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"HE DIDN'T GO IN DOING A SKYDIVE": SUSTAINING THE ILLUSION OF CONTROL IN AN EDGWORK ACTIVITY

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ABSTRACT: Exploring Lyng's notion of "edgework," this article draws on ethnographic data to explore the ways skydivers create and sustain the belief that they can maintain control while working the "edge" in this sport. The article focuses on the ways skydivers construct and maintain the "illusion" that they can exercise control as they negotiate their particular edge. It elaborates the ways this sense of control is constructed and the extent to which it informs the ways risk recreators approach the edge. In the choices jumpers make about how they participate in the sport and the ways they interpret the experiences of themselves and other jumpers, they defend the position that their hazardous environments are within their control. When this position becomes untenable, they often draw on the notion of fate to construct certain hazards as outside of the sport, thereby sustaining their sense of control. Keywords: edgework; risk; sport; control; fate.

Skydivers face a great deal of danger in their sport. According to the estimates of the International Parachuting Commission (IPC 2003b), between 1989 and 2002, the number of jumpers per fatality each year ranged from a low of 3,313 in 1991 to a high of 5,641 in 2000. When one takes into account the relatively short time of risk exposure per jump, the sport can be considered extremely hazardous (Celsi et al., 1993). Furthermore, beyond these fatalities, there are numerous cases of catastrophic injury to jumpers. In a culture in which taking "unnecessary" risks is often seen as foolish, senseless, and even reckless (Lupton 1999), there seems to be something of a trend toward increasing acceptance of risk in recreational activities. Whether in the form of participation in "risk sports" (Celsi et al., 1993; Kusz 2004; Lyng 1990) or in the acceptance of bodily risk in more mainstream sports (Hughes and Coakley 1991; Nixon 1994; Young 2004), there is considerable evidence that risk, rather than something to be avoided, is constitutive of many sporting experiences (Albert 1999; Donnelly 2004; Young 1993).
Lyng’s (1990) theorization of Hunter S. Thompson’s concept of edgework (see also Lyng and Snow 1986) and some of its recent elaborations suggest that risk-takers engage their “true” selves by negotiating the “boundary between chaos and order” (p. 855), exploring the limits of their bodies, their minds, and/or the technologies associated with their chosen risk activity. I suggest that one element of Lyng’s model is worthy of closer inspection than it has received thus far. Lyng maintains that the process of negotiating the boundary between form and formlessness gives rise to an “illusory sense of control” (p. 872). Other researchers have elaborated on the idea of control in voluntary risk taking (cf. Lois 2005; Lyng 2005; Natalier 2001). This study expands on this discussion, bringing participatory methods to bear directly on the “illusion” of control in a risk recreation setting.

Drawing on participant observation and interview data, I explore the ways in which skydivers mobilize knowledges about risk in making sense of their recreational experiences. I focus on how skydivers give meaning to risk, and I specifically explore the processes by which they construct and maintain the sense that they can exercise control as they negotiate their particular “edge.” To accomplish these tasks, I first discuss Lyng’s formulation of the edgework concept, some of its recent elaborations, and specifically the notion of control. Next, I describe the skydiving community in general terms and the strategies I employed in studying this community. In the data analysis section, I discuss how skydivers construct and maintain a sense of control as they approach the edge and how they keep this sense intact even in the face of sometimes extreme degrees of chaos. I conclude by considering the implications of these findings for our understanding of the edgework experience.

**EDGECWORK, RISK, AND SPORT**

Scholars of edgework conceptualize voluntary risk taking as “involving, most fundamentally, the problem of negotiating the boundary between chaos and order” (Lyng 1990:855). Essentially, edgework involves exploring the limits of one’s ability and/or the technology one is using while maintaining enough control to successfully negotiate the edge: “edgework most typically involves an effort to define the performance limits of some form or object and, in the process, explore the line between form and formlessness” (Lyng 1993:111). Practitioners “crowd the edge” (Lyng 1990) by coming as close as possible to chaos without losing control (Zwick 2005). Though all edgeworkers explore the boundary where order ends and chaos begins, they do so in different ways and to different degrees. As Milovanovic (2005) outlines, edgeworkers operate at different places on the continuum between in control and out of control, with experiences such as “packaged edgework” toward the in-control end of the continuum and “transcendental experiences” near the out-of-control end.

One dimension of the edgework model relevant to the current discussion is the notion that practitioners feel they possess a “survival instinct” that helps them successfully negotiate the edge (Lyng 1990). This instinct allows practitioners to respond properly in situations that border on mayhem, and this instinct is what makes them effective edgeworkers (Lois 2005). Notably, Lyng (1990) contends that
practitioners construct evidence for this survival instinct post hoc. Edgeworkers who successfully negotiate tumultuous circumstances are deemed to possess the instinct; those who fall off the edge are judged to have lacked the requisite survival instinct. For example, Lyng (1990:859) suggests that when skydivers are killed or injured in the sport, jumpers understand this not as an indication of the inherent risk of the sport but as proof that not everyone in the sport has this innate survival instinct.

Increasingly, sociologists of sport have taken up the project of exploring the nexus of sport and risk. The avenue that has seen the most research activity has been that of risk and injury—how particular ways of participating in sport (those that often place athletes at risk of debilitating injuries and deleterious long-term health consequences) pervade sporting institutions and practices (e.g., Albert 1999; Nixon 1994; Pike and Maguire 2003; White and Young 1999; Young 1993, 2004; Young et al., 1994). Embedded in many of these works is the idea of sport as a “culture of risk”—that injury, even death, “may have become a way of life that is produced and reproduced in sport” (Donnelly 2004:33). Donnelly (2004) is careful to caution that sporting participation—even in so-called “risk sports”—does not guarantee injury or death and that there are numerous ways to participate in most sports in relative safety. Nonetheless, his work (and that of others) highlights the sense in which taking risks is a ubiquitous feature of many sporting experiences.

A small number of sociologists have taken up the project of investigating various risk sports (e.g., Ferrell et al., 2001; Hunt 1995; Kay and Laberge 2004; Kusz 2004; Rinehart and Sydnor 2003; Williams and Donnelly 1985). Hunt (1995), for example, examines the ways deep sea divers learn accounts of “normal risk” in the sport through interactions with other divers as they construct their subcultural identities. She also explores how divers apply techniques of social control to encourage other divers to engage in challenging dives without undertaking “excessive risk” (for a discussion of risk and social control in skydiving, see Laurendeau and Gibbs Van Brunschot 2006). In Kusz’s (2004) exploration of the cultural politics of extreme sports in America, he contends that the valorization of extreme sports has come about at this particular sociohistorical junction because these activities “enable the apparent return of strong, confident, superior white men who are seemingly in control (of themselves and their environs)” (p. 209). In a study of skydivers, Miller and Frey (1996) contend that jumpers engage in a narrow range of other sports that they perceive as being “not risky” to “moderately risky.” That skydivers have low participation in activities they perceive as risky, Miller and Frey (1996:10) suggest, is evidence that jumpers are only drawn to danger that they can control. It is to this issue of control that I now turn.

ON CONTROL AND FATE

A requisite for successfully negotiating the edge is that edgeworkers maintain physical and emotional control in their risk endeavors (cf., Lois 2001, 2005; Lyng 1990). Several researchers examining voluntary risk have suggested that participants deemphasize the hazards of certain activities by accentuating the degree to which they can exercise control over the circumstances in which they place themselves
(e.g., Celsi et al., 1993; Doka et al., 1990; Natalier 2001). It is not that participants believe themselves skilled enough to handle any hazardous situation that might present itself. Instead, they assert that they come to understand their own limits, as well as those of the technology they use, through practice (Natalier 2001). The importance practitioners place on experiential knowledge and judgment constructs control as not only possible but also central, and it underplays the hazardous nature of the activity (Natalier 2001). Lyng (1990) theorizes that edgework activities involve “the right mix of skill and chance, a combination that maintains the illusion of controlling the seemingly uncontrollable” (p. 872). Furthermore, he suggests that the careful planning and the organization that go into some edgework activities may contribute to this sense of control, even though the course of events may in fact be largely a matter of chance.

Lois (2005) explores control in the edgework experience in her examination of a volunteer search-and-rescue organization. She outlines the emotional strategies members of this organization employ to maintain the illusion of control so that they can continue to perform on the edge. Her analysis reveals various stages in the edgework experience of volunteer rescuers, including one absent from Lyng’s seminal investigation of skydivers. Rescuers enter what she calls the “redefining feelings” stage when, in the wake of “unsuccessful” missions, they find it difficult to maintain the illusion of control (Lois 2005:138). The strategies they employ in this stage include denying responsibility for the victim’s fate, blaming the victims, and emphasizing the positive side of negative events (Lois 2005:144–45). Paradoxically, members also occasionally draw on a strategy of attributing control to a higher power. One of her respondents, for instance, suggested that death is part of life: “When it’s your time, it’s your time. Sometimes you go out nice and easy, and sometimes you go out pretty gory. That’s the reality of it” (p. 145). As this was one of many strategies employed by members, Lois does not elaborate on its significance. She does, however, suggest that the absence of this stage in Lyng’s initial formulation of the edgework model may be understandable because skydivers (and risk recreators more generally) most often encounter pleasant feelings and draw on the notion of a survival instinct to make sense of mishaps. Perhaps skydivers have less call than rescue workers, she suggests, for strategies to redefine feelings in the face of negative events.

Some researchers have elaborated on the idea that fate is important in understanding some of the ways people make sense of hazards. Tulloch and Lupton (2003) assert that this is related to the degree to which people feel a sense of control over the hazards they face: “Risks which are defined as subject to personal responsibility are those which are seen to be controllable. Risks which are conceptualized as external to personal decisions or actions tend to be viewed as non-controllable, as more susceptible to the vagaries of fate” (p. 32). Speaking to the risks of late modernity, Giddens (1990:111) theorizes that where the statistical probability of a particular risk is great, or the consequences of its realization extreme, the idea of fate becomes important in making sense of it. Examining individual-level risks, Lupton (2000) posits that appealing to fate is one strategy on which participants in risk activities draw in coming to terms with the possibility of negative outcomes. Her exploration of people’s fears of being victims of
crime reveals two contradicting discourses on victimization. On one hand, respondents embrace the idea that individuals are able to control their own destiny. On the other hand, they construct victimization as a product of fate, against which one can never fully protect oneself. Lupton argues that these practices are informed by broader discourses in Western societies that stress the vulnerability of individuals to hazard and simultaneously construct individuals as active agents who reject the victim status. In contrast, some researchers suggest that risk sport participants downplay the idea of fate, instead framing mishaps as the outcome of poor decision making (Doka et al., 1990). This strategy, these researchers suggest, supports the central assumption that the sport is not inherently dangerous (Doka et al., 1990:220).

THE PRACTICE OF SKYDIVING

Generally, skydiving takes place at a drop zone (DZ), a facility with authorization for parachute jumps (Lyng 1990). In addition to regular jumping, many skydivers attend events called “boogies.” Boogies are special events hosted by one DZ to draw jumpers from surrounding DZs for jumping and partying (Laurendeau 2004). They range from the relatively small, which draw jumpers from only a few DZs, to large international boogies such as the World Freefall Convention, which draws thousands of skydivers every year.

The central piece of skydiving equipment is a “rig,” a container system containing two parachutes: a “main” and a “reserve.” In the case of a malfunction of the main, a jumper may or may not jettison it (depending on the type of malfunction) before deploying the reserve. Rigs may also be equipped with an apparatus known as an “automatic activation device” (AAD). The purpose of an AAD is to automatically deploy the reserve if a jumper is too close to the ground and still falling too quickly. Initially, AAD technology was somewhat suspect, with early models sometimes activating at inappropriate altitudes. An unexpected reserve deployment at an inopportune time can be very hazardous and may result in a collision with another jumper or having one’s main and reserve canopies deployed at the same time, both potentially very dangerous situations. Initially, then, most experienced jumpers initially eschew these AADs (Celsi et al., 1993). In the last decade or so, however, more precise and reliable models of AADs have been developed and are becoming increasingly popular. They are very expensive, retailing at over US$1,300 or CDN$1,700.

In general, there are two parts to each skydive. First, there is freefall—for most jumpers, this is the “working” part of the skydive. Jumpers have a certain amount of time in freefall, usually between 30 and 60 seconds, to perform as many maneuvers as possible before the time comes to activate their parachute. For many recreational jumpers, this time is used for formation skydiving, commonly referred to as “relative work” because jumpers fly relative to one another, making particular formations with their bodies in freefall (U.S. Parachute Association [U.S.P.A.], n.d.). Others use their freefall time for other disciplines, such as freestyle, skysurfing (freefalling while attached to a surfboard-like apparatus), or freeflying (a relatively new type of skydiving, practiced by a growing number of jumpers, that
emphasizes freedom and flow of movement). Still others engage in coaching and instructing in freefall. One popular way for jumpers to begin in the sport is to do a “tandem jump.” In this case, a senior instructor wears a special rig designed to carry two people. They attach a novice to themselves and the rig with a harness and are ultimately in charge of the operation of the parachute equipment, helping the neophyte to deploy the parachute and land safely.

The second part of the skydive begins once one has deployed one’s parachute. For many skydivers, it is a great deal of fun to play with their parachutes high up in the air. Moreover, a number of jumpers enjoy testing their limits and those of their canopies closer to the ground. Modern high-tech canopies are very responsive and can be flown at very high speeds (Hart and Griffith 2003). Many jumpers enjoy generating high speeds by doing a maneuver often called a “hook turn.” This move involves initiating a turn just prior to landing so that the canopy dives toward the ground (which some jumpers refer to as “coming down the wall”). As the parachute planes out of this dive (which may be quite shallow, very steep, or anywhere in between, depending on the parachute, the conditions, and the inclination and skill of the parachutist), the canopy realizes an increase in ground speed. The parachutist “surfs” just inches above the ground for some time and then uses the “brakes” to “flare,” slowing the parachute for landing. If performed skillfully, a hook turn can result in a very spectacular approach and a soft and safe landing. Many serious injuries and deaths, however, have resulted from improperly executed hook turns (Hart and Griffith 2003).

According to a U.S.P.A. survey conducted in 2002, there were over 33,000 members of the organization at this time (U.S.P.A., n.d.). The survey results indicate that just over 15 percent of jumpers are women and 58 percent are between thirty and forty-nine years old. Military personnel, who were instrumental in the advent of recreational skydiving (Laurendeau and Wamsley 1998), still represent a significant percentage of skydivers, at just over 10 percent. The five best-represented occupations after the military are business management, building trades, the computer industry, engineering, and medicine. The results of a survey conducted in the early 1990s for academic research generally support those of the U.S.P.A. study and expand on them in certain respects (see Miller and Frey 1996). Of Miller and Frey’s (1996) respondents, 88 percent were men, 95 percent were white, and there was a skew toward the upper middle class in terms of income and education. Given the expense and time demands of the sport, this distribution comes as no surprise.

There has been a noticeable trend during the past decade and a half or so in terms of who gets killed in the sport and how they die. First, there seems to be a trend toward more experienced jumpers dying (as a percentage of all fatalities). In 1990, expert skydivers (those with over 250 freefalls) accounted for 33 percent (twenty-three of seventy) of all skydiving fatalities, according to the IPC (2003b:6). In contrast, in 2002, they represented 60 percent (forty-four of seventy-two) of all fatalities. For these thirteen years, there is a zero-order correlation of .682 between year and percentage of all fatalities who were expert skydivers (analysis not presented). Second, there is a parallel trend toward landing mishaps as the most important cause of skydiving fatalities. In 2002, of the seventy-three fatalities for
which the IPC has data, thirty-eight (52 percent) could be attributed to “fast cano-
pies” or “other landing errors” (IPC 2003b:6–7). Hart and Griffith (2003) examined
data from a database of U.S. skydiving fatalities between 1986 and 2001 and
found a correlation of .82 between year and number of landing fatalities. As jump-
ers generally gain a certain amount of experience in the sport before attempting
these high-performance landings, it would seem that these two findings are
related. These findings are not presented as the definitive word on skydiving
safety but rather to set the stage for the analysis of observational and interview
data that follow.

THE RESEARCH ENTERPRISE

By the time I initiated this research, I had been skydiving for approximately four
years. My contacts and identity in the skydiving community facilitated gaining
access to various research sites. Michael (pseudonym), in particular, was indis-
penisible to this project. With decades in the sport and several thousand jumps,
he could provide me with an “in” anywhere I did not already have one. In addition,
he had a keen interest in skydiving as a social phenomenon, was always
willing to provide feedback on my ideas, and often shared his own interpreta-
tions for me to consider. With his support, I obtained access to two main
research sites: one DZ that was largely run as a business and one that was more
of a club. I spent the 1998 skydiving season participating in jumping and social
activities at these DZs. Because of weather, a season on the Canadian prairies
generally lasts from April or May to October. This particular season, my first
jump was in mid-April and my last in early November. Most weekends, and
occasionally during the week, I spent time at one of these DZs or attending one
of a number of boogies. During these months, I completed approximately 130
skydives and attended several get-togethers away from the DZ. House-warming
parties and bar nights, for example, are important events in the social network
of skydivers. I briefly revisited the field in July and August 2004 to explore some
of the ideas for this article and to check analytical ideas with participants. I
made field notes after each of these encounters.

Through the course of the initial participant observation experiences and dis-
cussions with several experienced jumpers, I determined a relevant range of expe-
riences, characteristics, and examples that I wished to capture in my interview
sample. I conducted interviews with both men and women; jumpers of low, inter-
mediate, and high experience; recreational, competitive, and semiprofessional
(involving instruction) jumpers; and jumpers with and without experience of
serious injury in the sport. Jumpers were generally very receptive to the idea of
participating in interviews, as I knew most of them personally. As Lyng (1990)
notes, skydivers may be somewhat reluctant to talk to nonjumpers about their
perspectives on skydiving. My status as a jumper meant that I spoke the lingo,
understood the technology, and could relate to stories participants might tell. The
interviews were semistructured, exploring subcultural practices; safety, hazard,
and injury; and gender relations. Of the thirty-seven interviewees, there were
twenty men and seventeen women, all white. At the time of the interviews, they
ranged in age from nineteen to over sixty. They had been involved in the sport anywhere from a few months to almost thirty years, with an average jumping “career” spanning about eight and a half years. A couple of interviewees had fewer than thirty jumps, whereas a number had several thousand to their credit, with an average across the sample of almost 1,100 jumps and a sample median of 560 jumps. While the interviewees ranged from students to working professionals, all identified themselves as middle class. The interviews ranged between forty-five minutes and 120 minutes and averaged just short of seventy-two minutes. All names reported in both field note and interview excerpts are pseudonyms.

I worked back and forth between observational and interview data, first coding in very general terms and then working within these broad areas to develop and refine analytical ideas. As I developed these ideas, I checked them with two or three key informants for participant validation. As the analysis neared completion, I shared these ideas with several jumpers, asking them to verify, challenge, or suggest amendments to the analysis of risk in the skydiving community. Finally, I invited and received feedback on a draft of this article from several jumpers.

CROWDING THE EDGE

As suggested above, we can conceptualize one continuum of edgework as a range from in control to out of control. I suggest here that we can not only place different activities (e.g., workplace edgework, extreme sports, drug use) along this continuum, but we can also conceptualize a continuum underlying a given activity. Not all skydivers in this case crowd the edge to the same extent or in the same ways. There is a baseline level of edgework in which all skydivers engage by the simple fact of leaving a “perfectly good airplane.” Some crowd the edge more than others, however, by engaging in various practices that increase the potential for catastrophic outcomes. In this section, I explore various dimensions of edgework in skydiving, the degree to which these may be understood as crowding the edge, and how practitioners maintain the sense that they are in control of their hazardous environments.

The majority of skydiving activities have, during recent decades, become markedly less hazardous than they were previously. Rectangular parachute technology has dramatically reduced the weight of equipment and improved landing accuracy, and AAD technology has saved many lives that would otherwise have been lost because of no-pull/low-pull situations (IPC 2003a). These two shifts alone mean that “routine” skydiving (freefall according to safety recommendations, landing a moderately loaded rectangular parachute without doing an aggressive approach) might now be considered what one reviewer called “garden-variety edgework.” Jumpers still require a good deal of skill and expertise to perform well on the edge, but this is a less pronounced example of crowding the edge than other dimensions addressed below.

Jumpers assess the level of danger in skydiving in a variety of ways, from “I actually don’t find it that risky” (Jenn, 120 jumps) to “I think the people who are in danger are the people who don’t think there is risk, because it’s there” (Doug,
300 jumps). The ways skydivers elaborate on their assessment of the level of risk in the sport, however, indicate that they understand it in very similar terms. They suggest that skydiving is potentially hazardous but that they manage risks such that the sport is not especially dangerous for them. Sheryl, with more than 500 skydives, put it succinctly: “There’s some risk. I mean, you can’t say there’s no risk to skydiving. But I think that as long as you use common sense, and have the proper training, and don’t do anything really stupid, don’t go above your skill level, I think the risk is minimized.” This common way of understanding the dangers of skydiving arises from the fact that jumpers interpret these hazards in the context of their embeddedness in the skydiving community. Whether it is through in-person interactions, consumption of subcultural texts, attendance at seminars, or participation in online skydiving fora, jumpers frequently share their ideas on the hazards of the sport and how to limit many of them.

Jumpers draw on this socially constructed knowledge as they make choices about the hazards of the sport in an effort to manage the risks involved. It is important to recognize that this does not mean making the safest possible choices. Instead, the process is about being aware of one’s capabilities, one’s level of experience, and the jumping environment (e.g., weather, experience level of other jumpers on the skydive) and making smart choices in consideration of these factors. As Jane (with 260 jumps and four years in the sport) pointed out, “you can make it a more risky sport, or you cannot, depending on how you look after yourself, and packing, and equipment checks, and landings…. It’s all what you decide to put into the skydive. You can make it as risky as you want it to be.” Here, Jane suggests that she chooses her skydiving behaviors in such a way as to maintain control. She makes sure she knows her equipment is well maintained, chooses to fly her canopy in ways she can manage, and so forth. She learned the technical elements of this process as she gained experience in the sport. Moreover, she and other jumpers acquire this “risk management” perspective in a similar way. Throughout my time in the field, I routinely witnessed jumpers testing ideas on each other about managing risk. They discuss things such as new equipment innovations, “old” accepted wisdom (e.g., about the best way to respond to a particular malfunction) and whether it still holds, and numerous variations on this theme. Oftentimes, experienced jumpers do this in overt ways, stepping in to “correct” less experienced or more reckless jumpers (see Laurendeau and Gibbs Van Brunschat 2006).

There is also some evidence of belief in a survival instinct in the ways jumpers talk about safety in the sport. Numerous jumpers expressed this idea in the interviews. Chris (550 jumps), for instance, said:

I truly believe that some people react better in bad situations than others. You know, there’s the people that sit there and yell “fire, fire, fire!” while the other person walks over and picks up the fire extinguisher and sprays the garbage can down…. There’s definitely some people that shouldn’t be in this sport. The line I heard is “if at first you don’t succeed, don’t take up skydiving.” That’s probably truer than you’d think.

Similarly, Leanne (400 jumps) said, “I think skydivers don’t panic…. Well, some do. Well, then they shouldn’t be skydivers.” Both Chris and Leanne here express
the idea that to operate successfully on the edge, there is a certain innate quality that one must have: the ability to maintain one’s cool in the face of chaos. As we shall see, though, the absence of this survival capacity does not, by itself, serve as an explanation for mishaps.

One revealing scenario is when something goes awry on a jump (e.g., a malfunction). When a jumper performs well on the edge, skydivers hold the situation up as evidence that even when something goes wrong, they can, through their own actions, avoid the worst of outcomes. For example, when someone averts a close call, skydivers treat this as evidence that they are in control of their own destinies. A lengthy interview excerpt illustrates this idea. Andrew (300 jumps) recounted his first malfunction, describing a jump where his main was twisting violently. He cut it away and deployed his reserve, landing safely:

And about a half hour afterwards, I got a little more serious, a little more, you know, a little more reflective, I guess. And, ultimately, the conclusion of the emotional journey I guess was that I’m glad I had the malfunction. Often I have, I’m sure you have too, read the reports of people, especially with that kind of malfunction, have cut away a malfunctioning main, but have failed to for, God knows why, pull the reserve. And not been wearing an AAD or an RSL. I always wondered in the back of my mind, you know, “Do you have what it takes, do you have the ‘right stuff,’ or whatever you want to call it, to pull both handles?” And I did, obviously, and uh, it was a confidence builder and, um, I’m glad it happened.

As Andrew reflected on his handling of the situation, he framed the malfunction as a positive experience. He made reference to other situations where jumpers lost their cool on the edge and performed poorly. By contrast, his experience of doing what he was supposed to built his confidence that he had “the right stuff.” He and other jumpers who perform well on the edge hold this up as evidence that the hazards of the sport are within their control. Jumpers frame these incidents in such a way as to support the idea that one can effectively control the hazards of the sport and perform well.

Another dimension of learning about the edge is that it is an interactive process in which jumpers engage. Junior skydivers go through a set of progression guidelines, learning how to freefall safely, how to do so in proximity with other people, and so on. In addition, though, many senior jumpers make sure these newer jumpers learn that the hazards of the sport can be managed. One field note excerpt illustrates this point:

I had a malfunction today . . . I was struck by how Paul (the most experienced skydiver on the DZ), after talking with me about the incident, used it as an example for up-and-coming jumpers. . . . He gathered several of them around and asked me to describe what happened. I told them I tried twice to deploy my main (without success) and then activated my reserve. Paul said, “See? Just like we teach in the first jump course: Try it twice, and if it doesn’t work, go to your reserve.” The implicit message to these neophytes seemed to be “even when something goes wrong, if you just keep your head, and do what you’ve been taught, you’ll be fine.”
Here, Paul took the opportunity to explicitly reinforce emergency procedures to a group of novice jumpers. Simultaneously, though, he entrenched the idea that jumpers are in control of the hazards of the sport. This is the kind of experience on which these neophytes draw as they construct their own risk knowledges about skydiving.

While Paul seized an opportunity to “pass on” risk knowledge to newer jumpers, circumstances sometimes call for senior jumpers to step in and help junior jumpers redefine negative feelings. If relatively new jumpers go through something such as a malfunction or witnesses an incident that might shake them up, a more experienced jumper will often step in and help them frame the issue in such a way that it does not challenge the fundamental position that the hazards of skydiving are manageable. Jack (over 4,000 jumps), for example, recounted a time he and a novice were doing some coach jumps and watched someone “bounce.” (When someone dies in skydiving, jumpers refer to this as someone “bouncing” or “going in.” There is even a degree of superstition about the use of these terms to refer to anything else. One does not “go in” to town to buy beer, for example.) Here is how he described handling the situation:

The person I was jumping with [was upset]. So I took them and made sure that we got back in the air right away, so that they would be fine, and later we talked about risk management. Are you doing what you should be doing? Is everything you’re doing within the progression guidelines? Do you know your gear?... Go through the whole spectrum.... You get the person back in the air right away.

By reminding a jumper about risk management and getting the person “in the air right away,” senior jumpers emphasize that skydiving hazards are not inherent to the sport but are manageable if one adopts the right approach to the edge. This seems to be a slightly different phenomenon than the commitment cyclists express to get “back on the bike” as soon as possible after a crash (see Albert 1999). In the case of Albert’s (1999) cyclists, this expression of commitment serves as a signifier to others (and to oneself) that one is a true cyclist. In the case of skydivers, senior jumpers take it on themselves to step in and get less experienced jumpers jumping after an event that has the potential to disrupt the idea that skydiving hazards are within the control of practitioners. Getting the person jumping and talking to them about the incident helps redefine the negative feelings jumpers might have and protects their sense of control.

Hook Turns

High-performance canopy flight has become a major component of skydiving and is one of the clearest examples of crowding the edge in skydiving. Over the past fifteen years or so, the technology informing rectangular parachutes has improved dramatically, and increasingly sophisticated high-performance canopy designs have emerged. This has come about as a result of better construction materials and changes in design that have made it possible to construct more efficient “wings.” In general, this means that parachutes are more responsive, fly
better, and land better than was the case fifteen years ago. At the same time, high-performance canopies now have unprecedented performance characteristics. Many of the high-performance canopies now are elliptical or semi-elliptical as opposed to rectangular. In general, these changes have meant that many experienced skydivers are flying smaller, more responsive main canopies than they were a decade or more ago. With these smaller parachutes come increased speed across the ground, more efficient flaring of the wing (the ability to convert forward speed into lift and drag; the ability of the parachute to slow down and stop), and increased maneuverability in the air. While these benefits all potentially increase jumpers’ enjoyment of their time under canopy, they also dramatically reduce the margin of error at the high-performance end of the spectrum (Hart and Griffith 2003). That is, with the relatively docile canopies of the late 1980s, a small mistake by the parachutist could result in a minor mishap and likely no serious injuries. The very high-performance canopies of today, however, are so responsive to input that a small mistake at the wrong time could result in a serious injury or death.

Many jumpers choose to own canopies that are small relative to their body weight. These jumpers load their canopies heavily enough that they often exceed the manufacturer’s recommended maximum suspended weight for the particular canopy. By itself, having a small canopy does not necessarily create the potential for serious injury. Many jumpers who fly these small canopies, however, also do a hook turn prior to landing. Unfortunately, there have been many incidents in Canada, the United States, and abroad of jumpers being gravely injured or killed by the impact of the ground, another jumper, or some obstacle resulting from a poorly executed hook turn (Hart and Griffith 2003). Of the interview participants in the current study, several have experienced broken bones resulting from low turns under their main parachute.14 Between them, these jumpers have spent several days in intensive care units, several weeks in the hospital, and many months rehabilitating from these injuries. In some cases, the evidence of these mishaps will remain with these jumpers for the rest of their lives, either in the form of metal devices (e.g., rods, pins, screws) in their bodies, physical scars, or symptoms that may never fully disappear. It should be understood that performing hook turns does not guarantee that one will sustain such an injury. Several participants in this study have executed hundreds, even thousands, of these maneuvers without sustaining serious injury. Even the most experienced of them, however, concede that the potential is there. One important point about canopy flight is worth mentioning here. Jumpers generally acknowledge a phenomenon that my own observations certainly bear out: men are much more likely than women to engage in the kinds of high-performance landings described above. Some women fly their parachutes reasonably aggressively, but many more men do so, and almost all of the most aggressive canopy pilots are men.

The notion of control infuses jumpers’ descriptions of why they engage in the practice of hook turns. They express pleasure in the fact that they can make such a high-performance parachute perform so well, knowing full well the consequences of a serious mistake. The following lengthy exchange with Jack illustrates this point:
Jack: I fly my parachute for myself; I don’t fly it for anyone on the ground. I went through that, but now I fly it for me.... So...I would say I have, like a Level 1 to Level 8 level of aggressiveness in flying. So I will execute the type of landing that is appropriate for the situation, because I’m landing for me, I’m not landing for anyone on the ground.

Interviewer: What about the argument that by flying your parachute this way, you take on an unnecessary risk, that if you make a mistake, you could be seriously hurt?

Jack: I would say yes, and I would say no. Because usually, to do a more aggressive maneuver, you’ve got to start higher up, you have a longer wall to come down, and you actually have more time coming straight down.... If you do a Level 8, your mistake starts if you started too low in the first place. That’s part of the judgment process.

Interviewer: But if you make a small mistake on a high-performance landing, the results could be catastrophic, couldn’t they?

Jack: Starting in the wrong place for a Level 8, that’s not a little mistake, that’s a big one. But I understand your point, right? If you didn’t do such a high-performance move and made a mistake, the net result is potentially more damaging than doing a lower performance landing and making a similar mistake.

Interviewer: So then, why do you do the high-performance move?

Jack: That’s because I can. Really it comes down to that.

Here, Jack begins by emphasizing that he flies his parachute the way he does for his own enjoyment, not to show off to anyone on the ground. He suggests that he is in control of these high-performance landings—he has the experience to accurately assess the situation and correctly judge how much upheaval he can successfully negotiate under the circumstances. Next, he highlights that the execution of these high-performance maneuvers is not simply about motor skills; it is also (even primarily) about judgment. He stresses that the most important part of a “Level 8” landing is starting the maneuver high enough to give the parachute time to come “down the wall” and plane out. This is the kind of judgment that comes only from doing hundreds, even thousands of skydives and learning how one’s parachute behaves in different conditions. He acknowledges that making a mistake on this kind of landing would be extremely hazardous but closes the exchange by stating in no uncertain terms that he has the skill and experience to control the situation.

It used to be that a major portion of skydiving fatalities were the result of someone, for whatever reason, failing to activate a parachute in time for it to inflate (Parachutist 2003:30). In recent years, with improvements in equipment technologies and increased use of AADs, the numbers of such fatalities has decreased dramatically. During the same period, however, serious injuries and deaths from what many jumpers call “pilot error” have drastically increased. Prior to the early 1990s, fatalities caused by landing problems were very rare, usually resulting from an attempt to avoid an obstacle in the landing area (Parachutist 2003:33). Largely because of the development and popularity of high-performance parachutes, this
category now regularly accounts for a larger proportion of yearly skydiving deaths than any other single category (IPC 2003b; Parachutist 2003). Eric, an aggressive canopy pilot with more than 1,400 jumps, outlines the concern that many jumpers express with respect to this trend:

[Canopy control is] where the big risk is right now. More so than in freefall and, I mean, the gear is so much more reliable now... Malfunction rates are down. But people are killing themselves and hurting themselves pointing their canopies towards the earth at low altitudes, misjudging what they're doing ‘cause they think it’s really hip.

It is interesting that very few jumpers argue that high-performance parachutes are inherently problematic. Instead, like Eric, they posit that the problem lies in people’s (in)ability to properly assess and negotiate the edge of canopy flight. Eric went on to suggest that the fundamental problem is that people “overstep their bounds close to the ground.” What this means, effectively, is that they put themselves in a situation over which they do not have control for one reason or another. As one jumper pointed out after reading an earlier version of this article, one of the problems in this arena is that some junior jumpers adopt a “monkey see, monkey do” approach to the edge, and “unfortunately, they don’t know where the ‘edge’ is yet” (Michael, e-mail communication, January 2005).

CHAOS

As mentioned above, the potential for serious injury or death is certainly present in skydiving. Departing from Lyng’s analysis, my data reveal that jumpers do not simply write mishaps off as evidence that someone did not possess the requisite innate survival capacity to perform well on the edge. Instead, jumpers engage in strategies to redefine their emotions such that the event in question does not threaten their sense of control, very similar to what Lois (2005) found among search-and-rescue volunteers.

Blaming the Victim

The most prevalent strategy jumpers draw on is some version of blaming the victim. In the case of their own poor performance on the edge, jumpers frame it not as an absence of the survival instinct necessary to negotiate the edge but as a momentary lapse in concentration. Rather than judge themselves incapable of negotiating the edge, the experience (including other jumpers’ interpretations) becomes part of the knowledge base from which they draw in determining future practices. When someone reflects on getting injured, for instance, they often express frustration with themselves that they did not handle the situation better. Andrew, who sustained a serious fracture to his leg, said, “Initially, I knew I had broken it to some extent. And my initial reaction was annoyance in myself. I was, you know, figuratively kicking myself in the butt, if I had a good leg.” As Andrew described the accident, he pointed out that he did an ill-advised maneuver to avoid traffic as he was coming in to land. He suggested that this “wasn’t the best
idea under a small parachute at that altitude, but hindsight’s 20/20.” Like Andrew, Bob (350 jumps) blamed himself for an injury he sustained on a high-performance landing. Rather than shake his confidence in his ability to do edge-work, this incident became part of his knowledge base for future landings. “[The injury] wasn’t a result of the inherent danger of jumping; it was a result of the danger of choosing the wrong maneuver at the wrong time. I corrected [that] factor.” These jumpers isolate the event in question from their identities as skydivers by insisting that the injury was a function of a particular poor decision rather than an indication that they are ill equipped to skydive. This is something of an interesting contradiction in light of the “survival instinct” and risk management discussions above. Jumpers construct success at negotiating the edge as a combination of adopting a mature approach to managing the hazards of the sport as well as an ability to remain “cool” in the face of danger. When it comes to falling off the edge, however, they seem to focus on the risk management angle—the decision-making (and thus correctable) component rather than the ability to “keep one’s cool.” This contradiction may be an example of what some social psychologists call a “self-serving bias,” where individuals tend to overestimate their own responsibility for successes and attribute failure to external sources (Larson 1977).18

In the case of a serious accident (or near accident), skydivers scrutinize the performance of the victim as well as the choices he or she made about what kind of skydive to do, arguing that the mishap could have been avoided had the person exercised better judgment. Chris, a relatively conservative canopy pilot, gave an account of one landing incident with a jumper at his DZ known for flying overly aggressively for his experience level:

I can remember yelling at Dave the one time he came in and bounced across the ground about three times….You know, “Are you OK?” “Yeah.” “You stupid son of a bitch! How many times are we gonna have to tell you? You can’t be doing those bloody hook turns!” Because he’s one of these guys that, he’s never gonna learn, he’s always got to be pushing.

Here, Chris is quite clear that this near miss happened not because Dave was flying a fast canopy but because he failed to exercise appropriate judgment when landing with this parachute. Because Dave has “always got to be pushing,” he is at risk in a way that Chris does not consider himself to be. Although the politics of the hazards are very different, there is an interesting parallel here between the ways jumpers talk about the dangers of skydiving and the ways antigun control advocates discursively construct the hazards of gun ownership—“guns don’t kill people; people kill people.” Both groups suggest that the technology is not inherently dangerous, that it is only a problem when an operator is irresponsible with it. In both cases, this downplays the point that the high performance of the implements creates the potential for more dramatic and catastrophic results with smaller inputs from those handling them.19

This strategy of blaming the victim is especially important when a jumper “goes in” (dies). If jumpers can argue that the victim was doing something that they do not do, it becomes easier to achieve distance from the accident as a fellow jumper. As people, they mourn for the deceased jumper, experiencing all of the
emotions normally associated with the death of a friend. As skydivers, though, they are able to compartmentalize the incident and keep on jumping. Sara (900 jumps), for instance, said this about the death of a friend: “There were reasons for her death. And I could put them down to specifics. Tandem—tandem’s a little bit more risky, so it didn’t affect me. I didn’t think, ‘Well, the sport is more dangerous for me now.’” Amanda had a similar experience with a close friend, and here is how she recounted the aftermath:

Complete disbelief, anger. What the fuck is he doing? . . . And Mark going in, in my mind, didn’t have anything to do with skydiving, necessarily. It was a stunt. Maybe that’s a justification, I don’t know. . . . And he didn’t go in doing a skydive. You didn’t get that same “there but for the grace of God go I” because I never would have done that. Not in a million, trillion years would I have done that. And nor would most of the skydivers I know.

Amanda’s assertion that her friend wasn’t doing a skydive is interesting here. Technically, he was doing a skydive. Because it was such an unusual jump, though, and qualified in Amanda’s mind (and, it should be noted, the minds of many jumpers) as a clear example of chaos, she easily maintained the sense that she could exert control over her skydiving environment. She mourned for the loss of her friend but had no difficulty continuing to jump.

In making sense of mishaps, skydivers scrutinize the ways they and other jumpers manage themselves, including how far out on the edge they choose to venture. In doing so, jumpers redefine their emotions about these accidents. Instead of having their own confidence shaken by these incidents, skydivers are able to incorporate them into their store of knowledge about the sport. They may feel frustrated with themselves or other jumpers, or sad in the case of losing a friend, but these feelings do not impinge on their sense that they can exert control over the hazards of skydiving in the choices they make and the ways they perform on the edge.

Fate

Although the idea of fate has received little attention in the edgework literature, the data from this study suggest that this is an oversight. In abstract discussions of the hazards of skydiving, many jumpers make reference to the idea that one could be seriously hurt or killed in skydiving but that this could easily happen elsewhere as well. Anna (800 jumps), for instance, suggested that “of course [skydiving] is risky. I mean, there’s the potential to kill yourself in the sport. But, I mean, there’s the potential of killing myself in my bathroom.” Chris elaborated on this idea:

I don’t think [skydiving is] any more risky than a lot of other things. It requires proper training, proper equipment, proper equipment maintenance, knowing your limits, acting within those bounds, and that’s no different than scuba diving or white-water rafting or mountain climbing or flying or any of these things. And I’ve done all of them, so I guess it’s just another one of those things. No different than crossing a street downtown on a busy day. If some asshole’s running a red light, and you’re not looking the right way...
Here, Chris points to the kind of routines jumpers (and other risk-sport participants) practice to minimize their exposure to hazards, and he parallels the level of risk between skydiving and several other forms of risk recreation. He then smoothly transitions to an everyday hazard—crossing the street downtown—as if this belongs to the same class of hazards. Several other jumpers offered variations of the idea that one could be hurt doing anything. As Damian (eighteen jumps) puts it, “no matter what I’m doing that day, if there’s some sort of celestial design that I’m supposed to get hurt that day, then it’ll happen no matter what I’m doing.”

In some cases where a jumper “goes in,” the “blaming the victim” strategy is untenable. Either the jumper appears to have done everything correctly, or there is not enough evidence to make a firm determination. In these circumstances, many jumpers draw on the idea of fate, suggesting that when your number is up, it is up. For example, approximately two years before the start of this research, a popular jumper “went in” under mysterious circumstances in western Canada. He seemed to have done nothing wrong and was performing a skydive that was well within his capabilities. There was much speculation as to the specific cause of the mishap, but there was no ready-made reason that would allow people to distance themselves from the incident by saying “that wouldn’t happen to me.”

Anna had this to say about the fatality:

Who knows? I don’t even know what happened. I don’t know if we’ll ever find out with that. I mean, they looked the gear over, there’s nothing wrong with the gear, so they don’t know what went wrong. But, I mean, it was never, “Oh, it was the sport that killed them.” No, it wasn’t. It was, it was fluke.

Similarly, Sheila (500 jumps) was present when a high-profile jumper “went in” on a large-formation record attempt. There were more than 100 jumpers on the attempt, and no one saw exactly what happened to the woman who died. In Sheila’s words, “You know, you just, you look for a reason, and you can’t find one.” Unable to distance herself from the fatality as a jumper, Sheila drew on the notion of fate to make sense of the incident: “If I was ever gonna die, I suppose I’d want to die that way. You know, painless, and quickly like that, and it was just, it just seemed like, you know, I suppose everybody has their time, and when it’s your time, it’s your time.” By invoking fate, jumpers frame a skydiving death not as a matter of the inherent risk in the sport catching up with someone but simply fate dealing the “victim” a bad hand. This trump card, therefore, keeps intact the notion that the sport is not particularly dangerous if skydivers manage the hazards properly. This allows them to move on in the sport without fundamentally undermining the sense that they can control their risk environments.

Drawing on fate seems to appeal to many skydivers as a strategy of making sense of the hazards of the sport, either in the abstract sense or when someone dies under circumstances in which it is difficult to blame the victim. Jumpers did not suggest that fate was responsible for accidents resulting in injury. In these cases, there is always at least one witness who can reconstruct the scenario, providing the information necessary for jumpers to engage in their preferred method of redefining emotions: blaming the victim. The appeal of the fate strategy seems to stem
from the way in which this frames the perils of skydiving. It constructs them, as well as certain dangers of routine activities, as “external to personal decisions or actions” (Tulloch and Lupton 2003:32). To the extent that one holds this position, the degree of fate is the same regardless of what one is doing, making skydiving only as uncontrollable as anything else one might do.²⁰ If this were the only approach jumpers took to maintaining the illusion of control in skydiving, it would be most difficult to maintain, as most jumpers have more experience with serious injury (their own or others’) and death in skydiving than anywhere else. Working in tandem with blaming the victim, however, fate seems to work as a stop-gap of sorts, operating to neutralize negative emotions when blaming the victim is not a tenable tactic.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

Like other studies of hazardous activities (e.g., Albert 1999; Celsi et al., 1993; Doka et al., 1990; Kiewa 2001; Lois 2005; Lupton and Tulloch 2002; Lyng 1990; Natalier 2001), this article points toward the centrality of control in risk-sport participants’ constructions of the hazards to which they subject themselves through their involvement in their chosen activity. In the case of skydiving, jumpers draw on socially and experientially constructed knowledge to frame the hazards of skydiving as within their control, and they reinforce this notion through an approach to the sport in which they identify the hazards they are able to negotiate and then make choices to manage them.

Maintaining control is about keeping one’s cool on the edge but is also firmly rooted in experiential knowledge about a particular risk activity in terms of understanding how much upheaval one can handle. This may go some way toward explaining Miller and Frey’s (1996) findings that skydivers engage in other forms of edgework only if they perceive themselves able to control the hazards of these other activities. Moreover, this sheds new light on the survival instinct dimension of the edgework model. The data from this study suggest that skydivers do not subscribe to a simple notion of an innate survival instinct. There is certainly an element of this as they make sense of mishaps in the sport, but they also emphasize very strongly that it is not just how one performs on the edge that counts but also where on the edge one chooses to operate (i.e., what kinds of skydives one does in what conditions). The survival instinct is transferable, as Lyng (1990) suggests, but only to a limited extent. As skydivers explain, negotiating the edge is about understanding how close to the edge one is equipped to walk, an understanding that is specific to the physical and technical demands of a particular sport and is developed through interaction with other jumpers (recall Paul and Jack taking novice jumpers under their wings in this regard). A survival instinct, or the ability to keep one’s wits about them, does not by itself equip one to crowd the edge. One must also develop the technical expertise to deal with the hazards of skydiving and, just as importantly, the judgment to properly assess what kinds of skydives to do, under what conditions, and so forth. It seems that a survival instinct, transferable across activities, intersects with experiential knowledge and
social experience, specific to particular risk activities, to determine which activities edgeworkers believe themselves able to control.

Recently, there has been a shift with respect to the technologies of skydiving. With the improvement of AAD and canopy technologies, fewer inexperienced skydivers are dying in the sport. Meanwhile, the development of high-performance canopy technologies has created the conditions for larger numbers of experienced jumpers to kill themselves under fully functional parachutes. Moreover, high-performance landings arguably represent the greatest degree of chaos in the sport at this juncture (Hart and Griffith 2003). This may go some way toward explaining why the notion of an innate survival capacity is less evident in these data than was the case in Lyng’s (1990) study of skydivers. At the time of Lyng’s study, jumpers had fewer choices about what kind of gear to wear when jumping, and to a much greater extent, they encountered perils that had more to do with malfunctioning equipment than with their performance as “pilots.” As this new way of crowding the edge appeared, it may be that the notion of a survival capacity became less persuasive as a strategy of making sense of risk, as the choice to crowd this part of the edge demanded new kinds of technical expertise and judgment. In other words, in the case of high-performance landings in particular, innate ability is useful only if one also understands what kinds of choices are appropriate under particular conditions and in light of the experience level of the skydiver.

As Lois (2005) describes with search-and-rescue volunteers, there are occasional but dramatic cases in skydiving where the boundary between chaos and order is clearly transgressed. In both rescue operations and risk recreation, these kinds of violations necessitate strategies to redefine feelings and maintain the sense of control so important to effective edgework. The process of redefining feelings identified by Lois in the case of rescue work also seems to be important for risk recreators. Though skydivers, in this case, experience many positive emotions, they may also feel intense emotional distress in certain circumstances, especially when a friend dies in the sport. Many skydivers, like Lois’s rescue workers, employ a strategy of blaming the victim for mishaps such as this. For jumpers, this is the preferred strategy, as it does not challenge the notion that the hazards of the sport are controllable. Moreover, in the case of the search-and-rescue volunteers, there is a fairly clear distinction between the victim and the rescuer in that the victim was engaging in the activity for pleasure, whereas the rescuer is doing so to help others. It makes some intuitive sense, then, that rescue workers, as one of their strategies, deny responsibility for the victim’s fate. Skydivers, on the other hand, have to make sense of injury and death among friends and acquaintances who voluntarily engage in the same practices as they do and for whom they have no professional responsibility. Under these circumstances, jumpers stress that they make smarter choices and/or are better equipped to handle the circumstances in question. The goal of these strategies, as with Lois’s volunteer rescuers, is to protect the sense of control that allows practitioners to perform well on the edge.

The reality that sometimes skydivers are not able to influence their circumstances makes it difficult for jumpers to maintain their sense of control. In response, they may draw on fate to maintain the illusion of control. As Giddens (1990) suggests,
this is a strategy sometimes employed when the potential outcomes of particular risks are extreme. Clearly, this is the case in skydiving. The reality, as jumpers point out, is that if one falls off the edge, there may be no coming back. To maintain the sense of control necessary to effectively walk the edge, then, some jumpers hold on to fate as a trump card of sorts to make sense of situations that seem beyond their control. By invoking fate, jumpers demarcate an area of chaos that they interpret as outside of the activity, thereby keeping intact the notion that the hazards of skydiving are manageable. Some jumpers make this boundary maintenance explicit, arguing that it was not the hazards of the sport that killed a fellow jumper but fluke. This strategy of invoking fate is the clearest illustration of what makes the sense of control in edgework illusory. Skydivers are quite right when they suggest that they exercise control over a number of factors in their sport, including equipment selection, the types of skydives they do, gear maintenance, and so on. The reality, of course, is that one cannot control everything, particularly in the face of chaos. Skydivers downplay these uncontrollables, emphasizing the factors they can manage. When this strategy is no longer a viable option, they demarcate potential hazards as outside of skydiving and hence irrelevant. “When it’s your time, it’s your time,” they suggest, so you might as well go doing something you love. As one jumper commented after reading a draft of this article, “How we die is irrelevant. How we live is essential” (Doug, e-mail communication, January 2005).

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NOTES

1. The sport is most accurately described as “sport parachuting.” Generally, though, jumpers and nonjumpers refer to it as “skydiving.”

2. Federal sport parachuting organizations are not required to submit these data to the IPC. As such, the IPC recommends a degree of caution when drawing conclusions based on these data, as they historically have a relatively low response rate (e.g., 52 percent in 2002). Even from countries that do respond, the data are often estimates rather than exact figures.

3. It is impossible to accurately assess the rate of these kinds of injuries, as their reporting is voluntary.

4. Milovanovic (2005) also outlines the relevance of other continua, including legal/illegal and lesser/greater emotional intensity.

5. In this chapter and in her earlier article, Lois (2001) also develops an insightful framework exploring edgework as a gendered experience. As one reviewer points out, this is a fruitful avenue for investigation in a sport in which less than one in five participants is a woman. This analysis is deserving of a more comprehensive consideration than space allows here, however, and is the subject of another study in development.
6. As one jumper pointed out after reading a draft of this article, a third part of the skydive is important in understanding risk. The airplane ride to jump altitude is a significant worry for some jumpers. Given the centrality of control in making sense of risk, this fear may be related to the fact that jumpers have little or no control over what happens during the flight to jump altitude.

7. Most, but not all, members of the U.S.P.A. are residents of the United States. Unfortunately, similarly comprehensive data are not available from the Canadian Sport Parachuting Association (C.S.P.A.), nor does the U.S.P.A. have data from earlier than 2001. The editor of Canpara, the regular C.S.P.A. publication, informed me that as of February 2004, there were 400 female and 1,872 male members of the C.S.P.A. (N. Ambrus, personal communication, June 10, 2004).

8. Unfortunately, the IPC report does not allow for a comparable analysis of international data. The United States, though, is far and away the most important skydiving nation in terms of numbers of jumpers and jumps. In 2002, for instance, they accounted for 145,000 of the nearly 360,000 jumpers worldwide and thirty-three of the seventy-three fatalities. France was next in both categories, with 39,000 jumpers and eight fatalities (IPC 2003b).

9. A “no-pull/low-pull” is an incident where, for one reason or another, a jumper fails to deploy a parachute in time for it to fully inflate.

10. According IPC data, between 1996 and 2003, more than 500 fatalities were prevented by AAD technology.

11. RSL stands for “reserve static line,” a device that automatically deploys a jumper’s reserve when he or she jettisons a malfunctioning main.

12. Another example would be the advent of “wing suits.” These are jumpsuits designed to decrease a jumper’s vertical velocity in freefall while enabling him or her to cover a great deal of horizontal distance. Some jumpers use these suits to freefall in very close proximity to mountainsides, for instance.

13. In general, canopies have similar design characteristics as aircraft wings. Thus, jumpers often refer to canopy technology in these terms.

14. In fact, one interviewee later died as a result of impact with the ground after a low hook turn.

15. Jack’s “levels of aggressiveness” represent how radical a landing approach he will execute in particular conditions. This generally means how big of a turn he does prior to landing (a 90° hook turn is less aggressive than is a 180° turn, for example) and how vigorously he initiates this turn (a gradual hook turn results in less speed and risk exposure than does a very forceful turn).

16. This article appeared in Parachutist, an internationally distributed publication of the U.S.P.A. Parachutist is widely considered one of the leading publications in the skydiving community. This article draws on American data.

17. The other categories are equipment malfunctions, collisions, no pull/low pull, reserve parachute problems, and other.

18. One of the limitations to my data is important here. As I only interviewed active jumpers, I did not capture in my sample jumpers who may have left the sport after a mishap, perhaps because they questioned their abilities to negotiate the edge. This is deserving of further attention.

19. I am indebted to one of the reviewers for pointing out this connection.

20. My thanks to one of the reviewers for raising this point.
REFERENCES


