

**THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY**

**Blue Skies, Black Death:**

**Risk, Subculture Issues, and Gender in the Contemporary Skydiving Community**

by

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*We must not cease from exploration. And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we began and to know the place for the first time.*

T.S. Eliot

## **ABSTRACT**

This study investigates meanings of risk in the contemporary skydiving community. In so doing, it considers subculture issues and gender construction in this social milieu. Despite an increasing public interest in risk activities, relatively few investigators have examined the meanings these activities have for participants, and even fewer have problematized the masculinization of risk sport. In an effort to address these issues, a study of current skydivers in Alberta was undertaken. The findings show that risk is a highly contextual concept that carries with it much contradiction for skydivers. Further, these meanings of risk are shaped by the dynamics of the skydiving community and by notions of gender-appropriate behavior. Data from participant observation and in-depth interviews elucidate some of the complexities of participation for skydivers. Issues of identity construction and confirmation, managed risk, resistance and accommodation, and gender construction all play a part in the process of making meaning of an activity that many jumpers acknowledge as potentially deadly. Lyng's (1990) notion of edgework and Gramsci's (1971) hegemony theory inform the analysis of risk, subculture, and gender issues in this contentious and under-studied social context.

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## **DEDICATION**

*To Keith. Friend, teacher, inspiration.*

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## Chapter One: Introduction

### Purpose of the Study

So-called 'risk sports' are a popular diversion in contemporary Western society, whether people go out only for 'the ride' or become avid participants. The nature of many of these activities, however, clearly places participants' bodies and lives at risk. In the 1996 season, three highly experienced Canadian skydivers 'went in', i.e., died in jumping-related incidents (Andrie, 1997; Parker, 1997a and b)<sup>1</sup>. In addition to these deaths that shook the Canadian skydiving community, the usual array of injurious incidents occurred, leaving experienced, novice, and one-time skydivers battered, bruised, and broken. This study examines the skydiving community to explore the ways in which participants make sense of the activity and why they *choose* to place their lives at risk. These understandings are crucial because of the intense public scrutiny that results when such incidents occur. Because of the sensational nature of these incidents, the press exploit the opportunity to titillate readers by offering in-depth coverage of skydiving accidents (anonymous, 1994). Without understanding the viewpoints of participants, however, we cannot accurately assess the nature and impact of these incidents and their meaning for skydivers' assessment of risk more generally.

This study examines insiders' perspectives on topics frequently debated within the skydiving community. Regulation and safety issues (Dentay, 1997) and public

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that the terms skydiving and sport parachuting are often used interchangeably, despite some slight differences in meaning. From personal experience, I would argue that current

perceptions of the sport (Ettinger, 1995), for instance, are important issues for skydivers, and are critical in understanding how it is that skydivers constitute a “group”. Is the willingness to participate in skydiving, an activity generally perceived by the public as dangerous, the only criterion for membership in this group? Further, given that risk is generally associated with men, this study will explore gender relations within the sport, as skydiving has been historically dominated (in numbers, at least) by men, and is thus a useful site for examination of the construction of gendered identities.

Despite the abundance of popular press articles that focus on risk-sport activities, the literature on the *meanings* that participants make of risk activities is surprisingly slim (examples include Aran, 1974; Arnold, 1976; Lyng and Snow, 1986; Donnelly and Young, 1988; and Lyng and Bracey, 1995). How do voluntary risk-takers make sense of their choices and continue to participate in “dangerous” activities? Is there a group perspective on assessing danger? Further, issues of gender construction in the skydiving context, historically associated with notions of ‘natural’ masculinity, have rarely been addressed. The skydiving world provides a ripe opportunity to examine these critical issues in contemporary sociology. This thesis begins to address some of these concerns.

### **Scope of the Study**

This study adds to a growing literature on risk recreation (e.g., Pearson, 1979; Lyng and Snow, 1986; Brannigan and McDougall, 1987; Lyng, 1990; Robinson, 1992; Lyng and Bracey, 1995; Laurendeau and Wamsley, 1998), and hopefully brings us closer to a more

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participants more commonly use skydiving. At the same time, however, most academic literature refers to

comprehensive understanding of meanings of risk. This thesis makes a valuable contribution to the literature by examining in some depth participants' perspectives in a sport that has a unique history (Salter, 1997). This research is unique in that it seriously considers gender issues in risk sport, an arena that has significant potential as a site of gender construction. This work also contributes to the sport subcultures literature (e.g., Donnelly and Young, 1988; Beal, 1995) and the gender and sport literature (e.g., Sabo and Panepinto, 1990; Miller and Penz, 1991; Young and White, 1995; Young, 1997) by examining previous theoretical propositions in a different social context.

### **Organization of the Thesis**

This thesis is divided into six chapters. In chapter two I illuminate an historical backdrop against which to read the current study. Evolving from a circus attraction to a legitimate (if scrutinized) sporting activity, skydiving has a colorful and complex history. After shedding light on the development of the sport, I examine studies of the current skydiving community. Through an examination of previous sociological discussions of skydiving, I outline insights that informed my approach to the current study. I also address the weaknesses of past studies of participants' meanings of the sport, and the ways in which this study addresses those weaknesses. Lastly, I outline the form of the contemporary skydiving community in Alberta.

In chapter three, I examine previous works in the areas of risk, subcultures, and gender as they pertain to the current study. I briefly discuss why these three areas were chosen for

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the activity as 'sport parachuting'.

this project. In the risk section, I outline previous studies of risk activities, and the meanings these activities have for participants. I also consider risk at a conceptual level, i.e., risk as contextual and constructed in process. Further, I consider in some detail Lyng's (1990) notion of "edgework", as this model played a significant role in informing the current study. In the subcultures segment, I examine issues such as rituals, symbols, shared meaning, and construction and confirmation of identities in a subcultural setting. The term subculture itself is dissected, with terms like resistance and accommodation elucidated. In the gender portion, I discuss gender not as an attribute of people, but as an ongoing accomplishment of individuals through their interactions with other gendered people and in terms of their position within broader institutions that constrain understandings of gender. I also examine hegemony theory as a useful tool in understanding gender because it treats systems of domination as dynamic and in process, constantly being contested and shifted, but appearing natural, even common sense.

In chapter four, I outline the research design of this project, the specific technical choices made in the research process, and the epistemological and ontological assumptions that guided these choices. I discuss the strengths and weaknesses of participant observation and in-depth interview techniques, as well as some of the ambiguities and complexities present in each. Moreover, I delineate the reflexive approach taken in this research, and choices made in connection with this approach. In keeping with this reflexive approach to research, I also outline some of the ways in which my presence in the field may have influenced the research process.

In the fifth chapter, the findings are presented, again separated into three sections. In the risk section, I delve into contextual risk, rationalization of risk, “managed risk” (the approach most experienced jumpers take), as well as making sense of injury and death in the sport. Further, I discuss elements of the edgework model and how these were evident in the data. In the subcultures section, I examine shared meanings, rituals, and issues of identity in the contemporary skydiving community. In the gender section, I consider gender construction, perceptions of gender differences in aptitudes, risk-taking, emotions, and perceptions of gender marking (Messner, Carlisle Duncan, and Jensen, 1993). I elaborate ways that skydivers challenge assumptions about gender and how, at deeper levels, they reproduce dominant and seemingly natural gender discourses.

In chapter six, I draw links between the findings discussed in chapter five and the theoretical ideas outlined in chapter three. I argue that skydivers’ participation is rife with contradiction about the kinds of risks they take, and the potential results of those risks. I contend that the notion of ‘control’ is central in understanding ideas of risk in this context. I outline how this concept helps us understand how skydivers fit into Lyng’s (1990) edgework model. Further, I assert that skydivers, like members of many subcultures, resist some notions held by members of mainstream society while accommodating others. As well, I discuss ways in which skydivers “do gender” in interaction, and the implications these interactions have for perceptions of gender more broadly. Moreover, I discuss the links between the three theoretical areas explored in the project, and how my choice of framework influenced the research project and the final product. Lastly, I delineate the broader implications of my research. Specifically, I note

how this research builds on previous research in the areas of subcultures, risk, and gender, and the ways in which future endeavors can improve upon my efforts.

## **Chapter Two: Historical Context**

### **Introduction**

It is important to recognize that a social setting does not exist in a timeless void. If we are to understand particular types of behavior in contemporary sport parachuting, for example, we must take at least a cursory glance at the path by which this activity came to take its current form. Knowledge of social processes that operated decades or centuries ago may offer some improved understanding of similar social processes operating in contemporary society. As such, in this short chapter, I illuminate an historical backdrop against which to situate the current study of skydivers. I outline the technological innovations that laid the foundation for the sport, as well as social dimensions in the development of skydiving. Further, I examine recent studies of skydivers. I discuss the contributions and shortcomings of these works. Lastly, I outline the current organization of sport parachuting in Alberta. The process of becoming involved in the sport and of achieving and maintaining membership in associations in this particular context are important considerations in locating the current study. From there, we can begin to look at contemporary jumpers with a better understanding of those that paved the way for the sport as we now see it.

### **Genesis and Early Development of the Activity**

As with many risk activities (cf. Berton, 1992; Pearson, 1979), the exact genesis of parachuting is a topic of considerable debate: "Time tends to distort the facts and the origin of the parachute idea appears lost in a haze of antiquity. Chinese legend credits

emperor Shun (2258-2208 B.C.) with being the first to descend in a parachute” (Greenwood, 1978: 17). Although Leonardo Da Vinci is commonly thought to be the originator of the modern concept of parachuting, Horan (1979: xiii) notes that Fausto Veranzio produced the first known printed sketch of a parachute, titled ‘Homo Volans’ (flying man), in 1595.

One of the major contributors to the early popularity of parachuting and other life-risking activities was the media. Throughout the 19th century, newspapers took every opportunity to sell copies by appealing to readers’ sense of courage, adventure, and daring (Berton, 1992). Such media attention served to legitimate ‘natural’ notions of masculinity, and contributed to the maintenance of a culture that encouraged further feats of daring, a culture ripe for the exploits of stunt jumpers.

There was much disagreement as to the appropriate use of parachutes. While popular with spectators, parachutes were not immediately accepted as *legitimate* safety devices. Initially, they were designed as safety devices to save one from either a burning building or a malfunctioning hot air balloon (Horan, 1979). While the potential of the parachute as a life-saving device was recognized by some (Greenwood, 1978; Horan, 1979; Meacock, 1982), the early attitudes of other groups towards the parachute as a piece of safety equipment were ambivalent at best:

In 1838 John Wise, an American balloonist, permitted his balloon to explode at 13000 feet. He then descended safely to the ground, supported by fragments of the bag. He held the accomplishment as proof that a

damaged balloon itself was more practical as a life preserver than a fragile parachute. (Greenwood, 1978: 20)

Balloonists, the first aviators to have access to parachutes, balked at the idea of taking a parachute with them for two reasons: the 'unnecessary' weight, and the idea that carrying one implied a lack of faith in the balloon they were flying (Horan, 1979). Early balloonists, then, were at least as apprehensive about the perceptions others had regarding their confidence as about their own safety.

Without general acceptance (initially) as a useful piece of safety equipment, the parachute found a more receptive audience with the entertainment-seeking public and the military and, as a result, gained a degree of legitimacy:

From the first authenticated jump in 1797 until 1930, parachutists throughout the world were, almost without exception, carnival stunt men or service personnel... Ironically, these early experiences paved the way for the evolution of the sport. The successes (and the failures) provided invaluable expertise to certain individuals who became important in the sport's popularity and acceptance. (Salter, 1979: 1)

With the advent of fixed-wing flight at the beginning of the 20th century came new problems for parachutists. These included the speed of the aircraft, the opening shock of the parachute, and the lack of an apparatus attached to the aircraft from which a parachutist could safely deploy a parachute (Horan, 1979). Furthermore, with the new technology came a renewed objection on the part of aviators to the functional application of parachutes: "Allied flyers vowed to stay with their burning, plunging aircraft, to a needless death in a crash" (Fensch, 1980: 21). As Horan (1979: xvii) notes, "[t]he general feeling was that parachutes as a life-saving device had no practical place in aeronautics". If these negative feelings towards the use of parachutes were to be

overcome, there would have to be a change in perceptions. Rather than being seen as a sign of weakness (i.e. a lack of faith in one's aircraft), the parachute would come to symbolize courage and adventure.

### **Military Influence**

World War I was a turning point for parachuting. As Horan notes, by the time World War I "was in full swing, the safety and performance of parachutes had considerably improved - so much so, in fact, that much of their previous notoriety was giving way to cautious optimism" (1979: xix). Williams notes that for "many men, their sense of themselves as masculine is deeply tied to military prowess and adventure" (1994: 415). In the case of World War I, that sense of adventure was displayed (by some, at least) through parachuting:

Possibly the first serious plan for the employment of parachute troops in combat was of Brig. Gen. William Mitchell when, in October 1918, he won acceptance for a proposal to capture Metz by parachuting from Allied bombers a strong part of an infantry division in the rear of the German defenses. (Huston, 1972: 47)

The military's involvement in parachuting activities affected the development of the sport in a number of ways. One by-product of military involvement was an increased demand for equipment. This demand led to important technological advances. For instance, in an effort to come up with a parachute suitable for use by military pilots, Leslie Irvin and Floyd Smith "designed, constructed, and tested the first practical manually operated parachute in the United States" (Horan, 1979: xxi). After demonstrating the suitability of the equipment by performing a 'freefall jump' (a jump in which one's parachute is opened manually after a delay following exit from the aircraft) in 1919, Irvin received an

order from the army for three hundred of his parachutes (Horan, 1979). The military provided such an immense demand for equipment that the few manufacturers employed were unable to meet the demand until 1942 (Huston, 1972).

There was another important way in which the military experience in World Wars I and II helped legitimate parachuting as a sporting activity. By dealing with many of the logistics surrounding the activity, the military experience paved the way for innovations in safety and performance. For example, Huston (1972) notes how the military encountered and dealt with the problem of appropriate airspeed for jumping activities:

The B-24...could not operate in formation at a speed of less than 150 miles per hour, and when paratroopers jumped at that speed they suffered considerable shock and painful strap burns...It was estimated that one hundred hours of transition training would be necessary to qualify pilots to handle the B-24 as a troop carrier... (90)

Huston goes on to describe the military solution to the problem of what is now known in sport parachuting as 'spotting', i.e., getting out of the plane at the appropriate spot above the ground: "It did not take very many airborne operations to make clear the necessity for navigational aids. At first commanders tried to overcome the difficulties by more intensive training of pilots. But radar offered a more promising solution" (1972: 113).

The defining moment for the legitimation of parachuting came in 1941. As Huston describes, in the spring of 1941, Germans "offered their final demonstration that airborne troupes were 'here to stay' - the ... assault of Crete. The capture of that strategic island in the eastern Mediterranean left a lasting impression on Allied armies" (1972: 48). This assault was the culmination of the successes and the technological advances facilitated by

the military in the realm of parachuting activities. This led to a widespread acceptance of parachuting as an acceptable activity. As Meacock notes, “modern sport parachuting, with a widespread public interest, can be directly traced to the establishment in 1940 of the British Airborne Forces” (1982: 132). Modern parachuting was and is influenced by the military not only in Britain, but also in North America:

Without a doubt, sport parachuting owes a great debt to the military: most of us learn to jump on military surplus gear; some of us still pack surplus reserves. After World War Two, after Korea, after Viet Nam, some sport parachute clubs were started and sustained by ex-military jumpers. (Fensch, 1980: 135)

With the foundation laid by the experiences of stunt jumpers and military personnel, in the post-World War II period, parachuting began to emerge as a sporting activity in Western societies.

### **The Emergence of Sport Parachuting**

Although the immediate post World War II era was one of relative prosperity for parachuting, it was still not accepted as a legitimate *recreational* activity. There was much resistance in the early 1950s on the part of airport officials to the notion of parachuting as leisure as opposed to exhibition or life saving (Horan, 1979). Gradually, sport parachuting became institutionalized, with national associations forming in many countries (Horan, 1979). In 1963, the Federal Aviation Administration established the first rules governing the sport (Fensch, 1980).

The advent of ‘relative work’ (jumpers freefalling in close proximity) in the late 1950s was important in many ways to the evolution of sport parachuting (Fensch, 1980). Not

only did relative work facilitate the evaluation of jumpers' abilities by the creation of new skills to be mastered and demonstrated, but it also provided the basis for an increasingly social angle on the sport. As abilities and techniques developed, progressively larger freefall formations became possible, building up to 50-person formations in the late 1970s (Fensch, 1980), and a 297-person formation in 1996 (Wright, 1997)<sup>2</sup>. Large and/or more complex formation jumps necessitate an increase in cooperation and communication between jumpers, many of whom do not know each other before the jump (Wright, 1997; Perron, 1997). The increased level of communication between jumpers from different drop zones [a drop zone (or DZ) is the place where skydiving (and many social) activities take place], regions, or even countries, contributed to and was facilitated by shared meanings, rituals, and symbols in the sport culture (these shared elements of the community are discussed in detail in chapter five).

The most significant technological innovation to shape the form of modern sport parachuting was the ram-air parachute, introduced in the late 1960s. Instead of a round parachute that simply slowed descent (leaving one at the mercy of the winds), the ram-air parachute was designed like an airplane wing and allowed accurate steering and softer landings (Fensch, 1980). This innovation changed the sport dramatically. The implications of this technological advance were far-reaching: "The square parachute made the parachutist, for the first time, a *pilot* not just a captive of the winds" (Fensch, 1980: 25, emphasis in original). At first glance, this would appear to signal increased

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<sup>2</sup>This '297-way' is not recognized as an official world record because it was designed as a '302-way'. In order to be recognized as an official record, every jumper has to be in the exact spot planned in advance.

safety in the sport because “athletes benefit from technological advancements in terms of sporting safety” (Balka, 1995: 42). Modern adaptations to the design of the ram-air canopy, however, reflect more than simple technological innovation. As Works and LeBlanc (1995) note, modern high-performance canopies are capable of previously unimaginable ground speed and responsiveness, while still allowing for safe landings. These authors argue, however, that these canopies also reduce the skydiver’s margin for error. Interestingly, there is some controversy within the skydiving community as to the suitability of such high-performance canopies. Some jumpers question the real motivation of those who feel it necessary to keep stretching the limits of performance at greater risk to the well being of themselves and others, suggesting that some jumpers are perhaps negligent (Works and LeBlanc, 1995).

With an understanding of the historical development of sport parachuting, we now turn to contemporary studies of sport parachuting culture. Examining the contributions and shortcomings of these works helps illuminate the aims of the current project.

### **Earlier Works on Skydiving**

Few academic studies have examined skydivers specifically, and even fewer have done so from a sociological perspective. Those that have are, for the most part, outdated by decades. The utility of examining these studies, however, is that they provide an historical context in which to situate the current study.

Arnold (1976) used participant observation in carrying out a largely descriptive examination of skydivers. He argued that jumpers are not daredevils, and in fact do not view the sport as dangerous. It is not the risk that attracts participants, but the desire for escape and community. Skydivers have “shared similar experiences, and ... also share a common argot, a common store of knowledge and stories, and common norms” (Arnold, 1976: 303). Technofetishism (the obsession with the newest and highest-performance equipment) and statisticalizing (the preoccupation with numbers of jumps, hours of freefall accumulated, and so on), he asserted, are central to the subculture. Central values and rituals of the subculture vary little from drop zone to drop zone because skydivers often travel and share experiences. Arnold noted that there is overt sexism in the subculture, with some male instructors and participants distrusting women in the sport or claiming women are incapable of developing the same level of skill as men.

Delk (1980) argued that sport parachuting was prototypic of high-risk sports (a debatable claim). While his study was largely concerned with anxiety and pleasure, there are some aspects of this research from which we can draw insight for our current purposes. First, Delk posited that skydivers object to the public perception of the sport as risky, asserting that “skydiving is less dangerous than driving an automobile on the [U.S.]’s highways” (1980: 395). Second, Delk noted that thirty of his 41 respondents had military experience. It is important to be cognizant of the links between the military and sport parachuting, links which were much more evident twenty years ago than now (Laurendeau and Wamsley, 1998). Interestingly, Delk also argued that jumpers might feel compelled to jump in order to prove to others (and themselves) that they are not

cowards. They want to be thought of as macho, so they continually re-affirm this for themselves. While this line of reasoning is relatively less sophisticated, it does touch on codes of masculinity in society, codes that are clearly at play in the world of sport more broadly (Messner and Sabo, 1990). Lastly, Delk observed that a positive gain of participation in risk activities is the feeling of belonging to an elite group. This is a recurring notion in the literature, that jumpers feel like they “get it”, and non-jumpers do not or cannot understand.

In the most recent and sociological work on skydivers, Lyng and Snow (1986) used ethnographic methods in generating data for a discussion of the dynamics of subcultures and the ways in which subcultural changes are tied to changes in broader society. The authors assert that from the late 1960s to the mid 1970s, the skydiving subculture went from one dominated by sexuality and hedonism (the “Eat-Fuck-Skydive” orientation) to one that was counter-cultural. From that point, they argue, the sport has moved towards an “edgework” orientation, with participants skydiving not to minimize risks, but to maintain control of as much risk as can be managed. This notion of edgework is elaborated in the next chapter.

### **The Contemporary Skydiving Community**

With an understanding of the historical forces that have shaped the development of sport parachuting, it would be instructive to consider the current organization of the sport in the context under consideration. I will briefly outline the process of becoming involved in the sport, issues of formal membership in Provincial and/or National associations, as well

as the distinction between two types of drop zones (clubs and business-oriented operations).

Drop zones are quite accessible to anyone (typically those recruited at a University or similar setting) who wants to undertake a first skydive (and perhaps progress towards independence in the sport) and has the money to do so. A first jump in Alberta typically costs somewhere between one hundred and two hundred dollars. After anywhere from an hour to a full day of ground school (depending on the type of jump), a student is ready to don a “rig” (a skydiving harness and parachute assembly) and get in an aircraft. For many neophytes, the first jump is also the last. Having faced and conquered their fear, they no longer have an interest in skydiving activities. For the few who pursue the sport beyond that first overwhelming experience, there is a gradual process of assuming more and more responsibility for their own safety and progression. After a certain level of knowledge is attained and demonstrated, a student is cleared for solo freefall. The next major stage in a student’s development is the attainment of an “A” (novice) Certificate of Proficiency (CoP). The “A” CoP certifies that a jumper is able to take care of themselves on a skydive from start to finish; that they no longer need to be under the direct supervision of an instructor. In order to obtain this certificate, one must become a member of the Canadian Sport Parachuting Association (CSPA). CSPA membership provides several benefits for jumpers, including a system of certification of abilities that is recognized virtually everywhere in the world, a subscription to *Canpara* magazine, and liability insurance in the event that it becomes necessary. A current CSPA membership

(or some equivalent) is mandatory in order to jump at virtually any drop zone in the country.

At a certain point in a skydiver's progression, they are encouraged to purchase their own rig instead of using the student equipment owned by the drop zone. A first rig usually costs about two thousand dollars, although one could spend less than a thousand or more than seven thousand. This is the point at which skydivers realize a considerable increase in freedom. Once they have their own equipment and an "A" CoP, they can jump at virtually any drop zone (in Canada or abroad) whether or not an instructor is available. In Canada, a jump without an instructor or gear rental typically costs between twenty and thirty jumps. For the average jumper who does 100-150 jumps in a year, then, jump costs are well into the thousands of dollars a year.

Once jumpers have their own gear, they can concentrate on progression towards jumping safely with other skydivers (while this is not the only possible path, it is definitely the most common at this stage). With increased experience, jumpers start to participate in more complex forms of skydiving such as freeflying, freestyle, and/or formation skydiving. As they gain experience, they can also obtain higher-level CoPs. "B" (intermediate), "C" (advanced), and "D" (expert) CoPs are commonly pursued by experienced jumpers.

In general, there are two distinct types of drop zones. One is a club, the other a business operation. At a club, members run the drop zone, and membership fees help pay for

social activities, drop zone facilities, and so on. Most jumpers are experienced, and there are relatively few students to subsidize the jumping of anyone else. Jumpers are usually members for a long period of time, and a relatively tightly-knit community results. Jumpers often get together away from the drop zone, either at a weekly bar night or at social event such as house-warmings, Christmas parties, and the like. Because clubs have little income, their operation is sometimes year to year, as they must secure aircraft, runway access, club facilities, and so on. Business drop zones, conversely, subsist to a great extent on the income generated by skydiving students. In Canada especially, because of the small size of these drop zones, many of the experienced jumpers are involved in coaching and instructing, and thus spend less time doing their own skydives. Even less experienced jumpers often subsidize their own participation in the sport by assisting with the operation, performing jobs like packing parachutes or organizing the jumping order.

Many experienced jumpers spend time at both types of drop zones. On a given weekend, they go wherever they believe the best jumping to be. Whatever drop zone someone frequents, however, many experienced jumpers in Alberta belong to the Alberta Sport Parachuting Association (ASPA). ASPA has a mandate to promote skydiving in Alberta and Albertan skydivers in their pursuits in the sport. Unlike most provincial associations in Canada, ASPA has ample funds available to meet this mandate. Much of ASPA's funding comes from volunteer activities such as Bingos and Casinos. They subsidize coach and instructor courses, and offer seminars in equipment and safety, formation skydiving, other disciplines of skydiving, even first aid. They also help fund the training

of their high-performance jumpers who take part in Provincial, National, and International competitions. Perhaps the most visible way in which ASPA promotes skydiving in Alberta is by providing funds for a drop zone to bring in a large aircraft in hosting the Alberta Provincial Championships each year. When it comes to aircraft, skydivers generally consider bigger to be better. ASPA helps ensure that there is at least one large airplane brought in each year so that skydivers have the opportunity to jump out of something other than a Cessna 182 (the jump plane of choice for most small drop zones).

### **Summary**

Initially, parachutes were the projects of a few innovators hoping to provide a safety device for emergency situations. It was soon evident, however, that parachutes and their related activities were not seen as fully legitimate, and thus found an audience only with those seeking entertainment, a circus attraction of sorts. With military ideas for the employment of parachute troops in World War I, and the widespread deployment of these soldiers in World War II, many of the logistics surrounding the activity were effectively managed, and some degree of legitimacy was achieved. In the post-World War II era, individuals who had been exposed to the activity through their military involvement became influential in the realization of parachuting as a leisure activity. Since then, both technology and performance have advanced, and skydiving has become as close to a mainstream activity as it has ever been. As skydiving has grown in popularity and legitimacy, researchers (e.g. Salter, 1997) have become somewhat more interested in examining the activities and their meanings for participants. Few investigators (Lyng and

Snow, 1986) have looked at skydivers as a community with particular boundaries and characteristics and have tried to understand jumpers' behavior in terms of these group dynamics. Before turning to these issues, we must familiarize ourselves with the literature in certain key theoretical areas. It is to this task that we now turn.

## Chapter Three: Literature Review

### Introduction

We now turn to an examination of the literature in the areas of risk activities, subcultures, and gender. In doing so, I lay the groundwork for my theoretical approach in examining the skydiving community. While these areas are treated separately in this chapter, they are inextricably intertwined in practice. This should be kept in mind as we discuss the literature in each of these areas. Finally, I identify some of the gaps in the literature that this project addresses.

The selection of the three bodies of literature addressed here is worthy of some discussion. My initial research interest in skydiving and skydivers was fueled by a curiosity about the voluntary risk element of the activity. Why do individuals voluntarily expose themselves to the possibility of danger? How is it, for instance, that someone can lose a friend in the sport, and yet continue to participate? How dangerous do skydivers consider their participation (knowing that non-jumpers generally consider it very dangerous)? Would someone return to the sport after a serious injury? If so, why? These were some of the problems I wished to address. As I delved into literature concerning other “risk-sports,” I discovered two things. First, some researchers had examined risk sport participants as a subculture, i.e., a group with particular boundaries and a set of meanings that created ties between participants, and an entity separate from but related to the dominant culture. Second, gender had not often been problematized in these discussions of risk, despite the apparent male predominance. It seemed to me that

if I wished to capture the complexity of risk in this particular social context, I had to examine subcultural issues as well as issues related to gender and the apparent masculinization of the sport. If participants sharing in risk activities often develop a sense of community, construct rituals, have a particular lingo, and so on, these concepts may shed some light on the ways in which they come to understand risk. Participants understand their surroundings not as isolated individuals, but as members of social groups. As such, I wished to examine the qualities of this social group in an effort to better understand the perspectives of individuals. How do skydivers come to feel like part of “the group”? How do rituals, symbols, and/or lingo contribute to the construction of a subcultural identity? What kinds of meanings about the sport do participants share? As for the issues of gender, my own theoretical interests in issues of gender construction and gender inequality lead me to see the lack of attention to gender in the risk sport literature as a significant oversight. In a society in which activities are imbued with notions of gender appropriateness in terms of masculinity and femininity, risk sport certainly seems a potentially fruitful context to examine. Do men and women see the risk element of the sport differently? How do participants talk about women and men in the sport? How do women and men make sense of their own genders in this social setting?

### **Risk**

Several activities (e.g., rock climbing, motor sports, skydiving, criminal activities) are broadly perceived to be ‘risky’. That is to say that people (participants and observers) believe that by taking part in these activities, individuals are placing their bodies or lives in danger. Why would anyone want to do this? How do people make sense of taking

part in activities that they know have caused great harm to others? It is to these issues that I now turn.

Risk is a function not only of one's circumstances, but also of one's interpretation of those circumstances (Dake, 1992; Frey, 1991). Participants in 'risk' activities define what is and is not risky in the context of their web of social relations. They draw on their social groups to understand what does and does not constitute danger in the course of their everyday lives. These groups share "beliefs and values that justify different ways of behaving" (Dake, 1992: 28). It is in terms of these beliefs and values that individuals come to consider a particular activity as having an acceptable level of risk. Frey agrees with Dake, asserting that risk is contextual, i.e., that understanding perception of risk is vital to interpreting the acceptance of this risk:

Culture determines what is risky (acceptable risk), to what extent, and whether it is worth entering into a risky event. Skydivers, for example, view jumping as a reasonably safe activity with a relatively low probability of failure (risk evaluation), and as a result view the benefits of participation to be well worth the risk of harmful outcome. *Risk is whatever is defined as risky at a particular time, in a particular place, by a particular group of people.* (Frey, 1991: 139, emphasis added)

The effect of social and cultural setting on the way in which risk is perceived by individuals is delineated by Dake: "[n]o doubt risk perception is socially constructed and culturally biased in the sense, and to the degree, that individuals respond to and reshape the prevailing opinions in their own social circles" (1992: 32). In a tight-knit group such as that organized around a high-risk sport, common ways of rationalizing risk are shared

between experienced members (implicitly or explicitly), and are passed on to neophytes as part of the process of achieving membership.

Within a given activity at any particular time, subcultural definitions of risk may differ for participants at different levels of involvement. As Ewert and Hollenhorst (1994) delineate:

Those participating at the highest levels of difficulty may actually perceive less risk in the experience than novices participating at less demanding levels...Adventure recreators appear to have an implicit belief that they are in control of the experience, that they are not exposing themselves to risk and danger... (188-89)

These “implicit beliefs” are, at least in part, manifestations of the collective beliefs of the sporting group, since “relational forms, together with the cultural biases that justify them, are each hypothesized to engender shared representations of what constitutes a hazard and what does not” (Douglas, 1970b, 1978, cited in Dake, 1992: 28).

It is not only participants’ perspectives that are important in understanding risk. One common thread through works on risk sport is that participants encounter numerous questions from outsiders about their willingness to participate in the activity. These perceptions from without are important to consider, as they undoubtedly shape (to some extent) the perspectives of participants. In attempting to understand the views ‘outsiders’ have of participants in high-risk activities, it is imperative that we understand the role of the media in shaping public perceptions about poorly understood phenomena. As Young (1986) explains, themes in ‘popular’ and ‘quality’ press coverage help to shape the reality(ies) around particular events, and, in the case of soccer hooliganism, contributed

to the public outcry witnessed in the aftermath of incidents in Europe in the mid-1980s.

Young argues that there are several aspects of press treatment of soccer hooliganism (and other deviant activities more broadly):

(1) the views which are selected and presented come predominantly from both the primary definers and the press, but are forwarded with such frequency and so interchangeably that only one dominant 'public voice' (Hall et al., 1978: 62) seems to emerge; (2) the inclination of these views and statements to focus on the most sensational features of the event ... tends to exaggerate the importance of the phenomenon being reported and concomitantly the threat offered by it; ... (5) with press reports pervaded by hyperbolic and violent language, supported throughout with vivid photographs, thick headlines and bold exclamation and question marks, the cumulative results and effects becoming quite alarming, and the symptoms of moral panic emerge. (Young, 1986: 263)

The reporting of skydiving 'incidents' often takes a similar form. Reporters who have little understanding of the technical aspects of the sport report incidents in inaccurate and misleading ways, but the priority accorded the story by many different sources makes it appear that the press is an authority on the matter. In the last two years, in addition to the negative press surrounding skydiving "accidents", the sport has received some positive press locally. This has been due, in large part, to the initiative of some experienced jumpers who have proposed story ideas to local newspapers in order to improve public perceptions of the sport.

Cultural studies scholars argue that a group sharing patterns of social relations subscribes to a set of cultural biases that shape the way actors in the group understand themselves, their bodies, and their interactions (Dake, 1992). While not a homogeneous group, athletes in particular sports do share certain patterns of interaction that promote a

common set of “cultural biases.” A significant aspect of the contemporary set of cultural biases in many sports involves the willingness to sacrifice one’s body for the “good of the team” or for enhanced individual performance. Coakley (1998: 146) calls this form of participation “positive deviance.” The notion of “positive deviance” is useful in understanding risk sport. Hughes and Coakley (1991) outline some of the ways in which positive deviance contributes to unhealthy dimensions of sport. For Hughes and Coakley, this type of deviance stems not from a rejection of particular important values in sport (e.g., taking risks in the pursuit of higher performance), but from an uncritical acceptance of these values. This orientation towards sport places athletes’ bodies (even their lives) at risk, and can cause irreparable damage to emotional relationships with family and friends since the athlete sees a particular extreme type of athletic participation as super-ordinate to other facets of their lives. Hughes and Coakley also hypothesize that this extreme acceptance of the sport ethic results in strong fraternal bonds among participants, particularly “in sports wherein athletes are perceived to be unique because they endure extreme challenges and risks” (1991: 313). This ‘selfless’ way of participating in sport inevitably *does* lead to pain and injury, and so an athlete must develop an understanding that corresponds to her or his set of cultural biases. This process of making sense of pain and injury is illuminated in the discussion of risk and gender to follow.

### *Edgework*

A recent conceptual framework with which to examine risk is outlined by Lyng (1990). Lyng’s theoretical discussion of ‘edgework’ draws in part on data from his study (Lyng and Snow, 1986) of skydiving. At its core, the concept of edgework conceptualizes

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). Lyng argues that while different forms of edgework provide different specific sensations, there are some common themes, including: self-actualization; “fear during the initial, anticipatory phases of the experience”; and elation/exhilaration afterward. Lyng holds that edgeworkers “often interpret their experiences as magical and sensual, as belonging to a special realm that transcends more conventional, institutional experience” (1993: 109). Lyng also posits that edgework is more common among younger than older people, and among men than women. The tentative explanation Lyng offers for this gender dynamic, however, leaves me unsatisfied:

Males are more likely to have an illusory sense of control over fateful endeavors because of the socialization pressures on males to develop a skill orientation towards their environment. Insofar as males are encouraged to use their skills to affect the outcome of all situations, even those that are almost entirely chance determined, they are likely to develop a distorted sense of their ability to control fateful circumstances... Hence, edgework may attract more males than females because the male skill orientation may lead them to underestimate the risks involved. (Lyng, 1990: 873)

This explanation does not take into account issues of power and resources (women and men may have differential access to these activities, or be rewarded or sanctioned

differently for participating in them), and paints participants as too easily molded by socialization processes.

### **Subcultures**

Vanreusel and Renson (1982) define a subculture as an identifiable collectivity with a set of norms, values, sanctions, etc. that has a specific social structure; an impact on the behavior and lifestyle of its members; and which operates as an entity but not totally independent from the dominant culture. This relationship between the subculture and the dominant culture, Brake (1985) suggests, is essential to understanding the 'focal concerns' of the subculture (i.e., the shared values and concerns around which the subculture is constructed).

Subcultures are often perceived as groups that do not conform to certain values and beliefs commonly held in 'mainstream society'. Indeed, it is argued that the stigma associated with their non-conformity (i.e., the view outsiders hold of subcultural members) may be a necessary and desirable feature of membership:

this repudiation of outsiders, necessary in order to protect oneself from feeling concerned about what they may think, may go so far as to make nonconformity with the expectations of outsiders a positive criterion of status within the group. Certain kinds of conduct, that is, become reputable precisely because they are disreputable in the eyes of the 'out-group'. (Cohen, 1955: 53)

Some subcultures, then, construct values in opposition to those of "mainstream" society precisely because they are oppositional. Parts of participants' lives do not make sense in terms of dominant values and practices, so a subculture becomes a setting in which

participants better understand their circumstances because there is a better fit between their experiences and the values of the subculture. Thornton (1997: 204) agrees that non-conformity is an important aspect of membership in many subcultures, asserting that there is little agreement on the characteristics of members, but members are “happy to identify a homogeneous crowd to which they don’t belong.” For example, skydivers recognize that members have different occupational, educational, and class backgrounds, but they are adamant that no skydiver belongs to that group of people who are “afraid to live”. That is to say that jumpers assert that they, unlike members of ‘mainstream’ society, get out and pursue their interests rather than sitting on the couch wishing they could try these things (this is elaborated in the findings chapter).

Social resistance has been a key concept in academic studies of social groups organized around particular marginalized activities. Whether we are discussing skateboarders (Beal, 1995, 1996), surfers (Booth, 1994), rock climbers and rugby players (Donnelly and Young, 1988), boxers (Halbert, 1997), bodybuilders (Klein, 1993), bikers (Lyng and Bracey, 1995), skinheads (Young and Craig, 1997), or any other subgroup, social resistance is a central notion in understanding the location of a particular group in the mosaic of social groups in contemporary society. Crosset and Beal (1997) go so far as to argue that the term subculture has been used so broadly as to lose its explanatory power. Cultural studies theorists, they argue, have come to assume resistance and marginalization of subgroups, and thus are left only to interpret which of the dominant values are being opposed, and how. Subculture status, they note, “is not claimed by a subgroup but defined by their treatment by members of dominant groups” (Crosset and

Beal, 1997: 80). Crosset and Beal further argue that we must not assume marginalization, but prove it. If we are unable to prove resistance, the group should be called a “subworld” as opposed to a subculture (Crosset and Beal, 1997).

It is often the case that a group with an alternative culture engages not only in resistance, but also in accommodation. That is to say that in resisting certain values dominant in mainstream society they actually reproduce others. This does not mean that the resistance has disappeared or is unimportant, but simply that this (sub)group has not completely overcome the dominant notions held by members of ‘conventional’ society. Given how common sense many of these dominant notions seem, it should not come as a great surprise that particular subgroups do not resist all of them. A few examples of contemporary research into the resistance and accommodation of some of these social groups may illustrate the problem.

Drawing on data from Hunter S. Thompson’s (1967) case study of the Hell’s Angels, as well as their own participant observation data, Lyng and Bracey (1995) argue that the criminalization of the biker subculture came about largely as a response to class oppression, and that the media image of bikers contributed to their criminal identities. These researchers argue that bikers face structural barriers to social rewards based on their position in the class system in contemporary society. In a society in which higher education and a prestigious career are signs of success in life, bikers who have neither are considered less accomplished as individuals by those who conform to cultural expectations. ‘Angels’, the investigators argue, relish their deviant identities, and create a

subculture in which mainstream norms (those that privilege the middle class) have no value. They construct their own culture in which being labeled a 'loser' by outsiders is a sign of accomplishment. Other signs of accomplishment are clearly destructive, but create the illusion of being in control of one's circumstances:

... the positive assessment of death can ... be understood as part of a unique strategy for coming to terms with the insults and injuries of lower-class existence. By adopting a fatalistic view of one's chances for a "short and brutish" life, many lower-class individuals tacitly accept their powerlessness to control their own existence. By contrast, the bikers respond to this problem by eagerly embracing the likelihood of an early death, thereby creating an *illusion* of control over their lives. (Lyng and Bracey, 1995: 243, emphasis in original).

The authors offer the 'edgework' perspective (Lyng, 1990) as a potential explanation for this type of behavior. They argue that behavior that 'pushes the limits' is euphoric and self-actualizing, particularly for people who face considerable structural constraints in their lives. This reasoning sounds similar to the notion of 'magical solutions', which, as Hebdige describes, conceptualizes the subculture as a context in which participants both escape from and fit back into the "surrounding terrain" (Hebdige, 1979: 122). The escape comes from the ways in which a particular group resists the dominant social order, valuing risk activities and drug-induced euphoria over a 'conventional' conservative lifestyle, for instance. Fitting back into the surrounding terrain, or accommodation, is accomplished by a group in that their 'marginal' existence often ends up reproducing many of the dominant values in modern society, as with notions of adventure and toughness in the biker subculture.

Young and Craig (1997) provide another example of the ways in which resistance and accommodation play out in a social context. In a study of a group of skinheads, the authors assert that rather than espousing radically different values than members of mainstream society, 'skins' actually reproduce dominant values about gender, race, and ethnicity. While these skins certainly believe themselves to have radically different value-systems than members of mainstream society, the above-mentioned dimensions of their worldview tie them to broader society in concrete and important ways.

### *Sport Subcultures*

Several sports sociologists (i.e. Donnelly & Young, 1988; Williams, 1989; Donnelly, 1993; Booth, 1994; Beal, 1995) have drawn on the early work of theorists like Clarke et al (1975), Hebdige (1979), and Brake (1985) to examine groups organized around particular sporting activities as potential sites of social resistance, and to examine the values of participants in these groups. Beal (1995) postulates that 'skaters' resist dominant sporting ideologies (competition, adult authority) in overt ways as well as in their everyday participation 'style'. This resistance, however, is a local one, not intended to carry over to other institutions, but rather to create an environment in which these particular participants are comfortable. The social resistance of this group is further limited by the reproduction of notions dominant in mainstream sport. There are clear overtones of sexism, as well as some racism and homophobia, in the subculture. Beal (1995) argues that this group, while challenging some of the dominant notions of mainstream sport and society, reproduces others.

Donnelly (1993) explores the historical relationship between particular sport subcultures and the dominant sport culture. Some activities, he argues, maintain a particular meaning (context) while the dominant sport culture undergoes a transformative process. Donnelly calls these 'residual forms'. Others, meanwhile, may be emergent, and may have a transformative effect on the dominant culture. Donnelly stresses sensitivity to the meanings that are attached to a particular activity in particular historical circumstances:

Practices having alternative meanings in one culture or at one time may be fully incorporated into dominant social relations in another culture or at another time. It is this question of context, together with the dynamic nature of culture, that is crucial to the better understanding of resilience and transformation in sport subcultures. (Donnelly, 1993: 134)

Further, Donnelly argues that the "development of new technologies and the growth of commercial potential in various sport subcultures can have a major transformative effect" (1993: 40). These are important considerations in examining the contemporary skydiving community, as I discuss in a later chapter.

The transformative effect alluded to by Donnelly can be seen in Booth's (1994) examination of surfing in the 1960s. Booth examines the historical conditions that contributed to a different conception of leisure in the post-World War II era. New technologies, he postulates, along with improved mass communications, created "insatiable appetites for new goods, experiences and personal fulfillment" (Booth, 1994: 264). Surfers, Booth argues, created a cultural style which worked within the emerging middle-class hedonism, adopting "their own argot, humor, rituals and style of dress" (1994: 266).

Donnelly and Young (1988) explore the notion of individual meaning in the group context in their analysis of identity construction and confirmation. The term construction is instructive in that it conceptualizes the creation of meaning not as a static event, but as a set of ongoing processes throughout involvement in the subculture. The authors argue that subcultural participation involves the construction of an identity for two separate audiences – subculture members and members of ‘mainstream’ society. Part of the process of becoming a member of a subculture, then, is understanding the relative importance of each of these audiences, and the identities appropriate in each.

Williams (1989) posits that Gramsci’s (1971) notion of hegemony can be useful at micro levels of analysis in examining sport subcultures. Hegemonic ideas of ‘appropriate’ ways of participating in sport, he asserts, are contested within the boundaries of subcultures: “[S]ubordinate groups set the common sense of the dominant order against the practical concerns and concrete situations of the sport and reproduce a fragile and highly conditional version of that order” (Williams, 1989: 316). That is to say that in particular situations, sport groups (or other subgroups) weigh the dominant notions of appropriate behavior against the requirements of their own particular activities, and construct a culture that balances the two. For example, Miller and Penz (1991) investigated women’s bodybuilding and found that women negotiated their own legitimate ways of participating in a traditionally male preserve. In this “culturally contested terrain”, women argued that men’s preoccupation with mass was less important in bodybuilding than the women’s focus on symmetry and fitness. These women challenged the dominant order of bodybuilding (an order in which they would be marginalized) by asserting that

size and power were not paramount in the sport. Female participants simultaneously reproduced some of the values prominent in bodybuilding, such as the notion of making considerable personal sacrifices to achieve a desirable physique. We must be cognizant that resistance is not purely oppositional (Williams, 1989). New understandings of appropriate ways of participating are likely to be both similar to and different from those that they replaced.

### *Risk Sport Subcultures*

Over the last thirty years, several investigators (e.g., Arnold, 1976; Brannigan and McDougall, 1987; Pearson, 1979) have examined specific risk sport subcultures in an effort to improve understanding about the dynamics of these groups, the ways in which participants construct subcultural identities in these groups, and contextual understandings of risk in these particular social settings. If researchers are to understand issues of risk more broadly, they must find some common ground between different groups who voluntarily subject themselves to the very real possibility of serious physical harm. No doubt there are slightly different processes unfolding in these separate contexts. Some common threads linking the ways in which people make sense of risk activities should, however, be evident. Before embarking on an investigation of skydiving, then, it is imperative that we are familiar with what has been found in other social contexts.

In examining subcultures organized around three high-risk sports, Vanreusel and Renson (1982) postulate that risk-sport participants are seen as semi-deviants by mainstream

society. Participation in these activities, they assert, “may be a means to dissociate from the mainstream society and to associate with a subculture” (Vanreusel and Renson, 1982: 183). Moreover, they argue that there are three components of status in a high-risk subculture – exposure to risk, involvement in the subculture, and performance. That is to say that one’s identity in a risk-sport subculture is dependent upon one’s willingness to engage in the ‘risky’ activities, one’s participation in the social dimensions of the activity, and one’s ability to negotiate the technical demands of the sport, i.e., one’s skill. One other important conclusion the researchers draw is that each sport fosters a differently organized subculture. Despite what may seem like common values, each particular social context provides for a different structure, a different set of values, norms, and practices.

In a discussion of risk-recreation from a functionalist perspective, Robinson (1992) works from the position that individuals who feel challenged in their everyday lives are unlikely to seek out risk recreation experiences, whereas those whose work is routine or predictable seek out these ‘extreme’ activities as compensation for the lack of excitement in their careers. We all have a need for stimulation, he argues. Some of us find it in our careers or our family lives. For others, these aspects do not offer enough excitement. It is those in the latter group, Robinson argues, who search out risk recreation. The position that people have a particular level of stimulation that they require, and seek out compensation in recreation if they don’t find it otherwise, sounds analogous to a catharsis argument for violence in hockey. Hockey players are naturally aggressive, proponents of this theory argue, and thus need to vent their aggression through fighting, otherwise it

will surface in other forms such as high-sticking or spearing. Both of these positions seem naïve to me. Robinson's arguments are further weakened by his neglect of different types of participation, structural constraints on participation, class, gender, and so on.

The notion of resistance, while not forefronted, is still evident in Brannigan and McDougall's (1987) study of hang-gliders. By classifying hang-gliding as 'semi-deviance' or 'tolerable deviance', they infer that society perceives participants' values as somehow in opposition to those of 'normal' people. This exploratory study discussed the ways in which individuals became involved, maintained participation, and neutralized conflicts over participation. The work is limited, however, in that there is no discussion of class, race, gender, or other structural constraints to becoming involved or participating in particular ways.

While the works mentioned here offer important insights into particular risk sport contexts, none offers a persuasive discussion of the processes by which participants in risk sport come to grips with the possibility of serious injury or death resulting from their participation. Further, these pieces offer little to improve our understanding of how participants make sense of gender issues in these social contexts. They fail to examine processes of gender construction as they relate to gendered notions of risk. These are some of the problems that I address with my study of skydivers. Having delved into some of the themes in investigating risk and subcultures, it is to the issue of gender that we now turn.

## **Gender**

As discussed above, structural barriers to participation or particular types of participation are important considerations in examining subcultures. Further, as Messner admonishes, it is imperative for male researchers to forefront gender as a stratifier, as gender oppression has received too little attention from dominant groups thus far (1990: 149).

As such, a review of some of the foundational studies in gender relations is appropriate.

Connell (1983) offers some particularly informative insights into theorizing masculinities specifically and gender more broadly. In his theoretical discussion of hegemonic masculinity, Connell emphasizes that boys grow to understand that a particular kind of masculinity is ‘appropriate’ and ‘natural’, and that this version of masculinity emphasizes the ‘natural’ superiority of men over women. All of this takes place, he argues, without males “actually exercising power over females” (Connell, 1983: 28). Moreover, Connell clarifies that one’s gender is a construction, constantly contested and produced in an involved process:

... the embedding of masculinity in the body is very much a social process, full of tension and contradiction; ... even physical masculinity is a historical, rather than a biological, fact. That is to say it is constantly in process, constantly being constituted in actions and relations, constantly implicated in historical change. (Connell, 1983: 30)

From Connell’s work, we glean that there are multiple masculinities (and, hence, femininities) in society, and that we must be sensitive to the underlying issues of power as they relate to gender issues. Young and Craig (1997:13) also point out important issues in predominantly male groups:

In his work on youth subcultures, Brake (1985: 178) refers to the celebration of masculinism in predominantly male groups as the lionizing of “appropriate” manly performance. This involves displays of force and aggression and implies derogatory attitudes towards women and gays, as well as displays of crudity and excess of the kind alluded to in the by-now-considerable literature on gendered sports identities ... and men’s studies more broadly.

Gender is understood by many contemporary theorists as relational and continually constructed situationally or contextually. Connell captures the relational aspect of gender:

... the groupings which are the major actors in sexual politics on the large scale are constructed historically. It may still sound strange to say this of categories like ‘women’ and ‘men’. But it makes sense when the ‘construction’ itself is more closely defined. It means giving a particular content to a social category, *establishing particular contrasts with and distances from other social categories...* (1987: 137, emphasis added)

Murray (1996: 370) argues that the process by which gender may be constructed takes place at three levels. These levels should not be thought of as separate, but rather as inextricably intertwined. It is only for purposes of analytical clarity that they can be considered individually. The first of these levels involves gender as “an attribute of individuals, inasmuch as individuals are the ones who do gender” (Murray, 1996: 370). ‘Doing gender’ refers to “gender as a routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interaction” (West and Zimmerman, 1987: 125). This dimension of the approach accords some priority to individuals as agents in constructing their own gender. Gender is not imposed on social actors, but rather is *accomplished by* social actors within the constraints of higher-level systems of gender organization.

The second level at which gender is constructed is in terms of interaction with others (Murray, 1996: 370). It is in interacting with others that we have the opportunity to compare our gender against that of other people. As Chafetz and Kotarba observe, people “do not accomplish gender work in a social vacuum... Instead, *people accomplish gender in real, concrete situations, for real, particular audiences*” (1995: 239, emphasis added). Sport is an important site in which individuals ‘do gender’ in interactive settings on an ongoing basis (Whitson, 1990: 25). For example, when an athlete tells a male teammate or opponent that he “throws like a girl”, gender is being ‘done’ and evaluated in interaction. These interactions reinforce notions of what it means to be a woman or man for all participants, since “to ‘do’ gender is not always to live up to normative conceptions of femininity or masculinity; it is to engage in behavior at the risk of gender assessment” (West and Zimmerman, 1987: 136). The ‘do-er’ sets her behavior out for examination and, to a certain extent, judgment, by others. She exhibits behavior that may either be appropriate or inappropriate as defined by others for her gender, and this behavior constitutes her gender in the eyes of others. Spectators, meanwhile, examine the actions of the ‘do-er’ in relation to their understandings of appropriate gender behavior, and judgments are made accordingly.

The third level at which gender is constructed is in “a system of social relationships that infuses and informs the organization of society’s institutions. As an organizing system, gender interacts with and influences institutional structures, such as economic structures, the family, religion, and so on” (Murray, 1996: 370). Social institutions are organized in ways that articulate and reproduce the differences between men and women. As Lorber

(1994: 26) notes, “for society, gender means difference.” The ways in which gender is “done” (organized) at the institutional level thus perpetuate existing gender perceptions and shape the way individuals do gender in social settings.

This conceptualization of gender relations provides an important framework for understanding gender, as it identifies the role of individual agency in the process, and thus allows for the possibility of resistance to normative conceptions of gender (although this resistance is constrained by dominant conceptions of gender at the broader levels). Additionally, it expands on early power analyses in that gender is contested not within two homogeneous categories (femininity and masculinity), but within broader categories that allow for different types of femininity or masculinity (Connell, 1995: 35). Further, this contemporary approach to gender relations delineates the extent to which individual constructions of gender take place within a broader social context that shapes and constrains both the ‘doing’ of gender and the understanding of the gender of others (Luke, 1994: 290; see also Connell, 1995; Klein, 1990; Murray, 1996).

The current gender order cannot be conceptualized as static, permanent, or solid. It is constantly being produced, reproduced, and transformed by the actions and interactions of individuals. Far from being a status that is accorded at birth and subsequently played out in a pre-determined fashion, gender is continually constructed by individuals, and this construction takes place within a social context which, in turn, shapes the ways gender is done. Certainly, biology has some influence on the ‘doing’ of gender, but biological differences in and of themselves do not account for the massive social differentiation

between men and women. Even the categories 'women' and 'men' are overly simplistic, because neither women nor men are a homogeneous group. There is no single masculinity or femininity. Genders may be ascendant in, reproductive of, or resistant to the social order of which individuals are a part.

### *Sport and Gender*

As with many sub-disciplines in sociology, the sociology of sport has recently seen the emergence of a tremendous body of work concerned with gender (cf. Beal, 1996; Connell, 1990; Gillett and White, 1992; Hargreaves, 1990; Messner and Sabo, 1990; Theberge, 1997; Whitson, 1990; Young, 1993, 1997). Clearly, gender is a central consideration in examining sporting groups and processes, and must be so if researchers are to address the complexity of many of the issues. That is not to suggest that gender is the only important stratifier, but rather that it is one with which I am centrally concerned. As a point of departure, I shall consider the insights gleaned from some important works by gender theorists in the sociology of sport, insights that help to frame my current approach.

As one of the most prominent gender theorists in sport sociology, Messner draws on historical data to argue that "organized sports have come to serve as a primary institutional means for bolstering a challenged and faltering ideology of male superiority in the 20<sup>th</sup> century" (1988: 197). He asserts that as women increasingly participate in sport, their participation signals a challenge to male hegemony (broadly), and thus becomes a contested issue. He notes that during two periods characterizing a "crisis of

masculinity” (~1890-1920; post World War II-now), “organized sport has been a crucial arena of struggle over basic social conceptions of masculinity and femininity, and as such has become a fundamental arena of ideological contest in terms of power relations between men and women” (Messner, 1988: 199). Messner theorizes that with this modern contestation of ‘the female athlete’, women’s participation in athletics has come to carry serious ambiguities for themselves as well as others. Most people, he posits, are unwilling to associate athletic prowess, muscularity, toughness, and so on, with notions of femininity. The media contribute to these ambiguities by marginalizing or trivializing female athleticism. Recently, these techniques have become less viable, so the media have incorporated “watered-down version[s] of the values of the oppositional group. In so doing, the ideological hegemony of the dominant group shifts but is easily maintained” (Messner, 1988: 206). For example, where broadcasters would previously have simply stated that women are not athletes the way that men are, they now avoid that type of characterization. Instead, however, they often emphasize women’s sexuality, passivity, and family roles (Messner, Carlisle Duncan, and Jensen, 1993). Finally, Messner criticizes liberal feminist notions of equal opportunity for participation, noting that most sports “are defined largely according to the most extreme possibilities of the male body” (1988: 206). Messner postulates that the physiological differences between men and women would make this notion of equal opportunity just another way of asserting men’s ‘natural superiority’ over women.

I strongly agree with Hargreaves (1990), who claims that both women and men can and should participate in the process of striving for greater power and autonomy for women

in sport. She outlines the liberal feminist approach to equality in sport, and notes that this approach would benefit only a minority of women. Hargreaves speculates that the “notion of equality for women fails to question which women want to be equal with which men. Far from challenging male sport, liberalism endorses it” (1990: 290). She also critiques radical feminists and separatists, though, arguing that these groups reproduce the notion of ‘natural’ differences between men and women. Further, she offers an insightful discussion of hegemony, noting that this term describes

a form of control which is *persuasive*, rather than coercive. It is not, however, straightforward indoctrination, but the result of people’s positive reactions to values and beliefs which, in specific social and historical situations, support established social relations and structures of power. (Hargreaves, 1990: 297, emphasis in original)

Hargreaves goes on to outline the way in which male hegemony in sport is not complete or uncontested, arguing that some women and men “support, accommodate to, or collude in existing patterns of discrimination in sport”, while other women and men “oppose them and struggle for change” (1990: 298). Interestingly, Hargreaves also outlines men’s collective interests in redefining masculinity, as the current dominant version not only oppresses women, but saddles men with the emotionally and physically damaging task of constructing an unhealthy version of masculinity. This is a point that has often been overlooked in the gender literature. If we can question dominant versions of masculinity in sport, and legitimate alternative versions, this benefits not only women, but also the many men who have been emotionally and physically scarred through their sporting experiences. By participating in the discussion of gender as a stratifier in sport, men are contributing to an improved social context for women and men.

Young examines this notion of hegemony in the context of the male sport culture. Young (1993) draws on victimization literatures and feminist sport studies to examine the issues of violence and injury in the context of professional sport. The feminist work, he argues, “demonstrates how tolerant attitudes to injury and other workplace hazards emerge in a process of masculinization that brings central meaning to the lives of many male athletes” (Young, 1993: 374). In other words, this approach sees violence and risk not solely as an issue of exploitation or consent, but potentially as a set of circumstances which ‘make sense’ to participants. Young argues that a “culture of ‘masculinism’” may have some explanatory potential when examining issues of workplace violence. Young agrees with Brake (1985), who, examining youth subcultures, notes the celebration of ‘appropriate’ manly performance. Young notes that this manly performance includes violence and aggression, but additionally encompasses derogatory attitudes towards women (and, I would argue, homosexuals), and “displays of crudity and excess” (1993: 379).

Young also contends that we should understand male tolerance of risk and injury as a *constituting* social process that is “linked with larger ideological issues of gender legitimacy and power” (1993: 380). Whereas some research still conceptualizes athletes as “gullible dupes”, the use of victimization, feminist, and hegemony perspectives recognizes that “many negative effects of workplace victimization and masculinist attitudes are not entirely lost on athletes themselves” (Young, 1993: 391). On the contrary, sport is fraught with paradox for athletes (that the masculinity that is celebrated is one that jeopardizes their health and well-being, for instance).

Perhaps the single most important reason why athletes rationalize and internalize pain is their acceptance of dominant notions of masculinity. The privileging of masculinity over femininity, and of certain brands of masculinity over others, contributes to athletes' understandings of their own bodies. Sport is an arena where males articulate their 'maleness' in physical and forceful ways. The most physically dominant, 'tough', and daring males are those who are seen as the most masculine, and thus are often accorded the most respect as men. McTeer and White (1991, in Young, 1993) express this point exactly:

the social construction of sport injury is...linked to male power. Through the way that males expose their bodies to physical risk, play while injured, and rehabilitate in order to be potentially injured again it is clear that, while few males actually enjoy physical violence or pain, they willingly "choose" to participate in the cult of masculinity.

Young (1993) argues that the element of 'choice' in these processes is a complex one. Are athletes really choosing to participate in this way, or are elements of the dominant sports culture pushing them to place their bodies in harm's way? Many theorists argue that the denial of pain and injury is indicative of more deeply rooted issues of hegemonic masculinity (Sabo and Panepinto, 1990; Young, 1993; Young et al., 1994). Young and White, for example, argue that "[f]or some men, the cultural meanings of physical danger and living with injury resonate with larger ideological issues of gender legitimacy and power" (1995: 45). This is a sophisticated approach to understanding rationalization of (potential) pain and injury because it recognizes that actors are agents in making decisions about risk, but that structural barriers limit these decisions.

It is imperative that we understand some of the contradictions encountered by women in 'masculine' sport. In any sport that emphasizes 'masculine' ways of participating, women are faced with difficult choices. Do they challenge dominant versions of the activity? Do they participate with men in 'masculine' (i.e., forceful, aggressive) ways? Do they create their own alternative version of the activity? This paradox is captured by Balka: "[w]omen adventurers (and risk recreators) are in effect emasculated by virtue of their involvement with adventure, which has remained largely in the male domain" (1995: 44). This cultural understanding of risk activities as 'masculine' is still with us, as illustrated by Sherrill in her discussion of modern surfing: "Within the anachronistically macho world of professional surfing, respect comes when you *rip like a man* and act like it's no big thing" (1996: 90, emphasis added).

In contemporary society, sport and risk both contain implicit notions of masculinity. As Seagrave (1994) suggests,

body sense is crucial to the development of male identity, and learning to be a male includes not only learning to project a physical presence that suggests, even threatens, latent power, but also learning to demonstrate power through efficient, practiced, and successful combinations of force and skill. (108)

Because of the prominence of sport in society, this type of masculinity becomes naturalized, as Seagrave describes: "Analyses of both a historical and a contemporary nature have demonstrated how sport constructs and bolsters masculine hegemony and hegemonic models of masculinity by ritualizing and celebrating culturally approved ways

of being male” (1994: 98). One of the most important of these approved ways involves engaging in the search for adventure and risk, and the display of courage and skill.

Having reviewed some of the important works in the areas of risk, subcultures, and gender, I now consider some gaps in the current body of literature, and the ways in which my study of skydivers addresses these gaps.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

First, there is a need for current research into the skydiving community, as most previous studies of this group have been from an historical perspective (e.g., Huston, 1972; Greenwood, 1978; Horan, 1979; Salter, 1979; Fensch, 1980; Salter, 1997), or are outdated (e.g., Aran, 1974, Arnold, 1976). Aran’s (1974) study, for instance, examined the experiences of paratroopers, experiences that are radically different from those of sport jumpers. Further, there have been enormous technological advances in the sport in recent years. The sport has also become increasingly commercialized, with events now part of the ESPN Extreme Games, for instance, and proposals on the table to make competitive skydiving more spectator friendly. These transformations have altered the sport dramatically (Sherman, 1996; Works and LeBlanc, 1995), and thus made it imperative to examine the perspectives of current participants and their perceptions of risk, subcultures, and gender. It is important to elucidate, for instance, understandings of risk, meanings of rituals, and perspectives on technology. The extent to which these have changed recently illuminates broader issues at play.

Second, studies of other sport groups (e.g., Hamilton, 1979; Pearson, 1979; Williams and Donnelly, 1985; Donnelly and Young, 1985, 1988) do not illuminate all of the processes of interest in relation to the contemporary skydiving community. As Salter argues, the historical development of sport parachuting looks quite different from that of many sports:

Most contemporary Western sports evolved in a similar way. With their roots embedded in the folk-culture, they were codified and institutionalized during the industrial revolution by upper-middle class sportsmen. Professional athletes later emerged in some sports and with their “win-ethic” subtly changed those activities. However, parachuting was different. Although it was not a by-product of the “sporting underworld,” that spawned pugilism and the so-called “blood sports,” it was similar to them in that it was nurtured in a professional/entertainment milieu. Only much later did it become recognized as a legitimate sport and attract diehard amateurs. In a sense then, *its development was the direct opposite of most mainstream leisure activities*. (1997: 2, emphasis added)

In addition, as mentioned above, different sports (and their associated cultures) are organized in different ways. For example, I examine the place of technology in sport parachuting, the perspectives of participants on their equipment and the relationship between equipment and risk. These issues could then be contrasted with the perspectives of rock climbers, for instance, in an effort to uncover patterns that allow for some broader theoretical propositions about risk activities. An examination of skydivers, then, informs important issues that contribute to a growing understanding of risk sport participants and cultures.

Third, previous studies of skydiving (e.g., Fensch, 1980; Aran, 1974; Horan, 1979; Greenwood, 1978) have not problematized the issue of gender. As outlined above, a

subgroup in which men predominate, and which is organized around “masculine” risk-taking activities, provides an excellent opportunity to examine the construction of gendered identities within a masculinized risk activity. For example, I examine whether women are perceived differently or perceive themselves differently than men within the skydiving community. Further, I examine issues of power and privilege within the activity and the construction of gendered identities, within a unique risk context.

## Chapter Four: Research Design

### Introduction

In generating data for this research, I drew on six months of participant observation, as well as thirty-seven in-depth interviews with current participants in the sport.

Additionally, informal follow-up interviews were conducted with participants throughout the research process. I was and am a full participant in skydiving activities, and drew on my skydiver identity as well as the assistance of key informants to gain access to drop zones, skydiver parties, and information. For the interviews, participants were selected to capture a “relevant range” (Mason, 1996: 92) of experiences, types of participation, and so on. The informal interviews took place throughout the research process, as I was continually checking propositions with participants for a measure of participant authentication.

I have taken a reflexive approach to my study of the skydiving subgroup. This approach “embodies an obligation by researchers to describe their social, normative, and, in some cases, emotional relations to the [participants], problems, and data they study. In other words, researchers must explicitly identify themselves as part of the research process” (Lyng, 1998: 246). I recognize that I am not simply a researcher who went out to study a pre-existing and concrete reality, but I am and have been a party to the creation of that reality. As McLaren (1991: 50) posits, “field workers engage not just in the analysis of field sites but *in their active production*” (emphasis in original). In this chapter I comment on some of the ways in which my own presence in the field may have

influenced the research process. I outline the methods employed to study the skydiving community and, specifically, I discuss some of the benefits and drawbacks to participant observation methods and in-depth interviewing. I also discuss epistemological and ontological issues with which all researchers must grapple. These concerns, more than any technical considerations, guided my choice of methods in this project.

With respect to the reflexive approach mentioned here, I feel that if I am to recognize myself and my interactions with skydivers as part of the research process, then the language I use in reporting my research should reflect this exchange. As such, I avoid using the word “subject”, as this infers a relationship of power wherein I am doing the studying, and the skydivers in my project are being studied. This approach fails to acknowledge the complexity of the relationships that develop in the field, and neglects my part as an active participant in the research process. Instead of subjects, then, I often refer to the skydivers who have taken part in my study as “participants.” Also, in referring to the process of obtaining data, I employ the word “generate” as opposed to “gather” or “collect”, again to reflect my active part in the process. One can only gather or collect something if it is already in a “collectible” state. In contrast, the data in my study developed in the interactions between myself and other skydivers. I feel it is important to clarify this with my choice of language.

### **Sampling**

Through the course of my participant observation experiences and discussions with several experienced jumpers, I determined a relevant range of experiences,

characteristics, and examples that I wished to capture in my sample as dictated by my theoretical interests. The participants I needed to interview included both men and women; jumpers of low, intermediate, and high experience; recreational, competitive, and semi-professional (involved in instruction) jumpers; as well as jumpers with and without experience of serious injury in the sport. To reiterate, my goal was not to have a known mathematical representation of the *typical* skydiver, but to interview skydivers who covered this broad range of experiences and characteristics. Several jumpers in each group were interviewed. Of the 37 interviewees, 20 were male, 17 were female. They ranged in age from 19 years to over sixty years. While the interviewees ranged from students to working professionals, all identified themselves as middle class. Sampling was discontinued when I reached the point of 'saturation', i.e., nothing new was being gleaned about that particular theoretical proposition or category (Bryman, 1988: 117). I must acknowledge that there were participants who fit into more than one category. For example, many of the very experienced jumpers who were interviewed were involved in instruction of the sport to a greater or lesser extent, some in competitive skydiving, and most, to a degree, in recreational skydiving. Thus, the distinctions between the categories are blurry in many cases, and participants often fall into more than one category. With greater resources at my disposal, I could have interviewed many more participants, such as interviewing several highly experienced recreational female jumpers, several intermediate-experience competitive male jumpers with a history of serious injury, and so on. As this approach was impractical, I must instead be forthcoming about the limitations of my sample.

Ideally, in social research, investigators wish to obtain samples that allow them to make claims about broader groups of people. Even in quantitative research, however, practical considerations and limitations often prevent one from obtaining a truly 'random' sample, a sample that would permit the researcher to draw conclusions about a broader population with a known probability of being wrong (Bryman, 1988: 117). In research where the goal is to see through the eyes of participants in order to understand their perspectives, how do researchers know that participants not involved in the research share these perspectives (Bryman, 1988: 117)? One approach to answer this concern is to establish

... a relationship where the sample is designed to encapsulate a *relevant range* of units in relation to the wider universe, but not to represent it directly. The range referred to here might incorporate a range of experiences, characteristics, processes, types, categories, cases or examples, and so on. [The researcher] should have a strategic purpose in selecting [a] specified relevant range which means that the relationship between [the] sample and the wider universe is not *ad hoc*... (Mason, 1996: 92-93)

This is the type of sampling logic employed in my examination of the skydiving community. I was not interested in obtaining a simple random sample of skydivers (even if this had been possible), because it is not "the skydiver" in which I am interested, but rather the processes by which skydivers make sense of their experiences. I could have employed a logic of convenience sampling whereby I undertook interviews from among my contacts in the skydiving community with little thought as to representativeness. While this would have answered some of my questions, it would certainly have created others. Alternatively, I could have generated a snowball sample whereby I interviewed a few important participants and let them lead me to others. Again, however, any claims I might have made about generalizability would have been very weak.

## **Participant Observation**

I have drawn on my already-established identity as an experienced jumper to investigate the skydiving subgroup, using participant observation techniques to generate ideas about issues to be pursued through other methods. I spent one full skydiving season (because of weather, a season in the prairies is generally from April to October) participating in jumping and social activities at two drop zones. Most weekends, and occasionally during the week, I would spend time at one of the drop zones. During these months, I did approximately one hundred and thirty skydives. Additionally, I attended several get-togethers away from the drop zone. House-warming parties, bar nights, and so on are another important dimension of the social network of skydivers. After each of these encounters in the field, I reflected on my interactions and the activities, and made notes for future reference. These notes were instrumental in the construction of the interview guide, as were discussions with key participants and with my supervisor<sup>3</sup>.

Participant observation is a term used to refer to the process of entering a social setting, participating (to a greater or lesser extent) in the activities in that setting, and making systematic observations about the interactions, activities, and relationships in that setting (Mason, 1996: 60-64). Researchers choose to engage in participant observation for several reasons, including forefronting the meaning particular activities have for participants and generating the trust of the people from whom one wishes cooperation.

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<sup>3</sup> During the research process, a change in supervisors was necessitated. As such, I will sometimes refer to *supervisors*.

One express goal of those who employ participant observation methods is to understand how the world is viewed from the perspective of those being studied (Bryman, 1988: 61). Engaging in this type of research is not as simple as showing up at the bar and hanging out with bikers (Lyng & Bracey, 1995), although this, too, may be complicated. There are issues of “getting in,” “learning the ropes,” “maintaining relations,” and “leaving and keeping in touch” (Shaffir & Stebbins, 1991). Each of these problems has to be answered according to the specific characteristics of the setting, the research questions, and, not least, the investigator. As Shaffir and Stebbins note, “the so-called rules and canons of fieldwork are frequently bent and twisted to accommodate the particular demands and requirements of the fieldwork situation and the personal characteristics of the researcher” (1991: 22). The researcher engaging in participant observation hopes to gain some insight into the worldview of participants by taking part in their everyday lives, activities, and relationships. As Page posits:

... the study of the culture of any group – whether that of a primitive society, a modern occupation, a social class, or of sportsmen – calls for an understanding of the *meaning* of the particular culture or subculture for those who share it. And to gain such an understanding requires “field research,” study which involves close observation, participation, and, not least, a measure of empathy with the members of the group. (Page, 1973: 36)

This method is commonly combined with other methods of investigation such as in-depth interviews and “nonreactive measures.” I have taken this approach to my study of skydivers. By using multiple methods, I address some of the concerns often raised about the validity of research in which the investigator is a full participant (Mason, 1996). I discuss these issues in more detail towards the end of this chapter.

Some social groups consider their lived experiences as so different from those who do not share their activities that it is not worth their time to even engage these “others” in conversation about their worlds (Lyng, 1998). In his discussion of the methods that he employed in constructing his edgework model, Lyng outlines this phenomenon: “In the face of an experience that they regard as largely ineffable, edgeworkers feel that little can be gained from discussing the phenomenon with nonpractitioners” (1998: 230). As Lyng argues elsewhere, edgeworkers share a common feeling that “to fully understand edgework, one must experience it directly because language simply cannot capture the essence of the phenomenon” (1993: 112). With this in mind, I felt it essential to use participant observation as part of my approach to researching skydiving and skydivers. Not only would this encourage skydivers to trust me with their thoughts about the activity (because I have done it and continue to do it), but it would also allow me to share the experiences with them, and the meanings attributed to those experiences. As Van Maanen speculates, understanding “comes largely from being caught up in the same life situation and circumstances as those one studies. One knows how others feel because one feels it, too” (1991: 40). In the case of skydivers, it is particularly important to be seen as “one of them.” As Lyng has pointed out, skydivers are reluctant to talk frankly about the sport with someone who is hesitant to take part. He tells the story of a pivotal day in his research on skydivers:

... the journey began with a specific statement from one of my subjects: when I asked him to talk about the freefall experience, he responded, “If you want to know what it’s like, then do it!” It became clear that the nature of my study would dictate the use of research methods oriented to the lived experience of my subjects. I would have to become a participant

observer in order to penetrate the meaning structures surrounding these activities. (Lyng, 1998: 224)

There are several puzzles that researchers must address throughout the fieldwork experience. These include problems of access, relationships in the field, representativeness, reflexivity, trust, and honesty in the field. In the following pages, I examine these problems, and discuss the ways in which they were addressed in the current study of skydivers.

### *Access*

In order to legitimate my research objectives, I felt it necessary to draw on the experience and connections of some key participants. Michael<sup>4</sup> was particularly helpful with regard to access. A long-time jumper with several thousand skydives to his credit, Michael has lived and jumped in many countries, and has close personal ties to other highly experienced jumpers almost everywhere he goes. He and I met two years prior to the start of the research through our involvement in skydiving, and have been friends as well as fellow jumpers ever since. My relationship with him allowed me to ask him to vouch for me with other jumpers or at other drop zones. In many cases, he contacted participants for me, gave them a brief description of my research objectives, and told them I could be trusted. This opened numerous doors that might otherwise have remained closed. In other cases, key participants helped me to access particular types of participants that I did not already count among my contacts. Amanda, for instance, is a jumper whom I have known since 1994. Our relationship enabled me to meet with

Roger, an extremely successful international competitor. My approach to sampling necessitated that I interact with different types of participants at all levels in the sport. The cooperation of these key informants allowed me to meet these objectives.

One of the first concerns of a researcher entering the field is how to gain access to the data necessary to address the research questions. Often, researchers establish a relationship with one or more insiders, and these relationships become key to the research process (Shaffir & Stebbins, 1991: 28). These 'gatekeepers' can grant access to information or people vital to the research. As Shaffir and Stebbins point out, it is not often that there is a single point of entry into a social setting. Rather, there are usually

multiple points of entry into the setting and, consequently, negotiations with gatekeepers who can grant permission for specific kinds of access. As Greer (1970) has observed, research access is not merely granted or withheld at one particular point in time but is an ongoing issue for the researcher. (Shaffir and Stebbins, 1991: 28; see also Burgess, 1991)

These multiple points of entry were certainly evident in my study of skydivers. My own participation in the sport provided me with ready access to numerous drop zones and participants. Having only participated for approximately four years, though, there were many people (and some places) to which I did not have ready access as a researcher. At each of these junctions, I dealt with different gatekeepers, negotiating different kinds of access. In some cases, it was access to an individual's perspective. In others, I dealt with access to a particular site or person.

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<sup>†</sup> All names used are pseudonyms. This will be elaborated in my discussion of the interviews.

### *Relationships in the Field*

From the research standpoint that I adopted, my full participation in skydiving and social activities was imperative. Simply hanging around at the drop zone did not seem from my perspective to be enough to understand the meanings attached to the activity. In order to access these, it was essential that I jump out of the same airplanes, land the same parachutes, and “bullshit” around the same campfires as the people I was purporting to study. That is not to argue that I had only one role during my time in the field. My experiences were similar to those described by Bryman (1988:48). I was cast in three research roles: “total researcher”; “research participant” and; “total participant.” These different roles were apparent not day to day, but often minute to minute. The nature of a drop zone is such that at times there is constant activity, with little time to stop and analyze one’s surroundings for hours on end. At other times, however, there is a long wait prior to a jump. During these down- times, I found myself simply an observer, trying to make sense of the behaviors I was witnessing in terms of my research questions. At other times, I was participating in the activities while thinking about my research questions. Often, however, I was a full participant in the activities of the moment, and reflected later on how those activities and my participation in them related to my research.

One element of establishing and maintaining relationships in the field is deciding the extent to which the researcher shares in the lives of the participants. Whether to remain an observer as participant or take greater part in the everyday experiences of participants

is a pivotal decision. Some researchers, for example, warn against becoming too involved in the lives of 'subjects' for fear of "going native" (Bryman, 1988: 96-97). While it is important to be able to step away from one's role as participant in order to examine issues in the field (issues related to data or to ethical concerns, for instance), I concur with Lyng, who argues that

... there can be no doubt that the depth of understanding is related to the degree of "co-presence" between subjects and researchers... A high degree of co-presence means not only occupying the same spaces and experiencing the same events as one's subjects but also sharing the circumstances of their lives with a constitutional stance that matches theirs as closely as possible. (1998: 225)

Lyng goes on to argue that the edgeworkers he studied

assumed that anyone who was not a regular visitor to [their world] could only understand their actions in terms of the irrational behavior of half-wits or insane individuals. Hence, they would share their interpretations of the experience only with someone they knew had also danced to the siren's song at the edge. (Lyng, 1998: 232)

Not only does sharing in the lives of participants allow a researcher to gain an understanding of the worldview of participants, but it also contributes to the willingness of those being studied to share their experiences and opinions. Trust is essential in relationships in the field, and is not easily established if one is seen as an outsider: "Trust ... comes forth only in particular situations with particular people as the field-worker displays practical understanding, a partisan stance, and a visible conformance to the forms of conduct followed by those studied" (Van Maanen, 1991: 35). I felt it essential to be a full participant in the activities at the drop zone, as no single gatekeeper could grant me access to all relevant data. I had to establish and confirm my identity as a

skydiver to validate my identity as a researcher. Every person I encountered in the field had access to information, stories, and opinions that were important for my purposes. For that reason, I needed the trust and cooperation of all of them. As Burgess (1991: 48) states, “each person in the field site is to a greater or lesser degree a gatekeeper. In some cases the gatekeeping roles include assisting or impeding physical access, whereas in other cases control of information is at stake.”

Another consideration in examining relationships in the field is the issue of the researcher’s characteristics (Gurney, 1991). It is imperative to recognize that experiences and interactions in the field encompass both participants and the researcher. As such, ascribed and achieved characteristics of the researcher are important in determining the way in which the fieldwork experience unfolds. As Burgess notes, “age, sex, social class, social status, and ethnicity ... influence the extent to which access is granted or withheld” (1991: 49). The fact that I am a young, middle class, well-educated, white male certainly influenced my fieldwork experiences and relationships. These characteristics made it reasonably easy to establish open, honest relationships with most of the jumpers I encountered in the field, as we share many of the above characteristics.

That is not to suggest that my personal characteristics provided only benefits for my fieldwork experience. Without a doubt, there are some skydivers that did not and do not accept me as ‘one of their own’. As much as I may have endeavored to create positive relationships with the skydivers I encountered, I was and am different enough from some of them that access to certain dimensions of the skydiving world was not readily granted.

Skydivers without experience in a post-secondary education setting, for instance, were not always ready to accept as legitimate my status as a graduate student. I made efforts to de-emphasize this role and emphasize instead my established role as a skydiver. Even still, there were certain groups of people, engaging in specific activities at the drop zone, with whom I was not always welcome. For instance, I observed some jumpers congregating in secluded places on the drop zone during or after jumping hours to smoke marijuana. While it was no great secret that they were doing drugs, there was no doubt in my mind that I would not have been welcome at some of these get-togethers. My opinions on the place of drugs in skydiving, known to others before the start of my research, prevented me from hanging around in these circumstances without radically altering the dynamics of these interactions.

### *Representativeness*

Generalizability was a significant consideration in the research process for my study of skydivers. The sampling process and my fieldwork strategies were undertaken with the aim of representativeness in mind. For me, however, representativeness does not mean that I can say with certainty that a particular percentage of skydivers espouse a specific perspective on risk, rituals, gender attributes, or any other aspect of this research. What it does mean is that the participants I encountered captured a relevant range of experiences and characteristics, and the *processes* by which these participants make sense of their worlds are representative of the processes taking place in this particular social context.

In examining the issue of representativeness, one common criticism of qualitative research generally, and participant observation specifically, is that one cannot easily generalize from a small group of participants to a much broader population with any degree of “scientific certainty.” I concur with Bryman (1988), who argues that we must be careful of imposing on qualitative research standards that are more relevant to “scientific” quantitative research. He argues that generalizability of qualitative research may not be as great a problem as it appears at first glance because

... a wide range of different people and activities are invariably examined so that the contrast with survey samples is not as acute as it appears at first glance... [Also], the issue should be couched in terms of the generalizability ... to theoretical propositions rather than to populations or universes... (Bryman, 1988: 90)

Once again, I was not striving for generalizability to the population of skydivers, but rather to the range of processes by which skydivers come to make sense of their experiences.

### *Reflexivity*

The question of reflexivity was and is a major concern for me in this research. The fact that I was a participant in the sport for four years prior to the start of the research, my continued full involvement throughout the course of the research, and the personal characteristics that I brought to the field made it essential for me to critically examine my part in the research process. As Mason posits, qualitative researchers should

... constantly take stock of their actions and their role in the research process, and subject these to the same critical scrutiny as the rest of their ‘data’. This is based on the belief that a researcher cannot be neutral, or objective, or detached, from the knowledge and evidence they are

generating. Instead, they should seek to understand their role in that process. Indeed, the very act of posing difficult questions to oneself in the research process is part of the act of reflexivity. (Mason, 1996: 6)

It is for these reasons that I challenged myself to understand and outline my part in the research process, and to report my research in the particular way outlined above.

The notion that there is no such thing as true objectivity in social research is an important guiding principle in my research. It is my position that there is no single objective reality ‘out there’ to be discovered, but that reality is contextual, and produced in interaction between particular people in particular social settings (Holstein and Gubrium, 1994: 265). From this perspective, a social researcher cannot claim to offer an “objective” account of reality, but rather an interpretation of the process of creating that reality in the social setting of interest. Thus, it is not simply my status as an insider that prevents me from claiming objectivity, but my epistemological and ontological assumptions that lead me to outline my part in creating the reality that I am examining. This process of critically examining my part in generating the data led me to decide that I would draw on my participant observation experiences to generate ideas and themes to be pursued in the interviews, but would not treat my field notes as data to stand on their own. The observations made in the field were subjected to analytical scrutiny, and many propositions were generated, but these ideas were all discussed with participants for “member validation” (Shaffir and Stebbins, 1991: 16). This brings us to the second major method employed in my study, that of in-depth interviewing.

### **In-depth Interviews**

Based on my field experiences, the literature reviewed, discussions with key participants, and consultation with my supervisor, an interview guide was constructed and employed. This guide was slightly revised over the course of the first six interviews. These revisions were based on feedback received from those interviewed as well as insights gleaned from the interview process itself. This finalized interview guide (see Appendix A) was employed for all remaining interviews. Over the course of 10 months, I conducted thirty-seven interviews with current participants in the sport. The interviews ranged from forty-five minutes to two and a half hours in duration. The interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed. The 37 participants interviewed encompassed a range of types of participation, levels of experience, gender, and experience with injury. After these 37 interviews, sampling was discontinued, as I had reached a point where the relevant ranges that I determined to be of importance were captured, and no new data were readily emerging. Glaser and Strauss (1967) call this the point of “theoretical saturation.” They argue that “[s]aturation means that no additional data are being found whereby the sociologist can develop properties of the category” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 61).

The interviews covered a common range of topics, but I encouraged participants to feel at ease to raise issues of importance to them. As I was trying to probe the meanings participants attach to particular issues, it was imperative that I ask participants to explore issues that they viewed as salient. Clearly, my approach to interviewing drew to some

extent on phenomenology, an approach that attempts “to understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations” (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982: 31). Elements of this approach clearly informed my interview strategy, as the ontological entities that I was exploring were not concrete events or experiences, but the meanings that participants have of those events or experiences. The assumptions that participants have about risk, recreation, and gender were some of the underlying meanings I hoped to uncover and clarify.

In-depth interviews are common in qualitative research because they do not impose on participants a set of potential response categories (Mason, 1996). By undertaking personal interviews, the researcher allows participants to answer questions or pursue lines of reasoning in terms that make sense to them, as noted by Marshall and Rossman:

Typically, qualitative in-depth interviews are much more like conversations than formal events with predetermined response categories. The researcher explores a few general topics to help uncover the participant’s meaning perspective, but otherwise respects how the participant frames and structures the responses. This, in fact, is an assumption fundamental to qualitative research – the participant’s perspective on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it, not as the researcher views it. (Marshall and Rossman, 1995: 80)

Interviews provide opportunities for direct and intimate interaction between the researcher and the participant, contributing to the sense of personal involvement held by those being studied. The data resulting from the interview are generated not simply from the minds of the participant, but from the interactions that take place in the interview setting (Mason, 1996: 38). A participant may wander from the topic at hand, but the wandering itself may become a dimension of the data, revealing the concerns of that

individual, which may or may not match those touched on by the researcher (Bryman, 1988: 47). If the researcher is constantly aware of this process as one of interaction (not simply “collection” of data), then she or he is able to interpret this wandering as an important part of the data set generated. As the goal of this research project was to understand the ways in which skydivers make meaning of their everyday lives, it was essential that I encourage them to express these ideas in their own words. In addition, my concerns about the effects of my own participation in the sport on the observations I made in the field led me to conclude that it was essential to draw on multiple methods in the study.

There are certainly some drawbacks to the interviewing method. As interviews are centered on personal interaction, a certain level of comfort must be achieved if data of high quality are to be generated. The individuals involved must be comfortable with one another, and participants must be in touch with and willing to discuss their feelings on the topics of interest (Marshall and Rossman, 1995: 81). If someone is unwilling to disclose details of experiences or feelings, or is not truthful, the interviewer is left in a very difficult position. Alternatively, an individual might be “unaware of recurring patterns in their lives” (Marshall and Rossman, 1995: 81). It is because of these difficulties that in-depth interviews are often combined with other methods of generating data in a particular research project (see Bryman, 1988; Marshall and Rossman, 1995; Mason, 1992).

### **Other Formal Interviews**

At a relatively late stage in the research process, a realization struck me. As interesting as it is to ask participants how they make sense of continuing to participate in skydiving after seeing friends injured or killed in the sport, I had only been asking the people who *had* continued to skydive. If I truly wanted to understand how people make sense of taking part in a sport with serious potential for physical injury or death, I should also be listening to the people who could *not* rationalize those risks. Similarly, people may have left the sport because of some element of the social structure of the group, or because of some of the gender issues involved in a male-dominated sport. Regardless, so long as I was only interviewing current participants, I was missing part of the picture.

After some discussion with my supervisor, it was decided that I should make an attempt to contact people who, after some serious involvement, had left skydiving for one reason or another. For practical reasons, I could not undertake vast numbers of interviews with these people, and hence would have to be extremely careful with any claims I tried to make from these data. We decided, however, that it was an important shortcoming to acknowledge in the research process, in the hopes of raising awareness of the issue so that the same mistake can be avoided in future research endeavors. I employed the help of key informants in contacting several people who had left skydiving over the past several years. Of these contacts, I was able to undertake formal interviews with only two former participants. This small number, I believe, is symbolic of two things. First, most people who attain a serious level of involvement in the sport are able to rationalize

continuing to participate after a change in life circumstances, an “incident” in the sport, or some other potential reason for quitting. I have discussed this at length with some of the long-time jumpers in my sample, and there seems to be agreement on this point. Second, the only recourse I had for finding these former participants was through current participants. Generally, if someone leaves the sport, they gradually disappear from the social circle of jumpers as well. As such, in some cases, I was aware of a former jumper, but was unable to find a current contact number for them, as none of the jumpers with whom I spoke had been in contact with them for some time. The two interviews that did take place were much shorter in length than the 37 main interviews, as the issues of interest related to their choice to leave the sport. The guide for these interviews can be found in Appendix B.

### **Analysis**

Once all of the interviews were transcribed, the bulk of the analysis was undertaken (the initial phases of analysis of fieldnote and interview data were undertaken before and during the interview process). The first step in analyzing the transcripts was to read through all of them over the course of a few days to confirm that I had a sense of the principal themes and issues. Once this task was completed, I went back through each transcript making notes of how particular responses fit into these broader issues. Each transcript was treated this way before any direct comparisons across transcripts were undertaken. Once each transcript had been thoroughly examined, I considered the important themes and issues one at a time by scrutinizing the responses from all of the interviews that had been labeled as relevant to that particular theme (e.g. perceptions of

gender differences). Over the course of several such treatments, I became confident in the conclusions drawn from the data. These are presented in chapter five.

### **Validity**

I addressed the issue of validity in a number of ways. The first strategy was the use of multiple methods. Observations made on the basis of participant observation and interview data offered a rich, detailed view of the important issues and processes. These methods cannot and should not be expected to generate data that can simply be compared for confirmation. Instead, they illuminate different dimensions of the processes and issues of importance. Major themes, however, should be somewhat consistent between the methods. Therefore, a careful comparison of data from the different methods offers some measure of validation of the results. Further, I have discussed the data, and my interpretations of these data, with my supervisors on an ongoing basis. As experienced qualitative researchers, they are in positions to offer feedback and constructive criticism, and to point out areas of particular concern for the validity of the findings. Finally, emergent themes, patterns, and issues were discussed with the participants for authentication in informal follow-up interviews. This is not to argue that the standpoint of the participants places them in a privileged position to offer *unequivocal* validation of my interpretations. As Mason (1996: 152) points out, researchers “cannot expect the practice of asking research [participants] to check...*interpretations* to be a quick-fix to the problem of interpretive validity” because “we cannot assume that a single research [participant] (or even a group of research [participants]) unequivocally possess such

privilege.” Taken as *one part* of the validation process, however, participant authentication is a useful tool.

I would further assert that my involvement in skydiving is advantageous in addressing the issue of validity. While some have noted concerns with researcher standpoint epistemology (e.g., Mason, 1996), other researchers have argued that their own experiences with the processes under consideration increase their confidence in the validity of their findings (e.g., Young et al., 1994). I contend that my familiarity with the sport enhances my ability to make valid claims about the processes taking place in the skydiving community, particularly when taken as only one small part of the validation process. That is not to say that my familiarity with the sport and participants gave me unfettered power to make claims about processes taking place in the field. Quite the contrary, in fact. While this familiarity allowed me to generate ideas about issues in the skydiving community, I continually developed and questioned these ideas in light of new information that arose in the course of participation in the field, formal interviews with participants, informal follow-up discussions with participants, and exchanges of ideas with my supervisors. At each of these points, I had to be conscious of my participation in the processes that I was examining, and how that position could potentially undermine my ability to construct clear sociological ideas about the issues under consideration.

### **Ethical Concerns**

My own involvement in the community made it particularly important to be cautious about issues of anonymity and to be forthright about my researcher status. This is an

issue because, as Mason (1996) notes, researchers create a relationship of trust with participants. This relationship, she argues, “gives us a special responsibility to ensure that we do not abuse that trust by renegeing on commitments, acting deceitfully, or producing explanations which may damage the interests” of the research participants (Mason, 1996: 159). My involvement in skydiving contributed even more to the trust that participants felt, so I had to be very cautious with these issues. Every effort was made to ensure the anonymity of the participants. Pseudonyms were used in the participant observation notes as well as in the interviews and the subsequent transcribing and data analyses. A master list of the participants’ names was kept at my home, accessible only to me. I made it clear to participants that despite all precautions, anonymity could not be fully guaranteed. Given the conspicuous nature of the activity, descriptions of events, experiences, or opinions may give clues as to the identities of particular participants. The consent form that described the research and the role of interview participants can be found in Appendix C.

### **Epistemological Concerns**

As an inexperienced profeminist male researcher, I felt it important to be aware of some epistemological issues related to men studying gender as I entered the research setting and as the research process unfolded. I am familiar with the literature in the area of gender inequality, but have not previously had the opportunity to take my sensitivities into a field setting. As such, it was important to be informed of some of the issues with which other researchers have grappled, and to continually question my place in the field, and how my interests influenced the ways in which I conducted my research. It is easy,

for instance, to sit in a classroom and agree that particular attitudes in sport are important in producing and reproducing gender hierarchies in society. It is quite another, however, to struggle with the issue when an oppressive position is taken by someone with whom you have a personal relationship, someone who has trusted your research objectives because of your friendship. Whether to act as a disinterested observer when this was going on, participate in a limited way so as to “share their lived experiences”, or openly question attitudes and beliefs was an ongoing struggle. This is where the role of the researcher is a difficult one to disentangle from the role of a participant. I have a new respect for the complexity of the academic, personal, and moral ambiguities with which field researchers must deal in order to answer the questions in which they are interested.

Coltrane (1994) and Messner (1990) offer some insight into the contentious issue of men studying gender inequalities. Coltrane admonishes profeminist men to avoid the regressive tendency to universalize the experiences of men by highlighting gender and paying close attention to issues of power in gender relations. Further, he asserts that by “using multiple methods and relying on diverse ways of knowing, one might move closer to some tentative conclusions about which theoretical explanations for gender inequality are most plausible” (Coltrane, 1994: 53). Coltrane defends (profeminist) men’s studies by arguing that

[m]en are in a unique position to do research on groups of men and to identify processes through which men create rituals, reaffirm symbolic difference, establish internal hierarchy, and exclude, belittle, dominate, and stigmatize women and nonconforming men. Locker rooms, playing fields, board rooms, shop floors, the military, and fraternal organizations of all types provide access to the relations of ruling... (1994: 56)

Messner (1990: 139) notes that some have argued for qualitative methods as a way of asking “‘woman centered’ questions about sport and thus building critical and liberatory sport studies.” He speculates, however, that it is not the method with which we should be concerned, but is rather the epistemological orientation to research. He then outlines three different reactions to the call for feminist research in sport sociology: 1) antifeminist masculinism; 2) profeminism; and 3) inclusive feminism. Profeminism and inclusive feminism should not be seen as mutually exclusive, but as complementary for profeminist male researchers.

Men studying men, Messner (1990) postulates, must be careful to understand the complexities of the issues with which they are struggling. In particular, two different areas must be carefully considered. First, studying hierarchies between different masculinities runs the risk of losing sight of men’s power over women. It is vital that researchers recognize that sport can extract heavy costs from men who participate, and in particular from men who struggle to conform to dominant masculinities. It is equally important, however, to attend to the fact that by participating in the construction of these masculinities, athletes are reproducing a gender order in which men, as a group, enjoy institutionalized power over women as a group. Second, Messner notes that there is no single feminism, no single standpoint of women. It is imperative to recognize that many systems of domination are in operation at any one time, and that these systems are inter-related. Messner (1990: 147) argues that “the study of concrete ways that various masculinities are constructed in relation to each other through sport holds the potential to make a key contribution to the construction of a more inclusive feminism”. He holds,

however, that “male scholars must, for the foreseeable future, always forefront gender oppression” (Messner, 1990: 149). This is so because gender has been accorded too little attention by men, and because “it is today within feminist theory that the greatest strides are being made toward understanding the linkages among various systems of inequality” (Messner, 1990: 149).

### **Summary**

In this discussion of research design, I have outlined the specific methodological choices made in the research process, as well as some of the difficult epistemological, ontological, and ethical questions that I have had to answer along the way. With these issues in mind, I now turn to the heart of the issue. What do these hundreds of pages of notes and transcriptions tell us? How do they shed light on social processes at play in the skydiving and perhaps other social settings? These are the questions to be tackled in the next chapter.

## **Chapter Five: Risk, Gender, and Subcultural Meanings**

### **Introduction**

Having laid the groundwork for my study of skydivers, I now turn to a discussion of the findings. As mentioned, observations were made in the course of my participant observation, and were subsequently followed up in interviews with participants. What follows, then, is a discussion of the dynamics of the drop zone, the perspectives of participants, and so on. It is important to note that while these findings outline patterns of behavior, these behaviors are not universal. That is to say that a majority of jumpers may make sense of certain circumstances in particular ways, but there are exceptions to these patterns. It is also imperative that I again stress my own participation in the processes under consideration. In most cases, I have taken part in activities described and espouse opinions (as a jumper) expressed by the participants in this study. In the final chapter, I bring these findings together with the theoretical approaches outlined previously to draw some conclusions about the ways in which my findings contribute to the literature in the areas of risk, subcultures, and gender.

### **Risk**

The issue of risk is a contentious one in the skydiving community. From jumpers you hear everything from “it’s not risky at all” to “you’re potentially dead every time you leave an airplane.” While these may sound mutually exclusive, experienced jumpers often hold both of these opinions. The version that they offer depends on the specific question they are answering. What often underlies their response is the belief that

skydiving is potentially very risky, but that they (and most of their friends) manage these risks such that the sport is not risky for them. Michael, an extremely experienced jumper, articulates this idea very clearly:

Well, potentially, it's probably the most ... dangerous sport in the world. I mean, every time you leave an airplane, you're potentially going to die, unless you open your own parachute. You have to know how to use the equipment, you have to be taught properly how to do it, and jump within your limitations, know your limitations, and continue to expand them. If you argue for your limitations, then they're going to be yours. If you realize your limitations, and improve them and extend them or expand them, then you're going to be safe.

The irony of this "risk management" approach to safety is that it does not mean presenting yourself with the least amount of danger possible in order to have the greatest degree of safety. Instead, each participant decides how much danger they are willing to accept in a trade-off for the benefits they receive. Michael, for instance, told me that

if you just get out at 3500' and ... open at three grand, jump a 252 square foot canopy and land in the middle of an open field and walk half a mile back, then obviously you're not going to hurt yourself. But you're not going to have a lot of fun. Are you with me?

A certain amount of risk is consciously accepted in order to enjoy the activity at the desired level. Eric, with 1400 jumps under his belt, explained to me why he chooses to do a particular maneuver under his canopy (called a hook turn) that some people consider risky. The rush of an aggressive approach under canopy, he said, is too great to neglect: "... hook turns, yes. Love them. They're like sex to me, hook turns are. Feel good. I love skimmin' across the grass, I love draggin' my toes, I love the speed, speed freak. Another reason why I got into the sport, I'm a speed freak". Managed risk, then, is really

about *acceptable* risk. Each jumper decides on a level of risk that they can tolerate and chooses their skydiving behaviors accordingly.

There are several contradictions apparent when considering the notion of managed risk. One of these is the issue of equipment choices. In sport parachuting, jumpers can greatly alter the potential for injury (even death) by their equipment choices. An automatic activation device (AAD), for example, is a piece of safety equipment designed to automatically deploy a reserve parachute if it senses that a jumper is in imminent danger (i.e., at a low altitude and still falling rapidly). Whether or not to own an AAD is an important safety decision that must be made by each jumper (for the record, my gear is not equipped with an AAD). What kind of main parachute to own is another important decision concerning a jumper's safety. Smaller, faster, more responsive canopies arguably have a greater potential for serious injury than do larger, more docile canopies. The choices that jumpers make about these two pieces of equipment are interesting to consider in light of the 'managed risk' argument.

Automatic activation devices present an interesting set of contradictions for skydivers. The earliest versions of automatic activation devices were not especially reliable in that they would occasionally fire at a higher altitude than that which was pre-set prior to the jump. This often resulted in a jumper having both a main and a reserve canopy out at the same time. Under these circumstances, it is understandable that there was considerable apprehension among experienced jumpers about owning and/or using such a device. Recent technology, however, has greatly improved the reliability of AADs. One

manufacturer in particular (Airtec) has an AAD (called a Cypres) on the market that has an excellent reputation for reliability. Why, then, would not every jumper own such a device? The most commonly heard answer is that they are too expensive (a new AAD can cost upwards of \$1500 Cdn). That is not to say that a jumper could not save up that much money, but that they would sooner spend it on something else. Fred, with about three hundred jumps over six years in the sport, said “if I had the money, I’d probably buy [better gear instead of an AAD]. If I had so much money that I could, I would probably have one.” Sheila, with several years in the sport and approximately five hundred jumps, put her choice in even simpler terms: “If I had the extra money to spare, I think I would. I mean, I’m not anti-AADs by any means. It’s just been a matter of, either I get to skydive, or I buy a Cypres. So I’ve chosen the option to skydive.” For many jumpers, then, an AAD is considered a luxury item. It would be nice to have one, but not at the expense of having a new main canopy or going to Arizona in the spring to skydive.

For some jumpers, whether or not money was mentioned as an issue, the choice not to own an AAD is based in part on a belief in their own ability to handle any situation that they may encounter. To illustrate, Jack, an extremely experienced competitor and instructor, said “I don’t feel I need it. ... [part of my] risk management is to keep me out of the situations that may require one”. Fred, who mentioned money as a contributing factor, also cited his own skill and awareness as a reason not to own an AAD: “[the] second issue being I don’t feel I need one. Uh, because I try, well, I do, I make sure I’m there every time I do it, and fully, and, you know, I don’t feel for myself it’s a need

because I've never come that close that it would be used. So possibly that's it. Maybe I've just never come close yet." Part of a jumper's rationalization of risk, it seems, is to hold the position that they are fully capable of handling any situation that they may encounter in the types of skydives in which they participate. This entails a firm belief that they will be conscious, aware, and physically able to deploy their parachute every single time.

Several jumpers who claim to participate in such a way as to manage the risks involved own very small, fast, responsive canopies. If someone truly wanted to minimize the risks involved in landing parachutes, they would jump 288 square foot student canopies throughout their jumping career. These canopies turn more slowly, are more forgiving of mistakes, and are easier to land than are high-performance parachutes. The problem, however, from the perspective of an experienced jumper, is that these canopies are not fun to fly. Because they are large, docile, and easy to handle, they present little challenge to a veteran jumper. There is more excitement in learning to handle a "hot canopy", experiencing the performance potential of something on the leading edge of technology. Additionally, a larger canopy is more limited in its performance capabilities. Because it has a slow forward speed, such a canopy achieves little or no forward drive in moderate wind conditions. With a smaller canopy, however, a person could jump in winds five or seven knots higher and still achieve forward drive. The contrast that I have just drawn between a 288 square foot canopy and a 135 or 150 square foot canopy is an extreme one to illustrate the concept. The same logic applies, however, to someone who chooses to fly a 120 square foot elliptical canopy instead of one that is 135 square feet and

rectangular (elliptical canopies are generally more responsive than are rectangular canopies). As Amanda told me, “with gear and lead, I’m probably 140. I weigh 125, I’m flying a 120. There are guys 200 pounds flying a 120. And it’s a Sabre, not a Stiletto. I’m not wing-loading it heavy, just enough for some decent performance.”

A jumpers’ desire to fly something smaller is not the only factor affecting their choice of canopy. Jumpers generally know what kind of canopy others fly, and the perception among some is that “smaller is cooler” (to a point). As Michael outlined, “a lot of it is peer pressure... Got to get the smallest, fastest, hottest. And they don’t realize that they have to be pretty hot themselves to fly it”. High performance landings under small canopies often draw the attention of other experienced jumpers, and certainly draw the attention of less experienced jumpers. It is not often that everyone stops what they are doing to watch someone land a Falcon 195 (a relatively conservative rectangular canopy). When someone is landing a Stiletto 107 (an extremely small high-performance canopy), however, the sounds and sights of this landing often cause people on the drop zone to pause for a moment and take it in. As mentioned above, there is some ambivalence about the place of ever smaller and faster canopies in the sport. After a certain point, the “coolness” of having a small canopy is debatable. If one is perceived as too inexperienced or unskilled for a particular canopy, or if the canopy is so far on the leading edge of technology as to be unfamiliar to jumpers, there is still a sense of awe, but one accompanied by anxiety. If someone with 100 jumps showed up with a Stiletto, or anyone showed up with a 69 square foot Icarus Extreme, people would notice, but the

message “what a cool canopy” would be accompanied by “what are you doing jumping that thing?” Paul, for one, does not believe that

... some of these high performance canopies are for everybody... you've got to be doing all kinds of jumps with them all the time just to stay current on them. You know, all of a sudden, Joe Blow from \_\_\_\_\_ decides to be a cool skydiver and [buys] him or herself one of these hot machines, and guess what happens?

### *“Going In”*

There is another central issue in the sport of skydiving that sheds some light on how skydivers deal with risk. It is illuminating to consider the ways in which skydivers respond to another skydiver “going in”. In order to participate long-term in the sport, jumpers must come to terms with the notion of death in one way or another. As Sheryl, with 560 skydives, states, “... the chances are, if you're in the sport long enough, you're gonna' know someone [who goes in].” There are some interesting patterns in how jumpers talk about the death of other jumpers and the risk of their own death. The fact that skydivers say that someone “bounced” or “went in” as opposed to “died” tells us something in itself. Some jumpers assert that the word ‘die’ is “not as elegant” (Amanda – 1400+ skydives). There may be more to it than that. As Damian tells us, “it's a lot easier to accept a phrase like that than it is to actually verbalize someone's death.” There is perhaps less a sense of finality to going in than to dying. This vocabulary is one that is instilled in jumpers from early levels of participation. In many instances, if someone inadvertently uses an inappropriate phrase (e.g. “I'm just going in to town to grab a case of beer”) they are quickly corrected. Usually in a playful tone, someone says “you are

not *going in* to town, you are *driving* to town.” In this way, it is made clear that this particular vocabulary is reserved for certain circumstances.

Another technique many jumpers use to deal with the notion of death in the sport is rather than avoiding the issue, making it a central issue. By forefronting the issue of death, usually in a humorous way, some jumpers are saying “I’m not afraid of death, I embrace it.” T-shirts, posters, and other paraphernalia often have slogans or images that fly in the face of conventional avoidance of death. A jumper in the United States, for instance, designs, produces, and sells products with the grim reaper as a central figure. In the images, the reaper is sometimes part of a skydive, other times an omnipotent being controlling the fate of a jumper. Still other products picture complex skydives with many jumpers, all of whom are relatively well known in the community, all of whom have gone in. Another example is the traditional lead-in to telling a story around the campfire at the end of the day. As you prepare to recount a particularly interesting jump, you say (or are coached to say) “there I was, swear to God, thought I was going to die.” In these ways, jumpers show that while they recognize the possibility of death, they are not afraid, death will not ‘get’ them.

When someone does go in, jumpers are forced to deal with death seriously. One way in which jumpers come to terms with another jumper going in is to find specific reasons for the mishap, and subsequently explain that those circumstances are not relevant to their own participation. If they can argue that the victim was doing something that they do not do, it becomes easier for them to achieve distance from the accident as a jumper. As a

person, they mourn for the deceased jumper, experiencing all of the emotions normally associated with the death of a friend. As jumpers, though, they are able to compartmentalize the incident and keep on jumping. Sara, for instance, said 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.’” In other words, Sara did not perform the same kinds of jumps as her friend, and therefore was not susceptible to the same fate. Amanda had a similar experience with a close friend, and here is how she recounted the aftermath:

... she said that he’d gone in. ... Complete disbelief, anger. What the fuck is he doing? Normal grieving emotions. A lot of bonding going on, a lot of old friends. I mean, any funeral, right? And \_\_\_\_\_ 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. But what he was doing was getting out of a helicopter too low, with really fucked up gear, I’m not entirely sure why he was doing that. ... The fact that a skydiver had gone in, like I said, in my mind, wasn’t a big deal. The fact that \_\_\_\_\_ was dead was more important by a long shot than the fact that a skydiver had gone in, ‘cause skydivers go in. That’ll be a fact of life. *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.

If a jumper can identify a specific reason for a fatality and rationalize it as irrelevant to the kind of skydiving they do, they can continue to jump without reflecting too much on their own mortality.

It may be that a jumper does do the very thing that got someone else killed. If, however, they believe themselves to be better equipped or better prepared for such activities, they

can still continue to take those particular risks. Eric, for instance, expressed frustration that so many people are getting hurt or killed in executing high-performance landings. As for himself, he said “I really suspect, as arrogant as this sounds, my likelihood of injury is, by my viewing, is lower than some people. If I get injured, it’s probably going to be some extenuating circumstances other than just me pointing myself towards the earth like a fool.” When possible, jumpers argue that their lives are within their control. They make better decisions, are more aware, or have more experience or skill, and thus will not find themselves in the same circumstances as the person that went in.

What about when there are no easily discernable reasons for a fatality? What if someone was doing a normal skydive, and no one can explain what went wrong? Approximately two years before the start of my research, there was one such fatality in western Canada. A fairly popular jumper had gone in under mysterious circumstances. There was much speculation as to the specific cause, but there was no ready-made reason that would allow people to distance themselves from the incident by saying “I don’t do that.” In these circumstances, many jumpers become a bit more philosophical about their participation in the sport. In the interviews, I heard two lines of reasoning as to why one would participate in a sport that may very well result in their demise. Often one person would mention both of them in the course of the interview.

One type of reasoning is to express the notion that “sure, I could die skydiving, but I could die doing anything.” Chris, for instance, with eight years in the sport and five hundred and fifty skydives, said it’s 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..."

Michael expressed a similar idea:

I saw four [fatalities]. It affected me. Maybe it was trying to tell me something. Didn't stop me jumpin'. I like it too much. I think everybody knows the risks involved with jumping. I mean, everybody knows ... the risks of driving a car. ... And they accept that risk and just deal with it, in the main.

Similarly, Damian, with less than twenty jumps, told me "people die every day. It's part of life. Like, I could, I think I've got a better chance of being hit by a car while out for a bike ride or a run or something like that." This approach, then, rationalizes the risk of skydiving by acknowledging the risk in everything. If you deny yourself pleasures because of potential risks, you will not have a very enjoyable life. Where each person draws that line of acceptable risk, however, is not a question on which skydivers spend a great deal of time reflecting in the course of their everyday jumping.

Another way to make sense of a death that cannot be easily explained is simply a variation on the first. "When your number is up, your number is up", says Anna (900 skydives). Sheila was present when a high-profile jumper went in on a large-formation record attempt. She said "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". Anna had this to say about the death of a friend:

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."

These two approaches to making sense of a seemingly unexplainable death are rather fatalistic. The logic seems to be “If I’m going to die, I might as well have fun in the meantime.”

To summarize, for a skydiver to continue jumping in light of a death in the sport, they must come to terms with that fatality in some way. It seems that if a jumper can explain away the incident as something that wouldn’t happen to them, the dilemma is solved. Another technique at a jumper’s disposal is to consider death as out of their hands. This is one of the most interesting contradictions in this research. On the one hand, jumpers argue that their skill, awareness, risk-management choices, experience, and so on, will prevent them from being in a situation where they could potentially be killed. That is to say that they have control over their own fate. On the other hand, they deal with the very real possibility of death by asserting that death is beyond the control of any individual; that it is largely in the hands of fate. To continue skydiving after seeing a friend killed, jumpers must come up with ways to make sense of death. The irony that some of these techniques are entirely contradictory seems to escape jumpers (including myself prior to this research).

### *Edgework*

Lyng’s (1990) notion of edgework is an important theoretical tool in examining the skydiving community. As previously discussed, edgework involves negotiating the boundary between chaos and order, i.e., pushing the limits of personal and/or technological performance to the utmost while still maintaining control (Lyng, 1990).

This negotiation, this pushing of the envelope, produces feelings of euphoria and self-actualization (Lyng, 1990). There are many ways in which skydivers do this (some to a greater extent than others). This is not surprising, given that Lyng and Snow (1986) examined skydivers specifically while the edgework model was in its formative stages of development. In the next several pages, I elaborate on some specific dimensions of Lyng's model as they apply to the current study of skydivers.

By paying money to participate in an activity that they explicitly acknowledge as risky, jumpers are engaging in edgework (to a very limited extent). Even first time jumpers, I would argue, have tasted edgework. They have tested their own personal limits by challenging themselves to get out of an aircraft when this is clearly not the prudent thing to do. They have tested the technology involved in skydiving in that they have taken the word of experts (whose credentials they have likely not even seen) that the parachute will get them to the ground safely. I would argue that this single *edgework* experience, however, does not make them *edgeworkers*. To experience edgework is one thing. To construct a lifestyle within which edgework is a central activity is quite another. The edgeworker is the experienced jumper, who has a clear understanding of the technical demands of the sport, the potential for injury and death in the sport, and may even have first-hand knowledge of someone dying through their participation in skydiving, yet continues to make it an important part of her or his life.

Contrary to the findings of Lyng (1990), my data indicate that jumpers are not, for the most part, "scared" fifteen to twenty minutes before a jump. Even with less than fifty

jumps, Athena describes herself as “calm, relaxed” in the airplane on the way to altitude. It is not uncommon to see experienced jumpers sleeping in the airplane or joking with each other in a very relaxed manner. The distinction between jumpers and non-jumpers is quite clear in the airplane. On a jump airplane, it is quite easy to pick out the students (people just learning to freefall) because they are the only people looking especially anxious. Others may look excited, focused, relaxed, even bored. Fear, however, does not seem to be a common emotion prior to a jump for the vast majority of experienced jumpers. There are times when they describe anxiety prior to a jump, but these are most often in unusual circumstances. When one has not jumped for several months over the winter, for example, there is often some fear and exhilaration associated with the first skydive of the year. Alternatively, a jumper may be doing something with which they have little experience, and this may be cause for anxiety. For example, they may be doing a “planned cutaway”, a jump where they plan in advance to release their main parachute after deploying it, and subsequently to deploy their reserve. This is not a common procedure, and hence may be cause for some anxiety. Others may experience some form of performance anxiety. Only one of the participants in my study described regularly feeling afraid prior to a jump. That is not to say that there is no fear involved for others. It is likely that the degree of apprehension prior to a jump is minimal compared to what it was in the early stages of one’s jumping, and has become so familiar that people cease to describe it as fear, and instead describe it as excitement.

One dimension of Lyng’s model that posed problems in the early stages of analysis in the current project was the notion that edgeworkers feel that they possess a “survival

instinct” that helps them negotiate the “boundary between chaos and order” (Lyng, 1990: 855). As I looked over my field notes and read through interview transcripts, I struggled to locate this dimension of the model in my data set. When asked about incidents in the sport, participants did not chalk up injuries or deaths to a lack of survival skill, but to other factors that have been discussed. I could not find any indications that at the conscious level jumpers believed that they possessed this survival instinct. While reading Lyng’s (1998) discussion of dangerous methods, however, it dawned on me that many jumpers do express a belief in this survival instinct at a subconscious level. Eventually, I discovered that this notion was present in discussions of AADs, as well as in the way jumpers spoke of returning to the sport after a serious injury.

When asked about the issue of AADs, many jumpers expressed the idea that anyone who relies on an AAD (either has one fire to save them or is entirely unwilling to jump without one) should seriously consider whether or not they belong in the sport. Implicit in that statement is the notion that if you rely on a piece of equipment to save your life, perhaps you are not the right kind of person to be participating in this sport; perhaps you don’t have “the right stuff.” Sheila, for instance, “heard the analogy that if anybody has an automatic opening device fire on them, you know, and they’re not unconscious, then that’s, you know, your first clue that you shouldn’t be in the sport.” Bob made the same point, saying “If I had an AAD fire as a result of lack of awareness, ... I would at that time seriously ask myself the question: ‘are you capable of continuing to do this?’” These jumpers are implying that it takes a certain something to participate safely in skydiving. It may be difficult to verbalize, but it is analogous to Lyng’s (1990) survival

instinct. Without it, a jumper's safety is in jeopardy, as is their reputation among other jumpers.

Another way in which experienced jumpers expressed this notion of a survival instinct was by noting increasing reliance on AADs (and other pieces of safety equipment).

Again, the notion expressed is that the sport is about taking a particular approach to managing the risks involved. Any time that survival instinct is absent, whether because of a lack of awareness or because of reliance on safety devices, the safety of that skydiver, and, by extension, of other jumpers sharing the sky with them, is threatened. In

Michael's words:

I find it very scary that people are pushing their limitations in the sport, and not worrying about it as much as they should do, because 'I'm safe, I've got a hard helmet and an AAD.' And I've seen that attitude a lot, and it's disgusting. They're relying on mechanical devices rather than their own intelligence to save their life. As \_\_\_\_\_ would say it, they're fuckin' up the gene pool. Idiots are being allowed to breed [laughs]. That's going a little extreme, but I know exactly what he means.

Jack has taken note of the same phenomenon. He feels that his own safety is jeopardized by these attitudes, and that he may have to take extra safety precautions because of it:

I probably see myself in the future being forced to get [an AAD] due to the change of behavior, or slightly more reckless behavior of the average skydiver out there because of the AAD, and everyone buying one, thinking the sport is safe now. [I'll be] forced to get one because the average jumper out there will be more reckless because they have one. And if I don't get one, their recklessness is going to take me out. I've already, I'm already seeing that happen.

Most jumpers seem to agree that technological advances are great for the sport. The accompanying changes in attitude, however, frighten some jumpers, and make them worry for the future of the sport.

During my time in the field, another instructor approached me about a problematic student. This student exhibited excellent body position and technique in general, but when she experienced a problem on her seventh jump, she failed to activate her parachute at all. Her AAD fired, saving her life. Several experienced instructors concurred, we would not allow this student to continue to jump. She had exhibited a critical lack of awareness and action. No matter what happens in a skydive, we agreed, you have to make an attempt to activate a parachute. Anyone who does not make that attempt is simply not cut out for this sport. They do not have the “right stuff.” A more experienced jumper provided another example of a reputation being tarnished. His AAD was malfunctioning one particular day, and he was unwilling to jump without it turned on and functioning properly. For some, this did not pose a problem. A few jumpers, though, questioned his confidence in his own abilities. Jack, for instance, noted that this jumper, by refusing to jump, had admitted that he changed his skydiving behavior based on the fact that he had an AAD<sup>5</sup>. Jumpers notice the behavior of other jumpers. When someone exhibits a serious lack of awareness or ability, or lacks confidence in their own abilities, other jumpers may take a hard stance. Tim, for example, had this to say about the

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<sup>5</sup> Details of these and other stories have been altered somewhat in an effort to protect the anonymity of the parties involved.

response of jumpers to bad situations: "I think skydivers don't panic. ... Well, some do. Well, then they shouldn't be skydivers".

The notion of a survival instinct was also present in discussions of returning to the sport after an injury. Many jumpers noted that if they were injured, they would undoubtedly jump again, if only to prove to themselves (and perhaps others) that their mishap was a fluke, that they had what it took. The idea expressed is that there is a certain aptitude required to participate safely in the sport. This skill is not simply physical, but is rather an ability to handle the mental and emotional demands of the sport. An injury, it is argued, would potentially be an indication that one did not possess this survival skill. By returning to the sport, one demonstrates that one's survival instinct is intact. Sara, for instance, when asked why she would return to the sport after a major injury, said "... first of all, to prove that the sport hadn't got me. If I didn't jump again, it would be, it would feel like a failure, it would feel like I'm jammin'." Chris expressed a very similar sentiment when he said "I think the type of person I am, I'd at least have to go out and do a few after I'd recovered, just to show myself that it was a fluke, that, you know, I'm still capable of jumping and stuff." Sheryl experienced a serious injury several years ago, and described the course of events that followed:

Broke my pelvis in three places, shattered my femur. The surgeon told me that it was so shattered ... [that] they put a rod through it and everything, and then just sort of laid all the broken pieces around the femur to calcify, right? And then broke my arm ... and there's still a little bit of numbness and weakness there. Shattered my cheekbone. Had to have plastic surgery to replace the cheekbone... There was never any doubt about going back to skydiving. ... it was like a pride thing. You know, it's not

going to beat me. You know, I got injured, but *'I'm gonna' go back and prove I can do it'* kind of thing.

For a jumper to quit because of an injury is to admit that the sport got the better of them. Clearly, this is something that jumpers are not ready to concede. They take pride in the fact that their normal activities include things that many people are afraid to even try. They do not want to let go of that distinction.

Another dimension of Lyng's (1990) edgework model is the notion of pushing the limits of the technology associated with an activity. In addition to the advent and development of AADs, technological advances have changed skydiving through increasingly sophisticated canopy design. The major innovation in canopy design was the rectangular parachute, replacing the round parachute. By the late 1970s, round parachutes had become quite reliable and commonly accepted as safe. They were, however, difficult to steer and had low ground speeds, so there were relatively strict limitations on the wind conditions and geographical locations in which they could be used. In addition, equipment was heavy and landings were quite hard, sometimes resulting in lower leg injuries. Under these conditions, sport parachuting was tremendously physically demanding and draining. With the advent of the rectangular parachute, designed much like an airplane wing, came solutions to some of these problems. Container systems were designed that could hold main and reserve parachutes together, reducing the weight of the equipment. Parachutes could more easily be steered and had a faster ground speed, meaning wind and obstacles were less threatening. Rectangular parachutes could also be flared, allowing for much softer landings. These changes resulted in much greater

accessibility of the sport. Athena, for one, said that without this advance in canopy design, she would never have tried the sport: “I would never [have] jumped a round parachute [laughs]. I hope I never have to do a PLF (Parachute Landing Fall) roll. ... It makes it a lot easier for people to get into, because it’s very safe to do. It’s so much safer.” Michael, who has been around long enough to see all of the major changes in technology, concurs:

... Technology I think is everything. ... It’s the reason why a lot of people stay jumping, I think. Um, I think the percentage of people who continue on jumping from the first jump course is still low – about 3% - regardless of all the technology and stuff, but more people are doing the first jump course than ever before. And that’s because square parachutes, better marketing and stuff as well, AADs, the sport’s getting out there more. So, as a by-product of that, more people are staying in the sport. The same percentage is staying in the sport as always has, right, but because we’re training more people to experience it, our actual membership numbers are increasing.

This innovation changed the course of sport parachuting history. It made skydiving accessible to people who could not have taken the beating of fifty pounds of gear into the ground at ten miles per hour.

Advances in canopy technology in the last ten years have been met with more ambivalence. The technology informing rectangular parachutes continually improved, and over the last decade, increasingly sophisticated high-performance canopy designs have emerged. Whereas ten years ago it was uncommon to have a canopy that could sustain a wing loading of one pound per square foot, there are now canopies that have a recommended wing-loading range of 1.5-2.2 pounds per square foot. 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'. Many of the high-performance canopies now are actually elliptical or semi-elliptical as opposed to rectangular. What these changes have meant is that, in general, skydivers are jumping smaller main canopies than they were a decade ago. With these smaller parachutes comes 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 a jumper's enjoyment of their time under canopy, they also reduce the margin of error. That is to say that 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 could result in a serious landing injury to oneself and/or others.

Because these high-performance canopies are so unforgiving of mistakes, manufacturers have recommended that potential buyers have a certain amount of canopy-flying experience before purchasing such an item. Depending on the specific canopy, manufacturers may recommend having over a thousand jumps before flying their product. These high-performance canopies have become so fast, so responsive, and so potentially injurious, that many experienced jumpers are now worried about the numbers of injuries and fatalities resulting from canopy-collisions, misjudged landings, and collisions with obstacles. Paul, for instance, who started jumping on round canopies and now owns a medium-performance rectangular main, said

I don't think some of these extremely high-performance canopies are for everybody. You know, I wouldn't want to jump one because, number one, I don't jump enough. And when you get into the very, very high performance type canopy, ... you've got to be doing all kinds of jumps with them just to stay current on them. You know, all of a sudden, Joe Blow from \_\_\_\_\_ decides to be a cool skydiver, and [buys] him or herself one of these hot machines, and guess what happens?

Like Paul, some people have no desire to jump these heavily loaded canopies. They recognize that they are not skilled or current enough to handle these parachutes, or they are simply not interested in owning a canopy with such a tiny margin for error. That is not the case for everyone.

The fact that manufacturers continue to research and develop new high-performance canopies tells us that there is a market for small, fast parachutes. For some jumpers, the challenge of learning to fly such a canopy skillfully increases their enjoyment of the sport. When asked how the technological changes in canopy design have affected the sport, Sophia points out that for some people, these high-performance canopies are very appealing. She notes, however, some of the worries she has as these parachutes become increasingly prevalent:

[High-performance canopies have changed the sport] positively in the performance for people who like to fly their canopies, ... but negatively in that the forward speeds have just increased so much that it's making it, it's causing a lot more accidents on opening and on landing than have ever happened before, that I know of, in the history of skydiving. It used to be that opening collisions were just about unheard of. And landing, I mean, how could you hurt yourself with a big parachute? Unless you broke your ankle from a round, you know, it was pretty tough to hurt yourself. Those canopies, the canopies were very forgiving. But now, people can kill themselves because of the high performance of the wing over their head.

For many jumpers there is considerable ambivalence about high-performance canopies. They do not want to take away the freedom of others to choose the type of equipment they like, but they also fear for the safety of some jumpers underneath these canopies, as well as those that share the air with these people.

The most prevalent way in which jumpers create added risk is by the way they fly their main canopies. As mentioned above, many jumpers choose to own canopies that are small relative to their body weight. This creates a situation where jumpers are loading their canopies heavily enough that, in many cases, they are exceeding the manufacturer's recommended maximum suspended weight for the particular canopy. This means that a jumper's "main" (most jumpers omit the word canopy and simply refer to it as a "main" or a "reserve") flies faster, is more responsive, and can achieve higher ground speeds just before landing. By itself, having a small canopy does not necessarily create the potential for serious injury. Most jumpers who fly these small canopies, however, also do a maneuver just prior to landing in order to increase the speed of the canopy with the goal of creating more lift and better stopping power for the canopy. This move involves initiating a turn just prior to landing so that the canopy dives towards the ground. As it planes out of this dive (which may be quite shallow, very steep, or anywhere in between, depending on the conditions as well as 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 finishes the flare to stop the forward speed of the canopy. If done correctly, this action results in a very safe and spectacular landing, a landing that is exciting to execute and to watch. The problem, however, is that if the

move is initiated at the wrong time, or the flare is not executed properly, the results can be devastating.

There have been many incidents in Canada and abroad of jumpers being gravely injured or killed by the impact with the ground or some obstacle, an impact that resulted from a poorly executed “hook turn” (this move is commonly called a hook turn even though it can take many forms). Of the interview participants in the current study, several have experienced broken bones resulting from low turns under their main. Between them, these jumpers have spent several days in intensive care units, several weeks in hospital, and several years 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 rods in their bodies or physical symptoms that may never disappear. It is interesting to note that at one boogie (a special event that draws jumpers from several drop zones) attended by the researcher, there was a special jump organized open only to those jumpers who had undergone surgery as a result of a skydiving injury. This jump was called the “heavy metal dive.” The premise, of course, was that everyone brought some metal (in their bodies) to the jump. 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 moves without sustaining serious injury. Clearly, though, the potential is there.

From jumpers who actually own and jump high performance parachutes, we hear the argument that canopy-related injuries/fatalities have less to do with high-performance

parachutes than with unskilled pilots flying parachutes for which they are not prepared. The analogy that Eric drew was "... people kill people. Guns don't kill people." The line of reasoning, again, has to do with managing risk, and deciding what level of risk is acceptable for you as an individual. The choice is not about the capabilities of the equipment, but what the pilot can handle, as Jack told me:

I understand your point, right? [If you do] a high-performance move, and make a mistake, the net result is potentially more damaging than doing a lower-performance landing and making a similar mistake. [So why do I do the high-performance landing?] That's because I can. It really comes down to that.

This may sound like confidence or arrogance, but really, a jumper has to have unshakeable confidence in her/himself in order to rationalize the risks of skydiving. Similarly, a jumper who chooses to fly a high-performance canopy in an aggressive way has to have total faith that she or he has the ability and awareness to handle any situation that might present itself. What worries these people, as Eric outlined, is jumpers who are not aware of their limitations:

I actually don't have a problem with people that have less skills than the capability of their parachute, but what they need to have with that is enough brains to know that they don't, that they're not as good as their parachute can be. I really do think of one person in particular who has a [high-performance canopy], yet he points himself at the ground, goes into full deep brakes every time he hook turns, and probably one time out of seven or eight, he creams in. And he wants a smaller, faster parachute now.

Again, we are told that hook turns or small canopies are not the problem. The problem, according to jumpers who fly high-performance canopies aggressively, is people who do not jump within their limitations. In the terms Lyng (1990) uses, these edgeworkers have

a problem not with people who negotiate the edge effectively, but with those who lose control while on this boundary between chaos and order.

From many of the jumpers who like to execute these high-performance maneuvers, we hear the notion that if they did not fly their canopies like this, they would not enjoy skydiving nearly as much. Bob, who has been seriously injured executing a high-performance landing, told me “they do it because a graceful high-performance landing executed under an airfoil ... is one of the most personally satisfying activities I believe man can experience. ... they’re following the lure of the most enticing perfect moment of any skydive, of any flight.” Fred agrees, although he couches it more in terms of pushing himself and his equipment:

Pumps up the adrenaline. Makes you feel alive. ... I don’t think you’re trying to expose it to other people by flying it aggressively, maybe some. But I don’t, I don’t fly it that way. ... I would be just as content doing it alone with nobody watching and I, I have. You know, I try to get as much out of this canopy as I can. And, and maybe that’s it, I’m just trying to push that envelope.

Trying to push that envelope, as Fred put it, is for some jumpers a good part of the reason for jumping. Tim, for instance, said “being able to fly your canopy well [is] a very enjoyable part of the skydive.” The self-actualization and exhilaration described in Lyng’s edgework model is clearly evident in the above statements.

For some jumpers, simply participating in the activity, getting out of the plane several times each weekend for several months each year, constitutes negotiating the edge. They test themselves every time they get out of the airplane, they test the equipment every time

it brings them back to earth, and they feel exhilarated for having done so. For others, though, this participation is not close enough to “chaos”. They find ways to increase the risk associated with skydiving because by doing so, they find greater enjoyment, greater fulfillment. The choices about what kind of main to fly and how to fly it are examples of this behavior.

Another way in which some jumpers engage in a more extreme version of edgework is by combining skydiving with drug use. There are some out there for whom jumping is not, by itself, enough of a mind-altering experience. These few people add to the euphoria of skydiving by adding alcohol and/or illicit drugs to the mix. My data indicate that this type of behavior is far less prevalent in skydiving than has been reported in the past. Several of the participants in the current study reminisced about the days when they and their friends would smoke pot, do some mushrooms, and then go throw themselves out of an airplane. Most no longer take part in such exuberance. During my time in the field, however, there were occasions when I noticed a small group of people getting together in a secluded area while jumping was going on. While I did not witness the activities, several people on the drop zone mentioned that these people were “smoking up” before their jump. On one occasion, a jumper wanted to borrow my equipment to go skydive. I had just met him, but since he was a friend of several of my friends, I did not hesitate to lend him my gear. I thought his behavior a little odd while I was briefing him on the specifics of my equipment, and should perhaps have realized what was going on. Naïvely, though, I went about doing my own skydive (with different gear, of course). One of my key informants told me later what had taken place. Prior to borrowing my

gear, this jumper had consumed four beers and “a fat one” in anticipation of a jump. This had all taken place before eleven o’clock in the morning.

As mentioned in the research design chapter, I had difficulty gaining access to particular sights where drug activity was taking place. Further, I did not include any questions about drug use in my interview guide. As such, my observations about drug use in the sport are offered only to confirm that this activity still takes place to some extent. I cannot speculate as to how this behavior fits into the edgework model because I do not know what meaning it has for participants.

### **Subculture**

Depending on the time of day at which one arrives at a drop zone (and the conditions for jumping), the area can either be a hub of activity, or it can feel like a ghost town. Until and unless jumping is taking place, there is clearly an air of anxiety and impatience. “We came out here to skydive”, is the notion, “and we’re not going to be satisfied until we do.” Amanda, a very experienced jumper involved in many dimensions of the sport, says “the waiting can certainly get to you sometimes. The hanging around”. Fred, an intermediate-level jumper, concurs, noting that he dislikes “time wasted, for sure. Uh, quite often, you know, there’s nothing to do while it’s raining, or what not, and literally nothing to do”. For neophytes, there seems to be a sense of dislocation to go along with the anxiousness. Jumpers at the early stages of participation are not quite sure about what to do when they arrive at the drop zone, so they look to others for clues. For those jumpers still at an early stage in their jumping ‘career’, the drop zone can be intimidating.

Looking around, they know that most of the people they see have a much better grasp of the activity than they possess, but just as importantly, that the experienced jumpers are more comfortable in these social surroundings. It can be intimidating for these new jumpers to approach someone who has been around for awhile, because they may feel like experienced jumpers do not want to be bothered by 'stupid questions'. Until these new jumpers feel like they belong to the group, they often congregate and share experiences. Athena, involved only a few months at the time of the interview, illustrates this idea:

Like, I would go up to somebody that wasn't as experienced, just because I felt more intimidated by the more experienced people, not because they were shunning me, but because I thought that they'd had it asked to them so many times that they may get a little annoyed with people always asking, but it's completely the opposite. You have to ask questions.

Newer jumpers spend time learning the specific demands of the sport, but also becoming comfortable socially in a group in which they do not quite yet belong.

When learning to skydive, one learns not just the technical aspects of the activity, but also some of the social expectations. As neophytes hang around more experienced jumpers, they start to see examples of the types of behavior expected of members. Until this happens, though, one is likely to make some missteps. Experienced members usually notice these errors. For instance, I was told a story of a young jumper who had not yet figured out that skydiving paraphernalia is usually considered inappropriate outside of the drop zone setting:

This one guy in particular, he used to wear his jumpsuit to the bar all the time. And he'd have, like maybe only the bottom part on. He wasn't, I

mean, he'd only done a couple of jumps. *He looked ridiculous in the eyes of other skydivers.* Um, he would always try and pick up women. People who weren't skydivers. Women who weren't skydivers, ... or women who were so new in skydiving, like they'd done one or two jumps, that they just wouldn't know the difference, that he didn't have ten thousand jumps, that he only had two. (Sophia – 1060 jumps; 10 years)

Another aspect of skydiving with which new jumpers become familiar is the language that is used in the sport. This language ranges from technical descriptions of formations or equipment to informal phrases that have particular meanings to jumpers. Most of the experienced jumpers I queried felt similar to Jane, who said “it's not really like you're trying to exclude them [newer jumpers] from the conversation, we're just talking about stuff we know, and they don't know. But we forget that.” To newer jumpers, however, there is a definite feeling of alienation when they do not understand the subtleties of what is being said, and a tangible feeling of membership when they do start to “get it”. As Damian, with only 17 jumps, stated,

Yeah, certain phrases I've heard, like “whuffos”, uh, “going in.” OK – whuffos – meaning “what for you jump” or something like that. People who haven't jumped are sort of classed together as whuffos, like not understanding why we do it. ... [understanding this language] sort of makes you part of the group. It, of the subculture. Uh, you can understand each other, you can, you can talk, you can meet somebody who you've never seen before, and, I guess, depending on their understanding of the language, you can sort of judge what they know about the sport, and what sort of, how they fit into the sport.

Experienced jumpers may simply have become so comfortable with the argot that they no longer consider it exclusionary. Clearly, though, from the perspective of those just becoming members, understanding the lingo is an important part of being a skydiver.

The experiences of more veteran jumpers are quite different than those described above. At their home drop zone, jumpers typically arrive with their equipment slung over a shoulder, walk into the clubhouse area, greet other jumpers, and quickly arrange to do a jump. In some cases, this means checking the manifest (the sheet outlining who is jumping on which loads) to find an opening. For others, this means approaching other jumpers and proposing a jump together. Either way, there is a clear sense of purpose. This is part of the “hurry up and wait” phenomenon at the drop zone. Jumpers commonly set all else aside for a few minutes in order to arrange to jump, and then are often required to wait some time before the jump itself (or often even the preparations for the jump) takes place. In fact, this sense of urgency is expected at the drop zone. If someone arrives at the drop zone and seems disinterested in jumping, other jumpers notice. The seemingly reluctant jumper may be invited to do a skydive, or may be questioned. “Why aren’t you jumping?” sounds like an innocuous query, but the frequency of this question on the drop zone has clear implications. If you are a skydiver, and you are at a drop zone, you are expected to jump. This expectation can be dodged if one has an acceptable explanation. “I’ve already done four, I’m just taking a breather”, “I’m hung over”, “I’m waiting for (someone particular) to do a jump with me”, or something of the like allays suspicions. The message in these reasons is clear. This person wants to jump, and will as soon as the conditions are right. An explanation such as “I don’t feel like it right now” or “I’m not into it”, however, will usually not allow one to sidestep the issue. “Why don’t you feel like it?” or “what’s wrong, you came here to jump, didn’t you?” will often follow.

People's participation is monitored in a more long-term way as well. In order to be seen as a legitimate member of the group, one must devote a great deal of time to skydiving. If one has not been involved for a long time and/or does not "stay current" (do enough jumps in a year to be familiar with everything), one encounters a degree of marginalization. This may come in the form of comments (e.g. "do you remember how to work that thing?"), or perhaps being overlooked for the 'hot' skydives. In the case of newer jumpers especially, being invited on skydives with the experienced jumpers is a tangible sign of acceptance. For example, Sheila recalled when she felt like she had become part of the group: "I would think that it was after a couple hundred jumps. Uh, once I could actually skydive. And, you know, you got asked on skydives by people who are really good, and that felt great, because ... before, they didn't want to skydive with you." Someone whose skills are not sharp might not make it to their place in the formation, or might take out another jumper. If participants are unsure about someone's abilities, they are unlikely to invite that individual on the important skydives for fear that they will not perform well. This marginalization may result from an assessment of the type of jumps someone does as well. A particular jumper may do 150 skydives a year, but if they are not the "right kind" of skydives, they may still not be perceived as able to handle the challenging jumps (complex formations and so on). For instance, at one boogie, an experienced jumper was excluded from a very important jump because he had "only been tossing pilot chutes (i.e., dispatching students) this year." This jumper had certainly been around enough and was well known to the organizers of the skydive. The perception, however, was that he was not current enough for the skydive being planned, and they didn't want anyone screwing up the jump.

As alluded to in a previous chapter, there is no agreement on the characteristics of skydivers. On the contrary, the consensus is that skydivers come from all walks of life, participate for all sorts of different reasons, and bring different characteristics to the group. The way some see it, these people might not even get along outside of skydiving. Amanda, for instance, told me “you’ve got everything from these pot-heads to adrenaline junkies. You know, the youngish guys with money, like, \_\_\_\_\_, sort of typifies another extreme. ... More money than they know what to do with. And these people, they will never appreciate each other.” Anna, with eight hundred skydives and a decade in the sport, agreed, saying

I mean, you’ve got guys that live on a drop zone and pack for a living, and live out of tents and stuff like that, and then you have doctors, and you have lawyers. Would these people ever get together if they didn’t have something else in common? Like, would they be friends?

Jumpers seem to stress these differences between skydivers in order to illustrate how individual they are, how unique they are.

Despite the differences outlined above, though, there is still something tying these people together, even if jumpers cannot discern what that something is. To illustrate, Anna continued the thought expressed above by saying

It’s a certain type of person that decides they want to go skydive, and then it’s a certain type of person that stays with the sport. ... I think it’s people that, they want to enjoy life as much as they can. And they get involved in a sport that, it is very close-knit. ... You can go to New York, and if you don’t have a place to stay, you will; if you don’t have anywhere to eat, you will; and if you need to borrow something from somebody, you can get it there. Whether it’s a pair of gloves, a pair of goggles, an altimeter, or even a rig, you can get it whether you know people there or not.

There is a certain cohesiveness among jumpers, most participants agree. Some told me that this comes about because they share an experience that most people do not or cannot understand:

There's a bond between skydivers that is just there. Because, it doesn't matter where you go in the world, when you meet somebody who skydives, instantly, you're their friend. I met somebody today at work who used to be an active jumper ten years ago, back from \_\_\_\_\_ days, and instantly, it's just like we had lots to talk about, and stuff was going on. It's pretty neat. ... I think it's not, it's not something that most people take an interest in, so you have met very few people in life that you can actually share that experience with. (Sheila – 500 jumps; 5 years)

Skydivers understand something that they believe no one else “gets”, and this results in affective ties between them.

While jumpers clearly “get it”, there is almost universal agreement that non-jumpers are incapable of understanding what skydiving is like. Lyng and Snow (1986) reported a similar phenomenon, as mentioned in the research design chapter. It was clearly evident in the interviews that jumpers consider themselves to be poorly understood (whether or not they care is another issue – this is discussed below). Tim, with about 2500 skydives, says “the people in the general population just look at skydiving as being an unacceptable risk. Why would you jump out of a perfectly good plane? ... They don't understand why we would ever do that.” Eric put it in more colorful terms:

You can say well, yeah, it feels like the roller-coaster and the drop of doom, and getting shot out of a cannon, and then getting yanked on by your you-know-whats, and this, that, and everything else, but no, there's so many of the other factors that are there too. It could never be clearly described.

Sara expressed a similar notion when she describing her first jump: “it was just like ‘what the HELL am I doing here, and whose stupid idea was this anyway? I’m not getting out of this airplane.’ I mean, how do you describe that to somebody?” For skydivers, participation means not only being involved in jumping activities, but having an implicit understanding that you are part of a select group.

When experienced jumpers talk about their involvement in the sport, they do not seem to be talking about a voluntary activity, but rather a physical need. Based on the words used to describe how they feel about jumping, their participation fulfills many needs in their lives. It is not simply the thrill that keeps them involved, but also the friends, the bonds between jumpers, the challenges of the activity. Jane, with two hundred and sixty jumps over four years, said: “I never even thought of stopping. Just, I don’t know, there’s not any one thing that I could look back and say that’s why I continued jumping. I just did it. *I needed to.*” Sheryl, who has skydived for six years, talked about the many dimensions of involvement mentioned above:

... the excitement, the challenge. Um, but there’s also the camaraderie. It’s just a brotherhood kind of feeling, you know? I’ve got a group of people that I get along with pretty well. And, it’s just, you know, a lot of fun to hang out with those people who do the same things you are. ‘Cause, you know, you spend almost every weekend together. So there’s that. I like traveling. It gives you some place to go, gives you motivation to get out of town. It’s also to get out of town and to, you know, get the fresh air, and be semi-active.

Fred speculated that his involvement in skydiving helps him cope with other stresses in his life: “... everything else in your life is, is just blown away while you take care of ... this interest of yours. ... It just helps you put breaks in your life. Gives you a will to

live.” Here, again, jumping is seen not just as a hobby to be pursued when time permits, but also as a necessary activity helping to keep everything else in perspective.

One dimension of subcultural membership examined by Donnelly and Young (1988) is the issue of audiences. That is to say that over time, subcultural members confirm and construct identities for non-members and for members. In the early stages of membership, it is the view outsiders have of their participation that members think is important. As one becomes more deeply involved with the group, however, the opinions of outsiders become less important. The perceptions of other participants then become the mirror in which one sees oneself. This phenomenon is definitely evident among skydivers. Less experienced jumpers show a greater interest (positive or negative) in what non-jumpers think of the activity and their participation in it than do more experienced jumpers. At the earliest stages of involvement, there is a positive take on this perception of outsiders that the sport is dangerous or that skydivers are daredevils. Jenn, with 3 years in the sport and 120 skydives, says non-jumpers

... don't know, they have no idea of how much safety is actually within the sport. They think it's crazy. They think it's just like jumpin' off of a cliff with nothing else on your back... I like it [laughs]. I don't think it's ever really gonna' change, with skydiving especially, just because there's so many people that aren't really willing to take a chance to go and do that ... In a way, that's what makes it so neat to be a skydiver, is because you, because it's a sport that people think you're crazy to do.

At moderate levels of experience, it is more likely that jumpers have a negative take on the views of non-jumpers. They still care, but only to the extent that they want to effect change in the opinions of outsiders: “If they don't know anything about the sport, and

they don't know you, then they automatically assume it's reckless, and I just kinda' go 'well, you know, you should try it. It's not.' It's actually quite the opposite" (Anna).

Amanda illustrates the position of most highly experienced jumpers. She no longer cares what non-jumpers think. Her take on the general public's perception of skydivers is:

"[they think] we're all nuts. ... Probably most people think it's kind of a dumb thing to do." When asked how she feels about that perception, she told me:

I don't want to talk about it [with them]. They're outsiders. You have the same conversation over and over again with a whuffo'. They always want to know the same things. And frankly I'm ... not interested in talking about skydiving to a whuffo', really. Not any more. You know, unless they're a really good friend. You think they might be interested. A friend of mine from work really is. "Always wanted to do that, I'm gonna' do that." Great. Happy to talk about it. But the vicarious, the voyeurs, I'm not interested in sharing.

Amanda's identity as a skydiver is so firmly established that non-jumpers' views of her or of the sport are irrelevant. A long-time jumper with about three thousand skydives, Paul expressed very similar sentiments:

I don't really give a damn, because I don't talk, most people don't even know I skydive. ... That's my own thing I do by myself, I don't really talk about it that much. If somebody's interested, you know, I'll do whatever I can to encourage them ... to try it, but I'm not into talking about it at coffee breaks every time, and all this sort of stuff. You know, it's my own personal life.

For these experienced jumpers, it's no longer important what the non-jumping public thinks, or even that anyone outside of the sport knows what they do. They have no need for validation from outside as they have comfort in their own place in the sport.

As with many subcultures, rituals occupy an important place in skydiving. The clearest example of a ritual in contemporary skydiving is a “pieing”. When jumpers reach important milestones in their skydiving career, other jumpers pie them. The first such milestone is usually one hundred jumps. After that, at five hundred, one thousand, and multiples of one thousand jumps, skydivers are usually pied again. Depending on where this takes place (geographically), and the experience level of the jumper, this ritual can have different specific forms. At some drop zones, it is a simple cream pie delivered to the face of a (sometimes unsuspecting) jumper. This is also more likely to be the case with very experienced jumpers. At some drop zones, and often with newer jumpers, a pieing can be much more of an ordeal. Multiple pies, messy ingredients (e.g., syrup, fruit filling, chocolate sauce), and/or physical restraints may be involved. In extreme cases, a pieing can look much like an assault, with a jumper accosted by several other jumpers, tied in some way to a building, chair, or apparatus, and then splattered with pies all over their bodies. I even heard stories of jumpers who were stripped of some or all of their clothing once they were restrained, only to be pied in all of the sensitive areas. While this sounds borderline torturous, it seems to be a source of amusement for those presenting the pie(s), and usually a cause for pride for those receiving it (them). Irrespective of the type of pieing that just took place, this part of the ordeal is often followed by a chorus from all of the jumpers “Him, him, fuck him.” This particular aspect of the pieing is less common at drop zones with fewer experienced jumpers. It seems that this was a common element of the ritual in the past, and the presence of very experienced jumpers is required to keep it alive at younger drop zones today.

Regardless of experience level, most jumpers identified the one-hundred-jump pie in particular as a sign of acceptance and membership, a rite of passage if you will. As Leanne, with six years in the sport and 400 jumps, stated, "I loved it. I thought it was another part of the acceptance into the, now the next group, you know?" Tim expressed that pieing is a way to encourage and recognize those jumpers who have made it to a particular level of involvement:

Pieing, traditionally, is a hundred jumps, and, to me, if somebody's got the point of doing a hundred jumps, they're now a skydiver. I mean, chances are, they're not going to stop, and if they do, they're not going to stop for, like, a while anyways. Like, they're part of the sport. ... It's like your initiation into being a skydiver.

Most of the jumpers I interviewed interpreted pieing in general, and particularly the pie received at a hundred jumps, not just as a positive thing, but as an essential part of becoming a skydiver. As mentioned above, pieing is seen not simply as a fun ritual where someone is recognized, but as an acceptance into the membership of 'real' skydivers, those who are experienced and in it for the long haul. Jane captures the importance of this ritual:

It was like an initiation. You've hit a milestone, and it was, everyone says 'oh, I don't want to even do my hundredth, 'cause I don't want to be pied.' Well, everyone says that, but then once you get there, I think if you actually missed it and someone didn't do it, I think you'd be crushed.

Being pied, then, is a central part of the process of becoming an experienced skydiver, and a defining moment in achieving membership in the group. The cleaning up afterwards, it seems, is a small price to pay for the benefits realized.

There is more ambivalence about being pied later on in one's jumping career. At a thousand jumps, for instance, a ritual still takes place. There is some debate, however, on whether a pieing should take place for someone who has reached that level of experience. Jack, for example, does not think so: "My own belief is that that should be pretty much the only time you get pied, for your 100<sup>th</sup> jump, and it should be left pretty much up to pieing." Michael disagrees, noting that a thousand jumps is an important milestone that deserves to be recognized:

... if it's a big one, you know, somebody getting, you know, like a thousand jumps, somebody I've been jumping with since they started jumping, I want to throw it. Do you know what I mean? It's just, I want to say "well done, congratulations." ... I don't regard it as insulting at all. It might be a little bit "you may have a thousand jumps, but we can still throw a pie in your face" type na-na-na-na. That kind of idea, which is great. Most people, a lot of skydivers have egos, but the majority of them, I really don't think they do, I think they just, they like skydiving, and a thousand jumps makes them smile, and a pie in the face and buy a case of beer...

Whatever a jumper thinks about pieing at a thousand jumps, it is clear that the ritual has different implications at that point than at a hundred jumps. As Sara, coming up on her thousandth skydive, said, "I think by that time, it's not acceptance. You know, at that point, you don't need to feel the acceptance. ... when \_\_\_\_\_ did his thousandth, bottle of champagne. Good move. Um, pies aren't necessary at that point." The consensus seems to be that by the time you reach a thousand jumps, you do not need confirmation that you are a skydiver. The ritual may be congratulatory, a sign that your friends care about you, or just plain fun. It does not, however, have the same symbolism as a 100-jump pie.

Discussions of the place of pieing in skydiving can evoke some strong emotions among jumpers. Recently, over e-mail, one Canadian jumper expressed that he would charge anyone who tried to pie him with assault. He felt it was a degrading practice that had no place in the sport. While this position is very rarely taken, the response from many people was fast and furious. Many jumpers expressed strong positive emotions about their own experiences of being pied, and argued that it is an excellent way to recognize someone and welcome them to the skydiving 'brotherhood', as Sheryl called it. Some jumpers feel that the practice can be taken too far when it takes hours to clean up afterwards, or when it seems malicious rather than fun, but there is a general consensus that pieing is positive and should remain a part of the sport. Jack's description of his experience with pieing illustrates both the importance of the event for a new jumper and the potential for a malicious approach to the experience:

... in all honesty, I was hoping to get pied for my hundredth jump, 'cause to me that was almost a part of being accepted and recognized. I felt a little bent that at a hundred jumps, nobody really cared that I did my hundredth jump. And my first jump course instructor was actually on the drop zone that day, and I asked him if he would do my hundredth jump with me, and he said no. Oh well. I did my two-hundredth jump, and I got pied that evening, which I thought was OK. I showered, and I cleaned up, and they grabbed me again, and they tore my clothes off and plastered me with Mazola and sprinkled me with [inaudible]. And that one wasn't fun at all, because it was entirely, like revenge motivated... I didn't care for that. It served no purpose.

From these illustrations we see that the ritual of being pied is a principle occasion in the confirmation of one's identity in the skydiving community. It is the one time that there is an expectation of being the center of attention, and jumpers notice whether and how others recognize this milestone.

Another example of a ritual in the skydiving community is a jumper buying beer when she/he does something significant for the first time. For example, when a jumper reaches solo freefall, she/he is expected to buy beer for everyone to consume around the campfire that night. To inform the jumper of this debt owing, several jumpers shout "beer!" or "case of beer!" Similarly, when one achieves their first Certificate of Proficiency in skydiving (usually between 10 and 30 skydives), one is again expected to provide a case of beer. At some drop zones, it is so formalized that your name, along with the reason for owing beer, is placed on the "beer board" until your debt is settled. With a beer debt outstanding, other jumpers may remind you of the circumstances with playful ribbing, or you may not be allowed to jump until you have paid your dues. "Beer" is not just to recognize milestones. Buying beer is also called for when one breaks an important rule on the drop zone. For instance, there is often a particular area that is out of bounds for landing, such as an area too close to obstacles and/or runways. In many cases, this area is marked in some way as to identify a "beer line" not to be crossed. Either with a fence, flags, grass cut short, or some natural marking such as a ditch, an area is marked as out of bounds. If a jumper lands on the wrong side of that line, "beer!" is heard from other jumpers, and it is expected that the offender will comply. These rituals contribute to the enjoyment of the group after jumping is done for the day, either by having fun at the expense of someone, or by adding to the reserve of beer around the campfire. They also, however, reinforce important values for the group. Whether those values are celebrating each other's successes, observing particular safety guidelines, or bullshitting around the fire after a day of jumping, the rituals get people paying attention, if not involved.

## Gender

As mentioned above, skydiving is a sport that is dominated in numbers by men. Military influences on the sport, conceptions of appropriate leisure activities for men and women, and economic realities have contributed to this being the case. As such, it is interesting to examine the perspectives of participants on the different meanings jumping may have for men and women, different aptitudes of men and women, and reasons for women's relatively low participation rates. These are the tasks tackled in the next several pages.

Most of the skydivers with whom I spoke emphasized that skydiving is not like other sports because men and women compete together. They jump together recreationally and on teams, use the same equipment, are equally capable of succeeding in the sport, and so on. Jenn provides an example of this rhetoric of gender equality:

I really don't think it [gender] matters, not in skydiving. Like I said, with our typical stereotypes of sport, is basically like, you know, men are stronger, they can do this better, they can do that better. And you put all those aside, and well, even if you're actually using those, skydiving has nothing to do with physical strength. It has a lot to do with, basically, a lot of mental capabilities.

Skydiving is set against other physical activities, and it is argued by many that the "playing field is leveled" because the physical demands of the sport are not extreme.

Chris posits "it's probably one of those sports that strength really doesn't matter.

Assuming that the average male is stronger than the average female. And a woman should be able to be equally as good as any guy."

This notion of gender neutrality in skydiving is an appealing one, but when we take a closer look at the opinions of the jumpers I interviewed, there is a sense of casting women as a group that are not as physically capable as men. Skydiving is an appealing sport, many participants argue, because it makes traditional notions of women as “the weaker sex” irrelevant. That is not to argue, though, that they are not the weaker sex, some are saying. Chris, who just said that “a woman should be able to be equally as good as any guy”, goes on to note that

There’s no reason, like, you’re not going to get female hockey players, because of the strength and the size of the guys playing, most women can’t take the pounding type thing. But the nice thing about skydiving is there’s people that can get involved in it that can’t get involved in other sports. There’s people with a bad leg, or weak legs or something, that have enough motor control that they can control their skydiving, but that they couldn’t be a runner or skier or something like that. I think it’s a good sport from that point of view, that you don’t have to be super fit or super strong to participate.

While arguing for the capacity of women to compete on equal footing with men in skydiving, then, Chris implies that women as a group are less capable of physical activity generally than are men, that they are more likely to be weak or unfit than are men. This was a common theme in the interviews. Several variations of “men are stronger, but strength isn’t important” were heard as the interviews progressed. This “gender logic” pervades sport more broadly, and “privileges boys and men and gives them power over girls and women both in and outside of sports” (Coakley, 1998: 233).

One argument jumpers make about gender differences in skydiving is that any discrepancies that do exist are present in society more broadly, so it is no surprise to see them in this environment. For example, Jack posits that

From a confidence point of view, we have a small percentage of women exercise [sic] good assertiveness in controlling their own fate, controlling the types of dives they do, taking a leadership role. A very, very small portion. ... That's just the way our population has grown up to be. I don't see it any different in the real world.

Sara concurs, asserting that women in general are not drawn to the sport in the same numbers as men:

Women aren't 'allowed' to, incited to be really aggressive, or wanting to do really aggressive things. You know, the types of commercials that they show little boys and their trucks, and little girls and their dolls. Hopefully, that's changing. But I'd say that's the biggest reason. Women learn to fear a lot of things because they're taught to fear a lot of things.

Skydivers perceptively make the link between gender at the level of society and gender in this particular social context. Few jumpers mentioned that the effect could also be in the other direction, i.e., that challenging traditional notions of masculinity and femininity in skydiving could contribute to a change in perceptions more broadly.

Previous research has indicated that there exists some overt sexism in skydiving, with male participants or instructors distrusting women or claiming that women cannot develop the same level of skill as men (i.e., Arnold, 1976). Since this study was carried out, societal perceptions of gender have continued to evolve. These changes, it would seem, have reduced the extent to which these attitudes are present in the skydiving subgroup. According to my data, there is currently little overt sexism in the sport. No

one, for instance, told me that they distrusted women in general, or that they felt that women could never achieve the same levels in the sport as could men. As close as anyone came to the latter statement was to suggest that the very best women could not quite match the very best men, a notion common in sport: “I would say you’d be hard-pressed to have a female 4-way team do some of the stuff, or a female 8-way team do some of the stuff the top 4-way or 8-way teams [all male] are doing, because they are using their physical strength to get to the point they’re getting nowadays” (Tim). The notion that at the top levels, women and men are not quite on even footing is heard throughout sport because of the slight physiological differences between male and female bodies (Messner, Carlisle Duncan, and Jensen, 1993). This is certainly less objectionable than someone saying that they distrust women in general. That is not to say that there are not some jumpers who hold outdated views on gender, views that are apparent in their participation in the sport or in their discussion of the sport.

One participant told me that she was training for Canopy Formation Skydiving (formerly known as Canopy Relative Work; commonly referred to as crew) with some coaches. One of the coaches told her that “cracks [an offensive moniker for women] can’t do crew.” This particular woman has quite progressive views on gender relations, and found this comment offensive. She has encountered similar attitudes from a few other coaches/competitors who have been around for some time. As for opinions that surfaced in the course of my interviews, one participant acknowledged that there are female skydivers around who are much better than he is, yet still offered the following perspective on what the sport means to men and women respectively:

For men, I'd say it's probably a sense of uh, self-commanding, you know. Like, you feel like you're God up there, you know. When you're doing it, you feel like you're controlling the sport, it's not controlling you. I think, uh, I don't know, I can't say as far as women really think, but I think that they think that, it's an adventure to them, and not, not a control thing. I think it's more an adventure, and uh, possibly glamour. I, I see a lot of women that like the pretty clothes in the sport and all that. They can't jump, they're not very good skydivers necessarily, but they look good.

The attitudes expressed here, while perhaps not as blatant or as prevalent as those reported by Arnold (1976), still contribute to the reproduction of oppressive gender stereotypes, and thus constrain women's participation in a "gender neutral" sport that has been and still is dominated in numbers by men. As Messner asserts, the "the ideological hegemony of the dominant group shifts but is easily maintained" (1988: 206).

Many participants agreed that one barrier to the increased participation of women is the way some men in the sport treat women in the sport. This is certainly not true of all male participants, but a certain percentage treat female participants as sexual objects first and skydivers second. Eric told me that men are

... all dogs. And we want all the babes. So a girl comes on the drop zone, gets all this attention, it's cool for a while, get all these thrill dives, "oh, yeah, we'll take you out and show you this." ... All these, what seems to be free coaching which is motivated by something other than progression. It's not free. And they [women] eventually realize that there's actually nothing in the sport for them except for a bunch of dogs trying to lick the bowl.

Leanne explained how some women feel uncomfortable in a social setting with so much explicit sexuality:

There's two first jump students ... hanging out. And they've got two guys, one on each side of them. And the guys are just screaming at them: "Show us your boobs, show us your boobs! You've got to do it. If you

want to hang out with us, you've got to...”, and these girls are like terrified. I would never, I wouldn't have left that fire-pit. I would have waited for someone to escort me to my car, if I would have been one of them. ... [But] the perception of what skydiving, like males think that women should be doing is hanging around the fire-pit, taking off our tops. I mean, that's what we're good for. ... And I think that's wrong. ... Kind of like \_\_\_\_\_. You don't see a lot of males up there taking off their bottoms for us. It's always the women doing it for acceptance, I guess. I don't know. 'Cause a lot of women aren't accepted if they don't do that. I think that's wrong.

Whether or not they choose to participate in the antics that sometimes take place around the fire-pit, women may be turned off the sport by the realization that the sexual dynamics at the drop zone are often quite imbalanced and sometimes offensive.

While most participants claimed that women and men have roughly equal skill potentials in the sport, there was certainly mention of different tendencies. Just because men and women can skydive equally well does not mean that they skydive the same way. The ways in which participants talked about these differences were revealing. The most commonly heard example of this was the notion of men skydiving “aggressively.” Be it the way someone flies their canopy, the way they do freestyle, or the way they approach their “slot” (designated place in a formation), many participants asserted that on average, women are less aggressive than men. Fred, for one, noted that women are “not as aggressive, so they don't think they're ready for everything before they necessarily are which, I think, a lot of guys are (sic). ... very few women that you see are so aggressive that they're taking steps over where they should be.” Amanda has also observed that men approach the sport with a higher level of aggression: “I mean, you see more women doing the artsy freestyle, whereas more men do the aggressive freestyle, the Deanna Kent

versus Mike Michigan style of stuff.” Men, participants argue, go after what they want in the sport with somewhat more reckless abandon than is the case with women. This type of language casts men as controlling of their own destinies. They do not wait for something to happen, they make it happen. As James remarked, “there’s something to be said for the odd time when someone isn’t, becomes impatient and gets right in there and things work out. ... I think that the guys are generally more driven to get things going much faster.”

The language used to describe women’s approach to skydiving carries with it much different implications. Rather than speaking in terms that suggest command and confidence, participants talk about women’s strengths with words that evoke notions of passivity. That is not to say that they are insulting women. On the contrary, women’s qualities are lauded. The interesting thing is that the traits that are complimented are either physical (in a sport in which physical capabilities are less important than mental) or indicate a passive approach to the sport. For example, Michael notes that “no guy I’ve seen in the videos comes even close to the gracefulness that a woman can give freestyle. Men can do all the moves, but ... the female form just gives it far more grace.” As for the mental approach to jumping, Bob argued that women “tend to be more cautious.” James concurred, asserting that rather than create an opportunity, women are more patient in letting the opportunity create itself: “I think women are less, they’re more likely to hang out until, say, until their slot is actually where it needs to be. Um, they’re more likely to let, say, a formation build, and then get in there. Yeah, better patience. Not quite as egotistical. Not as stupid.” While each of these people were complimenting

women on strengths, the way these compliments were framed depicted women as passive participants in the activity.

The ways in which jumpers talk about men's and women's jumping 'style' contribute to our understandings of gender in this social context. By framing men's participation as active and women's as passive, jumpers reinforce "common sense" ideas of masculinity and femininity. It may very well be that men and women *do* participate in these ways. That may be the case, however, because of being socialized in accordance with these hegemonic ideas (at least in part). For change to come about (if that is what is wanted), these perceptions must be challenged at one level or another.

When asked if women's participation in skydiving challenges traditional notions of femininity, skydivers offered an interesting array of responses. In many cases, to clarify my question, I elaborated by telling them that I was not interested in whether the women were *interested* in challenging these notions, but whether their presence in the social milieu would contribute to anyone developing a more progressive attitude towards women and their capabilities. A few jumpers dismissed this notion out of hand. Most, however, acknowledged that at some level, women's involvement in skydiving might challenge the perceptions of women that are present in society. Michael, for one, expressed this idea:

You know, if you ask, if I was to ask most women, they'd just laugh when you asked that, and say well, they just jump 'cause they like it. Fuck traditional role values or whatever. They're not doing it to make a point, they're doing it 'cause they like the sport. Uh, yeah, I guess it does kinda'

go against, you know, “you should be staying home and making babies” and all that stuff.

Other men agreed, and some even called for this challenge. They thought it important that oppressive stereotypes be questioned whenever possible. Fred told me: “I think that’s necessary. ‘Cause, like I say, these old beliefs that we have are no good. And I’ve seen women that are better than me, so how could I say that women shouldn’t or couldn’t, ‘cause she does, and she’s better, and, you know?” Several women saw the challenging potential of their involvement as well. Jenn noted that women and men

start as equals, and women can advance quicker than men in skydiving, both starting from the same point. ... [They] both compete for the same medals. It doesn’t matter if they’re, you know, an all-male team or an all-women team, and women could beat men if they want. You know, I think that sort of challenges society[’s notions of femininity].

Other women recognized the challenges, but questioned the whole idea of challenging dominant perceptions:

Sure. I’m as good as the boys. I can be just like the boys. I am one of the boys. I can be just as tough, just as coarse, take just as many ribbings, swear just as much, be just as good as. Sure. Of course, now this takes an underlying notion that women are inherently not as good... (Amanda)

The relationship between men’s participation in skydiving and traditional notions of masculinity is an interesting one, according to participants. Whether or not participants believe that skydiving is a “masculine” activity, most agree that perceptions of skydiving fit right in with perceptions of masculinity. Aggressive, tough, brave, and macho are all adjectives that might be used to describe both. Eric described the relationship between masculinity and skydiving as follows: “We have a bunch of things that love to be gratified, and I think skydiving does that for us. ‘Cause men love it when other people

say ‘ooh, you’re a skydiver. Wow, that’s cool.’ And guys go ‘oh yeah, I am. Really cool. Look at the size of my penis.” Chris, too, notes that skydiving fits with a certain conception of masculinity. He says

people look at me and go ‘well, yeah, you’re crazy. You skydive, you’ll be single all your life. That’s just the type of guy you are. You’ve got a death wish.’ And they sort of associate the single male, macho, have to do things to prove yourself type perception, and skydiving fits right in with that.

It is not only men that see an association between skydiving participation and notions of masculinity. Several women asserted that skydiving fits in with the idea of a tough, macho, egoist male. Jenn does not “think it really changes the perception of men, really, in skydiving, ‘cause it just basically is what, like, ‘daredevil men’ should do.”

Participants paint a picture of a sport that reinforces traditional notions of masculinity in our society. Whether or not men in the sport actually subscribe to dominant ideas of masculinity, there is a perception among skydivers that by participating in the sport, men are contributing to the reproduction of dominant notions of masculinity.

### **Women’s World Record Attempts**

Over the last few years, there have been several high-profile attempts at establishing a world record for the largest all-female freefall formation. On September 5, 1999, a record 118-way was built over Perris Valley, California (Aitken, 1999). Interestingly, the latest record attempt was not just a skydiving event, but also raised funds for a salient issue for women. “Jump For The Cause”, as the event was called, raised over \$460 000 US for breast cancer research (Aitken, 1999). The topic of Women’s World Record

attempts evoked strong emotions from all of the participants who mentioned it<sup>6</sup>. Some of the women who took part in one or more attempt found it/them to be in some ways more enjoyable than skydiving in a mixed-gender environment. They spoke in particular of feeling more support and encouragement from other female skydivers than they often get from men:

The whole atmosphere is so different than any regular experience that I've had at the drop zone. The women aren't the same. The women are so much more supportive of each other. They're not critical of each other's skydiving. In a mixed gender group, I would see a lot more of men criticizing somebody else's, the way they're jumping, or their skydives. Where women, if somebody did screw up, they're a lot more supportive. ... *Part of the attraction, and part of the whole experience is just women supporting each other in an environment where you don't always get a lot of support.* Not, I mean, you get a lot of help, but emotional support. You know, if you've had a bad jump, or a bad jumping day, it's something that's not part of, you know, the regular activities at the drop zone.  
(Sophia)

For some women, skydiving in an all-women environment presents an opportunity to participate in the sport in a more fulfilling way than they would normally experience.

Contrary to the experiences just described, there are some women who feel ambivalent at best about the notion of organized all-women skydives. Anna described why she chose not to participate in the latest record attempt:

You'd expect that there would be some sort of bond between all these women that have something in common, but it was, there was a real sky-God attitude from some of them. And it ... doesn't make it fun. It was supposed to be fun. You know, that's what we'd heard. It was gonna' be

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<sup>6</sup> As indicated by my interview guide in the appendix, I did not include a question about the Women's World Record attempts in all of my interviews. Instead, I queried women who had been involved in one or more attempt about the meaning it had for them. Several other participants, however, mentioned the attempts in the context of answering another question about gender issues. It was my oversight not to ask everyone about the place of these attempts in the sport.

fun. And you get there, and it was like “yeah, we’re gonna’ try and do this, and yeah, there’s a potential to be axed.” And we knew that. If we didn’t do our job in the air, of course you’re gonna’ get kicked off the load. I mean, don’t be stupid. You’re screwing it for 115 people. Um, but just the attitude of people on the ground. It was, they were just getting really snarky, and bitchy, and it wasn’t that much fun. ... It was an experience. I’m glad I did it.

For Anna, then, the all-women experience was not the supportive environment other women described. Amanda objected more to the concept of a woman’s world record than to the specific dynamics:

My personal opinion is that skydiving should be and is a gender-neutral sport. When I am asked to participate in the women’s records, I shake my head and say only if I have to. I don’t see any reason on the face of this planet why there should be a women’s record category. There’s no physical difference in the way women can skydive as opposed to the way men can skydive. I mean, there are minor physiological differences. ... But there’s no reason in this world that there’s anything more special about 100 women than there is about 100 men, except that there are fewer women in the sport. But that, in my mind, doesn’t justify having a women’s world record. I think they’re dumb. ... I already know I can do this. I don’t need to tell anybody I can do this too. See, that, in itself, is, to me, you’re saying ... there’s a reason you think I can’t do this. Of course I can do it. Why shouldn’t I be able to do it?

We see that there is some resistance to even the notion of a women’s skydiving category in a particular event, coming even from some women.

In summary, participants assert that societal notions of what kinds of activities are and are not appropriate for women and for men act as barriers to the increased participation of women in skydiving. Most of them further posit that women’s current participation challenges traditional notions of femininity in a significant way. Lastly, they note that men’s participation contributes to the reproduction of dominant notions of masculinity, notions that continue to set the stage for more men to experience risk sport and perhaps

become involved. From these points, we would assume that women's participation in skydiving would be on the rise. There are at least two reasons evident in the data to be cautious about predicting such a process. First, there is much ambivalence on the part of participants towards events that increase the visibility of women in the sport. Second, jumpers draw on gendered vocabularies in describing men's and women's participation and aptitudes, reconstructing hegemonic understandings of masculinity and femininity, understandings that we have just identified as barriers to women's participation.

Having examined shared meanings, issues of risk, and ideas about constructing gender in this social environment, it is to the task of linking these findings with the theoretical ideas discussed earlier that we now turn our attention. What do these data mean in relation to earlier studies? How do these findings contribute to our understanding of risk, subcultures, and gender? What implications does this project have for future research in these areas?

## **Chapter Six: Discussion and Conclusions**

### **Introduction**

We now have an understanding of the literature in the areas of interest, as well as a picture of what our data tell us in the current project. The task in this chapter is to draw these together to develop a clearer picture of the contributions of this research to the relevant bodies of knowledge. First, I examine issues of risk under the umbrella of edgework. How do skydivers make sense of risk in this social environment? Does the notion of risk management fit into Lyng's (1990) edgework model? To what extent are skydivers engaging in edgework?

Second, I discuss issues arising out of the subculture literature, especially the notions of resistance and accommodation. In what ways (if at all), do skydivers construct a culture that resists values dominant in mainstream sport and/or society? Which dominant values do skydivers reproduce, and how? Are they a subculture according to the criteria discussed in the literature review chapter? Further, I consider notions of identity construction and confirmation among skydivers. How do jumpers come to feel like part of the group? How do their identities as skydivers affect the ways they understand and interpret their participation in this risk activity?

Third, I consider notions of gender construction. Do skydivers see differences in the ways in which women and men participate in the sport? How do skydivers talk about

women and men in the sport as this relates to risk? How do the answers to the above questions contribute to understandings of gender at broader levels?

Fourth, I draw some conclusions about the relationship between the three areas outlined above. Does it make sense to examine risk, subcultures, and gender together in the context of skydiving? How did this approach contribute to the final product?

Fifth, and last, I delineate the implications of this project for future research endeavors. What answers to the above questions has this research begun to illuminate? What new questions has it created? How can future undertakings build on the contributions and address the shortcomings of this research?

### **Edgework**

Lyng's (1990) edgework model has several dimensions. The notion of edgeworkers pushing the limits of themselves and/or their technology is fascinating, and, I believe, clearly present in the data from this project. As to why such behavior makes sense for participants, Lyng and Bracey posit that bikers respond to the oppression of their class position by "eagerly embracing the likelihood of an early death, thereby creating an *illusion* of control over their lives" (1995: 243). While this proposition relates to bikers, who clearly occupy a lower social stratum (as a group) than do skydivers, we may be able to draw some insight as to how the participants in the current study fit into the edgework model. The phrase "illusion of control over their lives", I believe, is key.

The euphoria and self-actualization reported by skydivers may have to do with the perceived control that they possess while participating in the activity. As Michael pointed out, “you’re potentially going to die *unless you open your own parachute*.” This would seem to be the ultimate in control over one’s life. In a sense, jumpers are saving themselves from imminent death every time they activate a parachute. This is not, however, an element of control that jumpers emphasize. For the most part, they do not consider their lives in immediate danger on a skydive. As James stated, “I mean, I know that at some point during the jump, I’m going to get one of two canopies over my head. Most likely the first one.” Jumpers do recognize, however, that they have almost total control over the *manner* in which they skydive. They choose to jump lower or higher-performance gear; they choose whether to jump solo, with people they know and trust, or with absolutely anyone; they choose to activate a parachute at, below, or above the minimum recommended altitude; they choose whether or not to execute a high-performance landing. My data indicate that jumpers see the issue of control as central to their understandings of risk. If the activities in which one participates are within one’s control, then they are not perceived as genuinely ‘risky’. It is only when one goes beyond one’s abilities, one’s limits, that one is really taking risks.

Jumpers’ responses to someone else “going in” support this notion of control as central. As discussed above, the first recourse of a jumper when someone goes in is to create distance from the incident (as a skydiver) by finding a reason for the mishap. Participants then argue that they have better control over that particular dimension of participation. Either they make more informed choices about safety or they are more skilled and/or

experienced. Ultimately, the issue is control. Skydivers believe themselves to be in control of their own circumstances, of their experiences. They have enough mental awareness (control) that they would not have undertaken the particular activity that resulted in the death of this jumper. Alternatively, they have enough physical control that they would have accomplished the maneuver more skillfully and come out unscathed. It is only when presented with irrefutable evidence that one cannot control everything that skydivers acknowledge the notion of fate. That is to say that under these circumstances jumpers acknowledge that one cannot always control the outcome of undertaking dangerous activities. Even then, they do not say “she had the same amount of control as I do, and was unable to handle the situation”, they say “when it’s your time to go, it’s your time to go.” In so doing, skydivers assert that if they are presented with a situation in which their control would make a difference, they could handle it. The only time that they cannot save themselves is if and when control is completely out of their hands. This is a risk that they are prepared to accept in return for the physical, emotional, and mental rewards of an activity that they believe a non-participant can never understand.

Lyng (1990) also asserts that edgeworkers push both themselves and technology used in their activity (e.g., motorcycle, parachute equipment) to the limit. The data in my study indicate that technology is a vital consideration in understanding participants’ approach to risk. Arnold (1976) asserts that the skydivers in his study did not consider the sport risky, but rather were involved for escape and community. Current participants, on the other hand, recognize that the sport is potentially deadly. This may have a great deal to do with the technological changes in the sport. At the time of Arnold’s study, rectangular

parachutes were just emerging. Round parachutes were the standard, and had become quite reliable. The risks involved in the sport, then, were present to roughly the same degree for all participants, and included minimal maneuverability to avoid obstacles, hard landings, and the absence of automatic activation devices. Of course, jumpers could still alter the degree of risk in their participation by, for example, opening their parachutes at different altitudes. On the whole, though, the level of risk was fairly consistent. As described above, however, that is not the case today. With the technological evolution of the sport, participants make many more choices about their personal safety in the sport. Do they buy a docile canopy, a highly loaded elliptical canopy, or something in between? Do they perform straight-in approaches for landing, or radical hook turns? Do they purchase and use an AAD? Do they try to undertake canopy formation skydiving at low altitudes? Do they strap a surfboard to their feet and try skysurfing? These are all questions that jumpers did not have to ask themselves twenty-five years ago. The presence of these choices has contributed to the ways in which participants talk about risk in the sport today.

The jumpers that Arnold (1976) interviewed, by definition, had all come to terms with the degree of risk inherent in the sport at the time. That is to say that they understood the risks of the sport, and considered them to be *acceptable risks*. They came to the conclusion, as did Sophia in the current study, that “skydiving has maybe a pleasure quotient of 100, and the risk is much lower on that scale to me. The risk as maybe 5 out of that 100. So that’s the trade-off I’m willing to make.” As such, risk was not a central issue for Arnold’s (1976) participants. They were the people that had come to terms with

that risk, so they did not consider it to be a problem. Initially, this may sound at odds with the participants in the current study saying that a jumper is potentially dead every time she or he leaves an airplane. It seems that risk was not an issue for participants in Arnold's (1976) study, and it is for the participants in the current study. Upon further examination, though, these two positions appear consistent with one another.

As elaborated in the findings chapter, current participants (especially those with greater experience) argue that the sport is potentially extremely dangerous. Because of the technology today, the sport is more accessible to the average person than it was twenty years ago, but it also has more potential for experienced jumpers to hurt or kill themselves than it did even ten years ago. They note, however, that their own participation is not especially risky, because they make choices to manage the dangers involved. What jumpers today are saying, then, is similar to the assertions of jumpers twenty-five years ago, with slightly more complexity. Whereas a jumper in Arnold's (1976) study might have said "I don't find it particularly risky", a jumper in the current study might say "I don't find it particularly risky for myself." In both cases, these jumpers are referring to acceptable risk. A jumper today might add that the dangers are great for other people participating in other ways, but the basic idea is still that they have accepted and controlled the risks for themselves. The technological changes that have made the sport more complex have also made the rhetoric associated with risk more complex. It is no surprise, then, to see that Lyng and Snow (1986) argue that participants in the sport have only recently developed an edgework orientation to skydiving. Only recently has the technology developed that allows participants to continually push

themselves to handle more and more complexity in every part of the skydive. Only recently have jumpers had such a broad range of experiences from which to decide where their personal “boundary between chaos and order” (Lyng, 1990) exists.

In exploring the notion of acceptable risk, it would be especially instructive to speak to former participants. Arnold’s (1976) study, the work of Lyng and Snow (1986), and the current project all suffer from this shortcoming. In all cases, the investigators speak exclusively or predominantly with people who consider the risks of the sport to be acceptable. It would shed considerable light on the discussion to speak with people who subsequently came to consider the risks unacceptable. By including former participants, a much greater part of the continuum of acceptable risk would be captured. Those who fully understand the risks of the sport and have decided that those risks are unacceptable would provide an invaluable source of information.

### **Resistance and Accommodation**

There are several ways in which skydivers resist dominant notions in sport and/or society. One way is by stressing that skydivers take chances with their bodies that others are unwilling to take in order to enjoy their lives to the fullest. Rather than sit at home after work wishing they could do something interesting, they just go out and try it. Jumpers argue that most other people do not ‘get it’; that they obtain their excitement vicariously. Skydiving gives central meaning to the lives of jumpers. Therefore, people who do not take part in the activity are missing out on something significant, and are not living their lives to the fullest. As a bumper sticker seen often inside of jump planes reads, “If riding

in an airplane is *flying*, then riding in a boat is *swimming*. If you want to experience the element, get out of the vehicle.” Skydivers believe themselves to be *doers* rather than *wishers*. The perception among jumpers is that most people in society live within a fairly well defined “box.” Members of mainstream society are uncomfortable, jumpers assert, when pushed outside of that box to experience new activities, new sensations.

Conversely, it is the thrill of those new sensations that keeps jumpers interested in the sport. For some, that means trying new dimensions of the sport. For others, that feeling comes from helping others to experience the sensations of skydiving for the first time (by teaching them to freefall or coaching them to learn relative work, for instance). Either way, jumpers are living the experience, not reading about someone else doing it. As mentioned earlier, skydivers, like members of other subcultures, feel like they “get it,” and no one else does. From this perspective, their definitions of what is important in life are correct, while everyone else is missing part of the picture.

Another way in which skydivers resist dominant notions of society is by changing the emphases on career and leisure. In “mainstream” society, many people are defined by what they do for a living. A person is “an architect”, “a plumber”, “a dental hygienist”, and so on. They often place emphasis on what they do for a living, and fit in leisure when possible around that work schedule. Most jumpers think of it the other way around. Work is something that one has to fit in around the often more important jumping activities, and is only useful insofar as it finances one’s skydiving endeavors. This is likely the case with anyone involved at a serious level in any leisure or sporting activity, but is clearly at odds with dominant models of defining oneself by one’s career. Many

jumpers choose particular jobs in part because they offer the flexibility to get away and skydive relatively easily. If a job calls for a firm commitment, many hours of overtime, and little vacation, this is extremely undesirable because it impinges on one's jumping more so than because of the physical or emotional demands.

One way in which skydivers claim to resist dominant notions of sport is in the equal accessibility of the activity. Jumpers acknowledge that skydiving is an expensive and time-consuming sport to pursue. Given that, however, jumpers claim that at a recreational level at least, there are few barriers to equal participation. Men and women, able-bodied and physically challenged, young and old can and do participate together. It would be rare to see a fifty-year-old man, an 18-year-old woman, and a physically challenged man all playing volleyball together. This would not, however, be as unusual at a drop zone. As several participants noted, the sport does not have tremendous physical demands below serious levels of competition. It is not so much physical skill that is required to participate recreationally, but mental awareness and concentration. The fact that men and women compete together and against one another was another way that skydivers stressed this participatory equality. There is no reason, many respondents asserted, that men should be any better or worse than women in the sport. If both train equally, both should be equally competitive. This certainly strays from the "gender logic" of sport that men and women are naturally different, and "women can't match the standards set by men" (Coakley, 1998: 233).

Another way in which jumpers resist dominant models of sport is by asserting that they have a freedom of expression in skydiving that does not exist in dominant sports. In a mainstream sport like basketball, for instance, personal expression on the court is limited to no-look passes and spectacular dunks. There are quite strict limitations to what one can do on the court. The rules of the game govern one's actions to a great extent. In skydiving, the basic rules are "exit the plane when you're supposed to exit," "don't get too close to other people/groups," and "open a parachute at a safe altitude." In between, a jumper may fly on their belly, their back, their feet, their head, or any other point they have the skill to hold. They may wear a jumpsuit, a clown suit, or nothing at all (as is occasionally done). They may even take their dog with them on a skydive (as a few jumpers have been known to do). The point is, jumpers do not want their personal freedoms constrained, as this freedom is greatly valued in skydiving. It is very likely that participants in other marginal sports maintain the belief that their sport allows for a freedom of expression not often seen in mainstream sports. Skateboarding, freestyle skiing, and rhythmic gymnastics are just three examples of sports in which there is a great deal of personal expression. These types of activities, however, are not considered "big time" sports. The major network coverage, the scholarships, and the spectators are the territory of basketball, football, baseball, and hockey in North America. In sports that do not enjoy such a high profile, there is undoubtedly a tendency to redefine what constitutes a worthy sport. Miller and Penz (1991) note a similar process with women in a male-dominated sport, with the women emphasizing different dimensions of involvement than the men in order to legitimate their own participation. In each case, participants

“reproduce a fragile and highly conditional version of” the dominant order (Williams, 1989: 316).

The forms of resistance outlined above help to create a unique skydiving culture, with a set of values that differ from those dominant in mainstream society. There are, however, at least two ways in which skydivers reproduce values dominant in “mainstream” sport and society. These two forms of accommodation are: 1) reproducing repressive understandings of gender; and 2) creating hierarchical relationships between participants. While the rhetoric in skydiving stresses gender equality, the manner in which jumpers talk about men and women’s participation in the sport reproduces ‘natural’ differences between men and women and hegemonic understandings of men’s superiority in most sporting activities. As well, the sexuality present at many drop zones contributes to the continued gender imbalance in the sport, as does the ambivalence of participants towards events that raise awareness of women’s participation in the sport. Additionally, skydiving is like other sports in that hierarchical relationships are created and maintained (not necessarily consciously) through, for example, social expectations and monitoring of participation. As in many other sports, new jumpers must learn technical and social aspects of involvement as they construct their identities in the sport, and may have feelings of insecurity about their acceptance as they progress. Fred alluded to this when he described how he felt before he was pried at a hundred jumps: “I’m always wondering, or did always wonder ... whether I was in.”

The question of whether the skydiving community should be called a “subculture” is not an easy one to address. As mentioned earlier, subcultures are related to the dominant culture of which they are a part, but have their own meanings, their own values, and often rituals, symbols, and an argot of their own. On these counts, skydivers clearly qualify. At a different level, however, subcultures resist elements of the dominant culture, and construct their own culture as an *alternative* to the mainstream. Those resistances may be political or philosophical, for example. In the current study, there are certainly some ways in which skydivers resist mainstream culture. These could be called lifestyle resistances. We must also examine the significant ways in which jumpers accommodate, or fit back into the “surrounding terrain” (Hebdige, 1979).

As explored above, jumpers reproduce dominant notions of gender difference as well as mainstream understandings of hierarchical relationships in sport. According to Crosset and Beal’s (1997) criteria, we must not simply assume resistance, but prove it. The question, then, is have we proven resistance in the contemporary skydiving scene? I do not believe that we have. The forms of resistance outlined above are not significant enough, I assert, to meet Crosset and Beal’s (1997) criteria for a “subculture”. Instead, these authors would call it a “subworld.” As discussed previously, these researchers believe that the term subculture has come to be used so frequently as to lose its explanatory potential. It may be that the world of skydivers may be more accurately described as a subworld. An alternative culture has developed around the current form of the sport, but this alternative is perhaps not as resistant to the dominant culture as it once was. As Lyng and Snow (1986) note, skydiving in the late 1960s and early 1970s

involved a great deal of partying and sexual hedonism (the Eat-Fuck-Skydive orientation), and later came to include a fair amount of drug activity. Jumpers were seen as renegades. With the recent advent of even more marginal risk activities such as B.A.S.E. (Building, Antenna, Span, Earth) jumping and bungee jumping, skydiving may have come closer to mainstream. Several long-time participants noted that the sport has seemed to incorporate fewer symbols, less lingo, and a more institutional form than it did in the past. As Paul stated, "it sure ain't as much fun as two or three guys borrowing an airplane, taking the door off it, and going and jumpin' out of it. ... Different thing altogether now." Jack noted a change in certain rituals as well: "When we used to take off in the airplane, for three, four years, every time the airplane took off, all the jumpers yelled 'blue skies, black death!' And it's a rare day in hell you say that now." As stated previously, an understanding of historical circumstances "is crucial to the better understanding of resilience and transformation in sport subcultures" (Donnelly, 1993: 134). The "major transformative effect" outlined by Donnelly may indeed have come about as a result of the "development of new technologies and the growth of commercial potential" (Donnelly, 1993: 40) in skydiving.

### **Identity Construction and Confirmation**

As has been observed in other sport groups (e.g., Donnelly and Young, 1988), there is a definite process of becoming a member in the skydiving subworld. Someone entering the social setting is not immediately given full membership in the community. Rather, membership is achieved in stages. One must reach solo freefall to be considered a 'skydiver'. A certificate of proficiency must be achieved for a person to drop the

moniker “student”. One must then learn to skydive in formation with others to be considered a companion. Then, it is not enough to simply possess the basic skills to fly with others. A jumper must develop reasonable proficiency with these skills (or some other dimension of the sport) to really be accepted. Once a jumper has developed these skills, they must keep them up by doing enough of the right kind of skydives to stay ‘current’. Even achieving the proficiency described above is no guarantee of full membership in a group of skydivers. As with any group, there are social expectations that must be learned along the way. Appropriate language, safety procedures, dress, and response to expectations (i.e., buying beer) must be learned and adhered to (to a greater or lesser extent). This process of attaining and maintaining full membership is not written down anywhere for a neophyte skydiver to consult. Rather, there are signs of membership and acceptance that are picked up along the way. As one progresses as a skydiver, one encounters rituals (e.g., pieings) and symbols of membership (e.g., invitations to jump or socialize with more experienced jumpers). These signal a process of acceptance in the sport and the social group. A jumper comes to share values with other jumpers in a process of identity confirmation and validation.

### **Gender Construction**

As discussed above, gender is done in interaction, but within a set of broader institutions that shape and constrain understandings of gender. At a drop zone, there are many ways in which participants do gender. Gender is done, for one, in the ways in which jumpers talk about how men and women skydive. Men’s skydiving is described in terms that evoke notions of control, assertiveness, and active participation. Men take control of

themselves and their skydives; they are in charge of their own destinies. This is important in light of the earlier assertion that control is central to understanding participants' perspectives on issues of risk. Women's skydiving, conversely, is talked about in terms of passivity, of letting the sport come to them. Women are complimented for being graceful and patient skydivers. While these qualities are admirable, this kind of discourse reproduces 'natural' notions of femininity.

Participants who discuss women-only events also do gender. The ambivalence around those events affects gender at the broader levels and contributes to the continued gender imbalance in the sport. Chris, for instance, said "I think there would be some pretty unhappy people if they decided to have an all-male world record, and they said 'this is gonna' be a man's world record, and there can't be any females on this jump.'"

Generally, participants were resistant to the notion that women-only events improved the visibility of women in the sport and could potentially encourage more women to become involved. Most of the people who considered women-only events saw them as organized "against" men as opposed to "for" women. The potential of these events to promote skydiving, as most people considered it, as a sport accessible to both men and women, is constrained as long as there is resistance to awareness raising efforts on the part of some women.

Gender is also done in the way that sexuality plays out at the drop zone. Nudity around the campfire (mostly female, although I have met at least one male participant who shed his clothes around the fire), public sexual acts after jumping is done for the day (e.g., a

woman was kicked out of a bar at a drop zone for performing oral sex on a man), and, most frequently, the way in which participants talk with each other about sex all affect understandings of gender at broader levels. Women, more often than men, are treated as sexual objects. The sexual dynamics on the drop zone have various effects on women subject to them. Some women are very comfortable with themselves and their sexuality, and enjoy the attention that they get from men. Others feel pressured to be sexual beings before they are skydivers. Some are embarrassed that women allow themselves to be treated this way. Still others never become seriously involved in the sport because the dynamics make them uncomfortable. Regardless of the specific response, this milieu contributes to the perpetuation of particular notions of gender at broader levels, notions that naturalize difference and inequality.

### **Conclusions**

Here we revisit the relationship between issues of risk, subcultures, and gender. In this thesis I have examined all three, and have kept them separate for the purposes of analysis. For my purposes, however, risk is at the forefront of the relationship between these three theoretical interests. The notion of contextual risk and Lyng's (1990) edgework model have held the most interest for me, and thus have guided many of my choices along the way. As noted earlier, though, a context in which risk is a central concern has serious implications for issues of identity and meaning, and also for problems of gender construction.

The fact that 'the public' perceives skydiving as dangerous certainly affects who it is that will come out and try the sport. First time jumpers may be attracted to the element of danger, or they may have a fear that they are trying to overcome through their involvement in the activity. Regardless, we are then dealing with a group of people with a relatively small range of perspectives on risk (compared to the range present in the entire non-jumping population). Someone entirely disinterested in risk would be unlikely to become part of the sport. This affects the way in which meaning is made of risk in the subworld. As individuals, skydivers bring certain perspectives to their participation in the sport. Shared group values, rituals, lingo, and so on through their long-term involvement, however, shape these perspectives. Risk must be understood in a particular way, and participants must espouse particular values in order to make sense of taking part in an activity that, as many jumpers point out, may result in the death of someone they know.

Most respondents agreed that there is a better match between skydiving and traditional notions of masculinity than between skydiving and conventional notions of femininity. In part, broader notions of appropriate behaviors for men and women can explain this. Men are permitted, even encouraged to engage in aggressive, adventurous, risky activities, while activities 'appropriate' for women are more passive and reserved. Further, the development of sport parachuting has been shaped, in the main, by and for men. In particular, military influences on the early development of the sport meant that a particular type of masculinity was encouraged and rewarded (Laurendeau and Wamsley, 1998). These factors contribute to a contemporary setting that is clearly gendered. Many

respondents noted that the public responds differently to women as skydivers than to men. Others pointed out that women are treated differently in the sport. In both cases, broader notions of femininity and masculinity shape the construction of gender for men and women within the sport. As such, the skydiving subworld provides a setting ripe for examining gender issues.

While I still believe that subculture issues and notions of gender are important considerations in examining risk sport, the framework that I adopted for this project (considering all three) presented some serious difficulties along the way. There were practical and analytical hurdles to tackling three different bodies of research at one time. Practical considerations such as the amount of time required to undertake interviews, transcribe audiotapes, and organize data were grossly underestimated. Maintaining my own focus and the focus of participants during interviews also proved challenging because of the two major shifts in emphasis along the way. By examining three areas at once, I drastically increased the sheer volume of material with which I was dealing. As a result, there was much material that, although interesting, did not make it into the final report. The question became one of quality versus quantity. I felt that had I included less relevant material in the final stages of the process, the quality of the work would have suffered. Further, analytical difficulties were encountered in establishing links between the three theoretical areas. As an inexperienced researcher, I found the analysis process within a particular body of literature to be challenging. To then draw links within the analyses was no small task, and one that, in retrospect, would better have been handled in stages. For example, given the opportunity to begin the project anew, I would have

maintained the framework in which I considered risk, subcultures, and gender. Once I had generated all of the data, however, I might have tackled each of the three areas individually rather than all at once. That is not to say that I would have discussed risk without considering gender, for instance. A project focused on issues of risk, with less developed discussions of subculture and gender issues, could have then been followed by a project that focused on gender, and then by a project that focused on subculture issues. Over the course of these three endeavors, a sophisticated picture of the relationships between risk, gender, and subculture issues could be developed. With a more focused task for each paper, the links between the areas would have been clearer as I progressed. At the same time, this three-phased approach would have gone well beyond the parameters I faced with respect to time and other resources.

### **Implications**

As mentioned earlier, this study is limited by several factors. First, the sample of participants interviewed was relatively small, and was drawn from only one province (Alberta). Considering the limitations associated with any thesis project, I chose not to undertake more interviews from a broader range of drop zones. Other studies examining similar issues should consider the meanings that the activity has for participants in other provinces, even other countries, and should draw on the experiences of more participants. The processes described here are likely similar to those in the United Kingdom, for instance, but a thorough examination based elsewhere would increase our confidence in these findings.

Second, this study essentially neglected the perspectives of former participants. Those who have been injured or seen a friend go in and have subsequently left the sport have valuable insights that this project failed to illuminate. If we are to understand the complexity of the issues involved, we need to examine them from every possible angle.

Third, this project failed to take full advantage of the recent emergence of large-scale organized jumps for women. These skydives have important political and participatory implications, and it would benefit future research endeavors to consider the views of women who are and are not involved, as well as men, on the concept and meaning of these skydives.

Fourth, the researcher's position as full participant offers some important advantages in the research and analytical process, but would be well complemented by the presence of a non-participant researcher. The "objective, detached" researcher could challenge the "insider" on issues and together they would have more confidence in the validity of their analysis. Bearing these recommendations in mind, future research in the area could make a considerable contribution to a growing body of literature.

Despite the limitations outlined above, there are several ways in which this research helps to guide future endeavors in the area of risk sport. First, the position of the researcher as a full participant in skydiving activities contributed to a sophisticated understanding of technical elements of the sport, an appreciation of some of the values, rituals, and so on

associated with the activity, and facilitated a high level of trust between researcher and participants.

Second, the use of multiple methods helped to develop a more comprehensive picture of the processes and issues salient for participants, and to address concerns about validity and reliability. Participant observation and in-depth interviews facilitated uncovering the perspectives of participants on the relevant issues, and allowed for the development of a rich, detailed portrayal of the skydiving community.

Third, this project improves our understanding of the complexity of the theoretical issues under consideration. By considering subculture and gender issues in the context of risk, this thesis sheds light on the relationships between these concepts, and the need for further development of these links. This thesis also helps to illuminate the many dimensions of the concept of risk, and the ways in which one's social context influences one's understanding of the dangers involved in a particular activity.

Fourth, this study furthers our understanding of the notion of contextual risk. It examines the idea that participants make sense of their participation in dangerous activities in terms of their web of social relations, their understanding of the technical demands and the technology associated with the sport, and their perception of gender-appropriate behavior, to name only three influences. This project has not answered every question relevant to the study of risk activities. Instead, it has worked towards these answers while creating new and pressing questions to be addressed in the future.

Skydiving and other “high-risk” activities have increasingly come to be considered newsworthy in an era in which consumers look to the media for sensational features. With the coverage received by the ESPN Extreme games, for instance, certain elements of skydiving are becoming increasingly visible to media consumers. Deaths (or non-fatal but spectacular incidents) in the sport also provide for a media spectacle, at least at the local level. The problem with this attention is that while the interest in the sport may be present, technical knowledge about the activity or an informed opinion of participants’ perspectives are most often lacking. As such, jumping is often portrayed as a poorly organized activity undertaken by people with no ambition and/or a death wish. These portrayals and the relatively slim literature examining meanings of risk sport were two significant factors influencing my decision to undertake this research project. The work here has addressed both issues to some extent. While it is unlikely that this project will change the way skydiving and skydivers are portrayed in the media, it provides for a better understanding of jumpers’ perspectives on the sport, and thus balances the scales to an extent. Further, this thesis has laid some of the groundwork for further examinations of issues related to risk sport.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Guide

#### Personal Involvement in the Sport

How long have you participated in sport parachuting? What first attracted you to the activity? Is the attraction still the same as it was when you first became involved? How did you then become seriously *involved*?

How many jumps have you done?

What do you enjoy most about jumping?

Are there any aspects of the sport that do not appeal to you? Could you tell me more about that?

How do you think the non-jumping public perceives the sport? How do you feel about that perception?

Have you ever considered giving up the sport? Why did you feel that way?

#### Subculture Issues

Are you involved in the social aspects of the sport such as the gatherings after jumping activities are over? Can you describe this involvement?

Would you say that jumpers are a bunch of individuals who happen to participate in a unique activity for different reasons, or are they more of a cohesive group? At what point did you feel like you were a member of this group?

How do skydivers differ from non-skydivers? Are there any really obvious differences? Do you think that non-jumpers can understand what it's like?

Do you think that you have changed as a person because of your involvement in jumping? Can you explain why you feel that way?

Have you been part of a "pie-ing"? How did you feel about that when you were being pied? How do you feel about that practice now? What do you think that this practice means for skydivers?

Can you think of any symbols that are important to skydivers? What do you think they mean?

Can you think of any particular language that jumpers use that is not common language? What purpose does this language serve?

### Risk and Injury

How do you feel about the risk element of the sport?

What kind of main canopy do you fly? What kind of reserve canopy do you have? Do you presently own an automatic activation device (AAD)? If not, do you plan to buy one in the future? How do you feel about the concept of mandatory AADs?

How conservatively or aggressively do you fly your main canopy? Why do you choose to fly it this way?

Do you feel like the technological advances in canopy designs have affected the sport? Do you feel like you or other jumpers push the performance limits of these canopies? Why do you say that?

How do you feel about the relationship between your own performance limits and those of your canopy?

Have you ever had a malfunction? How did you feel while it (they) was (were) happening? How do you feel about any past malfunctions now?

Have you ever been injured while jumping? Could you tell me more about that? If you were seriously injured (e.g., required hospitalization) in a jumping accident, would you continue to jump once you had fully recovered? Why or why not?

Who tends to get injured in skydiving? Why do you think that is?

Is there a mental dimension to dealing with problem situations (e.g., malfunctions), or is it more based on physical ability?

Have you ever witnessed a serious accident? Could you tell me more about that? How did you feel about witnessing it? How do you feel about it now?

Has anyone close to you been seriously hurt or killed in a jumping incident? Could you tell me more about that? How did you feel about it at the time? How do you feel about it now?

### Gender

Do you think the sport means different things to women than to men? Could you elaborate on that?

Why do you think that fewer women than men are jumpers?

I've heard some people argue that jumping is a 'masculine' activity, while others have told me that gender doesn't matter. What do you think about that?

Are there any things that women do better than men, or vice versa, in skydiving?

In the time that you've been involved in skydiving, have you seen a change in the extent to which women participate in the sport or in the social activities? What about the type of involvement?

Do you think that women's participation in skydiving challenges traditional qualities associated with females? Does this participation have any negative consequences for the way women are viewed?

How do you think that men's participation in skydiving relates to qualities traditionally associated with men?

### Background/Demographics

Age:

Gender:

How would you describe your class status (e.g., working class, middle class)?

### Wrap-up

Is there anything that we have not talked about which you think is important to understand about the sport?

## Appendix B

### Interview Guide for Former Participants

#### Prior Involvement in the Sport

How long were you involved?

How many jumps did you do?

Can you describe your level of involvement, i.e., how big a part of your life was skydiving?

What did you enjoy most about the sport?

When did you feel like you were a part of the group, a "skydiver"?

Can you describe your involvement in the social aspects of the sport?

Had you entertained thoughts of quitting jumping before you actually did quit?

When you were participating, how risky did you think it was? Has that view changed?

#### Exit from the Subculture

Can you describe the sequence of events that lead to your giving up the sport?

How did you come to the decision to quit jumping?

How do you reflect on that decision now?

Do you still have friends that jump? How do you feel about that?

## **Appendix C**

### **Skydiving Subculture Research Project**

#### **Consent Form**

*Jason Laurendeau*

*Department of Sociology  
University of Calgary*

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, please ask. Please take the time to read this form carefully and understand any accompanying information.

The purpose of this project is to explore several issues related to the sport of skydiving. The risk element of the sport, participants' perspectives on the public perception of the sport, and the degree to which skydivers are a cohesive group are the important dimensions of skydiving which will be examined. Male and female skydivers of varying experience levels are being approached to voluntarily participate in personal interviews.

Participation will involve one personal interview (usually one to two hours in duration) at a location that is convenient and comfortable for you. During the interview, you will be asked questions about personal experiences in the sport, including witnessing or hearing of injuries or deaths in the sport. This research project is investigating the meanings that

skydivers attach to these incidents, and how they understand their continued participation in light of these incidents. You may refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time. Following this initial interview, a short informal follow-up interview will be arranged at your convenience. During this interview, you will be encouraged to give feedback on the researchers' interpretations of the issues which arose during the course of the research.

With your permission, the interview will be audiotaped and later transcribed by the researcher into text form. You or the interviewer may stop the audiotaping at any time during the interview. The audiotapes will be stored securely at the researcher's home, and will be kept separate from the master list of participants' names. The tapes and the list will be accessible only to the researcher and his supervisor. Your name, as well as the name of the drop zone at which you jump most frequently, will remain confidential and any subsequent reference to you will be done through the use of pseudonyms. The finished thesis will be a public document and any further publications may include information gathered from the interviews. Despite every attempt to protect your anonymity, some readers may be able to deduce your identity from the experiences or opinions that you describe. *Complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed.*

You will not incur any financial costs nor receive any financial reward for participating.

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a

subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation. If you have further questions concerning matters related to this research, please contact:

Jason Laurendeau (Graduate Student)

*Department of Sociology  
University of Calgary  
220-6521*

Dr. Kevin Young (Supervisor)

*Department of Sociology  
University of Calgary  
220-6504*

If you have any questions concerning the ethics review of this project, or the way you have been treated, you may also contact the Department of Sociology Research Ethics Committee, and ask for the Chairperson, at 220-6501.

Participant \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.