family roles to pursue this leisure activity. Indeed, when Alison Hargreaves was killed in 1995, we saw the morality of risk taking go into overdrive.

As a mother of two, Hargreaves had effectively abandoned her children by taking such extraordinary risks. The particular cultural definitions and limitations imposed on Hargreaves ensured she would never dramatically, if fatally, distinguish herself from the crowd as a climber, but rather as an errant, unthinking mother. (Palmer, p. 66)

Donnelly (2004) explains that this vilification of Hargreaves was particularly pronounced in the tabloid press and women’s magazines. The following year, however, when Rob Hall died on Mount Everest leaving behind a pregnant wife, at no point did the media criticize him for “abandoning” his family responsibilities (Donnelly). Taken together, these observations point to the centrality of risk taking in constructions of masculinity (see Young, 1993) and the cultural importance of motherhood in constructions of femininity (see Choi, Henshaw, Baker, & Tree, 2005).
As Kay and Laberge (2004) point out in the case of adventure racing (AR), risk taking is commonly understood as a signifier of toughness and is generally associated with a desirable practice of masculinity. Risk management, on the other hand, is generally attributed to women as a “natural” skill (Kay & Laberge). These researchers argue that the discourse around AR privileges risk management as central to a team’s success in the sport, seeming to present a challenge to masculine hegemony in AR. Through the practice of the sport, however, women are constructed as “mandatory equipment” on coed teams, and are often framed as the weak link, a process that shores up rather than challenges masculine domination (Kay & Laberge). ¹ Similarly, Wheaton (2000) describes how, in the windsurfing scene, not only are there important status differentials between men and women but also between men who are more willing to “go for it” (take risks) and others who are not. These examples provide clear evidence of how risk and gender intersect, as well as some of the implications that this can have for systems of stratification. This intersection of risk and gender, which has been largely neglected in the edgework literature, needs to become a much more explicit focus of researchers’ attention.

**Gendered Risk Regimes**

In this final section, I draw together Connell’s (2002) work on gender and Donnelly’s (2004) discussion of risk culture to offer a provisional model for how gender and risk intersect as participants in voluntary risk activities crowd the edge. I suggest that theories developed about edgework to date have paid insufficient attention to the notion that one’s choice of whether and how to engage in edgework (and to continue doing so) is influenced by the culture of particular risk activities. To tease out this argument, I sketch a theoretical framework for making explicit connections between risk and gender and for exploring how the practices in which participants engage and the discourses upon which they draw become part of broader patterns of gender stratification.

**Gender Regimes and Hegemonic Masculinity**

In a discussion of what he calls “gender regimes,” Connell (2002) maintains that social institutions have “regular set[s] of arrangements about gender” including such things as who is recruited to play particular roles, “what kinds of social divisions [are] recognized, . . . how emotional relations [are] conducted, . . . and how these institutions [are] related to others” (p. 53). Gender regimes form the “structure of relations” within which individuals make choices about how to do gender. These structures then shape and constrain individual practices, defining the “possibilities and consequences” of action (Connell, 2002, p. 55). Gender regimes, Connell points out, are embedded in the gender order of society, which is a wider pattern of enduring gender relations. They are not, however, simply reflective of the gender order of which they are a part; they “usually correspond to the overall gender order, but may depart from it. This is important for change. Some institutions change quickly, others lag” (Connell, 2002, p. 54). Change comes about
through practices that challenge (or at least fail to perfectly reproduce) dominant structures (Connell, 2002).

Of paramount concern for many researchers exploring gender as an ongoing accomplishment is how these enactments at the micro level—shaped and constrained as they are by the gender regimes in which they take place—are connected to enactments and institutionalized forms of power and privilege at broader levels. To tease out this dimension of Connell’s ideas about gender, I will briefly consider recent treatments of his concept of hegemonic masculinity.

In light of some of the criticisms others have raised with respect to the idea of hegemonic masculinity (e.g., Demetriou, 2001; Hearn, 2004; Martin, 1998), Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) acknowledge that there are two dimensions of the concept of hegemonic masculinity that “have not stood up to criticism and should be discarded” (p. 846). The first, they outline, is an overly simple conception of the social relations surrounding hegemonic masculinity. In early conceptualizations of hegemonic masculinity, masculinities and femininities were too simplistically located within a “single pattern of power, the ‘global dominance’ of men over women” (Connell & Messerschmidt, p. 846). This glosses over the complexities of relations between competing masculinities, as well as the ways some women may appropriate dimensions of dominant masculinities (configurations of gender patterns) as they construct their own gender projects. The second dimension that Connell and Messerschmidt suggest scholars should set aside is the tendency to rely on “trait terminology” in descriptions of the “actual content of different configurations of masculinity” (p. 847). The essentialist conceptualization of masculinity implicit in this terminology leads to understandings of hegemonic masculinity as a fixed character type, an approach clearly inconsistent with other elements of the conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt).

Having acknowledged that certain elements of the hegemonic masculinity concept need rethinking, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) point out that the “fundamental feature” of the concept “remains the combination of the plurality of masculinities and the hierarchy of masculinities” (p. 846). Taken together with the notion that masculinity does not represent a certain type of man, but “a way that men position themselves through discursive practices” (Connell & Messerschmidt, p. 841), this feature highlights the now well-supported ideas that men draw on discursive practices as they engage in their “gender projects” (Connell, 1999), that different men do so in different ways, and that these practices have real material implications in terms of men’s power (as a group) over women and the power of some men over others.

Finally, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) consider those dimensions of the concept of hegemonic masculinity in need of reformulation. One dimension particularly germane to the current study is what these authors call the “dynamics of masculinities.” In this discussion, Connell and Messerschmidt address the criticism that these multiple masculinities collapse into a static typology:

We must now explicitly recognize the layering, the potential internal contradiction, within all practices that construct masculinities. Such practices cannot be read simply as expressing a unitary masculinity. They may, for instance, represent compromise formations between contradictory desires or
emotions, or the results of uncertain calculations about the costs and benefits of different gender strategies. (p. 852)

Hegemonic masculinity need not, as Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) point out, be the most statistically common pattern to be culturally ascendant. In addition, it is not a unitary brand of masculinity that comes as a package. Rather, men pick up (or do not pick up, as the case may be) various elements of hegemonic masculinity in their constructions of their own gender projects. Connell and Messerschmidt suggest that masculinities are dynamic in the sense that they are projects that “are constructed, unfold and change through time” (p. 852). They exist on trajectories, which is one reason why life-history methods have figured prominently in recent masculinities research (e.g., Connell & Wood, 2005; Poynting & Donaldson, 2005). Examinations of these trajectories can serve as entry points into considerations of the kinds of tensions and ambiguities outlined above.

**Risk Culture and Risk Regimes**

Donnelly (2004) takes up the suggestion that there is what he terms a “risk culture” in sport. He considers various ways researchers have tried to explain not only why sport participants engage in risk-taking behavior, but also why some categories of people seem to do so to a much greater extent than do others. Donnelly raises a number of critical points about the sport–risk nexus relevant to the current discussion. First, he suggests that the relationship between sport and risk is a complex one characterized by ambivalence and contradiction. He argues that, on one hand, many (even most) sports reward risk-taking behavior, whereas, on the other, there is a discernable level of discomfort with risk taking in sport: “[sport] continues to celebrate risk while it is also troubled by it!” (Donnelly, p. 54). This ambivalence, Donnelly posits, highlights the extent to which risk is a socially constructed phenomenon. What people consider risky, and whether they are “troubled by it,” depends to a great extent on the social context in which the risk-taking behavior takes place (Donnelly). Douglas (1992), for example, suggests that the groups in which individuals are embedded go some way toward determining the risk logics upon which they draw. Similarly, Lupton (1999) argues that alternative rationalities, often portrayed by experts as inaccurate or irrational, make sense in the context of an individual’s life situation, including the cultural frameworks and meanings that shape subjectivity and social relations, and the institutions and social structures within which individuals are placed. (p. 111)

Second, Donnelly (2004) argues that, in one way or another, most efforts at explaining risk-taking behavior in sporting contexts have approached the problem in individualistic ways. Even in what Donnelly acknowledges as the most sociological approach to the question (what he terms “response theories”), researchers suggest that engaging in voluntary risk activities is essentially “a reaction, a compensation, a transcendence. Implicit in this view is the value-laden assumption that no one would take a voluntary risk if he or she were not driven to it by circumstances” (Donnelly, p. 43). Lyng’s (1990) notion of edgework is a primary target for Donnelly’s critique. Although recent work in this field (e.g., Lois, 2001; Lyng, 2005) goes some way toward addressing the “response” criticism, it still does not
explicitly acknowledge that edgeworkers might engage in their practices in particular ways (and make sense of these practices) as members of particular communities. Nor does it provide a satisfactory answer to the question of why young men routinely engage in certain kinds of edgework to a much greater extent than do women or older men.

In contrast to the kinds of explanations he critiques, Donnelly (2004) offers a “critical social constructionist perspective,” suggesting that individuals may engage in risk-taking behaviors as part of a process of exploring their “selves”—not as a response to their relationship to the labor market, but in a search for identity more generally. They might find, he argues, that the kinds of material and emotional rewards to be found in particular risk-culture formations are worth the investment in and of themselves. These social formations value “character, a shared identity, and comradeship” (Donnelly, p. 47). The routes to achieving these rewards, he maintains, might be appealing for participants, especially those who stumble on these formations in a period of relative youth, when the search for social identity tends to be particularly pronounced.

Donnelly (2004) argues that scholars must be circumspect in employing the phrase risk culture. This is so both because it is possible to engage in most sports “in relative safety” (Donnelly, p. 33) and because, even in sports with high rates of injuries (even fatalities), not all participants engage in similarly risky behaviors (see Laurendeau, 2006, and Laurendeau & Gibbs Van Brunschot, 2006, for discussions of this phenomenon in skydiving). Following from Donnelly’s point about being cautious with the suggestion that there is a culture of risk in sport broadly, I employ the term “risk regime” to capture this same idea at the level of communities coalescing around particular risk activities. Donnelly’s notion of risk cultures conceptualizes meanings and constructions of risk in operation broadly (somewhat analogous to Connell’s, 2002, “gender order”). In contrast, I intend the notion of a risk regime to capture the arrangements of risk in operation at the community or subcultural level. The sense in which I propose to use this term allows for figurations characterized by reckless practices, as well as those with a strong emphasis on managing risk.2 This formulation also acknowledges that practitioners in those activities, though they are embedded in these risk regimes, still make their own choices about the kinds of sporting practices in which to engage. These choices are shaped and constrained by dominant understandings of risk, but that does not change the fact that some practitioners crowd the edge to a greater extent than do others (Laurendeau; Lyng, 1990).

**Gendered Risk Regimes**

Here, I draw together the idea of risk regimes with Connell’s (2002) concept of gender regimes. These notions conceptualize risk and gender, respectively, as phenomena that are actively constructed by individuals, as well as by communities, subcultures, and institutions (and the interstitial spaces in between these levels). I suggest that not only are risk and gender active constructions, but that these constructions intersect and are mutually constituting in so-called risk sports. That is, the gender regimes of particular sporting cultures have implications for the risk regimes of those same cultures. In addition, practitioners in these activities engage simultaneously in projects of doing risk and doing gender, projects that, I argue,
are “always already” (Butler, 1986) interwoven. They are intimately connected in what I call gendered risk regimes. That is to suggest that there are dominant understandings and practices that shape the gendered ways practitioners “do risk,” and the particular ways they do gender from within a risk regime. In his consideration of “violence, risk and liability” in the “male sports culture,” Young (1993) illustrates this point rather well. He draws links between vocational and sport settings, exploring cultures of “masculinism” (Young, p. 379) in which assumptions of risk and enactments of violence are not only commonplace, but, in fact, make sense. Considering the military specifically, Young points out that soldiers are “injured, maimed, or sometimes killed, and go on to receive commendations . . . for their dedication and sacrifice” (p. 380). This, Young points out, not only rewards individuals for these acts of “bravery” and “heroism” but also embeds particular meanings of risk and violence as “manly” in the dominant ideology in operation in this setting.

This is not to argue that the codes in operation determine how individuals construct risk and gender. Rather, these codes form the context within which people engage in their own gender and risk projects, rewarding certain enactments and sanctioning others. Even so, actors then make individual (sometimes contradictory) choices about the practices and discourses they choose to pick up. More explicitly, foregrounding these choices around gender and risk, how they intersect with one another, and the context within which actors make them is vital as scholars consider the contemporary proliferation of risk sports. One advantage to this focus is that it allows us not only to explore and theorize how participants in risk sport do gender but also to “put the spotlight squarely on the social processes that underlie resistance against conventional gender relations and on how successful change in the power dynamics and inequities between men and women can be accomplished” (Deutsch, 2007, p. 107; in the realm of sport, see Laurendeau & Sharara, 2008; Thorpe, 2005).

To flesh out the argument outlined above, I consider one central dimension of Donnelly’s (2004) discussion of the risk culture and draw on Connell’s (2002) work to illustrate the idea that risk and gender are interwoven. As I consider the issues of risk and responsibility, I draw on the importance Connell (2002) places on interaction, emotional relations, and social divisions in gender regimes. All of this is to suggest a movement beyond the idea that women and men do edgework differently and toward the notion that whether and how participants engage in edgework is itself part of the process of constructing particular masculinities and femininities.

Risk and Responsibility

Donnelly (2004) posits that the issue of risk and responsibility is one “in need of resolution,” suggesting that these concepts “form an interesting counterpoint” (p. 48). He points out that, on the one hand, risk-takers and risk recreators often claim that they are responsible for and to themselves alone. On the other hand is the notion that “‘no man is an island’—we are responsible for each other, and when we are injured or killed it affects others in various ways” (Donnelly, p. 49). He outlines some of the many difficult social and legal questions that this raises, including who is responsible for rescuing the risk takers who end up in difficulty,
for caring for those who end up with debilitating injuries, or for supporting surviving family members of those who die in their chosen pursuits (Donnelly).

As Donnelly (2004) points out, the issue of risk and responsibility is one that clearly has a gendered dimension to it. The very meaning of responsibility is profoundly gendered, as Donnelly illustrates with the different media responses to the mountaineering deaths of Alison Hargreaves and Rob Hall described previously. As press outlets choose how to respond to particular moments in the risk culture, they can reproduce, shore up, or challenge the configuration of that culture. Moreover, it highlights that these responses are themselves gendered. In the process of engaging with particular risk regimes (embedded as they are in the risk culture), participants (and observers) are also (re)shaping particular gender regimes. The kinds of media responses outlined above, for example, entrench particular ideas of masculinity and femininity, ideas that have important implications not only for how gender is enacted in these subcultural settings (though this is important) but also for systems of stratification more broadly. It does not seem much of a stretch, for example, to argue that constructions of motherhood as central to femininity (and of women as primarily responsible for mothering) become part of the broad matrix of understandings of gender (Connell’s gender order) within which women’s work is devalued (Duffy, 2007). In the meantime, women in the paid labor force continue to earn substantially less than men on average (Mandel & Semyonov, 2006), run up against a “glass ceiling” (Masser & Abrams, 2004), or put in a “second shift” of housework, performing many more hours of domestic labor than men even when they work as many hours outside the home (Hochschild and Machung, 1989).

An additional dimension of the issue of risk and responsibility is participants’ responsibilities for and to each other. The extent to which participants look out for each other in these activities, and the ways in which they do so, speaks to issues of emotional relations and role recruitment. As Thorpe (2005) describes in the case of snowboarding, for example, many top women boarders exhibit a good deal of camaraderie with one another, pushing each other to improve but doing so in a positive environment. Laurendeau and Sharara (2008) discuss similar issues in skydiving, where some women are uncomfortable that men often formally and informally act as coaches and mentors in the sport. In a variety of ways, some women are pursuing strategies in which women perform such roles as load organizing and coaching for other women (Laurendeau & Sharara). These examples speak to ideas of who is recruited to play particular roles in the communities surrounding these activities and the implications of the resulting emotional relations for gender construction. This is an avenue of research ripe for deeper analysis.

As participants decide whether and how to engage in voluntary risk activities (and the social relations in operation), they implicitly or explicitly address the question of responsibility. How they answer this question is also part of the kind of masculinity or femininity that they construct, a construction shaped or constrained by understandings of both risk and gender that are in operation at the community or subcultural level, as well as more broadly. For example, women who understand their responsibilities as mothers to be more important than their own interest in these risk activities and curtail their involvement as a result are, at one and the same time, doing a particular kind of femininity and constructing risk in a particular (gendered) way.
Similarly, men who “look death in the eye” construct a particular version of masculinity, one that is culturally ascendant, in which men are in control of their emotions (Connell, 2005). This is not to suggest that all (or even most) men have total control over their emotions or that this is at all desirable. Rather, it is to suggest that this is constructed as desirable when men are lauded for “taking one for the team,” or for engaging in practices that they know to be potential deadly despite (or, in some cases, because of) this knowledge. The messages men receive about enacting masculinity and claiming power, and what they do with those messages, have important implications for relationships (physical and emotional) between men and women, and also among men. Bairner (1999), for example, contends that often when men engage in violence it is not because they feel powerful, but precisely because they do not feel powerful—he conceptualizes violent action as an attempt to gain that feeling of power rather than an outcome of that feeling. Scholars must be cognizant, he suggests, that even though men as a group enjoy a good deal of power, this does not necessarily mean that individual men, even those who belong to dominant groups—heterosexual, White, middle-class, and able-bodied, for instance—feel powerful. This again points to the idea highlighted above that men’s gender projects are often rife with tensions and contradictions.

How (or whether) participants choose to crowd the edge is fundamentally connected to how one takes responsibility for one’s own participation in these activities, and it also has important implications for social divisions. As Thorpe (2005) outlines, in the case of snowboarding, women are increasingly engaging in a more aggressive style of boarding and earning “credibility” as a result. She suggests that there is evidence that “aggression, confidence, and the ability to take risks are traits that gain respect within the culture, regardless of gender” (Thorpe, p. 81). This is not to suggest that no social divisions are recognized here. As Thorpe points out, women boarders are still marginalized in the high-risk and high-reward “big-air” contests. Men organizing these activities (having been recruited to play a particular role) sometimes exclude women on the grounds of safety, illustrating a different kind of (paternalistic) responsibility in action. Laurendeau and Sharara (2008) shed similar light on social divisions in skydiving. One of the main areas of risk in the sport, they argue, is aggressive canopy flying. Because the vast majority of the most aggressive canopy pilots are men, it is not unheard of for someone to use the phrase “fly like a girl,” which clearly (re)produces social divisions in the sport and more broadly. Hargreaves (1997) describes a very different kind of edgework in a consideration of women boxers. She notes that these women “share the belief that facing danger and overcoming fear gives them an unbelievable buzz—they enjoy the physicality of fighting, the excitement, the roughness, and the risk” (Hargreaves, p. 42). At the same time, Hargreaves points out, many women boxers are concerned that these gendered performances also put them at risk for being labeled “butch” or “unfeminine.”

Following from the arguments outlined above, I offer here that risk and responsibility are about two questions: (a) responsibility to whom, and (b) responsibility for whom. Furthermore, how edgeworkers answer these questions is both intimately tied to their gender projects and shaped by the broader gender order. In this sense, as Robertson (2006) argues, risk “is not about probability, the chance of an event happening, but is integrated, woven, into the gendered fabric
of society’s expectations” (p. 181). Although Robertson’s focus is on narratives and practices of health promotion, he offers some insights relevant to the present discussion. He highlights that individuals can draw on numerous arrangements of gendered practices as they construct their gender projects. Moreover, he points out that as his subjects’ life circumstances changed, they drew on different narratives “to construct (or resist) hegemonic forms of masculinity” (Robertson, p. 185).

The previous point might shed some light on an apparent contradiction in the narratives of some men involved in risk sports. Donnelly (2004) suggests that many men involved in these activities tend to consider themselves responsible to and for no one but themselves (in terms of their risk-activity participation, that is). This stands in apparent contrast to one of the dominant narratives of hegemonic masculinity—that of being the “provider,” of being responsible for others (Heath, 2003). Robertson (2006) asserts that his older interviewees seemed to take their own health more seriously as they settled into stable relationships and, particularly, as they became fathers. Robertson suggests that this might be an indication of the relevance of life course to understanding the relationship between gender and health:

“What constitutes a hegemonic masculine ideal may alter through the life-course, and the expectation to demonstrate ‘edgework,’ a hegemonic ideal for younger or single men, shifts towards an ideal of ‘controlling excess’ when the responsibility of a stable relationship, and particularly fatherhood, are entered into.” (Robertson, p. 183)

Robertson maintains that the ways that his interviewees “do” health become ways of doing gender. I offer here that the same process is at play in voluntary risk activities in the narratives both men and women employ, as well as the practices in which they engage. That is, the ways skydivers, freeclimbers, mountaineers, or BASE jumpers, for example, “do” risk are also—and simultaneously, and always already—ways that they negotiate gender. This also raises the point that the ways both women and men do gender and risk intersect with other characteristics (in this case age).

The pressures that women face in the context of their edgework experiences reflect the pressures that are also brought to bear on women outside of sport participation. Policing of (and self-policing by) women is deeply rooted in ideas of femininity and motherhood, ideas that pervade other institutions as well. As seen in the press coverage of Alison Hargreaves’ death, observers place a great deal of emphasis on the issues of liability and negligence when women participate in voluntary risk activities. Unlike their male counterparts, women edgeworkers are more likely to be seen as breaching a duty of care by participating in edgework activities (Palmer, 2004). Women’s role as caregivers suggests that they should not be placing themselves in situations that could potentially affect their ability to provide the care that is stereotypically associated with women. Both these expectations, and women’s consciousness of them, become part of the process of choosing whether and how to engage in edgework practices. This is not to suggest that all women are affected by these expectations or that no men take these responsibilities seriously. The point, however, is that both men and women do gender in the ways they answer the question
of responsibility; choosing whether to participate in “risk” sport, the kinds of practices to engage in while doing so, and so forth are constitutive of both their gender projects and their constructions of risk.

**Concluding Remarks**

The work being done by edgework researchers and sport sociologists is important in terms of shedding light on sociocultural practices and constructions of risk and danger in an era of X-Games, adventure racing, and the proliferation of risk sports in general. My aim in this brief article has been to foster a dialogue between researchers in these areas. I contend that there is much to be gained through a dialogue of this kind. My hope is that this will, among other things, contribute to the impetus to consider the experiences of women in arenas that have generally been dominated by men. As Young and White (1995) point out with respect to elite women’s experiences with injury, it is fruitful to consider the kinds of practices and discourses on which both women and men draw, as well as the tensions and ambiguities associated with these choices, as they negotiate their participation in activities that continue to be seen (by some, at least) as signifiers of a particular kind of masculinity.

It is important to draw attention to the fact that this article relies heavily on informed speculation. It is vital that researchers exploring risk sport take up, challenge, and offer amendments to the arguments I have made herein, based on sustained empirical investigation. In addition, there is still an important limitation to this formulation in terms of investigating forms of risk-taking behavior in which there is a significant element of coercion (e.g., prostitution—see Miller, 1991). It may very well be that the potential of this theoretical approach is limited to those activities in which participants engage voluntarily and around which communities coalesce. In those formations, though, perhaps this opens the discussion to more regular and meaningful considerations of gender and other “systems of alterity” (Marshall, 2000).

Despite the limitations outlined above, this approach offers promise for addressing some of the limitations of edgework theorizing and research. My suggestion here is that this promise can be found on two fronts. First, the proposed revision to the edgework model allows us to move beyond the consideration of “group variations” in practices by acknowledging and building on the idea that gender is something social actors accomplish. It creates the possibility of describing and theorizing this accomplishment, the context within which it takes place, and how the accomplishment itself becomes part of the context. This approach also offers the promise of more nuanced considerations of the relevance of gender in voluntary risk practices, and, indeed, how the construction of risk and the construction of gender are always already interwoven. Moreover, it acknowledges the notion that there are multiple ways of doing gender and, thus, provides some tools to explore the many layers of the masculinities and femininities under construction in the communities that arise around various edgework activities. By approaching the study of risk activities in this way, researchers are more likely to tease out the intersection of gender with age, race, sexuality, and other markers of difference.
Second, it creates intellectual space to transcend the idea that practitioners engage in edgework as a response to the social conditions embedded in the late modern social order (and particularly to our relationship to the paid labor force). Instead, it frames edgework as a process of seeking identity, camaraderie, emotional intimacy and pleasure within systems of meaning in operation in particular communities. It also highlights how edgeworkers’ practices and narratives are shaped and constrained by understandings of both risk and gender in operation in particular settings, as well as at broader levels, and how these practices and narratives then reinforce, challenge, and/or reshape broader understandings. In other words, participants do not engage in voluntary risk activities in response to social conditions, but as part of the process of (re)constructing, shoring up, and/or challenging these conditions.

Notes

1. As one reviewer pointed out, risk management is an important component of risk taking, because risk taking always involves some sort of assessment of whether the risk is a reasonable one. The key point here, in my view, is that women are framed as risk “managers” first (i.e., they are cautious about which risks they take), whereas men are constructed as risk takers (i.e., they will sometimes take even ill-advised risks). Although the rhetoric of AR privileges risk management, the structures and practices of AR reward risk takers.

2. This does not necessarily mean that the latter figurations will be safer in any objective sense. As Martha and Griffet (2006) point out in the case of BASE jumpers, often times edgeworkers involved in the most hazardous activities are, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, extremely conscientious about risk-management practices.

3. A more detailed analysis of the relationship between “responsible for” and “responsible to” is the subject of another project and may yield some insights into this apparent contradiction. My thanks to Michelle Helstein for raising this point in a discussion during the development of this manuscript.

4. It should be noted that Robertson’s use of edgework here is only loosely associated with Lyng’s (1990) formulation of the concept.

Acknowledgments

A portion of this paper was presented at the 2006 NASSS meetings in Vancouver, BC. Thanks to those attending this session for their helpful observations and suggestions. My thanks as well to Carly Adams, Erin Gibbs Van Brunschot, Michelle Helstein, Gillian Ranson, Holly Thorpe, and the SSJ editor and anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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