

**“I Don’t Want to Die, But I Accept That it Can Happen”:
Taking Risks and Doing Gender Among BASE Jumpers**

by

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Abstract

Using ethnographic data generated through semi-structured interviews with 16 male BASE jumpers, observations of over 1000 BASE jumps (parachuting from fixed objects such as **B**uildings, **A**ntennas, **S**pans and **E**arth), and textual analyses of BASE-related websites, images, and publications, this research provides a sociocultural analysis of the relationship between masculinity and voluntary risk-taking. Drawing on wider debates about modernization, individualization, technology, gender relations, embodiment, and the sociology of the everyday, I illustrate the multifaceted nature of this phenomenon, in addition to the advantages of using a theoretically diverse approach. I link the emergence of BASE jumping in contemporary Western society to military history and the synthesis of two extreme sports, namely, bungee jumping and skydiving. I explore the practices, ethics, technologies, and mentoring styles specific to the practice, with the goal of demonstrating how BASE jumping integrates individuals into social groups. An analysis of the gender regime operating within the BASE community reveals tensions between engagement in the practice and issues of responsibility related to fatherhood, marriage, and other intimate relations. My findings further suggest BASE jumping provides a forum for learning, practicing, and perfecting valued skills within the localized field of the BASE community, in addition to other spheres of personal and professional life. Taken together, these insights provide a deeper understanding of gendered participation in the high-risk activity of BASE jumping, thereby addressing an important lacuna in the voluntary risk-taking and extreme sport literatures.

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Dedication

To those who endeavor to 'live' rather than 'die' their lives.

Introduction

My fascination with BASE jumping began several years ago while I was dating an avid skydiver who, over the course of our relationship, developed a self-described ‘obsession’ with parachuting from fixed-objects such as **B**uildings, **A**ntennas, **S**pans (bridges), and **E**arth (cliffs). Countless hours were (forcefully) spent watching BASE videos until I began to see a connection between this relatively new and increasingly popular form of voluntary risk-taking and my own academic interests in men and masculinities. It was not until I traveled to the USA for my undergraduate fieldwork and observed a training camp where people paid to learn about the history and ethics of BASE jumping, advanced parachute packing techniques, and BASE-specific parachuting and landing skills, that I realized to what extent the practitioners, camp organizers, event planners, equipment manufacturers, and pioneers of the sport are disproportionately male. BASE jumping has only attracted approximately five to ten thousand people worldwide (Cooper and Landreau 2007), and though official statistics have yet to be compiled, some jumpers estimate the male to female ratio is 20:1.

As I spoke with these men, took note of their surroundings, and observed them execute progressively more dangerous jumps from the Perrine Memorial Bridge in Twin Falls, Idaho, I came to understand the importance of thinking about voluntary risk-taking as a *fundamentally social activity* that involves or perhaps even necessitates interaction with other people: it is not simply individualistic. As Cockerham (2006: xv) points out, “others are necessary to initiate or train the novice in the risk-taking activity and/or serve as a social audience providing support, reassurance, approval, and perhaps even acclaim”. While BASE jumping is a relatively solitary practice in comparison to other team-oriented sporting

activities, most (if not all) aspiring jumpers reportedly learn in group settings by attending BASE camp, participating in an event known as ‘Bridge Day’, or more informally from (in)experienced friends. With the exception of a few pioneers who have developed equipment and parachuting techniques through trial and error since the 1980s, newer generations of jumpers are rarely self-taught.

BASE jumping also shares various and sometimes contradictory ideological and technological connections to war and sport. As traditional arenas of struggle where masculinities are created, celebrated, and reproduced, the worlds of sport and the military coalesce quite smoothly around the practice of BASE jumping. In some ways, BASE jumping is a hyper-masculine hybrid that bridges two institutional spheres renowned for nurturing male homosociality, gender hostility, violence, homophobia, and the inferiorization of females. On the other hand, BASE jumping embraces the sporting values of ‘anti-regulation’ and ‘personal freedom’ characteristic of the ‘extreme sports’ phenomenon (Wheaton 2004), and therefore also provides a vehicle for resisting dominant ideologies surrounding gender, skin color, sexual preference, social class, and ability still operating within the modern day context of these social institutions.

In my experience, however, BASE jumping can also be viewed as a contested terrain of social meaning where competing and intersecting ideologies create a multiplicity and hierarchy of masculinities and femininities (Connell 1987). This perspective is consistent with most social scientific approaches to studying patterned interactions *between* men and women, and *among* different groups of women and men in the context of extreme sports. Rather than thinking about masculinity and femininity as ‘roles’ or ‘types’ (i.e. what is expected or imagined), this framework draws attention to the configuration of social

practice(s) that encompass the positions of men and women in the structure of gender relations (i.e. what people actually do). It also acknowledges the impact of the economy, the family, the state, and the numerous practices, symbols, discourses, and ideologies associated with the binary categories of ‘man’ and ‘woman’. Furthermore, it accounts for the relations of domination, subordination, marginalization, authorization, and complicity that shape how human beings do gender within localized ‘gender regimes’ (in various institutions and settings) which are embedded within the broader ‘gender order’.

The forms of masculinity which are dominant or ‘hegemonic’ in particular institutional, historical, and social conditions are thus viewed as ideological constructs that privilege certain men, for they are always produced alongside, and in relation to, ‘other’ masculinities and femininities (e.g. disabled, racialized, homosexual). Of paramount concern for many researchers exploring masculinity as an ongoing accomplishment is how these everyday enactments are connected to broader forms of institutionalized power (Landreau 2008). Men’s dominant position in the gender order, for instance, brings numerous social, material, and political advantages including honor, prestige, authority, respect, safety, higher wages, and greater access to institutional power (Connell 2005). Although most men profit from this ‘patriarchal dividend’ to some degree, individual men may get more than others, or less, or none, depending on their location in the social order (hegemonic, subordinated, or marginalized).

Despite its wide application in sociology and critical sports studies, Connell’s work has attracted a number of important criticisms, one of which is its inability to explain the dynamic nature of contemporary gender relations in extreme sporting subcultures (Thorpe 2007). Critics have also problematized the concepts of masculinity and hegemony (Petersen

2003; Demetriou 2001), questioned the dualistic model of hegemonic power and its applicability to empirical evidence (Whitehead 2002; Pringle 2005; Seidler 2006; Moller 2007), and highlighted the tendency to focus on negative aspects of masculinity (Pringle 2005).

In response to almost 20 years of contention, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) undertook the task of reexamining the concept of hegemonic masculinity. From this review, a renovated analysis of hegemonic masculinities emerged that was anticipated to address some of the theoretical shortcomings and misapplications that had transpired since its debut. Given the multifarious relationships between different constructions of masculinities and femininities, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) contend that a more holistic approach to understanding gender hierarchy is essential for the contemporary usage of hegemonic masculinity. Scholars must remember that although dominant groups have power, subordinate groups also have agency, and that the interplay of the two informs the gender order. As such, my analysis of men and masculinities reverts to the fundamental principal that ‘gender is always relational’, bringing the interplay of masculinities and femininities back into focus through an exploration of gendered power, relational meanings of masculinity, and voluntary risk-taking in the BASE community.

Theorizing Risk

Although the social construction of masculinity is intrinsic to understanding gendered experiences of risk (Frost 2003), there are other competing but not necessarily exclusive social scientific approaches to studying risk. The work of British cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas has been useful for understanding why some dangers are deemed ‘risky’ while

others are not. Highly critical of individualistic orientations to risk, Douglas (1966) maintains that risk is a cultural phenomenon informed by judgments about danger, purity, and Otherness. Notions about risk and how to handle risks are shared by members in a particular cultural context, and this community orientation to defining and managing risk helps achieve social order by creating symbolic boundaries between self and Other (Douglas and Wildavsky 1982). Media outlets, for example, often portray BASE jumpers as social deviants who assume an unacceptable level of personal risk by highlighting accidents, injuries, and arrests (see Case 2008). Journalists play an indispensable role in ‘Othering’ BASE jumpers by signaling their own aversion to this ‘rebellious’ behavior and by blaming jumpers for transgressing societal norms.

Scholars drawing on Foucault’s understandings of power, knowledge, and social control hold a contrasting view in arguing that nothing is inherently ‘risky’. Risks, hazards, threats, and dangers are “a product of historically, socially, and politically contingent ‘ways of seeing’” (Lupton 1999: 35) and discourses—ways of talking, writing about or visually portraying risk—operate in the construction of subjectivity and social life. This approach often explores the role of social institutions and ‘expert’ knowledge(s) in constructing understandings of risk, and how this knowledge forms power. Specifically, Foucault (1978; 2003) uses the term ‘bio-power’ to distinguish two forms of ‘power over life’ that are linked but which exist on separate poles: 1) the control of entire populations (biopolitics of the population); and 2) the discipline of the human body (anatomo-politics of the human body). The former refers to how governments use statistics and probabilities to control *entire populations* under the guise of public health and risk regulation, while the latter refers more expressly to the control of *individual bodies*. Members of the BASE community, for instance,

engage in their own ‘anatomy-politics of the human body’ by routinely posting accident, injury, and fatality statistics online for the purpose of teaching others ‘what not to do’ when they encounter similar situations. Jumpers who consult this data and who subsequently engage in self-regulatory practices to avoid similar catastrophes demonstrate how the macro-dynamics of bio-power are also reflected in the micro-capillary flows of power in risk-taking activities such as BASE jumping.

The notion recently popularized by many sociologists that industrial societies are transitioning into ‘risk societies’ centers on a key structural principle governing the modernization process: the production of new risks associated with mass industrialization (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991). Risk societies are not necessarily more dangerous or hazardous than societies in previous eras. On the contrary, risk societies are increasingly concerned with managing the future, addressing the need to reduce harm, and engineering the development of various strategies for avoiding unwanted outcomes; that is, they are preoccupied with the notion of ‘risk’. In pre-modern times, risk was associated with the natural world or taken as evidence of supernatural forces, and this external orientation to risk meant that human beings were precluded from any responsibility or blame. However, in the modern world, risk emerges as a consequence of human activity, representing the downside(s) to many of the technological advancements that afford luxury and comfort such as motorized vehicles, for example:

A world which lives after nature and after the end of tradition is one marked by a transition from external to what I call *manufactured risk*. Manufactured risk is risk created by the very progression of human development, especially by the progression of science and technology. Manufactured risk refers to new risk environments for which history provides us with very little previous experience. We often don't really know what the risks are let alone how to calculate them accurately in terms of probability tables (Giddens 1999: 4 original italics).

The basic problem in contemporary societies is therefore not just the unequal distribution of wealth, but also the management of manufactured risks associated with air and water pollution, toxic chemicals and radiation. The ongoing public discourse emanating from the U.S. military surrounding the (supposed) removal of biological, chemical, radiological, and nuclear weapons from the Middle East is an excellent example of the extent to which the importance of recognizing and containing such risks has emerged as primary in recent decades. The commitment to disarm Saddam Hussein of his ‘weapons of mass destruction’ also illustrates how manufactured risks are politically charged insofar as they involve decision making, responsibility, and issues of social accountability (Beck 1992).

People, corporations, the state, and others are responsible for manufactured risks, and humans have reacted to the uncertainties inherent in conquering new markets and developing new technologies through processes of risk calculation and the development of insurance. While in previous eras, risk assessment relied more heavily on guesswork, the development of statistical calculations based on probabilities meant that “the consequences that at first affect only the individual become ‘risks’, systematically caused, statistically describable and in that sense ‘predictable’ types of events” (Beck 1992: 99). By making the “incalculable calculable” (Beck 1992: 100), the industrial system used public and private insurance agreements to create ‘safety pacts’ with citizens for the purpose of ‘protecting’ them against industrially produced hazards.

But because the environmental risks in late modernity are non-localized and have the potential to pose long-term threats, they are virtually incalculable and therefore uninsurable. As the social consensus on scientific progress was undermined through repeated violations against citizens (e.g. Chernobyl, Atomic Bomb), people came to view ‘progress’ and

mechanisms of social insurance as fundamentally inadequate through a process of self-confrontation which Beck (1994) terms ‘reflexive modernization’. In reflecting upon and critiquing the processes of modernity, a shift occurred from the production and distribution of ‘goods’ to a concern with the prevention and minimization of ‘bads’. Furthermore, it was towards the big institutions of late modernity—government, industry and science— that blame was allocated, while “the responsibility for risks...[was] increasingly directed away from organizations and collectivities and displaced on to individuals” (Lyng 2005: 8).

It is precisely this displacement that leads Lyng (2005) to consider how *voluntary risk-taking* or ‘edgework’ might serve as an integration mechanism in an increasingly risk-conscious society, rather than as a response to the alienating and over-socializing conditions of bureaucratized organizations, complex divisions of labor, and rationalized workplaces. Drawing on Marx and Mead, Lyng (1990) initially employs the concepts of ‘spontaneity’ and ‘constraint’ to point out how free action (voluntary risk-taking) emerges within a distinct context of constraining structures (paid labor). In Mead’s conception of the mind, the self is comprised of the ‘I’ and the ‘me’ whereby the ‘me’ represents the mediating voice of society that directs the spontaneous action of the ‘I’. Under the conditions of post-industrial capitalism, work has exceedingly separated itself from the ‘I’ and fallen into the realm of the socially constrained ‘me’. Edgework is a matter of moment-to-moment decision making that calls forth the anarchic self or ‘I’ and therefore suppresses the oversocialized, alienated, institutional self or ‘me’. From this perspective, practitioners are motivated to participate voluntarily in risky activities precisely because the experience itself is “seductively appealing”, and the closer they come to the ‘edge’ the more they report feelings of “self-realization”, “self-actualization” and “self-determination” (Lyng 1990: 860).

More recently, Lyng (2005) identifies a degree of synergy between edgework practices and the institutional order of late modernity. Using skydiving as his substantive illustration of the edgework concept, Lyng maintains that many of the skills, competencies, and symbolic resources necessary for negotiating the ‘edge’ or boundary between chaos and order (e.g. life/death, sanity/insanity, consciousness/unconsciousness) are also useful in risk societies where the boundaries between edgework and institutional life or “center work” are becoming increasingly blurred (Simon 2005: 206). For instance, by definition, edgework involves negotiating inherently turbulent boundaries on the threshold of particular physiological and/or psychological responses that (may) require practitioners to ‘feel’ situations intuitively rather than simply ‘know’ them cognitively. For Smith (2005: 196), the same is true of stock traders performing financial edgework on the market:

...avoiding the crowd, not going against the tape, trying to ride market momentum, and not taking any action when unsure...most traders set firm limits, for example, as to the losses that they will tolerate, and once their limits are exceeded, they will close a position even if they still believe it will work out in the long run...To catch market momentum, they keep a close eye on new highs and new lows. Perhaps most important, however, they stay alert to any market behavior that seems unusual. It is here that liminal knowledge comes into play. If something is happening that doesn’t make sense, then they assume that some factor presently not known is likely to be at work.

This example demonstrates that risk-taking is not necessarily as peripheral to social life as the edgework concept implies, but that “edgework is increasingly what institutions expect of many people” (Simon 2005: 206). In other words, the active pursuit of risk itself becomes a key structural principle extending throughout the social system, as evidenced by the ongoing discourse surrounding the risks inherent in everyday lifestyle choices such as food, travel, relationships, and of course, extreme sports. Thus, as the uncertainties of the risk society extend to every niche of social life, and individuals are increasingly expected to

manage them, edgeworkers valorize risk-taking propensities and hone risk management skills as they strive to better integrate themselves into existing institutional settings.

Another distinguishing feature of social life under conditions of ‘late’ or ‘reflexive’ modernity (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992) germane to this discussion is the breakdown of traditional certainties structured through age, gender, and social class, in addition to the plurality of new anxieties associated with family breakdown, marital instability, and employment insecurity (Lupton 1999: 70). Beck (1994) uses the term ‘individualization’ to describe a process by which individuals are expected to produce their own biographies in the absence of fixed, traditional norms. This phenomenon is widely understood to correspond with the demise of conventional forms of coping with anxiety and insecurity characteristic of the early stages of industrialization—rigid class structure, fixed gender relations, job stability—all of which contributed to a relatively coherent sense of self (Wilkinson 2001).

While individuals have always constructed their identities in relation to their social roles and obligations, personal identity is experienced differently in the latter portion of the twentieth century due to greater social and geographical mobility, improvements in living standards, the impact of social movements linked to feminism and gay liberation, and new demands placed upon workers within the capitalist mode of production, to name a few. As a result of this period of rapid social change, Giddens (1991: 53) argues that people become “obsessively preoccupied with apprehension of possible risks to [their] existence, and paralyzed in terms of practical action”. In other words, individuals feel disoriented in the absence of “permanent alliances” and “eternal verities” related to work, family, and other intimate relations (Wilkinson 2001: 29), and consequently, an anxiety emerges about the

meaning of self-identity: “Who am I and what do I want?” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1996: 31).

With these ideas in mind, this study builds upon field research conducted in my undergraduate degree where I observed and interviewed three BASE students attending a ‘First Jump Course’ in Twin Falls, Idaho. It moves beyond my earlier focus on BASE students with the goal of studying male members of the community more generally. BASE jumping is ranked as one of the most dangerous sports in the world (Pedersen 1997; Martha and Griffet 2006) and yet as an avenue for investigating issues of risk and masculine identity, it remains largely unexplored. Here, I use BASE jumping as my ‘substantive illustration’ of the edgework concept, and through an exploration of the discourses and practices characteristic of the BASE jumping community, offer a deeper understanding of the voluntary risk-taking phenomenon generally, and to gendered participation in edgework activities such as BASE jumping more specifically. The broad research questions guiding this analysis include:

- 1) What discourses on gender and risk are currently circulating in the BASE jumping community?**
- 2) What principles organize the risk-taking practices and risk management strategies undertaken in the BASE jumping community?**
- 3) How does BASE jumping relate to and produce everyday/everynight masculinities?**
- 4) What does BASE jumping tell us about edgework and gender in risk societies?**

“They’ll talk to you because you’re hot”: Methodology

This comment encapsulates the realities of studying difficult-to-access populations that are predominantly male, as a young female. At the same time, during the early stages of this research, my thoughts were plagued with concerns that my ability to recruit jumpers would be hindered by my status as a non-participant in both the BASE jumping and skydiving communities. These groups are notoriously resistant to social scientific inquiry (Cooper and Landreau 2007), and compounded by the relatively few connections I made during my undergraduate research, it became apparent that the success of this project hinged in part on my presentation of self (Goffman 1959), a point further emphasized by my colleague who crudely remarked that my age and appearance would ‘guarantee’ participation among jumpers: “They’ll talk to me because I BASE jump, they’ll talk to you because you’re hot”.

Because of the hazardous and specialized nature of the sport, I adopted the position of researcher as ‘observer’ rather than researcher as ‘full participant’. Some women who undertake research in male-dominated areas succeed in obtaining rich data by wearing makeup and revealing clothing to accentuate their femininity (Ramsay 1993 cited in Letherby 2003). Although I am aware of the social and material advantages afforded to young ‘beautiful’ women who dress provocatively, I consciously chose to ‘dress down’ for my fieldwork by wearing t-shirts, sweatshirts and jeans. Some aspects of my identity were impossible to disguise (skin color, Canadian accent), while others such as limiting makeup and jewelry were more easily adapted to the research setting. In part, I wanted to be taken ‘seriously’ and worried that Ramsay’s strategy might invite unwanted sexual advances; however, I also recognized that blending in with BASE jumpers would grant me access to

locations otherwise denied to women looking to socialize with BASE jumpers for other reasons.

The Bridge Day celebration in Fayetteville, West Virginia is one of the few occasions where BASE jumping assumes a moment of public spectacle. There, more than 300 BASE jumpers and 150,000 spectators gather annually to commemorate the 1977 construction of the New River Gorge Bridge with several hours of legal jumping. Bridge Day 2008 was held on Saturday October 18th, though activities organized by BASE jumpers, local residents, and various merchants began on Thursday October 16th and continued until Monday October 20th. Registration, seminars, and parties all took place in the hotel lobby of the Holiday Inn in Fayetteville, forming the epicenter of the entire celebration. Although hotel rooms were reserved for Bridge Day participants, I took part in the festivities by collecting documents, attending orientation and training sessions, watching videos of illegal jumps, and chatting more informally with jumpers in the ballroom of the hotel headquarters. Equipment manufacturers were also present in true ‘science fair’ form, displaying new parachuting technologies and answering questions for jumpers and non-jumpers alike.

On the actual day of the event, a mile-long section of the highway leading to the bridge was barricaded by police. The road was lined with an array of vehicles as men, women, and children of all ages walked apace with jumpers wearing full parachuting equipment towards the gathering point near the center of the bridge. During this highly charged anticipatory state, participants and observers traversed a gauntlet of consumer goods including hot dogs, pizza, coffee, snow cones, face painting, crafts, posters, Bridge Day T-shirts, and even the opportunity to be photographed wearing a parachute against a fake backdrop of the New River Gorge Bridge.

Once on the bridge, jumpers confronted an onslaught of media officials requesting interviews as they jockeyed for position in the media pit near the launch point. Jumpers were grouped according to the order in which they enrolled for the event; early registrants were granted the privilege of jumping first. Veteran jumpers took turns announcing jumpers, explaining technical aspects of BASE jumping, providing Bridge Day statistics, and offering commentary over a loudspeaker for the benefit of those elbowing their way to the aluminum railing where a number of early risers positioned themselves with cameras and binoculars. Others brought lawn chairs, coolers, and blankets, opting for a seat along the river shore in full view of jumpers flying into the landing site. As a spectator of the Bridge Day event, I divided my time between these two locations. By purchasing a ‘friends and family’ shuttle pass, I was able to avoid the long and arduous hike back to the top of the gorge. In total, I observed 1062 BASE jumps over a period of seven hours (9 a.m. - 4 p.m.), and had the opportunity to interact with jumpers and event spectators on the bridge and in the landing area throughout the day.

Part of the project also involved 16 semi-structured qualitative interviews with members of the BASE jumping community residing in North America, Oceania, and Asia. Since BASE jumpers rarely gather in such large numbers, Bridge Day 2008 was an excellent site for generating observational data and recruiting interviewees. In light of Donnelly’s (2006) recent criticism of studies that focus exclusively on ‘core’ participants, interviewees were selected on the basis of having completed one BASE jump in the past year, rather than how frequently they jumped or their length of involvement in the sport. The interviews lasted between one and two hours and covered a range of topics including how the respondent became involved in BASE jumping, thoughts and feelings experienced while BASE jumping,

the negotiation of risk and safety, perspectives on risk and responsibility, BASE trajectories more generally, and issues related to personal identity such as family, work, and friends. These questions were directed at eliciting their views and experiences of BASE jumping in relation to their personal biographies, allowing me to contextualize voluntary risk-taking within their everyday/everynight lives.

Following Oakley (1981) who argues that non-hierarchical relationships are best established when interviewers are prepared to invest their own personal identity in the researcher/participant relationship, I went into the study being extremely open about my research agenda and my graduate student status at the University of British Columbia (UBC). I remained equally open in the interviews, offering to answer questions about my research, the ultimate goal of my thesis, and personal questions about myself. Although Oakley's insights derived primarily from her experiences speaking with women, her participatory interviewing approach also proved useful in my interactions with men. By acknowledging that I was there to learn about rather than sensationalize their experiences (as journalists often do), I built good rapport with my respondents which helped bridge the 'insider/outsider' divide (Lofland and Lofland 2006).

Although I have no intentions of ever becoming a BASE jumper, I have performed other forms of 'edgework' where I actively negotiated the boundary between potential harm and safety. In fact, I can think of a number of scenarios during my teenage years where I traveled alone in politically unstable countries, consumed drugs and alcohol, or engaged in risky sexual practices. Never in these examples did I encounter a near death experience, though I did have the opportunity to enjoy many of the pleasures that accompany voluntary risk-taking. I had not anticipated speaking about my own risky practices during the

interviews; however, as the discussions unfolded, these experiences served as important reference points, enabling me to build rapport with BASE jumpers in ways that some have suggested is impossible to do (Cooper and Landreau 2007). I also related to participants in ways that some men relate to each other when establishing non-sexual relationships such as drinking beer, swearing, and talking about sports other than BASE jumping (typically homosocial practices). Furthermore, I engaged respondents in the type of conversation that more closely paralleled ‘shooting the shit’, with the goal of creating non-sexual relationships (heterosocial relationships) that would encourage rich, lengthy responses during the interviews.

Respondents ranged from 24 to 55 years old. Of the sixteen men I interviewed, one self-identified as ‘mixed race’, another as ‘Middle Eastern’, and the remaining fourteen as ‘Caucasian’. All participants alluded to being heterosexual throughout the interview by making reference to past/current girlfriends, though at the time of the study, eight respondents were single, two were divorced, three had girlfriends, two were married, and one had a common-law partner. I interviewed a wide range of male practitioners in terms of occupational background and motivations for BASE jumping, including non-elite jumpers, those who jumped infrequently or who no longer jumped, and those who had lived and/or jumped abroad. Participants were involved in the sport anywhere from one day (performed first jump at Bridge Day 2008) to over twenty years, with an average jumping career spanning approximately eight years. Some had less than ten jumps; most had accumulated a few hundred, though a couple jumpers reported over one thousand to their credit. General characteristics of study participants are elaborated upon in Appendix A.

In addition to carrying out semi-structured interviews, I performed a series of textual analyses on two BASE jumping websites, in addition to a skydiving magazine that publishes BASE jumping articles and images. As Landreau (2006) observes, texts that do not circulate widely but that constitute important elements of particular subcultures or groups have received limited scholarly attention. For instance, although a number of edgework scholars and sport sociologists have conducted textual analyses of technical manuals (Lyng 1990), magazines (Anderson 1999; Beal and Wilson 2004; Thorpe 2005), and videos (Ferrell, Milovanovic and Lyng 2005), website analyses are markedly absent in the edgework literature. One particular website—The World BASE Fatality List—details the majority of BASE fatalities since 1981 using narratives submitted by family members, friends, and other jumpers about weather conditions, equipment malfunctions, and judgment errors that occurred at the time of the accident. There are currently 131 deaths listed on the website, nearly all of which are men. Given that all BASE jumpers are invited to submit their interpretation of the event, a textual analysis of The World BASE Fatality List was especially useful for unearthing discourses on gender and risk circulating among community members more generally.

I also conducted a census of the narratives or ‘blogs’ posted on www.basejumper.com between September 15th and November 15th, 2008 (N=192). This online forum allows unregistered users to view information about community members, equipment, parachuting techniques, aerobatics, serious accidents, fatalities, and other technical issues. To supplement these findings, I analyzed a series of BASE jumping articles and images printed between February 2006 and February 2007 in *Skydiving Magazine* (N=39). This is the only international monthly publication that disseminates BASE-related information since there are

no BASE jumping magazines currently in circulation. Although I was primarily interested in discussions surrounding the Bridge Day event, I also used these data sources to cross-check my findings in the interviews. Details of all the methodological decisions and ethical issues I faced while conducting this study are elaborated upon in Appendix B. Note that all names reported in both the fieldnote and interview excerpts are pseudonyms.

“We always have a basic plan”: The Layout of the Thesis

As I delve into the topic of fixed-object parachuting, it will become apparent that BASE jumpers are not ‘lunatics’ or ‘daredevils’ but “meticulous performers, giving themselves to some lofty art form” (Rinehart and Snyder 2003: 12). As such, my ‘basic plan’ involves exploring the sociocultural rather than the psychological dimensions of voluntary risk-taking. In other words, this thesis is centrally concerned with issues of social identity, interaction, and context, and not with personality types, pathological behaviors, or the need for arousal. I wish to stress that this analysis is by no means exhaustive. In fact, the findings presented throughout this work are hardly representative of the volumes of data I generated over the course of this project. For all intents and purposes, I have only included the most salient, engaging, and meaningful themes related to gender and risk. As such, this exposition should be viewed as an ethnographic ‘snapshot’ of the BASE jumping world, and not an all-encompassing account of the voluntary risk-taking phenomenon.

In Chapter 1, I begin by tracing BASE jumping’s social pedigree through an exploration of the links to military history and the commodification of two extreme sports. In the following Chapter, I probe more deeply into the practices, ethics, and unique mentoring styles specific to the BASE community, with the goal of demonstrating how BASE jumping

integrates individuals into social groups. In Chapters 3 and 4, I shift more decisively into the ‘individualization of risk’ theme, but with close attention paid to regimes of gender and work. In Chapter 5, I conclude with a discussion of my findings, highlight the strengths and limitations of my current analysis, and suggest some avenues for future research in the areas of gender and risk.

“The jump won’t kill you; it’s the parachute that will kill you”

Introduction

With roots in the counter-cultural social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, BASE jumping and other ‘extreme’ or ‘alternative’ sports share many characteristics that run contrary to the controlled, competitive, rule-bound systems of traditional sports. As Rinehart (2000: 506) suggests, extreme sports are activities that “either ideologically or practically provide alternatives to mainstream sports and to mainstream sport values”. Extreme sports are usually non-aggressive, often individualistic both in form and attitude, and though they tend to embrace some degree of risk and danger, activities such as snowboarding and ultimate Frisbee, for example, can be performed in relative safety (Wheaton 2004).

Extreme sports are also organized around the consumption of new objects and technologies (e.g. boards, bikes, parachutes) in outdoor spaces without the fixed boundaries of hockey rinks or soccer fields (e.g. ocean, mountain, airspace) (Robinson 2008). Some argue that sociology has not sufficiently dealt with the different social practices which are related to being in nature and the outdoors (Macnaghten and Urry 2000). Indeed, most social scientific accounts of extreme sports overlook the “embodied set of relations among humans, non-human nature, and technologies” (Stoddart 2008: 85), a lacuna recently acknowledged in Stoddart’s exploration of the ‘naturecultural’ practice of skiing.

Moving beyond overly discursive approaches to understanding alternative sports, Stoddart demonstrates how skis, boots, poles, clothing, chairlifts, snowmobiles, animals, snow, and trees (i.e. non-humans) interact with skiers (i.e. humans) in ways that challenge

the assumed division between human subjects and non-human objects. Following Latour (1993; 1999) who emphasizes the importance of thinking about nature/society ‘collectives’ rather than nature/society ‘divides’, Stoddart (2008) traces how various non-human ‘actants’ are brought into skiing collectives. The evolution of ski gear, for example, improves interactions between older skiers and the mountainous landscape by alleviating pressure on the human body. By recruiting skis as ‘technological actants’ into skiing collectives, human skiers and non-human skis establish connections which subsequently modify the original human actor, non-human actant, and social experience of skiing through a highly complex process of co-creation (hence the active quality of the skis: ‘actant’). In other words, skiers are “largely inseparable from the machines that allow [them] to interact with the world” (Stoddart 2008: 87), a hybridization most often unaccounted for in the extreme sport literature.

In this chapter, I draw attention to the presence of non-human actants in BASE jumping collectives through an exploration of the objects, technologies, jumping styles, and techniques specific to the sport. BASE jumping cannot be considered in isolation from the rest of the world or understood independently of bungee jumping and skydiving since each has made an important contribution to modern day BASE jumping. As such, I begin by comparing and contrasting the three for the purpose of familiarizing the reader with the historical, technological, and technical aspects of BASE. I also map the evolution of parachuting technology beginning in the early twentieth century, and demonstrate how it is recruited as a technological actant into BASE jumping collectives today. My intention is to disrupt the tendency for extreme sport scholars to obscure or “blackbox” (Latour 1999: 209)

the non-human in social scientific accounts, an approach which serves to illuminate the centrality of objects, tools, and other technologies in the practice of BASE jumping.

1.1 “It all starts with a bungee jump”: Historical Development

Bungee jumping is believed to have originated in the Vanuatu Islands of the South Pacific nearly 1000 years ago (Soden 2003). There, natives engage in ‘land diving’ by jumping headfirst from tall wooden structures into soft mounds of soil on the ground using vines attached to their ankles to help ease the fall (Figure 1.1). According to legend, the ritual began when a man named Tamalié chased his wife to the top of a palm tree after discovering her adulterous affair. When Tamalié lunged towards his wife, she jumped and survived by securing liana vines to her ankles, while he fell to his death. Since then, the men believed it would be a good idea to practice the stunt in case they found themselves in a similar predicament. As a further precaution, females were not allowed anywhere near the tower as it was being erected, and were certainly forbidden to jump. They were, however, encouraged to participate in the ritual by standing silently and listening to the men make speeches from the platform, or by chanting and dancing nude to the waist as the men climbed the wooden structure.



Figure 1.1- Land diving in the Vanuatu Islands
(Soden 2003: 1)

The development of bungee jumping in North America is linked to nature journalist David Attenborough, who upon visiting the islands for *National Geographic* in the 1950s, insisted on trying the sport himself. In 1979, the first modern day bungee jumps were performed in Bristol, England by a group of five men who were members of the Oxford University Dangerous Sports Club. Although the men were arrested shortly after jumping from the Clifton Suspension Bridge using military-produced shock cords tied to their ankles, they continued to jump in the USA, most notably from the New River Gorge Bridge in Fayetteville, West Virginia (Soden 2003).

Today, bungee jumping is a widely commercialized activity that involves leaping from tall structures (e.g. bridges, cranes) or hot air balloons while connected to a thick rubber band. In fact, the same heavy-duty bungee cord originally developed by the military during the mid-twentieth century to absorb the shock associated with using large cargo parachutes to deliver tanks to the battlefield is now used for recreational bungee jumping (Soden 2003). Bungee cords work like springs, bringing the jumper up and down as the cord stretches and retracts. Under these conditions, the shock of deceleration is great and serious injuries can ensue. One study determined that almost half (42%) of bungee jumpers had a medical complaint after jumping, including headaches, blurred vision, dizziness, and muscular pain (Young 1999). Instances where jumpers have rebounded into platforms, had their necks lassoed by the recoiling cord, or launched with broken/worn straps and harnesses have also resulted in concussions, quadriplegia, and death, though enthusiasts maintain this is rare (Louw 1998).

With the exception of one study participant who reported progressing from one extreme activity to the next: “it all starts with a bungee jump, then skydiving, and then you

just kind of progress [to BASE jumping]” (Jonathan), none of the men drew any parallels between bungee jumping and BASE jumping during the interviews. This was somewhat surprising given that bungee jumping also involves exiting from fixed objects, offers the thrill of falling towards the earth, and poses some of the same difficulties as BASE jumping in terms of body position during freefall described below. The popularity of the activity among ‘sporting neophytes’, the marketing of bungee jumping via tourist-oriented commercially packaged avenues known as ‘adventure tourism’ (Palmer 2002), and the absence of any parachuting equipment, however, are all likely part of the reason that BASE jumpers tended to talk about their practice in relation to skydiving rather than bungee jumping.

While both the ancient Chinese and Leonardo da Vinci are credited with conceiving the idea of a parachute, the history of parachuting is said to have begun in 1797 when Frenchman Andre-Jacques Garnerin made the first successful jump from a hot air balloon using a parachute made of silk and stiffened with supporting poles. For the following century, parachute use was confined to carnivals and daredevil acts, with many parachutists along with balloonists and early aviators forming aerial circuses or ‘flying circuses’ as they were more commonly known (Soden 2003). The next major contributions to parachuting systems included the development of a harness for the parachutist (1887), the introduction of folding and packing procedures that would enable the parachute to fit into a backpack-like container or ‘rig’ (1890), and the creation of smaller parachutes known as ‘pilot chutes’ or ‘drogue chutes’ which upon inflating, serve to drag the main canopy out from the container and into the airstream behind the jumpers’ back (1911).

From World War I to the early 1930's, conventional round silk or solid cloth parachutes remained relatively unchanged in structure. During this time, the military used parachutes as a way to save aircrews from emergencies aboard balloons and aircrafts in flight, and later, as a way of delivering soldiers and cargo to the battlefield. Early sport parachutists relied heavily on ex-military style parachuting systems, experimenting with the aerodynamics of traditional round canopies by adding slots and holes to generate more stability and control (Figure 1.2). Efforts to minimize the sudden jerk during parachute deployment and the violent oscillations during canopy flight led to one of the most important improvements in parachute technology: the parafoil (Figure 1.3).



Figure 1.2- Traditional round canopy
(*Skydiving Magazine* February 2006: 3)



Figure 1.3- Parafoil or ram-air parachute
(*Skydiving Magazine* March 2006: 1)

This system functions by trapping air between two rectangular shaped membranes sewn together at the trailing edges and sides (but open at the leading edge), and several ribs are sewn to the inside of the upper and lower surfaces to maintain the profile in a span-wise direction. The parafoil or 'ram-air parachute' operates on the same principle as any airfoil shaped object such as a wing, propeller or blade. Unlike traditional round canopies which come straight down because they use the *parallel* component of the aerodynamic force

known as ‘drag’ (i.e. air resistance), ram-air parachutes can glide or fly because they use the *perpendicular* component of the aerodynamic force known as ‘lift’ (Fieldnotes, October 17, 2008). Most modern day parachutists use this technology because in addition to providing superior maneuverability, they can be flown backwards and/or stalled for zero-velocity landings.

Recreational parachuting or ‘skydiving’ emerged in the post World War II period and was largely the project of ex-military jumpers (Landreau 2006). The early organization of the sport reflected a “rough-and-tumble masculinity” characterized by “heavy equipment, hard landings, and a hard-partying atmosphere” (Landreau 2004: 398). During this time, the infamous maxim ‘Eat, Fuck, Skydive!’ pervaded the skydiving community, reflecting both the sensual, hedonistic character of the skydiving experience and the centrality of sexual practices in the social organization of the sport (Lyng and Snow 1986; Landreau 2004). Although women often participated in social activities and parties organized by male participants, they were severely marginalized as skydivers on the grounds of their ‘inferior’ freefall and canopy skills. As of 2001, there were over 34,000 members of the United States Parachuting Association (U.S.P.A.) of which only 15% were women (U.S.P.A., n.d.).

Skydiving usually takes place at an isolated airport known as a ‘drop zone’ or ‘DZ’ where pilots are authorized to bring skydivers to an altitude of 10,000-13,000 feet using a small aircraft. The first phase of a skydive typically involves jumping from an airplane, helicopter or hot air balloon followed by a period of freefall lasting between 30 and 60 seconds. Once skydivers reach ‘terminal velocity’ (approximately 200 km/h) their bodies no longer accelerate and they cease to feel like they are falling. At this point, recreational jumpers may perform one of many maneuvers including relative work (jumpers flying

relative to each other and creating particular formations in freefall), skysurfing (freefalling attached to a surfboard), or freeflying (freefall style that emphasizes freedom and flow of movement) (Landreau 2006). Others instruct novice skydivers during freefall or take first-time jumpers for a 'tandem jump', in which case the student is connected to an instructor by a harness designed for two people and is not responsible for deploying the parachute.

The second phase normally begins at 2500 feet above ground level (AGL), at which point the skydiver manually activates the parachute. All ram-air canopies have a square piece of nylon that holds the steering lines together called a 'slider'. As the name implies, the component slides down the lines to prevent them from tangling, but more importantly, it slows the activation process since instantaneous canopy deployment can snap the steering lines, rip the canopy, and/or hurt the jumper. Some jumpers enjoy playing with their parachutes high in the sky, while others enjoy testing the limits of their canopies closer to the ground by performing 'hook turns', a move which involves initiating a turn moments prior to landing. As the parachutist dives towards the ground, the canopy experiences an increase in ground speed, enabling the parachutist to surf inches above the ground before using the brakes to flare and land (Landreau 2006).

Although properly executed hook turns can produce dramatic landings, they have also contributed to a number of serious injuries and deaths in recent years (Hart and Griffith 2003). U.S.P.A. data for 2001 indicates a fatality rate of 1 per 1069 members of the organization that year, or 1 death for every 70,130 skydives. The vast majority of fatalities involved experienced skydivers exceeding their own limits, most notably by performing hook turns. High speed landings also contribute to various lower extremity, upper extremity, and

spinal cord injuries, representing the most common source of injury among both military and recreational parachutists (Glorioso et al. 1999).

BASE jumping is best described as a hybrid between bungee jumping and skydiving because it involves jumping from fixed structures rather than airplanes (bungee jumping), using equipment originally developed for paratroopers (military), but later modified for sport parachuting (skydiving). Although a number of fixed-object descents were recorded towards the beginning of the 20th century, modern day BASE jumping began in 1966 when experienced skydivers Michael Pelky and Brian Schubert made the first jumps from a cliff named El Capitan in Yosemite Valley, California. Both men struggled to maneuver their military-inspired skydiving parachutes, and both were injured as a result of either striking the cliff (Pelky) or landing on the rocky terrain below (Schubert). In 1978, cinematographer Carl Boenish filmed the first jumps from El Capitan using advanced parachuting technology and modern freefall techniques, and in 1981, coined the term BASE jumping. Boenish died in 1984 while BASE jumping in southern Norway (Trollveggen), reflecting both his unfamiliarity with the cliff (he failed to clear an outcropping and struck the wall), and the many downsides to pioneering a sport without the benefits of learning from experienced others.

Since BASE jumping (and bungee jumping) is performed at much lower altitudes than skydiving (200-2000 feet), jumpers do not usually achieve terminal velocity, meaning they cannot utilize the force of the wind to help stabilize their bodies. As such, jumpers must rely on athletic capabilities and general body awareness to ensure proper body positioning during freefall. Unlike skydivers who have large unobstructed landing areas, BASE jumpers are usually limited to a very small 'landing zone' (LZ) where various obstacles and uneven

surfaces pose additional risks to the practitioner. As an amalgam of other high-risk activities, BASE jumping carries the same risks as bungee jumping (striking the object) *and* skydiving (parachute malfunctions, landing), meaning the potential for injury or death is greater.

One of the only published studies on morbidity and mortality rates among BASE jumpers determined that jumping from a cliff in southwestern Norway (Kjerag Massif) was associated with a five to eightfold risk for injury or death compared with data on regular skydiving (Soreide et al. 2006). More recently, Monasterio and Mei-Dan (2008) reported a 0.4% accident rate among a sample of 35 BASE jumpers, of which 80% involved significant injuries to the lower limbs and spine. Injuries sustained through BASE jumping were also 16 times more likely to require hospitalization than injuries acquired while skydiving, with some study participants reporting chronic disabilities and significant loss of productivity in the aftermath of the accident. Although 131 fatalities have been documented in the relatively short history of the sport, it is nonetheless difficult to contextualize this number since tens of thousands of jumps have reportedly been made without injury or death (Cooper and Landreau 2007).

1.2 “JUMP AT YOUR OWN RISK!”: Risky Technologies

Although BASE jumping shares some important technical elements with skydiving and has benefited from many of the advancements in parachuting technology developed by the military and the skydiving community, there are three main aspects of the equipment that render it distinct. First, BASE equipment is designed to deploy much faster than skydiving equipment since BASE jumpers typically jump from objects lower than 500 feet AGL, whereas the lowest recommended altitude in which to activate the parachute among the most

experienced skydivers is 2,000 feet AGL (U.S.P.A. 2009). This deployment is achieved by using a larger pilot chute and a shorter bridle¹, both of which facilitate rapid parachute extraction from the container on the jumpers' back.

Second, one of the standard features of a skydiving 'rig' is the presence of a 'reserve' parachute. BASE rigs do not carry a reserve parachute since low altitude jumps leave insufficient time for reserve activation in the event of a malfunction with the 'main'. Third, skydiving rigs are usually equipped with an apparatus known as an 'automatic activation device' (AAD). The purpose of an AAD is to automatically deploy the reserve if a jumper is too close to the ground, a meaningless device for those performing low altitude jumps without a reserve to activate. Reserve parachutes and automatic activation devices also tamper with the simplicity of the BASE-specific system by introducing additional opportunities for malfunction and failure (Cooper and Landreau 2007). For these reasons, jumpers were strongly discouraged from using skydiving equipment for BASE:

Caitlin: So, did you eventually get a BASE rig?

Drew: I did. I made four BASE jumps with my skydiving gear in the configuration that I had done with that. And then I had made a skydiving trip a month or so after that to Florida and met up with a very experienced BASE jumper at the time. He told me that basically, if I kept jumping the gear that I was jumping, I was going to die. At first I kind of laughed and thought he was kidding me, because you hear a lot of comments like that from skydivers and I thought he was kind of poking fun at me. But his face went stone cold and he looked at me and he said "I'm serious. If you keep jumping what you're doing, you will die. Get some real gear. If you're going to do it, buy some real gear." And that's when it kind of hit home and I was like, "Ok, he's not kidding". So, when I came back to Canada, I didn't do anymore BASE jumps until I got a real set of BASE gear.

¹ A long piece of nylon webbing that connects the pilot chute to the 'main' parachute located inside the container. A 9' bridle will reach 'line stretch' much faster than a 20' bridle, meaning the former will tug on the parachute located inside the container sooner than the latter.

In parachuting, higher parachute deployment altitudes result in more time to recognize and deal with problems. Skydiving parachute systems need not deploy as quickly as BASE parachute systems, since skydivers typically have 3-5 minute canopy rides following deployment, whereas BASE jumpers may only have 10-15 seconds. By making jumps at lower altitudes, BASE jumpers give up the safety margins (i.e. altitude) that are standard in skydiving. The advice Drew received was therefore not an exaggeration; by making low altitude jumps with skydiving gear, Drew was using a parachuting system that deploys too slowly for the altitude at which he was jumping. In other words, Drew was sacrificing his 10-15 second opportunity to correct malfunctions by using the time for parachute deployment during freefall, and only by procuring BASE-specific equipment could Drew reinstate the relatively small safety margin afforded to low altitude jumpers.

Another way to make the parachute open very quickly is to attach the pilot chute to the structure using a small cord or 'static line'. This technological actant is used to make the parachute deploy immediately after leaving the object regardless of any actions (not) taken by the parachutist. Although most BASE jumpers were motivated to make higher jumps involving freefall, this method enabled the very lowest jumps to be made (i.e. less than 200 feet). This deployment method was first developed by the military to assist paratroopers with rapid parachute extraction during combat (Smith and Chappell 2000). By connecting the parachute to an anchor point inside the airplane, paratroopers were absolved of any responsibility for activating the parachute, meaning they could focus their attention on maintaining good body position upon exiting from the aircraft, thereby minimizing the chances of experiencing a parachute malfunction during freefall.

The risks inherent in parachuting technology were also evident on the World BASE Fatality List (WBFL) where 52 deaths (41%) have been attributed exclusively to equipment malfunctions. Sixteen of the earliest deaths in the sport occurred specifically because the jumper used skydiving equipment, and today, Bridge Day coordinators forbid participants from jumping with most if not all forms of skydiving gear, offering rental equipment for a nominal fee (\$200) on the day of the event instead. The link between skydiving equipment and the increased likelihood of grave injury and/or death has contributed to a rather precarious relationship between the skydiving and BASE jumping communities. While BASE jumpers were quick to credit skydiving for the canopy and landing skills they had acquired, the skydiving community was reportedly less keen about its purported affiliation with BASE:

Max: ...I was an extreme sport athlete way before I became a BASE jumper. I was climbing, surfing, and I was a skydiver. And in those days, BASE jumping was something that was so-called out of vogue. You couldn't speak about BASE jumping in the skydiving clubs.

Caitlin: Why not?

Max: Because the death rate was very high and it was just considered something that was not only negative, it was kind of unacceptable. Skydiving clubs tried to put BASE jumping very much aside, not to get the image of being an extreme sport with skydiving. So, if you were talking about BASE jumping or BASE jumps you had, the skydiving club would be very upset about it.

While Max attributed the marginalization of BASE jumping to higher death rates among BASE jumpers than skydivers, others spoke more specifically about the transfer of symbolic meaning resulting from the use of parachuting technology in both activities:

Drew: ...the skydiving purists looked at it as unsafe, that it was just the wilder or crazier bunch of skydivers that would actually get into BASE jumping...I think they just looked at it as, they were afraid that because we both used parachutes in the different sports that it would be associated with skydiving and give skydiving a bad name.

These experiences were typical of those who began BASE jumping in the 1980s and early 1990s. This period was characterized by numerous accidents and deaths related to improper equipment configurations, most notably the use of skydiving gear. On the one hand, the emergence of BASE-specific parachuting systems beginning in the 1990s represented an effort to reduce the number of “death rigs” (Doug) being used in the community, though on the other, it was also arguably an attempt by some of the early BASE pioneers to distinguish themselves and their sport from other high-risk activities such as bungee jumping and skydiving. This ‘Othering’ process is a common feature of communities that are defined by the Othering of outsiders in an effort to foster solidarity among insiders (Paetcher 1998). While the skydiving community certainly exemplified this process by very openly denouncing BASE, the development of BASE-specific equipment was itself a symbolic exclusion of the skydiving ‘Other’, which in turn, helped achieve group cohesion in the BASE community.

Six of the jumpers I interviewed did in fact use skydiving equipment for their first jumps, of which four retrospectively admitted that doing so was a bad idea. All of the men owned at least one BASE rig, with some having purchased used equipment from a stranger in an online BASE forum or through an acquaintance/friend. However, because the size of the parachute depends in part on the height and weight of the jumper (a heavier jumper requires a larger canopy) most study participants recognized the importance of ensuring proper fit, and therefore purchased new equipment online from a certified manufacturer such as Apex BASE

or Morpheus Technologies. Unlike skiers who tend to recruit the internet as a technology for verifying weather conditions (Stoddart 2008), the internet worked as an important technology for researching and purchasing gear among BASE jumpers.

By having existing jumpers vouch for prospective buyers prior to completing a sale, manufacturing and distributing companies such as Apex BASE serve as gate keepers for the BASE community. This process began in 2000 when a man named Fred (World BASE Fatality List, #53) was killed during his first jump after purchasing BASE equipment online without having his skydiving experience verified by the manufacturer. As a result, a number of screening procedures quickly ensued:

They have to be a skydiver. Then we talk to their [BASE] mentor. It's a pretty small world, we have to talk to somebody we know, or that knows somebody we know. It's based on trust, we get a feeling for the person, whether we feel comfortable selling them gear. At the end of the day, it's their responsibility not to be lying. They are the ones who will end up paraplegics or dead if they do (Apex BASE, telephone communication, March 10, 2009).

The negotiated relationship between risk and trust was an important part of the social dynamics within the BASE community. Trust involves “the vesting of confidence in persons...made on the basis of a ‘leap of faith’ which brackets ignorance or lack of information” (Giddens 1991: 244); and may be defined as “confidence in the reliability of a person or system” (Giddens 1991: 34). Jumpers entered risk-taking situations trusting they would emerge safely, and manufacturers relied on trust when a prospective buyer claimed to possess the skills and competencies necessary for safe BASE jumping. In order to participate effectively in BASE jumping, manufacturers also trusted that jumpers would deploy at an appropriate altitude, accumulate sufficient skydiving experience, and provide an honest assessment of their abilities. Although manufacturers conducted ‘background checks’ to

authenticate a prospective buyers' declaration ("We have to talk to somebody we know"), responsibility for managing the risk(s) associated with BASE jumping was placed squarely in the hands of practitioners ("It's their responsibility not to be lying").

A more blatant example of the heightened individualization of risk in the current historical context was found on the Morpheus Technologies website where a lengthy narrative detailing the potentially injurious, disabling and fatal consequences of the sport was juxtaposed with statements that directed the responsibility for these outcomes away from the organization supplying the equipment:

Do not use this equipment unless you accept full responsibility for any injury, serious or otherwise, including loss of life... Morpheus Technologies and its affiliates offers no warranty; expressed or implied, as to the reliability or safety of any equipment or product that it sells. This equipment is sold without any guarantee of its quality or performance. It may not perform as it is designed to... By clicking "Accept", you are releasing Morpheus Technologies and all of its affiliates of any responsibility or liability for injury, serious or otherwise, including loss of life...JUMP AT YOUR OWN RISK! (www.baserigs.com).

The inability to guarantee quality, performance, or even injury-free BASE jumping is a reflection of the transition from external to 'manufactured risk' characteristic of late modernity (Giddens 1991). Although Giddens is primarily interested in manufactured risks associated with environmental pollution, his insights are also applicable to smaller scale technological advancements. As a manufactured risk, BASE rigs emerged as a result of progress in parachuting technology, but because they created "new risk environments for which history provides us with very little experience" (Giddens 1991: 4) manufacturers were unable to calculate the risks, and therefore absolved themselves of any responsibility for how they functioned due to the obvious liability issues involved in distributing unpredictable equipment.

That BASE jumpers were *required* to accept the terms and conditions set forth by manufacturing companies in order to purchase equipment reveals how the individualization of risk is established as a normal practice in risk society. By limiting the consumer power of those who declined to take full responsibility for the parachutes' performance and related negative health outcomes, prospective buyers were forced to comply with a contract they may or may not have agreed with, but which nonetheless succeeded in institutionalizing the broader phenomenon of displacing risk management onto individuals by framing it within a discourse of common sense safety ("They are the ones who will end up paraplegic or dead"). Ironically, the same strategy is employed in the General Safety Program of the military where new recruits are forewarned "You will learn to ensure that anything you may be responsible for—you, your peers, and your equipment—are not injured or damaged in preventable accidents. Safety is common sense" (National Defence 2009).

As new BASE jumping technologies emerged and the risks inherent in BASE jumping with skydiving gear were eradicated, a notable shift occurred in the content of the fatality narratives posted online. Rather than attributing mishaps to inherently risky skydiving equipment, witnesses began associating accidents with other factors such as weather conditions, poor judgment, and inadequate canopy skills. As of 2002, none of the reports cited skydiving equipment as a contributing factor in fatalities, and beginning in the late 1990's, there was a marked increase in the number of submissions describing failed attempts to "employ commonly practiced evasive maneuvers" (World BASE Fatality List, #40), such as steering or stalling the canopy for the purpose of object circumvention.

Despite the fact that jumpers liked to feel "warm and fuzzy" (Wayne) about their pack jobs, they also recognized that a perfectly packed BASE rig could experience

malfunctions (Fieldnotes, October 18, 2008). Contrary to popular belief, parachute systems rarely fail to deploy or inflate once the jumper begins the activation process. Rather, the most commonly reported problems in both the interviews and the WBFL were ‘off-heading openings’ due to steering lines becoming twisted or knotted together (i.e. line twists and tension knots). While the reasons for these malfunctions were numerous, the result was the same: the jumper and the canopy were facing towards the object rather than away.

The importance of developing good canopy skills for the purpose of avoiding object strikes is evidenced by the number of skydives accrued by each study participant. As noted in Appendix A, most men reported several hundred, with some long time jumpers even reporting in the thousands. It was not uncommon for jumpers to halt their BASE jumping careers and return to skydiving (or alternatively, continue skydiving throughout) for the purpose of practicing obstacle avoidance, body position during freefall, canopy flight, off-heading correction, and landing accuracy. Indeed, because skydiving affords “lots, and lots, and lots of altitude with nothing to hit but the earth” (Mike), it was often considered one of the most suitable forums for honing BASE jumping skills.

The potentially disastrous results of having poor canopy skills due to a lack of skydiving experience had a sobering effect on Wayne, who took a hiatus from BASE jumping after witnessing his mentor nearly strike a chimney as a result of an off-heading opening:

Wayne: That was the scariest jump of the trip... Also with that came the realization of what I don’t know. And that was kind of like the beginning of the end for me. The beginning of the end as in me taking a break.

Caitlin: What did you realize you didn’t know?

Wayne: I realized that [pause] I wasn’t as good of a pilot as I thought I was. Anyone can jump off of something. The parachute is a whole different story.

The jump won't kill you, it's the parachute that will kill you. It will slide you into something, it will spin you around. It will take you for a ride and it will break your bones. So you need to know what you're doing with that thing.

Wayne was quite clear that parachuting technology—not jumping from chimneys—was inherently dangerous. His mentor's near miss was therefore attributed to the parachute's off-heading opening, not his failure to exercise appropriate judgment. Since Wayne had less experience flying canopies than his mentor, he viewed himself 'at risk' for catastrophic outcomes that had more to do with parachutes (i.e. "I wasn't as good of a pilot as I thought I was") than jumping from fixed structures (i.e. "Anyone can jump off of something"). Unlike skydivers who tend to talk about the dangers of operating parachutes in ways that antigun control advocates frame the hazards of irresponsible gun ownership—"guns don't kill people; people kill people" (Landreau 2006: 597) Wayne maintained it was precisely *because* the technology was inherently dangerous that superior canopy skills were required (i.e. people who own guns should learn how to use them). The parachute as weaponry metaphor meshes well with the overall theme of this thesis since guns have long gone hand in hand with masculinity, as have parachutes and the military. While guns and parachutes can certainly elevate the risk for morbidity and mortality, most gun-related deaths are the result of accidents (e.g. unintentional discharge) rather than criminal activity (Price and Oden 1999), a fact which speaks to the idea that BASE jumping with insufficient parachuting experience is like entrusting a novice gun handler with a loaded weapon.

This excerpt also demonstrates how parachutes have an active character in the production of BASE jumping collectives; they are designed to safely lower human bodies to the earth, but they also have the capacity to misbehave, act unruly, and even kill. Wayne's mentor, for example, recruited a technological actant (i.e. parachute) to facilitate his

interaction with non-human nature (e.g. air, wind, chimney), and though he likely packed his equipment with great care and concern, the parachute exhibited its active character by means of the off-heading opening. To suggest parachutes can “slide you into something”, “spin you around”, “take you for a ride”, and “break your bones” also reveals how non-humans can dominate humans, and not always the other way around. Irrespective of the parachute’s “intentions” (Stoddart 2008: 86), it is clear that both Wayne’s mentor and the technological actant he brought into the BASE jumping collective engaged in a process of co-creation in that both actively contributed to the outcome of that particular jump.

1.3 “The ground is the limit”: Types of Jumps

Unlike other extreme sports such as skateboarding and windsurfing which are usually limited to one of two settings (i.e. urban vs. rural), BASE jumping is a spatially fluid practice that is performed in both. In this respect, BASE resembles another high-risk activity which involves overcoming obstacles in the natural environment (e.g. railings, concrete walls) using the abilities of the human body known as ‘Parkour’. Both activities are quite basic in that practitioners need not develop special obstacle courses within which to perform their respective activities because they rely on existing structures. However, BASE jumping differs from Parkour on account of the inclination to parachute from objects rather than leap from one structure to the next without the aid of any equipment.

While the acronym B.A.S.E. was originally formulated in recognition of the four structures from which practitioners normally jump (building, antenna, span, earth), other popular fixed objects described in the magazines, websites and interviews have included: roller coasters, sink holes, waterfalls, dams, chimneys, trees, and cranes. The decision to

jump from a particular object was mediated by a number of important factors since each structure posed different challenges, commanded particular resources and skills, and offered practitioners a distinct form of gratification. Weather conditions, legal issues, the relative safety of the landing area, the height of the structure, the presence of rescue personnel, the jumpers' experience level, the risk of encountering an object strike, a mentors' recommendation, and the mere availability of objects: all impinged upon the decision to jump from one particular structure and not another.

Buildings were considered riskier or more advanced than antennas and spans because practitioners must avoid power lines, traffic, parked cars, poles, and street lights, to name a few. Wind was also a major concern with urban jumps since air passing through the metropolis is often quite turbulent; buildings tend to deflect wind, creating drafts or rotors that can snake around the structure unpredictably. As such, students rarely performed their first jumps from buildings, and most seasoned jumpers agreed that it was best to jump buildings when the winds were calm or nonexistent, as evidenced by the overwhelmingly negative response to a novice jumper blogging about his "first solo" at the "local B" with a "15-20 km/h tailwind" on basejumper.com:

"WHO THE FUCK MENTORED YOU?" (September 20, 2008)

Second to parachutes, wind was the most commonly discussed non-human actant in the interviews, websites, and magazines; respondents often cited wind as a reason for abandoning jumps and most accounts on the WBFL included a summary of the wind conditions at the time of the accident. This actant mediated the BASE jumping experience in a number of important ways, most notably by contributing to poor jumping conditions if the

winds were too strong or blowing in the wrong direction. For instance, wind blowing in the same direction as the jumper (i.e. tailwind) may have benefited the parachutist by thrusting him/her away from the object, though in the case of the building jump described above, a 15-20 km/h tailwind would have likely blown the novice into an adjacent structure (hence the unfavorable reaction).

Buildings and other urban jumps could also result in legal action taken against jumpers since access usually involved trespassing and/or breaking and entering. ‘Bandit access’ was described as the act of gaining entry to private property, and was usually achieved by hiding, picking locks, bribing security guards/window cleaners/employees, obtaining employment, impersonating employees, and/or donning an elaborate disguise to help conceal the parachute. The fact that jumpers must access buildings illegally was considered by many to be an integral feature of the sport, representing one of the many challenges to staying undercover, as there was always the risk of being caught both during access and following the jump. Others objected to this aspect of the sport, opting for structures where the likelihood of detection was greatly reduced:

Tom: There was a beautiful building in Toronto, one of the busiest streets, couldn’t be done. And then another one, also in Toronto, but it was too close to a police station, which didn’t make me too keen on it. It was a beautiful building, but just, I don’t want to get caught, I don’t want to get hurt, I just want to have fun. That’s it...I’d rather go to the antenna. Still get the good rush, not as intense as jumping over a police building.

Antennas were appealing because they were often less ‘risky’ than buildings and cliffs, and certainly more accessible than urban structures. Most radio antennas are located in rural areas, meaning the risk of apprehension was somewhat lower. A number of jumpers found suitable antennas by posting blogs online (e.g. “Anyone know of a good “A” around

NYC?”), others procured color coded maps listing the height and location of every antenna in a designated area, some explored the countryside and inspected prospective antennas by scaling iron service ladders for several hundred feet, though most were introduced to popular structures by veteran jumpers. Compared to buildings, the risk of experiencing an accident due to wind conditions was much lower with antennas since wind passes through the object and therefore creates very little if any air turbulence. Moreover, if the wind was blowing in the right direction (i.e. tailwind) it could slow or even stop the canopy from hitting the object in the event of an off-heading opening. Despite the fact that Jack, Drew, and Alex all successfully performed their first jumps from antennas (i.e. no accidents), these structures were nonetheless considered problematic for new jumpers:

Jason: Antennas are more risky because now there’s more things to hit. Like for instance, compared to the bridge. Once you jump and you clear the bridge, there’s open air so there’s nothing to hit. With antennas, if the winds are light enough and you have a 180 [off-heading opening]...Now, even if you do get it steered away from that antenna, you have guide wires to worry about. Not just one, but several guide wires. And then you have to jump at night time. Then you have to worry about getting busted by police for trespassing. So on and so forth. It’s just a higher anxiety jump.

Guide wires run diagonally from the top of the antenna to the ground, and therefore limited the amount of airspace within which the jumpers could deploy. Akin to building jumps, practitioners usually trespassed private property to access antennas, and while the risk of apprehension by authorities and/or service employees patrolling the area was less worrisome, land owners and passing highway motorists presented new problems with regards to detection. As such, most antenna (and building) jumps were performed at night, thus adding another element of risk that novice jumpers were not necessarily prepared to overcome. Jumping in total darkness is like “jumping with your eyes closed” (Wayne) which

made it difficult to gage the distance from the exit point to the ground, to see guide wires in flight, and required a special awareness of the landing area in order to prevent injury upon descent. While it was not uncommon for novice jumpers to exit from antennas in the absence of more suitable objects, first-time jumpers were generally advised to begin BASE jumping from bridges:

Caitlin: What led you to decide to jump from a bridge for your first jump?

Ben: The gentleman I bought my gear from. That was the object that he lived close to, that this business was close to. He knew that we could go out and make the jump. A bridge is, by BASE jumping standards, a relatively safe object. Because once you leave the bridge, there's not a real danger of hitting anything. You jump off of an antenna or a building you have the object right behind you in freefall...most people die in BASE jumping because they fly into the object they just jumped. With the bridge, you have open space underneath, so it's great.

Bridges were considered optimal objects for new jumpers because they provided ample airspace for deployment and required fewer canopy skills than buildings, antennas and earth (cliffs). Jumpers who experienced off-heading openings, for example, could fly under the bridge, meaning the risk of hitting the object was virtually nonexistent. In the case of the Perrine Memorial Bridge (PMB) where the water current was slow, and the New River Gorge Bridge (NRGB) where rescue boats were standing by during Bridge Day, jumpers also landed in the water to avoid hard impact landings on the shore. While some study participants had reportedly jumped from spans other than the PMB and the NRGB, most had jumped from at least one of these structures (though usually both) by virtue of attending BASE camp or Bridge Day. Local authorities had also granted permission to jump from the PMG all year around and the NRGB every third Saturday in October, thereby eliminating many of the issues specific to buildings and antennas:

Caitlin: So what lead you to decide to come to Bridge Day for your first jump?

Eric: I just figure it's the safest, it's the best way to do a first jump.

Caitlin: What about it makes it safe?

Eric: It's an organized event...lots of altitude...876 feet for a BASE jump is a lot. More of a margin for error. And you can do it during the daytime, I don't have to do it at night time which makes it a lot safer too.

As noted by Eric, another advantage to jumping at Bridge Day was the height of the object itself. Higher objects translated into longer periods of freefall, meaning the jumper had more time to achieve proper body positioning and safely deploy the parachute. The height of the structure also informed the method by which the jumper was able to launch, as different methods increased the risk of striking the object. The most common exit positions I observed at Bridge Day included facing away from the bridge (jumping forwards), facing towards the bridge (jumping backwards), and standing perpendicular to the bridge (jumping sideways). Most participants jumped alone, though a handful of groups performed 'multi-way' jumps where practitioners positioned themselves across the bridge and jumped in unison, or conversely, launched while standing on each other's shoulders (Figure 1.4). Nearly all jumpers screamed "3-2-1-C-YA!" moments prior to jumping from the bridge, an expression originally developed by veteran jumper to help coordinate multi-way jumps since group jumping (2+) requires a staggered deployment sequence to prevent canopy collision during freefall (Fieldnotes, January 11, 2009).



Figure 1.4- Multi-way jump
(*Skydiving Magazine* December 2006: 31)

At a height of 876 feet, the NRGB afforded practitioners a maximum of 5-6 seconds before they activated the parachute to avoid impact at 8.8 seconds. This was a substantial delay in BASE jumping terms, and given the relatively low risk of striking the object, jumpers at Bridge Day engaged in a variety of exit positions and aerobatics (somersaults and twists) depending on their skill level and inclination to ‘crowd the edge’. It is, however, worth noting that although ‘deeper delays’ were often associated with an added degree of risk, there were instances where postponing parachute deployment was essential for avoiding tragedies:

Caitlin: ...Can you explain a situation where a longer delay would be safer?

Mac: Yeah, off of a big cliff you get forward speed by tracking, and so, if you take a really short delay you’re really close to the object. And that’s more dangerous than hitting the ground really. If you hit the object...you’re probably going to die. So, if you take a longer delay, that allows you more time to get forward speed and then...you can be hundreds and hundreds of feet away from the wall ... That’s the most critical time. When the parachute opens, you want to be as far from the wall as you can, so it’s always a medium between long enough delay to get away from the wall and high enough not to hit the ground.

Like buildings, cliffs were usually some of the most dangerous types of jumps. The rotor situations were similar to urban jumps, and for this reason, it was best to jump cliffs in

low wind situations to prevent from being blown into the wall. While BASE jumping from cliffs was not illegal, attempts to prohibit fixed-object jumping under broad aviation bans that forbade landing aircrafts in National Parks (Canada) and delivering or retrieving persons or objects by parachute for purposes other than search and rescue (USA) had contributed to a rather long history of conflict between BASE jumpers, National Park personnel, and other authorities. Cliff jumps were nonetheless an attractive option for those who disliked evading the police since jumps made in the backcountry from public lands were generally permitted and typically went unnoticed. The fjords of southern Norway and the cliffs surrounding Moab, Utah were renowned for their “diving boards of over-hanging rock” (Mac) representing some of the most popular touchstones in the BASE community. On account of the superior tracking skills² necessary for gaining distance between the jumper and the wall, inexperienced practitioners were discouraged from attempting cliff jumps, and first-time jumpers rarely (if ever) jumped from cliffs.

There was substantial variation in the number of deaths for each individual object. Most of the lethal jumps listed on the WBFL were performed on cliffs (N=68%), followed by antennas (N=13%), bridges (N=11%), and buildings (N=6%). One lethal jump was performed on a waterfall, and another on a dam. Although BASE jumpers tended to consider buildings more dangerous than antennas and antennas more dangerous than bridges, findings suggest antennas were more lethal than bridges, and bridges were more lethal than buildings. However, it is important to recognize that because these seemingly more ‘lethal’ objects were

² Tracking refers to the use of body position to generate forward speed in freefall, a technique most often developed through substantial skydiving experience. A skilled jumper can achieve a glide ratio of nearly 1:1, meaning the jumper can cover one foot horizontally for every foot he or she descends (Cooper and Landreau 2007).

viewed as less dangerous, they were more likely to be frequented, and thus more likely to produce higher rates of death.

Of those jumpers listed on the WBFL whose sex could be determined, 92% were male and 8% were female. Men were more likely to die as a result of equipment factors, whereas women were more likely to die as a result of human factors (e.g. freefall instability). These results are partially attributable to the fact that men were more likely to wear a highly specialized jumpsuit known as a ‘wingsuit’, ‘birdman suit’ or ‘squirrel suit’³. This jumpsuit was the most recent and dangerous innovation in the BASE jumping community, one that was still in the early stages of development. Men also experienced a greater proportion of parachute malfunctions and off-heading openings. As for more female BASE jumpers dying as a result of human factors, some suggested women became involved in the sport because their boyfriends encouraged them to (Fieldnotes, October 19th, 2008). Their partners tended to teach them how to jump before they had gained sufficient skydiving experience, which might explain why there was a greater proportion of women who perished as a result of human factors related to inexperience.

1.4 “3-2-1-C-YA!”: Conclusion

In this chapter, I have highlighted both similarities and differences between skydiving, bungee jumping, and BASE, and identified a number of important objects, technologies and tools brought into the practice of BASE jumping. In viewing BASE jumping as a ‘collective’ of humans, natural objects and technologies, I have traced how BASE jumpers interact with nature and technology in ways that are mediated by legal issues

³ Wingsuits are jumpsuits which have fabric sewn between the legs and under the arms. See Chapter 3 for further details.

and/or a jumpers' experience level (to name a few), but which nonetheless produce a practice connecting humans and non-humans. In doing so, I have sought to demonstrate the importance of making non-humans visible for without buildings, antennas, spans, earth, parachutes and wind, fixed-object parachuting would cease to exist.

Objects and technologies link BASE jumping, bungee jumping, and skydiving to the military (e.g. static line, bungee cord, parachute), and connect bungee jumping (e.g. New River Gorge Bridge) and skydiving (e.g. parachutes) to BASE. Unruly parachutes and erratic wind conditions clearly shape the BASE jumping experience in ways that command superior canopy skills, and though BASE jumpers were advised to begin their parachuting careers as skydivers for the purpose of developing these abilities, other competencies necessary for avoiding apprehension, injury, and death were learned more specifically through engagement with the practice and interactions with members of the BASE community. It is these processes of social learning and group integration that I turn to in Chapter 2.

“BASE jumpers are a very close community”

Introduction

In discussing extreme sports such as BMX bike riding (Kusz 2003), rock climbing (Robinson 2008) and skydiving (Landreau 2006), scholars implicitly and explicitly use the term ‘community’ to describe how activities that are individually performed but practiced in small groups generate a sense of closeness among practitioners. This conception of community is predicated on the notion that risk sports automatically build community insofar as members are present to one another and feelings of togetherness are shared. While reflections from practitioners belonging to such ‘communities’ would likely affirm this viewpoint, such a simplified use of the term glosses over the collective process of learning that distinguishes ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger 1998) from other sporting subcultures, networks, and groups.

The term ‘community of practice’ is relatively new, and though it has found a number of practical applications in studies of business, organizational design, government, education, and project development, it has yet to be explored in the context of extreme sports. This idea was first established as an approach to learning and knowing as it occurs in the context of apprenticeships (Lave and Wenger 1991). Communities of practice are formed by groups of people who share a common passion or concern for what they do, and who come together to learn about and improve their skills through regular interaction. While learning skills might bring these communities together or be an outcome of community membership, not all

‘communities’ are necessarily communities of practice. A neighborhood, for example, is often called a community, and while networks and connections might develop between community members, they do not necessarily *form an identity* in relation to any particular *shared domain of interest*, build relationships that enable them to *learn from each other*, and/or engage in *practices specific to the group*.

The previous chapter dealt specifically with the recruitment of objects, tools, and technologies into the practice of BASE jumping. While non-human actants are an integral component to BASE jumping ‘collectives’, it is also important to consider how BASE jumpers *learn* to use the various technologies that constitute BASE jumping collectives in ways that also distinguish BASE jumping as a ‘community of practice’. In this chapter, I draw on several dimensions of Wenger’s (1998) notion of communities of practice to demonstrate how BASE jumpers engage in various processes of joint learning; rely on common words, routines, stories, actions and concepts to cultivate a shared practice; and develop a common identity by establishing boundaries and finding meaning in what they do. In doing so, I illustrate how BASE jumpers create unique learning environments where aspiring practitioners can learn about equipment, access objects, prevent accidents, and avoid arrest through social interactions rather than repetitive organizational routines. This process enables the formation and perpetuation of BASE jumping as a community of practice at a time where traditional forms of collective life appear to be slowly eroding.

2.1 “It was definitely a true mentorship”: Participating on the Periphery

BASE jumpers referred to newcomers as ‘apprentices’ or ‘students’ rather than ‘posers’ (Pomerantz, Currie and Kelly 2004) or ‘wannabes’ (Donnelly 2006). Their

participation was ‘peripheral’ insofar as novice members engaged in activities on the outskirts of the practice until they gradually progressed towards full membership. ‘Legitimate peripheral participation’ is not a pedagogical strategy, educational form, or teaching technique, but a way of understanding *situated learning* (Lave and Wenger 1991). Whereas ‘schooling’ refers to learning as a cognitive process with prescriptive properties, legitimate peripheral participation refers to learning as a social process involving full participation in the community. It is considered legitimate because all parties accept the position of unqualified people as potential members of the community of practice. Many aspiring BASE jumpers, for example, reportedly served as ‘ground crew’ for more experienced jumpers by keeping an eye out for police, driving the getaway car, filming jumps, and/or providing updates on weather conditions at the landing site via cell phone or two-way radio.

Most of the men in the study remembered first being exposed to BASE jumping through a variety of media outlets including the Internet, television, film, magazines, newspapers, and in some occasions, through homemade videos circulating in the skydiving community. However, Wenger (1998: 101) cautions against viewing such *observations* as anything but “prelude[s] to actual engagement”. Researching BASE jumping on the internet, talking *about* it with non-BASE jumping friends, and reading *about* it in magazines are very different from the explanations and stories which are *part of* the practice, which are shared by virtue of climbing an antenna with a BASE mentor or friend, for example.

Particular kinds of situated learning through interpersonal participation fundamentally distinguish BASE jumpers as members of a community of practice. Unlike amateur skateboarders who may begin their practice shortly after purchasing a skateboard, novice BASE jumpers were required to accumulate a sufficient number of skydives and procure

BASE-appropriate equipment (purchasing, borrowing, or renting) before legitimate peripheral participation enabled them to take part in peripheral aspects of BASE jumping, be recognized by virtue of participating in these aspects, and progress towards more central and often more dangerous aspects of BASE jumping. As Wenger (1998: 100) puts it:

Peripherality provides an approximation of full participation that gives exposure to actual practice. It can be achieved in various ways, including lessened intensity, lessened risk, special assistance, lessened cost of error, close supervision, or lessened production pressures.

Among the 16 men I interviewed, the most commonly cited forms of legitimate peripheral participation included: 1) attending an organized BASE camp or First Jump Course (N=2); 2) learning from (in)experienced friends (N=8); and 3) coming to the Bridge Day celebration in Fayetteville, West Virginia (N=6). These inbound trajectories represented the few avenues through which newcomers were granted enough legitimacy to be treated as potential members, for without the sponsorship of pre-existing member(s), apprentice jumpers struggled to access the practice, and thus fell short of what veteran members consider competent engagement.

While the level of instruction varied somewhat from one trajectory to the next, each avenue became an opportunity for learning rather than an excuse for dismissal (Wenger 1998). Private BASE camps, for example, emerged in the late 1990's as a result of an increased interest in the sport and a willingness among experienced jumpers to teach others in order to prevent grave injury and death. The camps were typically taught by advanced jumpers (500+ jumps) over the course of 2-5 days, and covered both the theoretical and practical aspects of BASE jumping:

Drew: I was teaching [the camp] out of my local skydiving club. They allowed me to use their classroom on their off days and I would teach the theory part of the course in there. It was a full, two eight hour days of theory and discussion and showing everybody what they needed to do.

Caitlin: Can you give me a brief description of the kinds of things you would teach them in the course?

Drew: The first thing is, I taught them the proper gear that they needed to use...how to choose the proper gear. How to assemble the proper gear, how to pack properly, how to inspect their stuff...make sure that it is airworthy, how to maintain it, small minor repairs that they needed to do, different packing techniques for different styles of jump...The proper way to go to a site themselves, say an antenna for instance. How they can go there and assess it and figure out the right way to jump it. Whether is safe or not. How to do the jump properly, because for the most part it's not legal, so how to do the jump without getting caught or arrested for it. And how to respect the sites and never cause any damage while you're there. Make sure that after you've done the jump, that if somebody were to come along, such as the owner of the property, would never even know that you had been there.

The structure of Drew's BASE camp was representative of most First Jump Courses offered in North America. Students spent some time in a classroom setting engaging in what Wenger terms 'preludes to actual engagement' by learning systematically organized knowledge applicable to a wide variety of circumstances (i.e. theory) such as wind conditions and rates of descent during freefall. When students began learning how to pack properly, however, the course shifted more explicitly towards 'learning by doing' in that mentors moved from student to student, correcting minor errors and even asking some to start over as they worked towards mastering parachute packing techniques.

Novice jumpers attending Drew's BASE camp also acquired strategies for accessing antennas and avoiding detection by listening to Drew recount his success stories and by accompanying Drew to a local antenna. Theoretical and practical skills were further reinforced as students joined Drew while he accessed the antenna and shared his reasons for

using the service ladder rather than the elevator (avoiding detection); evaluating weather conditions by spitting into the wind (direction and speed); and performing last minute gear checks by securing pins and straightening leg straps (minimize parachute malfunctions).

In addition to teaching students about equipment and accessing objects, Drew described showing students a variety of jumping styles, beginning with what is commonly known as a ‘pilot chute assist’ or ‘PCA’. In this scenario, Drew held onto the pilot chute to ensure canopy inflation occurred as soon as the student launched from the structure (Figure 2.1). Next, students performed pilot chute assists on each other, followed by a static line (pilot chute tied to the structure), and two jumps where the student launched with the pilot chute ‘hand held’ and therefore experienced a short period of freefall. This steady progression was designed to help students familiarize themselves with the sensation of jumping into dead air without having to think about deploying the canopy until the 4th and 5th jumps. As noted in Chapter 1, without the advantage of working with airspeed, BASE jumpers used their balance and centre of gravity to achieve good body position during freefall.



Figure 2.1- Pilot chute assist
(*Skydiving Magazine* March 2006: 30)

Students were also taught the importance of having a good exit; if the jumper rotated forward (head low), the risk of tumbling through the air and losing altitude awareness increased, meaning the chances of entanglement or malfunction increased. Alternatively, if the student simply stepped off the exit platform he/she would not gain enough distance, and thus risked hitting the object. A good exit was comparable to a belly flop: arms extended at the sides, belly to the ground and head up. This position was achieved by “keeping your eyes on the horizon” (Eric) since the body tended to follow the jumpers’ gaze. This advice also helped create a space behind the parachutist’s back where the canopy could safely deploy without the risk of becoming intertwined in the jumper’s arms or legs.

Some of the strategies used to train new BASE jumpers bear a striking resemblance to the approaches used to train new recruits in the army. During an intensive course known as ‘Basic Training’, military inductees learn to handle weaponry, orient themselves in the dark, and stay calm in tough conditions. Accounts from study participants frequently evoked images of Navy SEAL⁴ officers undergoing the rigors of military training in the 1997 movie *GI Jane*. During the second phase of Basic Training, recruits were often inspected by their drill instructor as they learned to assemble, take care of, and use assault rifles, much like students attending Drew’s BASE camp who were heavily scrutinized as they learned to properly fold and care for their parachutes.

Mac’s account of the “10 or 20” belly flops he was obligated to perform from a dock in preparation for his first BASE jump reminded me of another scene in the film where cadets were instructed to execute a grueling style of push-up in the ocean. The drill was performed in the midst of a storm and was clearly designed to degrade new recruits. Although Mac did not report feeling humiliated, he did remember thinking his mentors were

⁴ Navy Sea, Air, and Land Forces

“fucking with him”, and only when he refused to continue did they agree to join for the purpose of demonstrating how the drill was effective for practicing the exits he later performed from a bridge.

It is, however, important to remember that camp instructors posited themselves as mentors (not drill sergeants) in an attempt to build a relationship based on honesty, guidance and trust. Mentors offered apprentice jumpers support and respect, availing themselves both during the camp and afterwards since many students returned home to an absence of fellow jumpers. The same level of honesty was expected from the student who, prior to registering for BASE camp, was required to demonstrate a certain level of aptitude flying parachutes by having an existing BASE jumper provide a reference, by giving a truthful estimate of their competence, or by producing a copy of their skydiving logbook.

A logbook is a written record of every jump performed by the skydiver including the day, time, weather conditions, malfunctions, and/or any other pertinent pieces of information such as struggles or achievements. For Smith (1990a), the organizing power of such factual accounts can be traced to a number of intervening steps between the reader of the account and the actual event(s) that happened. First, logbooks were written from the standpoint of actual experience; it was the skydiver who documented the information, not the owner of the skydiving club, a veteran parachutist, or even the BASE mentor him/herself. Second, logbooks provided the reader (BASE mentor) with an itemized account of the events surrounding *every single skydive*. Thus, by specifying the jump number, time, location, type of aircraft, duration of freefall, and so on, BASE mentors were presented with an “already accomplished system of meaning” (Currie 1999: 12) that offered an objectified account of the prospective student’s skydiving experience that was virtually impossible to contest.

As an example of what Smith (1990b) calls ‘objectified forms of knowledge’, logbooks are not simply “self-contained available system[s] of meaning” (Currie 1999: 13) but entry points into the various social relations that organize the community of practice. BASE mentors were not engaged in the production of the various items that constituted the ‘Truthful’ representation of the apprentices’ skydiving experience, and yet as social texts comprised of narratives and statistics, logbooks organized how BASE mentors thought about ‘sufficient skydiving experience’ and therefore mediated initial relationships between BASE mentors and apprentices.

While there was no consensus in the community in terms of what constituted ‘sufficient skydiving experience’, most jumpers agreed that a minimum of 100 skydives was necessary. This was also true outside of the camp context where many jumpers reportedly learned from (in)experienced friends:

Mike: Yeah, it was definitely a true mentorship...one of the local riggers was a real good friend of mine. He was an avid BASE jumper. He probably had about 800 BASE jumps at the time. And so, we were friends and I probably learned a lot more about it from him. And then, eventually one day he was like “Ok dude, how many skydives do you have now?” and I was like “Two hundred and something now” and he was like “Ok c’mon, try this rig on” and it fit perfectly. And he’s like “It’s 1800 bucks”. Boom! I’m going to the fucking bank, got the BASE rig and started packing it...and then, we’re packing it, packing it, packing it, and then worked on different stuff for a number of weeks, and just worked up to a point where it was like “Alright, you ready to go to Idaho? Let’s go!” We went and I jumped. Started jumping and just haven’t stopped”.

Various types of inbound trajectories characterize any community of practice, some more informal than others. Here, Mike was granted enough legitimacy to be treated as a potential member on the basis of a brief conversation about his skydiving experience and the cost of purchasing equipment, and though his friend’s sponsorship resembled the traditional

mentor/apprentice relationship described above, *informal access* to the practice clearly necessitated a degree of social connection and interpersonal trust. Whereas students attending BASE camp did not need to have existing connections with mentors (weak or strong) in order to be granted enough legitimacy, entry to the community of practice via informal avenues usually required multiple contacts with an existing member, usually (but not always) in the form of an established friendship.

This example stands in clear contrast to another popular inbound trajectory—the Bridge Day celebration—where jumpers were required to: 1) have a minimum of 100 parachute jumps (skydiving and/or BASE jumping) of which one was performed in the past two years; 2) use BASE-specific equipment or one of the few approved skydiving parachutes; 3) be at least 18 years of age; 4) complete a background check for outstanding felony warrants, previous arrests for explosives, and terrorist-related activities, 5) attend a jumper meeting held the evening prior to discuss weather and river conditions, the landing area, and water rescue details; and 6) wear an ID badge displaying their photograph.

Furthermore, Bridge Day organizers reserved the right to confiscate ID badges (and prevent jumping) if jumpers falsified information on their application (such as level of experience), or appeared intoxicated on the day of the event. Practitioners were also obliged to have their equipment verified by an approved rigger⁵ on two separate occasions, once during onsite registration at the Holiday Inn in Fayetteville, and the other while standing in line prior to jumping from the bridge on the actual day of the event. Although Bridge Day participants were not mandated to wear protective equipment, nearly 85% wore helmets, knee pads, shin guards, elbow pads, and/or steel toe boots designed for other work and

⁵ A rigger is a person who is trained to inspect, repair, and pack parachutes.

leisure activities typically undertaken by men (e.g. soccer, motorcycling, and construction). BASE helmets were virtually indistinguishable from the American football helmets used by paratroopers in the 1940s (Smith 2007), and thus served to further connect the practice of BASE jumping to the military, in addition to the masculinizing sport of football.

The atmosphere at Bridge Day was particularly sociable and the mentors remarkably hospitable insofar as they donated their time to new jumpers and organized contests with prizes for some of the more comical/less technical aspects of BASE. My favorite, the ‘Stash and Dash’ competition, involved strapping a new jumper into a junky old harness and starting the clock while the crowd laughed hysterically as the novice struggled to remove the harness, tuck the parachute into a ‘stash bag’ and ‘dash’ across the finish line, all in an effort to simulate what a practitioner would typically expect after landing a jump with the police hot in pursuit.

The more experienced jumpers I interviewed all described a sense of obligation to teach apprentice jumpers the BASE curriculum, to provide newcomers with a sense of how the community operates:

Doug: The whole community they kind of chip in, watch over you, check each other out. And today, I’ll give advice for new jumpers, watch out and make sure they haven’t hooked things up wrong. Even on the bridge yesterday, I showed them how to make sure their chest straps are strapped properly...you just keep an eye out...you just kind of look at other people and just take an opportunity to make sure that everyone else is hooked up properly.

In a related way, novice jumpers recognized the importance of learning from their mentors, taking many opportunities to draw on their expertise:

Caitlin: How did you learn to pack [the parachute]?

Eric: One of my friends who is a rigger, who packs [skydiving] reserves, and packing a BASE rig is very similar to packing a reserve. So, I watched him do it a couple times because I was considering getting my rigger's license, taking the course. And, you have to observe so many reserve pack jobs. So, I watched him do it and then Craig went through it about two months ago with me and then last night they both went through it a few times with me. So, today the first one was kind of assisted, while the third and second one I was able to do on my own and just kind of have them look at it every once in awhile.

This comment was typical of the one-on-one attention given to amateur jumpers in the various contexts described above. At Bridge Day, for example, experienced riggers, manufacturers, and jumpers were easily identifiable, though not easily seen, since most were usually surrounded by a group of on-looking jumpers asking questions, taking notes, and in some cases, filming the presentation. While some workshops were scheduled for a specific time and topic (e.g. Wingsuit seminar at 1:00 p.m.) other dyads, triads, and larger groups gathered to watch BASE jumping videos and talk about various deployment and packing procedures more informally. Like any apprenticeship, practice is about learning, and it is only through processes of ongoing, social interaction like the examples described above, that communities of practice are formed and subsequently evolve.

2.2 “Take only pictures, leave only footprints”: BASE Ethics

As Wenger notes, mutual engagement with community members and exposure to their actions and their negotiation of the enterprise are more important than the manner in which initial participation is achieved. In other words, whether novice jumpers attended BASE camp, Bridge Day, or learned from friends was irrelevant since *each venue exposed new jumpers to the shared repertoire of experiences, stories, tools, objects, meanings, and ways of addressing recurring problems* specific to the BASE community. Jumping from

distinct objects in particular geographical locations, purchasing BASE equipment online, and saying “3-2-1-C-YA” prior to exiting the bridge were shared practices that emerged as a result of mutual engagement in the practice of BASE jumping, and therefore served (among many others) as sources of local coherence in the BASE community.

Through the development of BASE-specific discourses, jumping styles, concepts, and tools, practitioners have constructed a shared repertoire of performances that, while seemingly heterogeneous, “gain coherence from the fact that they belong to the practices of the community” (Paetcher 2003: 72). Mastering the repertoire was an important aspect of the transition from apprentice to core member, and it was through relations of mutual accountability that novice jumpers learned “what [was] important and why it [was] important, what to do and not to do, what to pay attention to and what to ignore, and what to talk about and what to leave unsaid” (Wenger 1998: 81).

Some aspects of accountability specific to BASE jumping were formalized in online statements and/or documents distributed to participants at the Bridge Day celebration, though they tended to exist more informally as a set of ‘unwritten rules’ or ‘ethical guidelines’ that nonetheless pervaded the community quite significantly. The underlying motivation for BASE ethics was the shared desire to jump and to do so while avoiding arrest and/or injury. It follows then, that actions which made it harder for others to jump were generally viewed as unethical to some degree. The list varied somewhat from jumper to jumper, but the flavor remained the same:

Mac: So with BASE jumping, the rule is not just to be “not caught”, it’s to not be seen, at least with urban jumping and illegal jumping. So, you try to leave no trace... You want to leave it exactly the way you found it, you don’t want to leave any evidence that you broke in...It’s not that you want to steal or anything like that. You just want to get to the top of the building, jump off, and not get caught.

Damaging private property by cutting chain linked fences, smashing windows, breaking down doors, littering, or drawing graffiti was considered unacceptable by every participant I interviewed. I found similar evidence online where bloggers engaged in a lengthy debate titled “BASE ethics” about a jumper sponsored by Red Bull⁶ who concluded a BASE jumping documentary by spray painting “Cedric Jumped Here On 11.09.08” on a pillar underneath the bridge. Although responses ranged from “Tagging is so lame” to “Cedric, may I suggest that you go and clean that shit up” (September 17, 2008) the message was clear: Cedric had broken the cardinal rule to leave no evidence, and his behavior was considered detrimental to community integrity. That BASE jumpers employed the environmentalist slogan “take only pictures, leave only footprints” also indicates an implied alliance with other hiking/camping/backpacking communities, in addition to the rather temporary/transitory character of this particular community of practice.

The nuances of BASE ethics often depended on the legal status of the site. For practitioners living in or visiting cities where arrangements had yet to be established between jumpers and local authorities, failing to respect sites and the associated guidelines for jumping them (formal or otherwise) strained relationships with other jumpers who had established and continued to jump from those sites. Site guidelines and procedures varied from simple (e.g. don’t land by the farmhouse) to more complex (e.g. drive up the left side of the dirt road, park behind the loading dock, and keep your lights on until you reach the third door). Some study participants even described avoiding arrest by lying to police about their motivations for accessing objects. Wayne, for example, managed to convince the police he was a meteorology student writing his Master’s thesis on wind variations after he was caught

⁶ Red Bull is a company that manufactures and distributes energy drinks.

climbing an antenna near his home. Other times, the outcome was quite different, particularly when jumpers were accessing high profile towers or buildings:

Wayne: We had this elaborate plan to get on the Eiffel Tower and we were with a Belgian guy who had jumped it previously a few times. [Laughs] and the plan just went to shit. There's just way too much security. The actual military is there and they had their own personal guards. Like hired strictly just to secure the Eiffel Tower. We made it past the marble pillars, we made it past the infrared cameras, we made it past the motion detectors. But at about forty, fifty feet up, we were spotted and we were held at gunpoint so [laughs] there's nothing you could do.

The process of transforming civilians into soldiers has been described by military historian Mark Osiel (2002) as a form of conditioning in which inductees are encouraged to partially submerge their individuality for the good of their unit. If we accept this failed attempt as a metaphor for the battlefield where troops (BASE jumpers) are in direct contact with the enemy (other 'actual' military personnel), Wayne's reported indifference to being arrested (capture) and greater concern with "not being able to jump" (winning the battle) suggest that a similar phenomenon occurs within this community of practice. While Wayne and his friends were fortunate enough to avoid any media attention and/or legal charges, for others, jumping from landmarks translated into negative media coverage stemming from misdemeanor charges for breaking and entering, trespassing, and reckless endangerment.

One example was a thirty-year old veteran jumper named Jeb Corliss who posed as a tourist and gained access to the roof of the Empire State Building in New York by wearing a 'fat suit', gray wig, and Latex mask with a beard. Although he was apprehended prior to jumping, Corliss was charged with trespassing, reckless endangerment (police argued that jumping would have placed pedestrians at risk), and assault for resisting arrest. Jeb's indifference towards the authorities (Figure 2.2) and the numerous interviews with the media in the aftermath of his bail release earned him the pejorative nickname "Britney Spears of

BASE jumping” by one study participant (Fieldnotes, August 20th, 2008), though his reputation was more recently defiled online when Mayor Michael Bloomberg signed a bill outlawing BASE jumping in New York City:

I don’t give a fuck how much shit I may get for this post. That guys a fucking douche, even if he pulled it off it was a stupid thing to do in broad daylight [from] one of the most guarded buildings in the most high profile city just hit by a terrorist attack. Fucking brilliant (September 22, 2008).

Thank you Jeb. Getting caught was a bummer. The shameless self promotion and the way you whored yourself out to the media afterwards though is nauseating (September 22, 2008).



Figure 2.2- Jeb Corliss
(*Skydiving Magazine* June 2006: 24)

Given the inclination to highlight accidents, injuries, and arrests, and to profile atypical jumpers such as Jeb, BASE jumpers were understandably resistant to speaking with the media to the extent that some insisted reporters should be “avoided like the plague and treated like lepers” on the grounds that “5 seconds of interview time could mean years of negative advertisement for the WHOLE community” (September 17, 2008). While the controversy surrounding the BASE jumping ban in New York City centered primarily on

Jeb's failure to stay undercover, jumpers were also aware that sites could be shut down if a jumper was injured or killed, which brought about elaborate plans to avoid detection in the event of an accident:

Drew: We had always talked about if somebody was [hurt] bad enough that we couldn't take them out of the area ourselves that we would take their gear off of them so that if the ambulance had to come and pick them up right there that there would be no evidence that that's how they got hurt. The story would have been that they didn't get hurt base jumping, they just got hurt because they fell off. They were climbing the tower and fell off.

Drew's willingness to subject himself to the painful process of having his equipment removed for the purpose of safeguarding the site for future jumpers reflected the strength of the concealment ethos among members of this community of practice and called forth images of wounded soldiers being dragged from the battlefield. As Coakley and Dunning (2003: 391) note, a close parallel may be found between athletes and military personnel, both of whom "follow strongly institutionalized regulatory structures, that is, they become injured, maimed, or sometimes killed, and go on to receive commendations such as awards, medals, special honors, and tributes for their dedication and sacrifice".

While BASE jumpers did not follow 'strongly institutionalized regulatory structures' or receive 'special honors' for preserving objects, some veteran jumpers described investing months or years of exploration to find suitable objects, and relatedly, a strong sense of frustration when objects were 'burnt'. An object was considered 'burnt' if a jumper was detected either during access, or following the completion of a jump. If an object was 'burnt', the site subsequently became even more difficult to access or impossible to jump. As such, burning an object was viewed as one of the most serious transgressions in the community, one that often resulted in an immense loss of respect among fellow jumpers since good objects were reputedly difficult to find.

Drew's account also touched upon another important unwritten rule among practitioners: never leave an injured BASE jumper behind. When I asked study participants whether they would go forward with a jump if the person launching prior to them was injured or killed, my intention was to explore whether jumpers observed a relationship between others getting hurt and the probability that they in turn would experience an injury. While every participant indicated he would still jump, the discussions invariably centered on the importance of helping the wounded jumper by calling an ambulance, performing first-aid, or by parachuting rather than climbing down if it meant reaching the individual more quickly. One blogger even chastised fellow practitioners for failing to help a jumper with a broken femur, citing "no first aid training" and "not knowing how to handle the situation" as reasons why the jumper eventually died (October 5, 2008).

BASE ethics gained coherence from the fact that they belonged to the practice of BASE jumping. Practitioners narrated, collaborated, and constructed a shared repertoire of task norms in which the BASE community's memory was embedded, and this memory was activated every time a jumper contributed to the repertoire or executed a jump without detection, regardless of time or space. It is important to remember, however, that relations of mutual accountability arise precisely because mutual engagement does not depend on homogeneity. Defining a joint enterprise through mutual engagement is a negotiation process, not a static agreement, meaning it is subject to challenge, negotiation and change. Practitioners brought their own personal histories and worldviews to the practice, and while they may periodically disagreed, the enterprise was nonetheless 'joint' in that it was communally negotiated and collectively produced.

2.3 “Hardcore BASE jumpers only”: Boundary Work and Authenticity

As noted in Chapter 1, BASE jumping does not exist independently from other communities of practice, nor can it be understood in isolation from the rest of the world. BASE jumping shares members and important artifacts with other communities (e.g. skydiving, bungee jumping, hiking, the military etc), and while forming close relationships, detailing a complex understanding of the enterprise, developing a shared repertoire of performances, and other forms of *participation* help distinguish BASE jumping from other enterprises, some concepts and practices have become *reified* as local markers of community membership. Wenger (1998) employs the term ‘reification’ more generally to describe both a process (how something becomes reified) and a product (a reified object or practice), meaning the products of reification reflect the practices of a community, and therefore also serve to establish and maintain boundaries.

The process by which practitioners experience the world and their engagement in it as meaningful is central to Wenger’s (1998: 53) conception of practice since “human engagement in the world is first and foremost a process of negotiating meaning”. BASE jumping itself is an example of the negotiation of meaning for it takes place in a context that combines a number of important factors, including wind conditions, skydiving experience, the presence/absence of a suitable mentor, the availability/legality of an object, and so on. Practitioners were also involved in the constant production, reproduction, and negotiation of what it meant to be a ‘real’ BASE jumper, and while full membership was based on sharing the core meanings for which the ‘unwritten rules’ were symptomatic, ‘core member’ status was more commonly defined through the acquisition of a BASE number.

The BASE number is a reification of the widespread belief that ‘authentic’ jumpers are those who have performed at least one jump from each of the original exit points (building, antenna, span and earth). Carl Boenish—the original BASE pioneer—began issuing sequential numbers in 1981. In 2008/2009, BASE numbers were assigned by a woman named Joy Harrison, who upon receiving video evidence or a written statement specifying the location and altitude of each of the four objects, awarded the applicant a number (e.g. BASE 1257). The date and time of the qualifying jump (i.e. 4th object) were also required, in case someone else in the world qualified on the same day. As of April 2009, an estimated 1300 BASE numbers were awarded to jumpers around the world of which 90% were men (Electronic Communication, April 16, 2009). Note that while these practitioners performed most of their jumps in the daylight, separate categories were instituted for jumpers who had completed all four objects at night (a few hundred) or with a disability (two).

Since core members shared a view that ‘hardcore jumpers’ were those who jumped from a variety of objects, ‘Bridge Day jumpers’ —those who *only* jumped at Bridge Day—were not included as full members in the community. Unlike apprentices who eventually moved towards full membership, Bridge Day jumpers were treated as outsiders, considered ‘non-jumpers’ or ‘S’ jumpers (span only), and periodically viewed as a burden. For instance, in preparation for Bridge Day, online forums were sometimes used to recruit jumpers who were traveling by road to the event, and who wished to get together with other practitioners to jump from objects located en route to West Virginia. One blogger specifically invited “experienced hardcore BASE jumpers only”, noting that “low time jumpers [are] not so welcome” on the grounds that “A *Bridge Day jumper*, about six years ago, *not a base jumper*, about went in [died] on a very reliable and friendly 1100’er and I almost had to dig

the shovel out of my trunk and dig a hole. There will be no EMS⁷ calls...” (September 15, 2008, italics added). Unlike apprentice jumpers whose blunders were more commonly viewed as inevitable outcomes of the learning trajectory, Bridge Day jumpers were ‘Others’ who ultimately remained on the periphery.

Nevertheless, the allocation of BASE numbers as symbols of full membership was to some extent a contested issue. Some men believed that the dividing line between those who have ‘made BASE jumps’ and those who are ‘BASE jumpers’ centered on other markers of authenticity such as staying current (i.e. jumping frequently), jumping from and discovering new objects, a willingness to say ‘no’ to jumps and walk down regardless of the reason, and maintaining an accident/injury free record. In fact, the latter point weighed heavily on Wayne’s decision to attend BASE camp with one particular mentor and not another.

Furthermore, Mike, Alex, and Mac had all jumped from the four original objects, identified as BASE jumpers, and yet refused to apply for their BASE number on the basis that it “doesn’t mean you’re a real BASE jumper” (Mike). In contrast, Jason mentioned his BASE number only moments after beginning the interview, and Chris even contacted me months after our exchange to report his recent jump from a building, and corresponding plans to submit his name for the award (Fieldnotes, January 12, 2009). Although these discrepant perspectives underscore the importance of thinking about meaning as fundamentally negotiable, they also speak to the idea that identity is both experiential and relational in the sense that practitioners could self-identify as BASE jumpers, and yet other members also designated practitioners as BASE jumpers by allocating a sequential number.

Having constructed identities as BASE jumpers in relation to doing things together, drawing on a shared repertoire of practices, and holding each other accountable for

⁷ Emergency Medical Service

transgressions, we can see how Ben's observation that "BASE jumpers are a very close community" was less about proximity and sameness, and more about the ongoing process by which newcomers and veterans assembled ideas about what constituted the practice of BASE jumping. To be accepted as a full member in the BASE community, jumpers displayed certain characteristics and behaviors (e.g. procure BASE equipment, find a mentor, respect objects, stay undercover, jump from different objects, etc) since failure to conform usually resulted in rejection from the group on the grounds of 'Otherness' (e.g. Bridge Day jumpers and Jeb Corliss).

Seen this way, identity is related to a convincing performance of a particular role, one that is defined both internally by the individual and externally by the group, for which the latter's inclusive or exclusive attitude has much to bear on the individuals' status as a peripheral or core member (Paetcher 2003). Those who stopped striving to understand the core meanings of the community or who rejected the collective understanding of what it meant to be a 'real' BASE jumper likely moved to an outbound trajectory in search of another community of practice, though in the case of edgework activities such as BASE jumping, outbound trajectories also included serious injury and/or death.

2.4 "3,2,1,C-YA!": Conclusion

Parachuting from fixed objects is a shared domain of interest among relatively few individuals in the world, and it is by virtue of connecting online, attending BASE camp at the Perrine Memorial Bridge in Twin Falls, partaking in the Bridge Day celebration in Fayetteville, or scaling an antenna with a friend that relationships are built for the purpose of learning from one another and/or engaging in practices specific to the group. These inbound

trajectories represented some of the few avenues through which novice jumpers or apprentices engaged legitimately with the practice on the periphery, and it was through interactions with mentors and other core members of the community that newcomers learned how to: purchase, pack, repair, and utilize risky technologies; negotiate risk through object choice, exit position, and length of delay; respect private property and preserve community integrity; and evaluate practitioner authenticity.

Collectivity among BASE jumpers can also be seen in relation to the various and diverse jumping practices that constituted the sport. Some jumps were performed in ordinary settings by initiates (bridges, apprentices) while others were executed in extraordinary settings by experts (cliffs, mentors, veterans). Some jumpers preferred huge gatherings at Bridge Day, while others limited themselves to relatively solitary leaps with friends. Given that practitioners were involved with more than one (or even all) of these jumping styles, it is perhaps more appropriate to treat BASE jumping as a “constellation of interconnected practices” (Wenger 1998: 127) that relate to each other on the basis of sharing historical roots with skydiving, bungee jumping, and the military, facing similar conditions (weather, injury, and death), sharing artifacts (parachutes), interacting online and/or in particular geographical locations (blogging, Bridge Day), using similar argot and expressions (3-2-1-C-YA!), competing for the same resources (BASE number), and recognizing members in common.

However, BASE jumpers were not all motivated to engage in their practice for the same reasons, nor did they connect BASE jumping to other aspects of their everyday/everynight lives in similar ways. The *desire* to experience the ‘edge’ was arguably the most deep-seated commonality among the men I interviewed, though as I explore in Chapter 3, the manner in which men ‘crowded the edge’ was enabled and constrained by

dominant understandings of gender and risk operating within this community of practice and more broadly.

“You can’t be a good dad if you’re dead”

Introduction

The social and cultural changes of the last several decades have produced an unparalleled troubling of dominant masculinity. Traditions that once shaped the life course—marriage, the nuclear family, and lifetime employment—have been weakened and challenged, thereby generating a plurality of new risks as well as high levels of anxiety and insecurity. As far as the family is concerned, these “bouts of existential identity” (Beck 1994: 46) are largely attributable to the inroads made by Second Wave feminists in terms of exposing the ‘nuclear’ family as a site for women’s economic dependence and social subordination to men, in addition to the predominantly white, middle-class, heteronormative assumptions that fuel the ideological underpinnings of this particular family arrangement.

The growing diversity of family forms and other domestic arrangements—single-parent, two-earner, non-white, same-sex—illustrates the extent to which the rhetorical imagery of heterosexual, white woman as ‘housewife’ and heterosexual, white man as ‘breadwinner’ is being destabilized. Women who attend university, secure paid employment, and who postpone pregnancy are less likely to depend upon men for financial security and/or social status, forging identities on the basis of their own educational attainments, careers, and relations with other women, rather than their historically contingent responsibilities in the home (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). This fact, in addition to the decline in pure labor and the professionalization of work, has led to a ‘contemporary crisis of masculinity’

(Kimmel 1987; McKay, Messner, and Sabo 2000), insofar as the masculinizing processes typically associated with providing for the family and performing physical labor in the workplace are being challenged and redefined.

This is not to say that the ‘provider’ (i.e. being responsible for others) is no longer a narrative upon which men frequently draw when constructing particular versions of masculinity (Heath 2003). As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005: 831) note, hegemonic masculinity need not be the most statistically common pattern to be considered normative, for it is precisely because the majority of men position themselves in relation to this “honored way of being a man” that it becomes culturally ascendant. Women in the paid labor force continue to earn less than men, encounter the ‘glass ceiling’ more frequently, and/or perform more unpaid domestic work, even when they work as many hours outside of the home (Mandel 2001; Masser and Abrams 2004). As such, ‘providing’ economic support for partners and children continues to be an important feature of hegemonic images of masculinity and men’s fathering experiences within the gender regimes operating at the institutional level of the family (Christiansen and Palkovitz 2000). While this position is always contestable, it is evident that when some men forego their financial responsibilities in favor of providing for themselves or others socially, emotionally, or not at all, they may be discursively positioned as ‘Mr. Moms’ or ‘Deadbeat Dads’, and therefore considered culturally subordinate to ‘breadwinning’ men and women.

How BASE jumpers make sense of their responsibilities to others as this ‘crisis in gender relations’ continues to unfold in conjunction with the rise of commodified edgework experiences has yet to be fully explored. The breakdown of traditional certainties and the resulting “surge of individualization” (Beck 1992: 87) have profound implications for the

construction of masculinities and femininities within gender regimes operating at the institutional and communal levels, and thus the gender order more broadly. In Chapters 3 and 4, I focus on relational meanings of masculinity, first with respect to the negotiation of ‘edges’ and then with respect to ‘work’. Here, I revisit Lyng’s (1990, 2005) conceptualization of ‘edgework’ and draw on Landreau’s (2008) recent theoretical framework for examining important intersections between gender and risk, with the goal of exploring gendered power, masculine performances, and risk-taking propensities in the BASE community.

3.1 Edgework

People who perform edgework have an interest in controlling the uncontrollable as they explore the limits of technology (race car drivers); the body (marathon running); or the mind (hallucinogens). The ‘edge’ is thus the point at which practitioners “are in peril of losing control over themselves, their equipment, their surroundings, and/or their sanity” (Landreau 2008: 294). Although the ‘edge’ or boundary line can be defined in numerous ways, the quintessential edgework experience is “one in which the individuals’ failure to meet the challenge at hand will result in death or, at the very least, debilitating injury” (Lyng 1990: 857). Even though some edgeworkers may attempt to artificially increase the risks as they ‘crowd the edge’, the point is to get as close as possible without going over.

Successful negotiation of the ‘edge’ is to a large extent determined by chance; however, most edgeworkers believe that survival skills determine the outcome thereby creating an “illusionary sense of control” (Lyng 1990: 872). This illusion of control or sense of immortality is characteristic of adolescents, which explains why edgework is more popular

among young adults. Lyng (1990: 873) also acknowledges that participation in edgework is gendered, alleging that “males are more likely than females to have an illusory sense of control over fateful endeavors because of the socialization pressures on males to develop a skill orientation toward their environment”. This male skill orientation, Lyng maintains, is inherent in edgework, and consequently leads to greater participation among men who tend to underestimate the risks involved.

The edgework concept has been used to study rescue organization participation (Lois 2001; 2005), dangerous ethnographic research (Hamm 2005), illegal activities (Lyng 1993), and high-risk sport participation (Ferrell, Milovanovic and Lyng 2005; Landreau 2006; Landreau and Van Brunschot 2006). Given that not all ‘risk sports’ guarantee the risk of injury or death, the literature on edgework and extreme sports is limited to only a handful of empirical studies. Landreau (2006) for example, suggests that skydivers maintain the illusion of control as they approach ‘the edge’ by invoking fate and blaming the victim in the event of an accident. Using the same sample, Landreau and Van Brunschot (2006) examine the processes by which skydivers police the edge using various formal and informal mechanisms of social control such as spectatorship and critique of fellow jumpers. In the only empirical study on edgework and BASE jumping to date, Ferrell, Milovanovic and Lyng (2005) describe how jumpers document their jumps through head-mounted video cameras, and how these videos, in turn, become a form of ‘situated media’ to be bought, sold, and used to legitimize the sport. Although these studies have successfully theorized high-risk sport within the conceptual framework of edgework, neither has addressed gendered participation in any detailed or in-depth way.

In a recent theoretical contribution to the study of edgework and other forms of voluntary risk-taking, Landreau (2008) proposes a framework for exploring important intersections between gender and risk that he terms ‘gendered risk regimes’. Drawing on Connell’s (2002) notion of ‘gender regimes’ and following Donnelly (2004) who uses the different media responses to the mountaineering deaths of Alison Hargreaves and Rob Hall (both of whom had young children) to demonstrate how the issue of responsibility is profoundly gendered, Landreau (2008: 301) argues that “there are dominant understandings and practices that shape the gendered way practitioners ‘do risk’, and the particular ways they ‘do gender’ from within a risk regime”. In this view, how (or whether) men and women choose to ‘crowd the edge’ is part of the process through which they construct a particular masculine or feminine identity, and central to these active constructions is the issue of responsibility.

Because the edge explored by BASE jumpers is most often the line separating life and death, BASE jumping involves negotiating an ‘absolute’ limit set by the “physio-organic limitations of living things” (Lyng 2005: 46). Edgework of this sort is about *transcending* limits between life and death in that boundary negotiation involves maintaining control over a situation bordering on complete chaos (i.e. a victory over limits). In contrast, illicit edgework (i.e. legal vs. illegal BASE jumping) involves crossing and re-crossing the line between normative and non-normative behaviors. The anarchic and chaotic nature of these jumps centers on the uncertainty surrounding access: BASE jumpers cannot know in advance whether bystanders will intervene or whether other jumpers will injure themselves or follow through with assigned tasks (verifying weather conditions, properly packing equipment).

For reasons of space, I am not going to discuss Foucault's notion of 'limit-experiences' or engage in a lengthy debate about the power-knowledge systems that define the limits between normal and deviant behavior, except to note that both limit-experiences and illicit edgework involve *transgressing* rather than transcending boundaries. Although life-threatening pursuits such as BASE jumping are included among the activities conceptualized as limit-experiences, I do not consider 'risk logics' as essentially individualized subjectivities. Instead, 'risk logics' refer to the principles and guidelines for negotiating the edge that are shared by the community of practice, and which are learned through interaction (mentorship) and participation (BASE jumping). With these ideas in mind, I further Landreau's speculative attempts to understand gendered participation in edgework activities through an examination of the risk logics operating within the BASE community.

3.2 "You dry faster than you heal": Risk Logics

Akin to other sporting contexts where risk logics are imbued with ambivalence and contradiction (Donnelly 2004), there was a tendency for BASE jumpers to reward risk-taking behavior, and yet exhibit a discernible level of discomfort with the potentially injurious, disabling, and fatal outcomes of the sport. As noted in Chapter 2, engaging in increasingly riskier jumps was considered 'progress' among apprentice jumpers, and the fact that practitioners were obligated to jump from buildings and cliffs in order to receive a BASE number also speaks to the idea that risk-taking was rewarded in the community.

It is important to remember that regardless of the risk logic I am describing, recognition and acceptance of the potential for injury/disability/death was one of the defining

features of the risk regime operating within the BASE community. The widespread belief that “if you’re not ready to die BASE jumping, then you shouldn’t be BASE jumping” (Ben) is evidenced by the fact that Bridge Day participants recited “I accept the fact that I may be injured or killed while participating at Bridge Day” on videotape prior to registering for the event (Fieldnotes, October 18, 2008). A minority of BASE mentors also obliged students to handwrite letters to their families explaining they had died BASE jumping and held no one responsible for their actions (*Skydiving Magazine* March 2006: 30).

In speaking about the issue of death with participants in my study, it became clear that while the rules and ethics that guided how BASE jumpers negotiated the boundary between life and death was shared by members of the community of practice, the meaning of death varied substantially from one jumper to the next. While there was a tendency to view death as a phenomenon that limited life’s totality, death was also viewed as an event which “continually [colored] all of life’s contents” (Simmel 2007: 74). For some jumpers, death was a manifestation of “funny Karma” (Mac), prompting them to live ‘morally’ and ‘honestly’ out of fear that failure to do so would result in BASE jumping accidents. For Damien, death was nothing more than the inevitable outcome of natural selection, meaning jumpers who perished lack the ‘intelligence’ or another heritable trait that increased their chances for survival. Other jumpers personified or anthropomorphized death, and spoke about “giving the Grim Reaper the finger” (Mike) or “slapping the Devil in the face” (Wayne). There was also evidence that by cheating death, practitioners affirmed their own existence. Ben, for instance, described feeling “super alive” after jumping at Bridge Day, further noting how “every time you BASE jump, you are living the last few seconds of your life”.

Some commentators argue that beginning in the late 20th century, the notion of risk was used with increasing frequency to denote danger, hazard, and threat (Lupton 1999). Douglas (1992: 24) asserts that contemporary lay understandings of risk tend to view it as entirely negative: “the word risk now means danger”. Most interviewees associated the concept of “risk” with negative ascriptions, often using words such as “stupid” and “dangerous” interchangeably. Loss of control, fear, anxiety, dread, and discomfort were connected to understandings of risk as uncertain and unpredictable. The need to control the future through careful consideration of the potentially fatal consequences was also linked to definitions of risk: “taking necessary precautions and then knowingly doing something which could kill you” (Damien).

In responding to questions about the risks they took earlier in their lives, several jumpers fondly described childhood memories of climbing radio antennas, breaking-in to abandoned buildings, or riding dirt bikes and motorcycles at high speeds. Indeed, for many, the danger associated with risk had positive aspects: adventure, emotional excitement, freedom, enjoyment, and fun. Contrary to Beck’s portrayal of the fearful, risk-averse, reflexive individual who views risk emanating from the big institutions of late modernity, BASE jumpers *actively sought* risk in order to give meaning to their everyday/everynight lives “Life without risk is meaningless” (Eric). That risk was viewed as both positive and negative suggests that many of the interviewees recognized how risk is a socially and personally constructed phenomenon and not a fixed, objective fact (Lupton 1999).

There was a consensus among members of this community of practice that BASE jumping became progressively more dangerous as practitioners began jumping from antennas, buildings, and cliffs. However, taking greater risks could also entail not wearing

protective equipment (e.g. helmet), consuming drugs and/or alcohol, jumping at night, exiting from lower or more technical objects (e.g. chimney or crane), jumping alone, performing aerials (e.g. summersaults and twists), videotaping other jumpers during freefall, wearing a wingsuit, and/or delaying parachute deployment. In terms of performing illicit edgework, crowding the boundary between detection and camouflage included jumping during the daytime, jumping from landmarks (e.g. Eiffel Tower and Empire State Building), and not wearing a disguise.

Although we can conceptualize the edgework continuum as a range from ‘in control’ to ‘out of control’ experiences with varying degrees of legality and emotional intensity (Milovanovic 2005), we can also conceptualize a continuum underlying a given edgework activity. Not all BASE jumpers crowded the edge to the same extent or in similar ways, and though there was a baseline level of edgework in which all BASE jumpers engaged by the simple fact of “throwing [themselves] off perfectly good objects” (Jason), some crowded the edge more than others by engaging in various practices that increased the potential for accidents and/or detection.

For several interviewees, the risk of injury or death was not limited to any particular stage of the BASE jumping experience: “Sometimes you smash yourself on the way up, sometimes you scratch yourself on the way coming down, and sometimes you fuck yourself up on landing” (Wayne). These practitioners tended to engage in the most purified form of edgework, often *artificially increasing* the risks by taking longer delays, performing aerobatics during freefall, jumping alone, consuming drugs or alcohol prior to jumping, accessing landmarks during the daytime—in short, they did it all. Men who employed this logic managed the risks associated with BASE jumping by wearing helmets, knee pads,

elbow pads, and specialized boots, all of which minimized the risk of injury/disability/death in the event of a parachute malfunction, object strike, or disastrous landing. Because these men engaged in practices that often led to serious accidents, wearing protective equipment became a way to minimize the negative outcome(s) associated with going *over the edge*, rather than a strategy for managing risk as they *crowded the edge*.

During interviews, men who subscribed to this logic described a number of scenarios where they slipped and fell from objects, landed on thorny patches, jumped while intoxicated, or parachuted over areas full of power lines. Some even described situations where they played dangerous games with other jumpers during freefall:

Wayne:...we were doing a lot of jumps at the bridge from two years ago ...we were doing them like holding onto each other and I was supposed to pull first, and he was supposed to pull second, and he couldn't pull until I would pull, so we were playing these games of almost chicken. And I wouldn't pull until about two seconds, just to screw him over so he would have to pull low. And then when we'd switch over he would wait like three seconds so that I would have to wait four seconds and he was trying to make it so that my parachute wouldn't open and I would land in the river.

Here, Wayne was demonstrating how men who sought to amplify the risks could turn a relatively 'safe' jump from a bridge into one bordering on complete chaos. This example, in addition to the few described above, suggest that for these men, opportunities for edgework were present during access, landing, and freefall. In fact, while other jumpers tended to frame access as an opportunity to "workout" (Drew) or "enjoy the scenery" (Chris) practitioners like Max, Craig, Alex, and Wayne enjoyed jumping from technical objects precisely because they offered another chance to crowd the edge. For instance, Wayne showed me a video of him accessing a 300 foot crane in Europe that commanded superior scaling skills insofar as the ledges surrounding the structure offered him little room to steady his feet as he climbed. Anxiety-filled breaths and swear words were audible over the sound

of the wind as Wayne and his mentor balanced themselves on their toes prior to leaping towards an iron bar they subsequently used to pull themselves onto a platform.

Having mastered jumps from ‘easier’ objects, veteran practitioners such as Jason and Alex preferred jumping from cliffs, often increasing the chances for catastrophic outcomes by jumping with hand or body mounted (video)cameras and/or flying specialized jumpsuits known as ‘birdman’, ‘squirrel’ or ‘wingsuits’ (Figure 3.1). Jumping with a camera was considered higher risk because the practitioner was looking at the subject rather than the flight trajectory, the direction of the parachute when it opens, and/or the landing area. Wingsuits increased horizontal movement or ‘tracking’ capabilities by shaping the human body into an airfoil using fabric sewn between the arms and legs. While modern flying equipment made some aspects of BASE jumping ‘safer’, wingsuits presented a whole new set of hazards.



Figure 3.1- Wingsuit
(*Skydiving Magazine* April 2006: 4)

First, wingsuit flying interfered with the internal freefall clock most jumpers developed because the jumps were twice as long. Second, there was less ‘ground rush’ on a wingsuit flight. ‘Ground rush’ referred to the optical illusion of the ground abruptly rushing

towards the jumper during freefall under 2000 feet. Experienced jumpers could usually gage when to deploy their parachute using this visual cue. Third, the rate of descent increased radically as the jumper ‘tucked up’ to activate the parachute, meaning if the jumper deployed too late, he/she left insufficient time for the canopy to fully deploy (Fieldnotes, October 17th, 2008)

In contrast, jumpers who employed *precautionary logic* were interested in minimizing rather than increasing the risks associated with BASE jumping:

Mac: I guess I always try to make the conservative decision, and have reasonable limitations on what I would jump off of. And you know, if the wind is bad, always go down. If you have a funny feeling listen to it. If it’s a “maybe”, don’t do it. Or, if you can take a longer delay or shorter delay, try to do the safer one.

For Mac, Damien, Tom, Ben, and Jonathan it was more important to execute technically easy jumps with greater frequency than it was to perform technically difficult or risky jumps. These practitioners tended to engage in more baseline forms of edgework, often minimizing the risk of accident or detection by taking shorter delays, refusing to consume drugs or alcohol prior to jumping, abstaining from high profile objects (e.g. Eiffel Tower, Empire State Building), walking down from a jump if they felt uncomfortable, only performing aerobatics from bridges, and avoiding jumps that had rough landing conditions or minimal options for correcting malfunctions (e.g. buildings).

Jumpers who subscribed to precautionary logic used the phrase “you dry faster than you heal” (Jonathan) to describe how injury avoidance strategies—such as landing in the water on a bridge jump—should always be employed if the jumper was in a situation where the alternative(s) would result in grave injury or death (e.g. high speed landing on the shore). Over 30% of the landings at Bridge Day 2008 were made in the water (Fieldnotes, October

19, 2008), an interesting finding given that Bridge Day organizers held a public denigration ceremony during which they presented a helmet-wearing skull trophy to the first person who was injured at the event (i.e. Dry Faster Than You Heal Award). Although water landings were usually reserved for inexperienced jumpers with poor canopy skills, veterans who employed precautionary logic also landed in the water if they were unable to steer their canopy to the landing zone in time.

Accidents and injuries (i.e. falling off the edge) were commonly experienced in-flight due to violent canopy deployment and/or object strikes, or upon descending due to rough conditions in the landing area (rocks, power lines, cacti, cars, etc). Eleven of the men I interviewed reported having at least one accident, of which four reported only suffering ‘bumps and bruises’, while the remaining seven were injured more severely (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1-Injuries reported by study participants

Injury	Number of Cases⁸
Bumps and Bruises	5
Fractured Ankle	3
Fractured Pelvis	2
Fractured Ribs	2
Fractured Wrist	1
Fractured Tailbone	1
Ruptured Bicep	1
Dislocated Shoulder	1
Deep Hand Lacerations	1
Paralysis	1

N=16

Although the potential for injury and disability was generally accepted as “part of the sport” (*Skydiving Magazine* March 2006: 16), the fact that some study participants had yet to

⁸ Some respondents reported multiple injuries per accident.

experience an accident suggests that BASE jumping can be performed in relative safety. Porro's (2000) observation that it may be more accurate to refer to 'high-risk practices in sport' rather than to 'high-risk sport' is pertinent to this discussion, since the men who reported having 'close calls' or who sustained the most debilitating injuries were also crowding the edge in ways that other jumpers considered reckless.

Drew, for example, was a well-known and well-respected practitioner who had mentored dozens of students and performed over 1000 jumps since 1993, but who was paralyzed after attempting a highly technical jump from the Perrine Memorial Bridge in Twin Falls, Idaho:

Drew: I was paralyzed actually, on my 1100th base jump...And I was doing a quadruple gainer [four reverse summersaults] on that jump...when I left from the edge, when I jumped, I realized immediately that I had kind of missed my exit. I hadn't started the rotations fast enough, so I was actually flipping too slowly. And the idea crossed my mind that you know, maybe I should only do three instead of four because the rotations are slow. But I was concerned for the other people that if I only did three that maybe I would open too soon and endanger somebody else and entangle somebody else. So I decided to do all four. And I knew that I was getting really low, so I kind of rushed my opening and the pilot chute wrapped around my foot because I hadn't quite finished the last rotation. I cleared it and the parachute got to the point where it was ready to start opening, but it hadn't opened yet, so I impacted the river upside down, still doing somewhere between 70 and 80 miles an hour, on my back.

Implied in Drew's account of the accident was the idea that failure to act altruistically would have resulted in greater harm for other jumpers. This explanation suggested he was adhering to the fundamental rule among BASE jumpers to 'watch out' for other practitioners, a principle grounded in the BASE ethic to 'never leave a wounded jumper behind'. This was a legendary accident in the BASE community, most notably because Drew survived, but also due to other circumstances surrounding the accident that Drew omitted from the interview:

Damien: I thought the jump they wanted to do was too dangerous. They were in a group and the vibe was about pushing the limits too far...he [Drew] was with an 18 year old and they flipped a coin to see who had the audacity to do a single back flip or front flip before deploying really low. After they both did the jump, they went back up and flipped a coin to see who had the audacity to do two flips and they did it again. Then they flipped a coin to see who had the audacity to do three flips, and they did it. Then they flipped a coin to see who had the audacity to do four flips, and at four flips, he opened, it got caught in his lines and he hit the water.

Some of the norms that constituted the risk regime within this community of practice were similar to the norms in other power and performance sports where Coakley (2004) observes athletes: 1) give priority to the game over other interests (in this case, health); 2) seek to achieve perfection and break records (4 summersaults); 3) accept personal risk as a sign of courage and dedication (4 summersaults rather than 3); and 4) ignore external limits as they attempt to achieve success (rotating too slowly). Damien's interpretation of the accident suggested Drew was engaging in what Coakley (2004: 171) terms "deviant overconformity". This occurred when a jumper crowded the edge without limits or respect for the boundary between 'life or death' around which the entire activity is organized. Reactions to deviant overconformity depended largely on the outcome of the jump, since those who successfully crowded the edge using the various examples described above were often praised for their courage: "You're a hero if you pulled it off, and you're an idiot if you didn't" (Mike).

Performing aerials and delaying deployment were unanimously accepted as ways to negotiate the risks associated with BASE jumping, and though Damien and Drew were both embedded within the same risk regime, they still made individual decisions about the kinds of risky practices in which to engage: Drew performed the jump whereas Damien did not.

These ‘choices’ were enabled and constrained by dominant understandings of risk—quadruple summersaults and deploying too low bring jumpers dangerously close to the edge—but as Landreau (2008) points out, these ‘choices’ were also shaped by dominant understandings of how to ‘do gender’ within localized gender regimes.

3.3 “The jumps I did before my kids I would not do today”: Gendered Risk Regimes

Of paramount concern for many feminist researchers exploring gender relations in the context of snowboarding (Thorpe 2005), windsurfing (Wheaton 2000), and skydiving (Laurendeau 2006) is the acceptance and embracement of risk as a strategy for occupying hegemonic positions within the localized gender regimes of these subcultures. For many men, the cultural meaning of physical danger and living with injury resonates with larger ideological issues of gender and hegemonic power (Young and White 1995; White and Young 1999). Some have suggested that male tolerance of risk and pain is a constituting social process through which (self-inflicted) violence, injury, disablement and even death become reframed as “masculinizing” (Coakley and Dunning 2003: 392). Others maintain that higher rates of injury among boys and men reflect the crosscut between masculinity and particular ways of doing sport, ways that embrace risk and adventure and downplay health concerns (White and Young 1999: 70-72). In this sense, taking risks becomes part of ‘doing gender’ (Robinson 2004), and through various commitments to ‘go for it’ (i.e. take risks) status differentials are established between men and women, and among different groups of men (Wheaton 2000; Laurendeau and Sharara 2008).

Connell (1987; 1995) identifies three dimensions along which to explore the nuances of doing gender and power in various social settings: 1) the division of labor in both the

private and public sphere; 2) the construction of power through hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity; and 3) ‘cathexis’ or the nature of intimate relationships and the emotions they give rise to. By working with separate but interrelated models, Connell suggests that gender relations can be studied at the level of social structures, social practices, and subjectivities (defined as bodies and feelings), and considered in relation to other markers of difference such a race, class, ability, sexuality, among others.

As Messner (2002) observes, however, individuals do not simply ‘import’ their gendered selves into neutral organizations, communities, or groups. Rather, organizations and institutions are themselves ‘gendered’ in that “gender is present in [an institution’s] processes, practices, images, ideologies, and distributions of power” (Acker 1992: 567). In this sense, the construction of gender goes beyond the level of individual members and is accomplished by the organization, or in this case, the community of practice itself. Acker (1992) describes the organizational production of gender in terms of four interacting and yet analytically distinct processes. These include the division of labor along lines of gender, the creation of symbols and images that support these divisions, interactions among individuals, and the formation of gendered identities at the individual level. Taken together, these insights enable me to consider both the emergence of BASE jumping as a *community of masculine practice* (Paetcher 1998), and the patterned interactions that make up the gender regime of the BASE community.

Following Acker’s (1992) description of the organizational production of gender, BASE jumping can be viewed as a gendered—or masculinized—community of practice. Bridge Day 2008 organizers, for example, had the power to delegate administrative duties to either a female or male BASE jumper (or family member) under their charge. Based on my

observations, most sedentary, repetitive, and routine tasks such as issuing ‘friends and family’ shuttle passes, distributing Bridge Day t-shirts to event participants, and pouring draft beer were performed by women. In contrast, men were overwhelmingly represented in mobile, dynamic, and ‘important’ tasks such as driving shuttle vans, hosting ceremonies, and videotaping jumpers launch from the bridge (Fieldnotes, October 20, 2008).

A number of study participants also described bringing female companions or spouses along to act as lookouts or ‘ground crew’. Although the term ground crew is not linguistically gendered, the term ‘crew’ is frequently used as a generic term for members of other masculinized institutions such as aviation, astronomy, and the military. This expression stands in interesting comparison to Beal’s (1999) ‘skate betties’ (female groupies who may/may not skateboard); Wheaton’s (2000) ‘windsurf widows’ (women who do not participate and who stay at home); and Robinson’s (2008) ‘belay bunnies’ (women who don’t usually rock climb but who hold the ropes for their male partners), all of which are highly feminized and somewhat derogatory labels. That BASE jumpers had yet to develop a comparable designation for women who assisted men with performing safe BASE jumps without necessarily participating in the sport themselves suggests male and female ground crew members held a similar if somewhat less derogatory status position within this community of practice.

It would nonetheless be inaccurate to say that male BASE jumpers’ views towards female participants (core and peripheral) were homogeneous. Although a few male practitioners described jumping with women or expressed enthusiasm at the thought of increasing participation rates among women, my findings suggest BASE jumping is an activity in which men sometimes engage in practices that marginalize, sexualize, infantilize,

and objectify female participants, and women more generally. For example, while talking with jumpers at Bridge Day, a discussion emerged about a woman who had supposedly performed a BASE jump while pregnant (Fieldnotes, October 17, 2008). The conversation invariably centered on the woman's 'duty to care' for the unborn fetus, and many expressed disgust at the thought of any woman BASE jumping pregnant, regardless of the nature of her pregnancy (planned/unplanned, wanted/unwanted), the stage of her pregnancy (first, second, or third trimester), or even her knowledge of the pregnancy.

For these men, BASE jumping while pregnant was considered 'unnatural' or 'selfish', whereas BASE jumping with a pregnant wife at home was not. Motherhood was seen not only as a biological relationship between a woman and her offspring, but as a special kind of social relationship that superseded any relationship she had with the practice of BASE jumping. While I am not suggesting that BASE jumping while pregnant is itself morally defensible, this example reveals how 'natural' differences between males and females as well as gendered expectations surrounding the household division of labor and issues of responsibility were used to marginalize female jumpers.

At the symbolic and discursive levels, the relative absence of images depicting female jumpers in the magazines was a reflection of the disproportionately low numbers of women in the sport, but it also served to construct BASE jumping as a distinctly masculine activity. Of the 39 articles I analyzed, four (10%) included images of women BASE jumping (as opposed to standing in the crowd), of which two reinforced stereotypical images of female sexuality and femininity. For instance, because femininity is often used as a proxy for heterosexuality, the media explicitly 'assured' male readers who consumed these magazines

that female BASE jumpers were heterosexual by alluding to their husbands in the article or by using photographs that portrayed them as “heterosexy” (Griffin 1998: 75).

Publishing a sexualized image of a female BASE jumper (Figure 3.2) is an example of how women who play ‘men’s games’ are routinely constituted as adhering to standards of ‘emphasized femininity’, the ascendancy of which is constructed in relation to ‘other’ women (Connell 1987). In the case of female BASE jumpers, this included only depicting practitioners who were White, able-bodied, and (presumably) middle-class. In addition to safeguarding against charges of lesbianism and constructing heterosexuality as the only legitimate form of sexuality within this community of practice, this image trivialized female athleticism, and therefore sent the message that female BASE jumpers were ‘less than’ their male counterparts. A similar message was conveyed in another image where a male BASE mentor is untangling a knotted pilot chute for a female BASE student who is seemingly incapable of doing it herself (Figure 3.3).

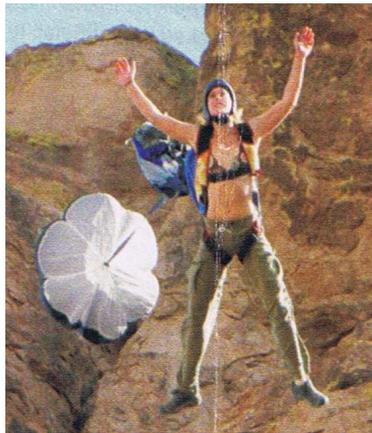


Figure 3.2- Heterosexy female BASE jumper
(*Skydiving Magazine*, August 2006: 31)



Figure 3.3- Female BASE student
(*Skydiving Magazine*, March 2006: 30)

For male jumpers, BASE jumping was itself taken as evidence of their heterosexuality, meaning magazine articles were free to focus on their technical accomplishments and homosocial bonds with other men. The male BASE jumpers who dominated the magazines I examined were predominantly White and exclusively able-bodied. They were portrayed as nomadic pleasure-seekers with endless disposable income who live carefree lifestyles in the company of other men. Based on my fieldnotes from Bridge Day, I would argue that this portrayal was not an exaggeration: a cursory glance at the hotel lobby of the Holiday Inn reveals a site of dominant Whiteness and ‘able-bodiedness’ where men seldom discuss work or family responsibilities.

Following West and Zimmerman’s (1987) emphasis on gender as a routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment, it is also useful to examine how BASE jumpers *do* masculine identity work. Sporting prowess as a way for men to compete with each other and demonstrate their masculinity is well documented in more mainstream sports (Connell 1995). Because BASE jumping performances and prowess cannot be easily measured (as in, who is the fastest from the bridge to the landing zone), being ‘good’, or in BASE jumper argot ‘badass’ or ‘hardcore’, was based primarily on the jumpers’ skill level. For instance, Bridge Day jumpers who performed the most difficult maneuvers (summersaults and twists) with the most daring style (low deployment) were accorded the most status, as evidenced by the cheers emanating from the crowd and the approving commentary provided by experienced jumpers over the loudspeaker (Fieldnotes, October 18, 2008).

It is important to note that badass masculinity was not the most prevalent masculine identity in this community of practice. Many men rejected the type of competition that would bring them dangerously close to the edge, often expressing disapproval towards veteran

jumpers who played “chicken” during free fall (Damien) or novice jumpers who progressed too quickly by performing backwards summersaults at Bridge Day, for example (Fieldnotes October 18th, 2008). Central to ‘cautionary’ masculinities was the rejection of values associated with ‘badass’ masculinities: looking death in the eye and/or engaging in practices know to be deadly.

Despite the differences in ethos and action at the core of this community of practice, socializing and camaraderie were important aspects of the BASE jumping experience for both the badass and cautionary men I interviewed. Homosociality refers to “social bonds between persons of the same sex, in addition to same-sex-focused social relations more broadly” (Bird 1996: 121). Relations among male athletes traditionally involve a culture of camaraderie built on sexism, homophobia, verbal sparring, the sporting activity itself, drinking alcohol, and ‘picking up’ women (Messner 2002). Within these homosocial contexts, men seek approval from other men, both identifying with and competing against each other in an attempt to improve their position in the masculine hierarchy through such “markers of manhood” as physical prowess and sexual achievement (Kimmel 1994: 129).

The relative absence of women in the sport, and the ideological emphasis on male superiority in both the magazine articles and my conversations with BASE jumpers suggest BASE jumping is a particularly intense site of male homosociality. Homosocial institutions such as sport tend to be strongly homophobic, precisely because homosexuality is an ever-present threat when men form strong bonds and/or preferences for other men (Lipman-Bluman 1976). None of the men I interviewed or observed at Bridge Day used antigay slurs to demean other men, a finding which suggests explicit homophobia was not as widespread as in other extreme sporting cultures (see Anderson 1999). Although some interviewees

indicated the presence of gay jumpers in the community, I did not meet any men (or women) who were ‘open’ about their homosexuality, perhaps out of fear they would face some hostility. The Othering of homosexuality was more frequently marked by verbal ‘put-downs’ of women, which included calling one jumper a “vagina” for expressing fear, and another a “whore” for sharing information with the media about a jump he performed from the Empire State Building (recall Jeb Corliss).

Consistent with other homosocial contexts, there is also evidence that BASE jumpers participate in an ‘exchange system’ in which women themselves become commodities. For example, partnering with a female BASE jumper provided men with sexual resources, but it also heightened their status claims in relation to other men (Lipman-Blumen 1976: 16-17). Male jumpers who posted blogs about their ‘BASE honeymoons’, for instance, were often deemed “lucky” by other jumpers (October 11, 2008). A minority of study participants spoke about the potential for a deeper connection with a woman who truly understood their engagement in the sport. In fact, one interviewee went so far as to describe his relationship with a “BASE jumping girl” as “sensational” in comparison to his partnerships with non-BASE jumping women (Alex).

As exchange objects, women also act as conduits through which homosocial bonds are expressed. Sedgwick (1985) defines male homosociality as a form of male bonding characterized by a triangular structure. In this triangle, men have intense but non-sexual bonds with men, whereas women are positioned as intermediaries (two males rival for the same woman, but are in fact more interested in the rivalry itself) or signifiers (men exchange *talk* about women, as in sexist jokes). However, as Sedgwick notes, the exchange of women in male homosociality need not be as literal as this:

Caitlin: Why did you name the antenna Amber?

Chris: When we first started, we were naming objects after girls who were significant in our lives. Amber was the first girl Wayne ever kissed, so that's why she was named Amber.

Caitlin: Why do you name them after women?

Chris: I don't know, I name everything after girls. You always refer to your toys as "her" and you can also use it for jokes like "Hey you wanna go nail Amber?"

In this excerpt, Chris and Wayne positioned the antenna as a feminized intermediary. In this sense, spending time together climbing and sitting on the antenna became more than just a BASE jump, but a symbolic sex act between Chris, Amber, and Wayne that was metaphorically structured as heterosexual since the object itself was named after a 'significant' woman in Wayne's life. Any accusations of homosexuality leveled against Chris and Wayne could therefore be refuted on the basis that time spent together was actually time spent 'nailing' Amber. But to regard women as commodities and to name objects after women was also a metaphorical act of violence and hostility: they did not 'visit' Amber, they 'nailed' Amber. As such, gaining possession of Amber conferred status upon Chris and Wayne in two ways: 1) they *triumphed* over Amber and thus had complete sexual control over her (albeit symbolically); and 2) if either Chris or Wayne jumped alone, they were given status in the eyes of the other.

Close relations of male bonding were also forged through the mentor/apprentice relationship in which older/more experienced jumpers often taught younger/less experienced jumpers in environments segregated from family members, loved ones, and friends. Reflecting on his first BASE jump several years ago, one jumper noted:

Ben: I made the mistake of taking my brother, a good friend, and my girlfriend at the time. It was nothing but a distraction.

Caitlin: In what sense?

Ben: It's just loved ones and especially my girlfriend. It was just a distraction. I could have been better focused to have gone out there alone.

Here, Ben gave primacy to the relationship with his male BASE mentor over his relationships with others. None of the men reported feeling any pressure from other BASE jumpers to prioritize their male peers over their female partners, though many perceived non-BASE jumping girlfriends (and women more generally) as distractions: “You can’t be BASE jumping for all the cute girls at the exit point” (Mike). As a form of ‘experiential anarchy’, BASE jumping and other archetypal edgework activities require a high degree of concentration, and by engaging in the practice for the sake of impressing women or by allowing people who neither BASE jump nor serve as ground crew to tag along, some believed their ability to innovate on-the-sport strategies for maintaining control over the edge was compromised.

However, Ben’s loved ones—particularly his girlfriend—also distracted him from fulfilling his homosocial obligations to his mentor and fellow peers. As I discovered in the interviews and certainly observed at Bridge Day, the homosocial character of this community of practice is organized around but not limited to the practice of BASE jumping. Jumpers also drank beer, ate pizza, shared hotel rooms, car pooled, planned BASE vacations, went camping, organized fund raisers, and spent evenings in coffee shops together after a jump. For some, the primacy that was given to homosocial bonds created marital problems and romantic instability:

Drew: I had a bit of a strained marriage, partly I would think, from BASE jumping. And after the accident, my wife called it quits.

Jason: Yeah. It's been hard through relationships over the years. I know a couple of break-ups that have been due to BASE jumping ... I've been in a couple of one year relationships, two year relationships, where in the beginning they think, "Oh, that's cool!" And they want to cling onto that guy, who they think is cool. But then it's like, "Well, you do that quite often." or, "What, you're going down to West Virginia? Well, you didn't want to go camping with me last weekend. And now you're going to West Virginia, spending 500, 600 dollar weekend? You could go camping with me and now you're going BASE jumping?" ... You know how it goes. It ends up in a screaming match: "F-you, F-you. We're done."

A number of jumpers spoke in depth about the extent to which BASE jumping affected their relationships with partners and how they were negotiated over the course of their BASE career. It was not unusual for jumpers to describe instances where girlfriends and wives expressed initial romantic interest on the basis of their involvement in the sport. Indeed, as Lipman-Blumen (1976) argues, the objectification of women as 'sex objects' is not simply something which has been forced onto women by men, but also a strategy adopted by women themselves to entice men away from their homosocial bonds with other men. However, like Jason, when girlfriends became 'disruptive', many participants engaged in deceptive strategies to maintain the relationship (lied about coming to Bridge Day, snuck out at night), expressed ambivalence towards their partners' feelings and continued BASE jumping, and/or terminated the relationship altogether. In contrast, married men in the study compromised with their wives by "doing something nice" (Tom) such as joining them on shopping trips or taking them out to dance. Generally speaking, the construction of cathexis in this gender regime was not about men risking their feelings with women: being open, honest, sensitive, and emotionally attached. Rather, it was about men protecting the intimate relationship they have with risk and with other men at the *expense* of their relationships with

women: “I don’t think I’d let anything get into my life, close to my heart to stop me from BASE jumping” (Jason).

Figure 3.4 is an ideal-typical portrayal of men’s involvement in and negotiation of sexual and gender relations among the men I interviewed. Given that this image was taken in Utah shortly after the nuptials, the groom (center) is presumed to be heterosexual⁹. The bride is noticeably absent from the scene, the brief caption accompanying the image indicates the photographer is male, and though the headline reads “Wedding Party Takes It Off The Edge”, there are only men BASE jumping. In sum, this photograph encapsulates what many study participants characterized as an ideal scenario: their wives supported/approved/did not know they were BASE jumping, meaning they were free to engage in high-risk behavior and spend time with their friends while simultaneously maintaining a heterosexual relationship.



Figure 3.4- Ideal-typical portrayal of sexual and gender relations
(*Skydiving Magazine* December 2006: 9)

The decision to pursue the practice of BASE jumping thus had important consequences for men’s (and women’s) roles in the private sphere, most notably as they aged and were more settled in heterosexual relationships. One of the central findings of this research was the manner in which men related to the sport after having children. Fatherhood

⁹ Utah voters passed a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage in 2004.

became a turning point for these men in terms of the amount of time they were able to give to BASE jumping, the time of day during which they jumped, and the degree to which they crowded the edge when they jumped.

Tom: I remember doing a building in Tokyo, very early in my BASE jumping career, and there was a lot of risk involved. The first thing was getting to the exit point, and then you had to open on-heading...and once you opened you had to back into the landing below you. That's pretty technical. It worked out, but the risk value was a lot higher. I took it on because I didn't have any other [pause] I was responsible for myself and that was it. You do a lot more [pause] you put yourself at a higher risk level if you don't have dependents. I have dependents now, so I probably wouldn't put myself to the point where the risk value is too high. I'd probably go home and jump the antenna.

Tom no longer pursued BASE jumping with the same all-encompassing zeal he did as a young, single, and childless individual. His decision to abandon a more dangerous jump from a building in favor of a 'safer' jump from an antenna demonstrates how his sense of responsibility towards his dependents (i.e. wife and child) was fundamentally connected to the manner in which he crowded the edge. Max reported a similar perspective on his risk-taking behavior following the birth of his children: "The jumps I did before my kids I would not do today". When I asked him what jumps he would perform, he stated "I would do acrobatic jumps from a bridge or a high cliff. I would not do acrobatic jumps like I did before from a building or low cliff".

Prior to having children Tom and Max both engaged in jumps that brought them dangerously close to the edge; they moved further away from the baseline level of edgework by jumping from buildings with minimal opportunities to correct malfunctions or by performing aerobatics from lower cliffs. However, as main economic providers for their families, Tom and Max had 'dependents' and therefore no longer performed such jumps. Their entrance into marriage and fatherhood was understood as taking on the responsibility

of being the primary breadwinner, a perspective shaped by dominant (and gendered) understandings of what it means to be a ‘good’ father and husband.

To take on the roles of responsible father and partner therefore entailed a more cautionary approach to risk-taking. Given that jumpers who had yet to sustain injuries were also celebrated in the community, cautionary masculinity enabled men with children to transition between home life and BASE jumping without comprising their masculine identity. To quit BASE jumping (and thus cease giving primacy to homosocial bonds) would signal surrender to the cultural narrative of being encumbered by the ‘ball and chain’ of domestic life (Flood 2007). However, to continue crowding the edge in ways that imperiled ‘providing’ capabilities also created tension between men’s participation in collective masculine performances and their other desires and attachments. The compromise was evidenced by the shared understanding between Max, Tom, and their respective wives that they would not perform jumps that jeopardized their ability to provide for the family. Indeed, jumpers could draw on numerous arrangements of gendered practices as they constructed their own gender projects, further illustrating how risk is “woven into the gendered fabric of society’s expectations” (Robertson 2006: 181).

In contrast, younger single men in their twenties and early thirties spoke ambivalently about marriage and fatherhood, often framing the incongruence between BASE jumping (risk life) and providing for partners and children (give life) within a discourse of failed masculinity:

Chris: Because if something happens to me, my wife at the time can’t support the kids financially or the kids don’t have a father growing up, so therefore their life is a fucking hell hole because you wanted to jump off a cliff yourself.

Jack: I didn't really want kids anyways, but it's definitely like, you can't be a good dad if you're dead.

These comments are representative of the ways younger study participants constructed and interpreted their perceptions about their potential experiences as husbands and fathers. Although some of these men were receptive to the idea of marriage and fatherhood in the abstract sense, most maintained they were responsible 'to' and 'for' nobody but themselves, and were not currently inclined to embrace any aspects of domestic life (e.g. "if I get married" rather than "when I get married"). Their views on domestic arrangements paralleled a life trajectory more commonly associated with the early stages of industrialization: "someone who marries their high school sweetheart, has a family, and starts working just to make ends meet in their early twenties" (Eric). Like many younger men in the study, Eric rejected this life path on the grounds that it was 'boring' and 'meaningless'. He was not bothered by the absence of 'permanent alliances' and 'eternal verities' stemming from family breakdown and marital instability in late modernity, and openly rebuffed the idealized construct of the nuclear family in favor of a personal life full of uncertainty.

Given that many accounts of hegemonic masculinity include such positive actions as bringing home a wage and being a father (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), it was not surprising to find that financial considerations were by far the most consistently mentioned concern with risk-taking and fatherhood. For these men, a man who risked his life was not taking 'good' care of his family as his ability to provide both economically (and emotionally) was threatened. Whereas older, married men with children in the study negotiated the transition from BASE jumping to family life by simultaneously positioning themselves in relation to celebrated forms of masculinity within both the public and private spheres, younger men viewed these identities as fundamentally incongruent, and thus adopted a less

nuanced conception of masculinity: you are either a good father/provider *or* a good BASE jumper, but not both.

3.4 “3-2-1-C-YA!”: Conclusion

In this Chapter, I have identified ‘badass’ or ‘hardcore’ masculinity as the dominant or hegemonic form of masculinity in this community of practice, and yet like all oppositions, it depends on ‘cautionary’ masculinity for meaning. Among the jumpers I interviewed, older married men engaged in practices the community of practice would deem badass or hardcore prior to having children, though once they became fathers, they performed more cautionary forms of edgework. Conversely, younger BASE jumpers avoided heterosexual relationships that hindered their ability to relate to male dominance through the embodiment of badass masculinity, and thus rejected the masculine identifier of the ‘provider’.

As members of a community of masculine practice, novice BASE jumpers learned to perform badass and cautionary masculinities that reflected behavioral norms of the BASE community. In this sense, legitimate peripheral participation also enabled apprentices to learn what it meant to be a ‘man’ (in various forms and ways) within this community of practice. Attending BASE camp or Bridge Day did not simply involve developing expertise in the practice itself, but learning how to speak and behave in ways that were also appropriately ‘masculine’. This is not to say that masculine behavior at Bridge Day would necessarily count as masculine behavior in another social context, nor does it suggest that masculine behavior exists in constant conjunction with male bodies (Paetcher 1998; 2003). Rather, it implies that within a community of masculine practice such as BASE jumping, male bodies

act as reified markers of full community membership, whereas female bodies remain on the periphery.

When separated from sex, gender clearly remains an embodied phenomenon in the sense that it manifests itself through bodily performances (gesture, posture, style of movement, speech, etc). Thus, whether or not the body is a pre-social basis for gendered power relations, “power relations [also] become inscribed onto and embedded into the body in the projected form of gendered practices, techniques, and dispositional styles” (Ford and Brown 2006: 86). Understanding the extent to which these gendered practices yield social, material, and symbolic rewards must therefore move beyond an analysis of the various relations of marginalization and subordination identified in this Chapter. This discussion helps delineate the structures within which these various advantages are received, but it hardly begins to address how edgework skills might be profitable for men (and women) living in risk societies. In Chapter 4, I explore these aspects of the social significance of the BASE jumping body as it relates to acquired skills and occupational background.

“BASE jumping is a lot of work”

Introduction

As a way to conceptualize how people pass over from their routinized existence to engage competently in high-risk activities on the periphery of institutional life, Lyng combines two ordinary words— ‘edge’ and ‘work’ —in an effort to explain why people engage in life threatening leisure pursuits in the absence of any material rewards. In the original formulation, Lyng points to the macro-level alienation felt by workers in the deskilled and bureaucratized workplaces of postindustrial society, and the resulting lack of opportunities for experiencing the spontaneous, impulsive part of the self at the micro-level. Edgeworkers, Lyng maintains, are motivated to participate in these activities because they derive social-psychological benefits that enable them to access their ‘true selves’, an opportunity otherwise denied to them under the alienating conditions of late modernity.

One of the major criticisms of this argument emanating from the field of sport sociology is the extent to which Lyng associates voluntary risk-taking to one’s participation in the labor economy. Donnelly (2004) accuses Lyng of coming close to characterizing voluntary risk-taking as a response to job dissatisfaction, and further points to the fact that while we are all experiencing the conditions of late modernity, there are relatively few individuals responding to such conditions by engaging in the type of high-risk behavior characterized as edgework. Furthermore, most accounts of leisure edgework and the development of the self tend to emphasize activity-specific skills and psychological sensations without consideration for the *degree of synergy* between edgework skills,

occupational backgrounds, and the possibility of accumulating economic, social, and symbolic wealth.

These analyses are grounded in the earliest formulation of the edgework model described above, and tend to leave unrecognized the structural principles extending throughout risk societies, the (re)production of social divisions resulting from differential access to these resources, and various aspects of embodiment. In this chapter, I draw upon theoretical work by Pierre Bourdieu and Iris Marion Young to help reveal how BASE jumpers develop a distinct ‘habitus’ that enables them to produce and convert different forms of capital (cultural, economic, social, and symbolic) within and outside of the structured social conditions of the BASE jumping field.

4.1 “Calculating risk ratios”: Gendered Habitus and Acquired Skills

The notion of *habitus* is central to Bourdieu’s theory of practice, indicating the pivotal point in the nexus between structure and agency. Bourdieu (1977: 83) defines habitus as “a system of lasting transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions”. The habitus is a general set of dispositions (versus determined or determining factors) that mediates between an actor’s position in the overall social structure and the practices undertaken by the jumper to signal his or her position to others. It is a product of embodied history guiding individual preferences, choices, perspectives and tastes. In short, the idea of habitus is a way of conceptually acknowledging how people’s actions and choices are shaped by their respective histories: “Habitus captures the way the social is internalized individually;

integrating all past experiences in the form of durable, lasting, and transposable dispositions to think, feel, and act” (Ahmed and Jones 2008: 60).

Bodily hexis refers more specifically to the various socially inculcated ways an individual deploys his or her body in the social world (Throop and Murphy 2002). For Bourdieu (1977: 69-70) “bodily hexis is political mythology realized, embodied, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable way of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking”. Stated differently, bodily hexis is the *embodied dimension of habitus* that is laden with social meanings and values. This hexis is typically divided into very clear-cut gender categories: “girls and boys are socialized into strictly gender-specific modes of walking, standing and sitting, of talking, keeping silent and listening, of laughing and crying, eating and sleeping” (Thompson 1991: 13). Men and women thus learn how to perform various body movements, gestures and postures according to the appropriate dispositions that characterize the gender category to which they belong. As Young (1991: 145) aptly notes:

There are indeed real physical differences between men and women in the kind and limit of their physical strength. Many of the observed differences between men and women in the performance of tasks requiring coordinated strength, however, are due not so much to brute muscular strength as to the way each sex *uses* the body in approaching tasks...When we [women] attempt such tasks, we frequently fail to summon the full possibilities of our muscular coordination, position, poise, and bearing. Women tend not to put their whole bodies into engagement in a physical task with the same ease and naturalness as men.

For Young (1991), the social valuation of these differences in bodily hexis is reducible neither to anatomy nor to physiology, nor is it the result of a ‘mysterious feminine essence’. Rather, these differences emerge in sexually oppressive societies where women’s bodies are ‘physically inhibited, confined, positioned, objectified...and gazed upon’ (Young

1991: 153-5). The sexually oppressive nature of an androcentric society is incorporated into habitus and structures women's and girls body comportment— ways of walking, standing, speaking, and gesturing that are distinctly 'feminine'. Girls, for example, learn through repetition at an early age to cross their legs when they sit and strategically crouch when they wear a skirt. In sport, women tend to wait for and react to an approaching ball rather than move forward and confront it (Young 1991). Boy's and men's bodies, on the other hand, are not subject to the same constraints, and their practices reflect a distinctly 'masculine' habitus whereby the body is used more violently and instrumentally, as evidenced by the higher rates of accident, injury and death among men than women aged 15-44 worldwide due to the propensity for men to engage in risk-taking behavior (White and Holmes 2006). In other words, although the body functions as a medium through which the habitus expresses itself, the body, as a reservoir of social experience is also an *essential component* of the gendered habitus.

The predominance of men in the practice of BASE jumping—an activity which necessitates an instrumental use of the body—can at least in part be understood as a product of the somatization of the social relations of masculine domination (Bourdieu 2001). In a community of practice organized around the 'androcentric principle', or in Connell's terms the 'social subordination of women', there was a taken for granted division between the sexes that privileged men. This division was present in both an objective, institutionalized form (as in the division of labor at Bridge Day) and an embodied form (the gendered habitus that assigns some tasks to women and others to men at this event). This gendered habitus—not class habitus as originally postulated by Bourdieu—is central to understanding why BASE jumpers are predominantly male, for it is the dialectical relationship between the

androcentric structures of the BASE jumping field (and society more broadly), the broader phenomenon of individualizing risk, and a jumper's life experiences which evoke a disposition towards risk-taking behavior.

As a social and not just individual practice, BASE jumping is both reproductive and generative because it necessitates pre-existing structures (parachutes, wind, techniques, Bridge Day, BASE camp), and yet these structures are not entirely 'objective' because they must be 'experienced' before they can be passed on by mentors at BASE camp and Bridge Day. The transmission of BASE-related knowledge, competency and legitimacy becomes embodied through repeated practical engagement with the practice and with other members of the community of practice. Although the biographical and historical trajectory of a BASE jumper will predispose him/her to specific ways of seeing, feeling, reasoning, and acting, so too will his/her experiences at Bridge Day, BASE camp, and other informal gatherings. These are settings in which practitioners, ground crew members, event organizers, and equipment manufacturers engage actively and creatively. Engagement in the practice does not happen anew every time BASE jumpers get together, nor is the BASE jumping field entirely malleable. This is because "the habitus, like every 'art of inventing' is what makes it possible to produce an infinite number of practices that are relatively unpredictable...but also limited in their diversity" (Bourdieu 1990: 55).

Thus, through repeated practical engagement with the rules, knowledge(s) and practices of the BASE jumping field, practitioners inscribe certain qualities into their bodies that begin to define them as BASE jumpers, but which also assist them in orienting themselves within the field in ways that will further define and distinguish them as BASE jumpers. While BASE jumping may share some fundamental similarities with skydiving in

that both involve engagement with air and wind, the dynamics are differentiated by the *nature* of the relationship to the wind and the various objects and technologies involved. In this sense, the connection between the field, the practice of parachuting from fixed objects, and the BASE jumping habitus is critical.

For instance, the BASE jumping habitus consists of numerous skills and dispositions that take a substantial amount of time to practice and acquire, a fact well encapsulated in Jack's observation that "BASE jumping is a lot of work". In Chapters 1 and 2, I described the various skills required to discover the performance limits of BASE-specific parachuting technology including canopy control, packing procedures, and superior reflexes. Some of these baseline skills were acquired through years of skydiving, and therefore constituted the BASE jumping habitus in ways which often escaped conscious attention: some jumpers spoke of having an innate ability or survival skill, for example. Other collectively held patterns of acting were acquired through diving lessons, gymnastics, and parachuting from hot air balloons, all of which contributed to aspects of the practice which involved bodily disposition and action: good body position upon exiting and aerobatics during freefall.

Some jumpers drew more specifically upon the skills they had acquired in their current or previous occupations. In discussing some of the mental work involved in BASE jumping, Max compared accessing objects to his experience as a paratrooper in the army:

Max: It's like in the army when you're going for something very important, very dangerous, like an attack or something. You do models. You do it like 10 times or 6 times before and you make sure that each time is going to be the best. Everything is going to be like boom, boom, boom, boom. That's what I do for jumping.

Max's familiarity with military strategy stemming from his past employment as a paratrooper enabled him to access objects without detection because he staged the

movements and replayed the sequence in his head as he would on the battlefield. Unlike Wayne and his friends who were caught accessing the Eiffel Tower, Max managed to deceive military personnel, by-pass infrared cameras, and parachute from the structure without apprehension due to the occupational habitus he brought to the performance. As a movie stuntman, Craig reported having similar advantages in that he was able to progress more quickly towards performing summersaults and twists during freefall. In fact, his superior body awareness and overall agility derived from years of stunt work assisted him in performing his first jump from a building, an unusual occurrence given some of the inherent dangers associated with building jumps discussed in Chapter 1.

Some BASE jumpers planned their jumps with extraordinary attention to detail, often spending days, if not weeks or months, assessing the landing area, planning access routes, and waiting for ideal weather conditions. The notion that edgeworkers achieve an ‘illusionary sense of control’ through rational calculation is perhaps most well exemplified in Damien’s lengthy account of the strategy he employed for gauging “risk ratios” before he jumped:

Damien: I have a theory that involves calculating the risk ratio for each jump. I teach people that you have to count. Rather than rely on your emotions or your feelings of strength, you have to use mathematics in order to get out of the emotionality and ask yourself “What exactly is involved here?” If there is a camera, that’s one. New equipment, that’s two. At night, that’s three. A new object that we don’t know very well, that’s four. And, one for the unknown, we’re at five, so we have to change something. Either we use equipment that we are familiar with or we do the jump during the day...Problems arise when we are unaware that the ratio is up to five. We have to be conscious of the ratio, and try to eliminate any added risk. If it’s impossible to reduce the risk, we must walk away, or review each point in order to understand what we need to do to get through the jump.

Damien used a logical rather than an emotional decision-making strategy as he prepared to crowd the edge. Implied in his description of calculating risk-ratios was the idea that emotionality puts the practitioner at greater risk for harm. Moreover, by emphasizing the importance of using logically-based, mathematical approaches to calculating risk, Damien polarized reason from other ways of knowing in a way that reinforced the conceptual connection between reason and masculinity, and between emotion and femininity. That the capacity to think logically was frequently cited as an important cognitive skill for performing safe BASE jumps may go some way towards explaining why women were excluded from and subordinated within the BASE jumping field.

Given that Damien had performed over 1000 jumps and sustained only a broken ankle (on a jump with a risk ratio equal to 5), it is fair to say that his method for calculating and managing risk was effective. When I asked Damien whether he would perform a jump with a risk ratio higher than 5, he enumerated additional strategies for mitigating problems in the event of an accident such as bringing a flashlight for a night jump or packing extra clothes to wear while waiting for an ambulance (winter jumps). BASE jumps with a risk ratio higher than 5 were not ideal, but they were ‘doable’ if proper consideration was given to each point that brought the jumper dangerously close to the edge.

Consistent with the search and rescue personnel described by Lois (2005), BASE jumpers I interviewed also performed ‘emotional edgework’ by managing their emotions at various stages of the risk-taking experience. Relevant to this discussion are the strategies employed in preparing for the edge. For instance, study participants described elevating confidence levels by anticipating potential problems, planning reactions to malfunctions ahead of time, visualizing well-executed jumps, committing to the notion that ‘failure is not

an option', and following instructions to "get out to the edge, take a deep breath, compose yourself, and then go" (Ben).

That some jumpers reported using the emotion management strategies commonly employed for safe BASE jumping in other realms of their lives demonstrates how the BASE jumping habitus is transposable, allowing for improvisation and change depending on the social space (i.e. field) in which the jumper is located (Calhoun et al. 2007). For example, jumpers working in life or death professions such as medicine cited "self-mastery" as an important skill acquired through BASE jumping: "It's mastering your BASE jumps, mastering your surgeries... It's being able to function well under stress, under major stress. Do the right thing, think clearly" (Max). Others working in entrepreneurial fields described how their success with BASE jumping gave them the confidence to pursue new business ventures: "I've discovered that once I'm capable of something as ridiculous as BASE jumping, I am capable of absolutely anything" (Alex).

Some men described how BASE jumping enabled them to manage and display emotions such as trust, vulnerability, exhilaration, and fear in ways that facilitated interactions with women and/or prepared them for fatherhood. Jason, for example, reported "greater confidence in everyday life" due to his heavy involvement in the sport, and though he was single at the time of the interview, approaching women became easier for him since he started jumping: "If I can jump off a cliff, I can talk to that girl". Similarly, Ben spoke at length about feeling unprepared for the "emotional overload" associated with "being in love" and "having a child". For Ben, BASE jumping enabled him to access and manage emotions within himself which he believed would later assist him with the "emotional exhilaration" that accompanies marriage and fatherhood.

While words of encouragement and mental processes of perception, judgment, and reasoning may in fact lead to a greater sense of emotional stability, they contrast other perceptions of ‘truth’ that stand independently from ‘reason’ reported by study participants:

Mac: If you have a funny feeling, listen to it. I’m very much into my intuition, and I think BASE brings out or doing dangerous things brings out your intuition more strongly...

Caitlin: What does that feel like?

Mac: I think you’re always scared...but it’s a very subtle difference... Often I just feel really tired and I’m like “I need to go to sleep”... That actually happened once where my friends and I were going to go jumping at this illegal site and then I just got this really bad feeling...all of a sudden I got really tired when I should have been really rested and stuff. And then I was like “You know, I am too exhausted, I can’t go”. And then they went, and they got busted by the cops.

Although Mac’s intuition saved him in terms of avoiding detection, Wayne’s account demonstrated the importance of listening to ‘gut feelings’ in situations where the practitioner was negotiating the boundary between life and death:

Wayne: It’s a gut feeling. I think that’s one of the most important things in BASE jumping. You have to listen to yourself...Sometimes, you get those voices. Then you feel sick. Then you feel like you’re going to throw up. Then you’re sweating. Then you’re shaking uncontrollably. Those are the [jumps] when you’re not doing it.... I have a friend who broke his back, and everything was right that day but he had a horrible feeling and he jumped anyway because everything was right in terms of condition and wind. But he said that he didn’t feel right about it. And he shouldn’t have jumped.

Discussions surrounding the notions of ‘instinct’, ‘intuition’, and ‘gut feelings’ were surprisingly commonplace in the interviews and magazines. Practices which seem to border on complete chaos like BASE jumping often invoke intense feelings of fear and anxiety, both of which threaten the practitioners’ ability to maintain a sense of control over the situation.

Thus, while the ability to successfully negotiate the edge depended in part on a number of physical aspects such as canopy control, body stability, and tracking capabilities, the ability to manage emotions and to trust gut feelings in the midst of an intensely stressful ordeal that was reportedly susceptible to peer pressure or ‘boogie mentality’¹⁰ was also part of the skill set that constituted the BASE jumping habitus.

4.2 Capital Accumulation and Conversion

In Bourdieu’s work, the social world is internally differentiated into many separate *fields* each of which has distinct dynamics, logics, structures, authorities, institutions, properties and activities. Within each field (e.g. scientific, political, cultural) there are numerous positions and processes of position-taking (practices) specific to that particular field, and for each to function there are “people prepared to play the game, endowed with the habitus that implies knowledge and recognition of the immanent laws of the field, the stakes and so on” (Bourdieu 1993: 72). In other words, within a given field, there is a social game being played that: 1) requires different resources and competencies from its players; 2) involves different rules of engagement; and 3) affords distinct possible and limited outcomes.

The jumpers I interviewed all had an investment in the ‘game’: they were taken in by the practice of BASE jumping, they believed in the sport of fixed object parachuting, and they agreed by the mere fact of attending Bridge Day, for example, that the game was worth playing. In this case, the game that constituted the field in question involved the rules, logics, procedures, and strategies related to accessing the practice and negotiating risk outlined in

¹⁰ A ‘boogie’ is a special event hosted by a group of BASE jumpers designed to attract jumpers from surrounding areas for jumping and partying. ‘Boogie mentality’ is a derogatory phrase used to describe jumpers who have compromised safety by adopting a ‘party mentality’ at an impromptu time (i.e. when BASE jumping), usually for the purpose of impressing others.

Chapters 2 and 3, in addition to the organizational structures at BASE camp and Bridge Day, and the different groups of men and women within them. The BASE jumping field was not a deliberate act of creation, but a product of the stakes over which BASE jumpers were competing. As members of a community of practice, BASE jumpers engaged in processes of mutual engagement and joint learning, but the competencies that were deemed worthy of entrance to the community (canopy skills) and the practices that merited recognition and reward (aerobatics, jumping from all four objects, avoiding detection) were defined by a dominant group of jumpers (manufacturers, Bridge Day organizers, BASE mentors) as metaphorically and literally the embodiment of BASE jumping.

Bourdieu's concept of *capital* is important in this regard when we consider how fields are distinguished from one another by the forms of capital and their most salient properties. Capital formation (especially accumulation and conversion) is at stake in each field since the acquisition and transposable value of capital have the potential to ultimately influence an actor's overall position within that field. The structure of a field (especially the distribution of capital) reflects the state of power relations within that particular field, and actors who occupy powerful positions are inclined to conserve their capital and maintain the status quo (Bourdieu 1993). Although an agent endowed with less capital might be inclined to resist change, such an agent is nonetheless complicit in that he or she 'tacitly and even unwittingly accepts by the mere fact of playing, of entering the game...Those who take part in the struggle help to reproduce the game by helping—more or less completely, depending on the field—to produce belief in the value of the stakes' (Bourdieu 1993: 74). Thus, while Mac, Alex, and Mike refused to apply for a BASE number, they nonetheless shared a fundamental

interest in the 'stakes of the game', that is, in the accumulation of symbolic capital, namely jumping from all four objects.

Broadly speaking, Bourdieu (1986) observes three different dimensions of capital, with respect to whether it takes an embodied, objectified and institutional form, though for the most part institutions define the form of capital that prevails in each social space. Economic capital refers to financial resources and is embodied in labor power, objectified in commodities, and institutionalized in the capitalist market. Social capital refers to social networks, and is embodied in rights, obligations, and trust, objectified in networks, and institutionalized in groups. Cultural capital is characterized by tastes, preferences and qualifications, and is embodied in competence, objectified in books or paintings, for example, and institutionalized above all in the educational system. Bourdieu also mentions a fourth type of capital: symbolic capital, which is defined differently than the three types described above. Symbolic capital is identified by the institutionally and universally recognized benefits associated with the possession of economic, social and cultural capital, usually taking the form of prestige and social status accrued through the conversion of one form of capital into another.

The assumption in Bourdieu's theory is that all actors in any situation strive to improve or at least defend their social status, defined in terms of their overall capital volume. Different types of capital hold more or less value depending on the given field, and each form can be produced, consumed, accumulated and converted (Kemple 2007). The rules of conversion between the different forms of capital vary for each field, though by definition, a given type of capital will have the highest value and exchange rate in its own 'pure' field. Quickly recuperating the parachute after a jump and successfully evading police (the skills

which make up a jumper's field-specific cultural capital), for example, had a higher value in the BASE jumping field than it did in the skydiving field. Note that conversion rates depend on many factors, including the amount of work needed to produce, consume and accumulate a given form of capital. Indeed, the accumulation of cultural and social capital requires substantial 'labor time' and thus typically only pays off in the long term (Bourdieu 1986: 253).

An important line of inquiry I explored within this framework is how BASE jumpers I interviewed accumulated and converted different forms of capital. Within this contested field, the accumulation and conversion of cultural capital took a considerable amount of time. As detailed above, prolonged engagement in the BASE jumping field gave rise to a state of embodiment or habitus that encompassed learned behaviors from other occupational backgrounds and leisure activities, but which also included dispositions specific to the practice of BASE jumping which enabled actors to accumulate and convert distinct forms of cultural capital into other forms of capital with greater efficiency within the social world of BASE jumping.

Although Bourdieu acknowledges the importance of the body in his concepts of habitus, bodily hexis and embodied cultural capital, I contend, as does Shilling (1991), that the 'physical' in his work remains largely under-theorized. Indeed, 'the body is central in its own right ...to the production of cultural and economic capital and the attainment and maintenance of status' (Shilling 1991: 654). In order to understand the social significance of the body in BASE jumping, one must make the body visible and place it at center stage. The physicality of BASE jumping required a certain degree of physical capital (in the form of body shape, athleticism, and able-bodiedness). Although BASE jumpers' bodies were not

necessarily mesomorphic, they were incredibly agile, had catlike reflexes, and enacted high levels of skill, most notably through the rapid application and modification of pre-learned canopy skills to new parachuting situations. BASE bodies are aerial bodies: they glide and fly like birds. They feel comfortable tumbling towards the earth; in fact, they usually love the sensation of falling through the sky. Above all, BASE jumping bodies are creative performing bodies that continually adapt to wind, drafts, and other unforeseen weather conditions. While many other body types may more accurately reflect the broad range of bodies that actually parachute from fixed structures, the qualities of the bodies outlined above formed the basis of the idealized, competent BASE jumper.

This is not to say that practitioners with lesser degrees of physical capital were unable to convert (or maintain) their capital within the BASE jumping field. Doug, for example, had been BASE jumping for over 4 years, logged 66 jumps, and was the second amputee to have received a BASE number. As a teenager, Doug underwent a leg amputation due to cancer, and at the time of the interview, he refused to wear a prosthetic leg for BASE jumping “because it flops all over the place, kicking other people and getting in the way”. Instead, Doug’s wife waited for him in the landing area with crutches, or alternatively, he jumped with a makeshift pair that he folded and tucked away under his chest strap. Although Doug was able to jump from most objects by hopping to the exit point, landing in relative safety was often a problem:

Caitlin: Can you land on one foot or do you need to roll over for BASE jumping?

Doug: For BASE jumping, I’ve only made 2 or 3 stand-ups [landings]... Pretty much land and just hit. Well, I usually land on my butt, that’s landed me in trouble and I’ve broken a few things. I’ve had bad injuries from base jumps. Even the last two months, I’ve had pretty severe injuries.

Having seen Doug's landings at Bridge Day, it was apparent that his disability placed him at greater risk for injury than jumpers who could minimize the impact by using both feet to land. Doug's buttocks hit the ground with such force that one would expect him to suffer from pelvic and spinal cord injuries quite frequently. With the exception of Alex, who after breaking his neck in a motorcycle accident continued BASE jumping with a neck brace a few months later (though he remained off work for two years), Doug was the only person who did not stop jumping while he recovered from his BASE-related injuries. For instance, on one particular trip to a remote waterfall in Mexico, Doug landed on a rock and broke his back, pelvis, sacrum, and tailbone. Although he could barely move, Doug insisted on jumping again, a decision that delayed the twenty hour car ride back to the hospital by almost two days. Doug began skydiving and BASE jumping only 4 months after undergoing surgery, aggravating his injuries to the point that he was forced to quit both skydiving and BASE jumping for over 4 years.

The relative weight of physical capital in the BASE jumping field put Doug at a disadvantage in relation to 'able-bodied' jumpers. He had limited access to objects, could not escape police as quickly, and was at greater risk of injury and/or death. In other words, there were greater risk and opportunity costs associated with efforts to convert physical capital into other resources among disabled jumpers. Although a jumpers' stock of physical capital was certainly disrupted by injury, it also grew and declined with age, and it died if the jumper was severely disabled or killed. Prior to Drew's paralyzing accident in 2004, for example, he averaged 200 jumps per year. However, at the time of the interview, he had only completed 10 jumps since the accident, most of which were from relatively 'easy' objects such as bridges and antennas, or performed at Bridge Day where the risk of detection is non-existent.

It was not uncommon for Doug and Drew to attend events such as Bridge Day to help other jumpers. This can be viewed as a move from the use of physical capital to cultural capital: a deep and embodied knowledge of fixed-object parachuting that comes from being steeped in the BASE jumping social world.

Canopy skills, freefall techniques, knowledge of parachuting technology, good intuition, emotion management strategies, and calculating risk ratios appear to be fundamental to the BASE jumping habitus. However, as these practices were inscribed upon the body, possibilities presented themselves and the body began to alter. Most obviously was the way in which novice jumpers, in practicing basic techniques at BASE camp in preparation for the transition to core member, learned to ‘feel’ their way through more difficult techniques by observing video footage or photographs of their jumps, receiving feedback from their mentors, experimenting with different parachutes, and perhaps more importantly, by practicing from different objects.

These competencies and their manifestations through the BASE jumping habitus were given value by other jumpers in the form of *embodied cultural capital*. The value of this embodied cultural capital (defined here as competency in negotiating risk) depended largely on the jumpers’ position within the BASE jumping field, in addition to the historical time in question. In other words, while BASE pioneer Carl Boenish’s habitus produced cultural capital based on his ability to parachute from fixed objects using *skydiving gear*, this form of cultural capital did not convert well among current generations of jumpers where expertise in *BASE-specific* parachutes was the most valued form of cultural capital.

There are two senses in which valued forms of cultural capital were produced and converted. First, there was evidence of an intergenerational reproduction of cultural capital

between fathers and sons. Chris, for example, recalled how his father bought him a dirt bike when he was only 12, and how as a young teenager, his dad encouraged him to drive snowmobiles and other machines at high speeds. The second sense of capital accumulation and conversion was more immediate: it involved converting economic capital (financial resources) into embodied and objectified forms of cultural capital (i.e. competence and BASE equipment). The transition from being a skydiver to becoming a BASE jumper required a substantial amount of economic capital. BASE jumping equipment ranged anywhere from \$1,000 to \$2,500 depending on the quality of the fabric and whether the parachute was new or used. Among the men I interviewed, it was not unusual for jumpers in higher income categories to own several BASE rigs, nor was it uncommon for jumpers in lower income categories to report selling vehicles and cancelling annual vacations in order to purchase equipment.

Although economic capital was certainly a pre-condition for accumulating cultural goods (i.e. parachutes), jumpers (usually) converted economic capital into embodied forms of cultural capital in order to use BASE equipment in accordance with its specific purposes. Not all BASE jumpers I interviewed had the same resources at their disposal, meaning their strategies for accumulating cultural capital differed substantially. Cooper and Landreau (2007) suggest the majority of BASE jumpers are upper-middle class, and yet my findings reveal a much broader range of annual personal income (Appendix A). As such, some study participants attended Bridge Day (cost: \$500); others opted for BASE camp (cost: \$1,000-\$1,500), whereas a select few could afford to spend weeks if not months travelling the world to exotic locations with more experienced jumpers (cost: \$5,000+).

A jumper's physical and cultural capital could also be converted into social capital, and vice versa. Unusually large gatherings such as Bridge Day allowed for the stylized display of bodies in a more formal context, allowing BASE jumpers to recognize and decode the body as a sign which conveyed values and experience level. Contacts were made at this event which were of great value in acquiring the services of others in such areas as wing suit flying, parachute maintenance, and packing procedures. Developing concrete personal relationships and networks of relations enabled novice jumpers to reach out to others in search of resources they did not have at their own disposal. Social capital enabled practitioners to locate BASE 'experts' or mentors with greater efficiency, to draw upon the knowledge of practitioners who have jumped from difficult-to-access objects, and therefore enabled them to perform their practice with greater efficiency.

Jumpers who lacked the economic capital to attend such events, or who engaged in behaviors that ran contrary to the groups' norms were not likely to foster the interpersonal interactions necessary for building a sense of trust and obligation critical to building social capital. Since jumping in groups was one of the ways practitioners negotiated safety, failure to accumulate social capital had potentially fatal consequences. Indeed, BASE jumping fostered a sense of trust among male practitioners often observed in the military: "A comrade in war is a man you can trust with anything, because you trust him with your life" (Burstyn 1999: 179). The homosocial aspect of trust was especially evident in Drew's account of the confidence he placed in other jumpers in order to continue BASE jumping with paraplegia. Drew described a scenario where a fellow practitioner drove nine hours to assist him with a jump by holding his legs while he scaled an antenna. At Bridge Day, jumpers steadied Drew

as he prepared to launch from the bridge and helped him collect his parachute in the landing zone (Fieldnotes, October 18, 2008).

Cultural capital was a symbolic good which, under certain conditions, was converted into economic capital. Although a minority of jumpers successfully earned a living running BASE camps and manufacturing and distributing equipment, others reportedly attended Bridge Day and charged \$50 to pack parachutes for novice jumpers who had yet to accumulate sufficient cultural capital in order to safely pack BASE rigs themselves (Fieldnotes, October 18th, 2008). For Mike, years of BASE jumping experience translated into competency repairing BASE rigs, enabling him to expand his skydiving rigging company and broaden his client base. Similarly, Alex's proficiency in flying wing suits and managing camera equipment during freefall allowed him to run a small production company producing and distributing BASE photographs and videos.

However, at a time in which risk societies are increasingly concerned with managing the future, addressing the need to reduce harm, developing strategies for avoiding unwanted outcomes, and displacing risk management onto individuals, there was also evidence that some of the cultural and physical competencies that derived scarcity value within the BASE jumping field also yielded material and symbolic profits and distinction in broader cultural fields. For example, both Max and Alex were sponsored by Red Bull, a relatively lucrative contract that permitted them to travel the world, represent extreme sport athletes at various international events, accumulate additional cultural capital without tapping into their personal stock of economic capital, and therefore distinguish themselves from other BASE jumpers and extreme sport athletes.

Wayne, Craig, Tom, and Alex all reported a capacity to convert their physical and cultural capital into economic capital by performing stunt work for commercials, television shows, and films. Similarly, Damien accumulated economic capital by taking part in numerous documentaries on voluntary risk-taking, of which some were played in IMAX theatres. Some practitioners even converted their cultural capital into economic capital they later donated to various organizations. For instance, there were magazine articles chronicling the success of two separate fundraisers organized by BASE jumpers in Twin Falls, Idaho (*Skydiving Magazine*, August 2006; November 2006). There, practitioners managed to raise \$35,000 for children with disabilities, and \$2,150 for local paramedics by accepting donations in exchange for jumping from the Perrine Memorial Bridge.

4.3 “3-2-1-C-YA!”: Conclusion

Symbolic capital is a kind of synthesis and summit deriving from the other forms of capital. Jumpers seemed to be primarily involved in the practice of BASE jumping for the symbolic capital, not the money, skills, or camaraderie. The power that resulted from symbolic capital—the accumulated capital of honor, respect, prestige attributed to a practitioner—originated from a jumpers’ past strategies expending other forms of capital (such as economic, cultural, and social capital) to cultivate his or her social reputation. BASE numbers emerged as a type of symbolic capital that jumpers collected in their quest for reputation and status. Symbolic capital works through reproduction, meaning individuals accumulate and transmit resources that produce the best yield for sustaining a field. BASE numbers, then, stemmed from developing and using measures of success that were related to the ways BASE jumpers accumulated symbolic capital.

BASE numbers were awarded to practitioners with large amounts of cultural capital; that is, to practitioners who had invested the time, money, and commitment towards developing an aptitude for taking progressively greater risks. A lower number reflected speedy progress, though it also communicated a jumpers' status position relative to the historical development of the sport. A jumper who had a number between 1 and 100 was considered a BASE pioneer, a signification worthy of additional recognition and respect within the field. Unlike scholastic qualifications which are conferred upon the recipient in the form of a degree or diploma, BASE jumpers did not receive a certificate or even a badge. However, my analysis of online blogs revealed that BASE jumpers, like academics, displayed their symbolic capital by including their BASE number after signing their names (e.g. John Smith, BASE #1000).

The factors that constituted the BASE jumping habitus were complex, detailed, and interpenetrating. Here, I am suggesting that a jumper's individual gendered habitus was molded by the localized habitus of the BASE jumping field. It was the product of the various social connections, achievements, attainments and attachments jumpers acquired in their occupations and other leisure activities, whether by formal or informal means. Bodily hexis, or embodiment, is the political expression of all the factors that make up practitioners' habitus— in this case, the social relations of masculine domination. It was embedded in a jumpers' physical being, and played out in the BASE jumping field, where an instrumental use of the body was a valued cultural practice. BASE jumpers quite literally embodied the social spaces they inhabited and identified with; the more 'expert' a practitioner was in the field of BASE jumping, the greater his/her cultural capital in the field, and the more cultural capital a jumper had, the greater his/her room to maneuver within or to manipulate that field.

Conclusion: **“Taking risks is part of who I am”**

The absence of clear guidelines for living through unfamiliar social contexts combined with the expansion of risk(s) to various domains of social life has had profound implications for the individualization process as numerous social commentators have identified. Insofar as risk endures as a matter of individual rather than collective concern, and with ‘do-it-yourself’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002) or ‘reflexive’ (Giddens 1991) biographies becoming the norm, it is perhaps unsurprising that *risk-taking* has become an integral component to constructions of selfhood in late modernity. Damien’s statement “taking risks is part of who I am” must therefore be viewed as an entry point into the complex world of BASE jumping wherein humans, natural objects, and technologies interact in ways that reveal as much about the individualization of risk as they do about gender in risk societies.

As a ‘manufactured risk’, BASE-specific parachuting systems created new risk environments stemming from the very progression of human development that, while highly unpredictable in flight, were nonetheless quite stable in maintaining the demarcation line between skydiving, bungee jumping, and BASE. Trust is a major factor in the consumption of risky technologies in late modernity, for without trust in the equipment and the manufacturers, BASE jumpers would likely forgo participation. However, in risk societies, trust is no longer entirely embedded in social relations. As Granovetter (1985: 491) notes, “while social relations may...be a necessary condition for trust and trustworthy behavior, they are not a sufficient condition to guarantee these”. Thus, in addition to conducting background checks and withholding parachutes from inexperienced consumers,

manufacturing companies placed trust in the sphere of institutional arrangements by using contracts and release of liability waivers, agreements which also served to further institutionalize the displacement of risk management on to individuals.

Beck and Giddens have been criticized for their overly individualistic model of the human actor and for their tendency to overlook the role played by gender, age, social class, and community membership in developing different risk logics and experiences (Lupton 1999). While risk management may emerge as a highly individualized phenomenon in late modernity, the importance of group membership in developing responses to the types of individualized risks undertaken by BASE jumpers is well illustrated by the process of joint learning that characterized the community of practice. The principles that informed the risk logics employed by BASE jumpers were not the products of autonomous individuals; they were shared and developed through ongoing interaction and engagement with the practice of BASE jumping. In this sense, communities of practice such as BASE jumping also bring people together at a time where traditional bonds between human beings are reportedly disintegrating.

As novice jumpers mastered the shared repertoire of performances unique to the practice of BASE jumping and moved towards becoming full members, they were simultaneously perfecting some of the risk management perceptions and skills necessary for overcoming the uncertainties in many institutional sectors of the risk society. Learning how to 'feel' a situation by listening to 'inner voices' did not necessarily result from direct participation in high-risk activities such as BASE jumping, in the sense that BASE jumping did not *cause* such sharpened intuitions per se. That said, BASE jumping clearly provides a forum for developing ways of knowing or sensing without the exclusive use of rational

processes related to knowledge and cognition. Perhaps through the experiential process of belonging to a community of practice such as BASE jumping, practitioners witness others who ignore their intuition and get hurt, or listen to their own intuition and avoid police detection, which in turn, reinforces the importance of listening to those ‘gut feelings’ as they approach and subsequently negotiate the edge. If this skill proves useful (i.e. accurate) in life or death situations, it is not unreasonable to think that it might be used with greater efficiency in ‘central’ realms of social life by virtue of its perfection on the periphery.

As noted in Chapters 1 and 4, many of the embodied skills employed by BASE jumpers are also useful in the stock market, among search and rescue personnel, in the medical field, and in the film industry. However, they could also be useful in other occupations where the risk-taking ethic commands edgework-specific skills such as policing, emergency room medicine, and/or other fields of post-Fordist employment which may benefit from actively embracing risk in the face of work-related insecurities (including cyclical unemployment, for example) (Baker and Simon 2002). Participation in high-risk activities such as BASE jumping might therefore be more appropriately understood as opportunities to learn, practice, and perfect the skills necessary for overcoming the insecurities in risk society, and it is through engagement with these communities or subcultures that these physical and mental capabilities are acquired, and potentially transferred to other domains. Along these lines, we might begin to understand contemporary social inequalities as resulting from differential access to risk knowledge(s) and management strategies, *in addition* to unequal distributions of wealth.

Giving form to the BASE jumping experience through the production of objects or tools that enable the execution of the practice is an example of the ‘reifying’ processes

emblematic of all communities of practice. BASE equipment, for example, reified a view of the parachuting activity (i.e. low altitude jumps are possible), but it also changed how practitioners engaged in the practice itself (jumping from fixed structures, rapid parachute deployment, superior canopy skills). In this sense, parachutes and fixed structures are “boundary objects” (Wenger 1998: 107) that connect BASE jumping to other practices which carry highly masculine cultural codes. That these cultural codes are deployed in the sport of fixed-object parachuting is evidenced by the fact that BASE jumpers are disproportionately male, women tend to provide technical and emotional support as ground crew members or participate on the periphery, and are often rendered subordinate to male practitioners.

Despite the fact that bungee jumping and sport parachuting emerged in different socio-historical and geographical contexts, both fostered male dominance by systematically excluding women on the basis of their ‘inferiority’ at a time where females were exercising a degree of agency over their sexuality or participating in sporting activities historically only available to men. Although competitive institutionalized sports played a significant role in the exclusion of women and the construction of masculine identities, increasing involvement and athletic success among girls and women beginning in the late 1960s “raised some serious questions about the deeply felt and widely accepted idea that playing sports was unnatural for ‘real’ women” (Coakley 2004: 13).

With the decline of sport as an exclusively male space and the growing commercialization of alternative sporting activities that embrace cooperation and individuality, some suggest that gender relations are being renegotiated in extreme sport cultures (Wheaton and Tomlinson 1998). My findings reveal that while relations between male and female BASE jumpers depicted in the magazines, observed at Bridge Day, and

discussed in the interviews corresponded to patterned interactions between men and women in the broader gender order (in terms of division of labor and relative position of inferiority), relations between male jumpers were renegotiated in ways that enabled (some) disabled, lower income, and racialized men to construct identities in and through their relationship to BASE jumping.

Although Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) caution against collapsing masculinities into ‘roles’ or ‘types’, certain aspects of BASE jumpers’ masculine identities were evident among most of the men I interviewed, such as being White and able-bodied. Differences in age, marital status, and class background informed the ways masculinities were negotiated and performed at Bridge Day and in the BASE jumping milieu more generally. Unlike other extreme sports where competition between core members proliferates, competitiveness in this community of practice was most apparent among men whose sense of self was firmly embedded in the activity, and among younger men whose masculine identity was perhaps more fragile. BASE jumpers who were marginalized in the broader gender order (in terms of race, class, and ability) were also more competitive over status, and thus more likely to reject the precautionary logic employed by older, financially secure, able-bodied, college/university educated men in the study.

By recognizing that BASE jumping is more than simply a homosocial institution that reinforces men’s power over women, but that it also involves relationships between men from different backgrounds, I have drawn attention to the multiplicity of masculinities, and the extent to which BASE jumping becomes a contested terrain of social meaning. At times, subaltern groups are able to use sport as a vehicle for resisting the domination imposed upon them, much like the racialized and disabled athletes I interviewed who used BASE jumping

as a means to attain status and/or upward social mobility. BASE jumping must thus be viewed as an activity through which domination is imposed *and* contested, a social arena in which “power is constantly at play” (Messner 1992: 13).

BASE jumping’s gender regime is fraught with contradiction and admittedly difficult to analyze. On the one hand, cautious men were celebrated because they avoided injury, and yet in some contexts, they were feminized and rendered subordinate for expressing fear (e.g. the “vagina” insult). Similarly, badass men were revered for their willingness to crowd the edge, but when they went over, they were deemed ‘idiots’ by fellow jumpers. Furthermore, while badass masculinity was certainly the idealized version in the community, cautionary masculinities did not necessarily remain on the periphery: some core members were badass whereas others were cautionary. While the number of men rigorously practicing and/or promoting the hegemonic pattern of badass masculinity was quite small, the number of men who were complicit appeared to be very large indeed. Although most complicit men in the study appreciated and were able to engage in practices commonly associated with badass masculinity (e.g. jumping from cliffs), they did not attempt to challenge or change it, and therefore also benefited from its hegemony.

It is important to remember that all practices involved in the construction of masculinities are laden with internal contradictions. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005: 851) remind us that these practices cannot be interpreted as a singular form of masculinity, inasmuch as they “represent compromise formations between contradictory desires or emotions, or the results of uncertain calculations about the costs and benefits of different gender strategies”. As study participants have demonstrated, masculinity is a life history project, ever-evolving and constantly under change. Given that badass masculinity does not

necessarily translate into a satisfying experience of life (in terms of injury and disability) and that everyone has the capacity to deconstruct, criticize and reformulate hegemonic masculinities, a shift towards more cautionary forms of edgework may in fact be intentional. This was especially true for study participants with dependents who drew upon the narrative of the ‘provider’ as they negotiated the transition between BASE jumping and the private sphere.

Despite the obvious homosocial bonds that emerged between male BASE jumpers, the community’s gender regime was also characterized by unequal distributions of power, authority, prestige and resources between women and men, and among different groups of men. People who were operating at the center of BASE jumping’s gender regime—camp organizers, event planners, equipment manufacturers, and pioneers of the sport—had acquired the power to deny access to the practice, withhold parachuting equipment, and define the ‘stakes of the game’. These jumpers (of which the great majority were men) were enabled and privileged by virtue of their positions in the (informal) structure of this community of practice, whereas peripheral members invested a significant amount of time and money prior to making use of the social, material, and symbolic advantages themselves.

Although Bourdieu is interested in wider social fields such as economics, politics and culture, his analytical tools are also applicable to localized social fields and the specific types of capital they define. Moreover, Bourdieu’s theory of practice helps understand the connections between habitus, embodiment, performance and identity. Although cautionary and badass jumpers both exhibited a masculine habitus insofar as the relations of masculine domination and the generic skills that constitute the overall practice of BASE jumping were inscribed onto their bodies, marked points of distinction became manifest as a result of using

diverse inbound trajectories, different parachutes, flying wing suits, filming during freefall, delaying deployment, and performing aerobatics, to name a few. These status symbols were especially important in the context of large gatherings such as Bridge Day where the most universally recognized marker of distinction was less apparent, namely the BASE number.

Although Landreau (2008) moves the edgework model forward by offering a conceptual tool designed to deal with the observation that edgeworkers are virtually all men, by over-emphasizing the importance of discourse surrounding gender and risk, he inadvertently draws attention away from the phenomenon of voluntary risk-taking itself. Although he alludes to the theoretical idea of ‘dominant practices’, methodologically, he only proposes examining the discursive strategies employed by edgeworkers through the use of two questions related to responsibility. As I discovered in this study, asking BASE jumpers ‘to whom’ and ‘for whom’ they consider themselves responsible does not generate the type of information that would contribute to a deeper understanding of the intersection between gender and risk. Perspectives on issues of responsibility emerged over the course of my fieldwork at Bridge Day or through interview discussions surrounding fatherhood and intimate relations more specifically, not through conversations prompted by the empirical questions proposed by Landreau.

Finally, in trying to understand the voluntary risk-taking phenomenon at the level of situated experience, Lyng successfully brings our attention to the risk experience itself and the many skills it requires and embodied pleasures it provides. However, as I have demonstrated throughout this thesis, in order to truly understand why something as ‘irrational’ and seemingly ‘anti-social’ as BASE jumping is predominantly undertaken by men, *edgework must be viewed as a gendering practice* and not merely a strategy for escape

or integration. My approach reveals how the changes characteristic of risk societies form the context within which to understand edgework, but that edgework is a practice that interacts with other practices to produce meanings about gender. It also draws the analytical focus away from the short-lived and psychologically satisfying experience of the edge towards the social origins and nature of edgework. Moreover, it moves beyond group variation considerations of gendered participation in high-risk activities by building on the idea that gendered identities are not biological destiny, but ongoing accomplishments, never finished, and always under negotiation (Jenkins 2004). Practitioners bring their social locations and various life experiences to the practice long before they negotiate the edge, and only through an exploration of family life, personal relationships, occupational background, and other axes of ordinary difference does the over-representation of males in high-risk activities such as BASE jumping become intelligible.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While evidence exists to support several of the conclusions identified above, I am cognizant that this study has limitations related to its cultural and historical specificity. Many of the processes instrumental to shaping the current moment (individualization, globalization) affect all countries, and yet my analysis is grounded in the voluntary risk-taking experiences of those living in consumer-driven (post-industrial) economic, cultural, political, and social milieus. This discussion is therefore most relevant in the world's developed economies since these are countries where BASE jumping is more culturally popular.

I also recognize that my observations were limited to five days in Fayetteville, and that several months have elapsed since I conducted the interviews. The size of the social setting, the sheer number of people attending the event, in addition to the transitions I made from the river shore to the exit point prevented me from documenting the entirety of the Bridge Day celebration. While Bridge Day was certainly the most feasible setting in which to generate observational data as a non-participant, there are other international locations and events where large numbers of jumpers and spectators congregate for several days at a time. For instance, state sanctioned jumps from the Petronas Towers in downtown Kuala Lumpur began in October of 1999, drawing experienced jumpers from all over the world for a weekend of competitive jumping. The community of Twin Falls, Idaho also welcomes jumpers as part of their tourist industry, allowing jumpers to exit legally from the Perrine Memorial Bridge all year round. I am aware that practitioners attending these events may systematically differ from the jumpers attending Bridge Day in terms of the various risk-taking practices and risk logics indentified in this thesis.

Although I did have the opportunity to watch several BASE videos and documentaries in preparation for my fieldwork, my analysis of bodily dispositions and gendered habitus are limited to existing literature on voluntary risk-taking, morbidity and mortality rates, my observations at Bridge Day, and the jumps described by study participants in the interviews. Despite my ongoing contact with research participants during the early stages of data analysis, their practices and perspectives may have more recently changed in light of accidents, injuries, and/or other life circumstances. Given my familiarity with the sport, I was able to understand the nuances of language and behavioral expectations, and had greater analytical insight into the workings of this community of practice. That said,

my unfamiliarity with the Bridge Day event and my status as a non-participant may have led me to overlook and/or misinterpret relevant information.

A number of scholars have also reflected upon the influence of gender on researcher/respondent interactions (Gill and Maclean 2002; Kosygina 2005). While conducting interviews with Russian migrants, for example, Kosygina (2005) noticed that her interviews with men differed considerably in length, format of communication and reflexivity than those with women. Indeed, implicit in her assessment was the belief that her interviews with men did not generate the same quality of data as her interviews with women. According to Finch (1984), this is partly attributable to the tendency for men to assume that female researchers will not understand them because they do not share the same social experience. These points suggest that in addition to my status as a non-participant, my social experience as a young, heterosexual, White woman from a relatively affluent background likely affected my interactions with men.

This was not a randomly chosen sample meaning it cannot be generalized to the wider population of BASE jumpers with any degree of statistical confidence. Generating a random sample of male BASE jumpers was not possible as there is not an even dispersal of jumpers anywhere in the world. Five jumpers were recruited using a network sampling strategy, and in three of these cases, the men were introduced to me by a third party whom I met during my undergraduate fieldwork. The other two were given my contact information by jumpers taking part in the present study. The remaining 11 jumpers were recruited using a convenience sampling strategy. One participant was recruited at a film festival I attended in Vancouver. Respondents located at Bridge Day were invited to do an interview following an informal conversation on the bridge or in the hotel lobby, while others approached me asking

questions about my research and subsequently offered to do an interview. Although network and convenience sampling techniques are appropriate when members of a special population are difficult to locate, they do pose limitations in terms of representativeness.

During the data management and analysis stages of the study, I became aware of several relevant themes that I was unable to address at this point in time, but which certainly merit future investigation. The relative absence of women's extreme sport experiences in the edgework literature is a reflection of the difficulties inherent in trying to locate female respondents who practice individualized sports which are largely unorganized and disproportionately undertaken by men. In trying to map the gender regime of the BASE jumping community, I relied primarily on magazine images, observations at Bridge Day, and discussions with male jumpers about the presence of women in the sport. Much could certainly be gained from incorporating women's experiences of risk and extreme sports into future explorations of gender and risk in the BASE community.

My attempts to work through issues of embodiment and gendered habitus are rather broad-brush at this stage, and not meant to be viewed as correlative in nature. I recognize that both the number of study participants and the community are quite small; however, I do think a more in-depth consideration of the ways in which men and women deploy their bodies would go some way towards understanding accident rates and risk-taking propensities among edgeworkers more generally, and BASE jumpers in particular. Anecdotal evidence suggests women are more likely than men to experience injuries at BASE camp (Forsey 2007), an observation which has yet to be verified empirically or considered in relation to matters of embodiment. Perhaps a study that incorporates observations of female BASE jumpers would

shed some additional light on the connections between objective structures of social space, masculine domination, and bodily dispositions.

Finally, a quantitative focus on the relationship between risk logics and injury/disability/death might also be worthwhile. For example, it would be reasonable to ask whether the (un)successful outcome of a jump is related to the particular risk logic employed, especially since some of the cautious men I interviewed reported experiencing accidents and injuries, while some of the badass men did not. These inconsistencies might form the basis for a larger-scale study wherein jumpers are asked to complete a standardized questionnaire about accidents and injuries. Risk logics could conceivably be operationalized as index variables consisting of several questions related to some of the high-risk practices identified in Chapter 3. Alternatively, each practice, object type, and weather condition could represent a separate variable. Combined with data listed on the Fatality List, the outcome of the jump might represent the dependent variable, whereas the risk logic or individual factor (practice, object, etc) could form the independent variable. Using a Chi Square Test for Independence, we could then determine the presence and strength of the relationship between parachuting from a cliff and experiencing an object strike, for example. From here, I could go on to explore the subjective meanings attached to the fatality list, existential questions concerning death and destiny, and the various discursive constructions of this ‘virtual graveyard’.

“3-2-1-C-YA!”: Final Remarks

The predominance of men in edgework activities such as BASE jumping is both a simple and complex issue. Here, I have attempted to shed some light on a topic which has otherwise been neglected in the voluntary risk-taking and extreme sport literatures. By

drawing on wider debates about modernization and individualization, science and technology, intimacy and emotions, heterosexuality and gender relations, the body and embodiment, in addition to the sociology of the everyday, I have illustrated the multifaceted nature of this phenomenon, in addition to the advantages of using such a theoretically eclectic approach. Although this thesis has been written with an academic audience primarily in mind, I hope that it will be of interest to the wider BASE jumping community, and to all those who engage in their chosen form of edgework in the context of their everyday/everynight lives.

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Appendix A-General Characteristics of Study Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Education	Occupation	Income
Wayne	24	University Degree	Waiter, Actor, Stuntman	\$30,000-\$39,999
Chris	26	College Diploma	Construction	\$65,000-\$89,999
Jack	27	College Diploma	Software Development	\$95,000-\$109,000
Eric	29	College Diploma	Tile Setter, Photographer	\$30,000-\$39,999
Mike	31	College Diploma	Business-Skydiving	\$65,000-\$79,999
Jason	34	College Diploma	Skydiving/BASE Instructor	\$20,000-\$29,999
Tom	34	Some College	Truck Driver, Stuntman	\$50,000-\$64,999
Max	35	Post-Grad (MD)	Surgeon	\$65,000-\$79,999
Ben	35	Some College	Business-Restaurant	\$95,000-\$109,999
Jonathan	36	College Diploma	Sales Manager	\$80,000-\$94,999
Mac	36	Some University	Athlete, Filmmaker	Refusal
Craig	36	University Degree	Stuntman	\$130,000 +
Alex	42	College Diploma	Photographer	\$20,000-\$29,999
Drew	43	Some High School	Unemployed	Disability Insurance
Doug	52	Post-Grad (MD)	Physician	\$130,000+
Damien	55	College Diploma	Construction Foreman	\$95,000-\$109,000

Pseudonym	Years BASE Jumping	# of BASE Jumps	Years Skydiving	# of Skydives
Wayne	2	97	5	300+
Chris	3	99	7	568
Jack	3	70	8	1200+
Eric	<1	3	6	550
Mike	5	300	7	1000
Jason	12	1330	14	1000+
Tom	11	60	12	400+
Max	10	200	14	1000+
Ben	8	100	12	1400+
Jonathan	3	6	16	500+
Mac	6	200+	6	200+
Craig	4	60	7	350+
Alex	20	600	24	6000
Drew	15	1110	18	1500
Doug	4	66	20	900
Damien	19	1023	35	2500+

Appendix B- Methodological Decisions and Ethical Issues

In this appendix, I briefly discuss some of the decisions I made over the course of this research. I begin by presenting a general overview of the research design which included participant observation, qualitative interviews, and textual analyses of BASE-related websites and magazines. Next, I describe the data analysis procedures, followed by a brief discussion of the ethical issues that arose.

Research Design

Since the overarching purpose of this study was to develop a deeper understanding of gendered participation in edgework activities, a qualitative approach was well suited to the study of risk and masculinity in the BASE jumping community. Answering the key questions guiding this research required knowledge about the context in which BASE jumping takes place, in addition to the ways in which BASE jumpers speak and behave within these settings. Most scholars use participant observation as their method for studying edgework within its natural environment (Lyng 1990; Landreau 2006; Lois 2001; 2005). Participant observation involves “the researcher’s disciplined, repeated, and focused observation of people’s behaviors ‘in the field’, and it includes providing evidence of those behaviors and of the meanings people attach to them” (Kirby et al. 2006: 147). Although different levels of involvement by the researcher are possible with this method, many agree that by becoming familiar with participants in their natural environment, conclusions are more accurately drawn about the relationship between a phenomenon (observed behaviors) and the meanings participants attach to them (Kirby et al. 2006).

Given that BASE jumpers rarely gather in such large numbers, Bridge Day 2008 was an excellent site for generating observational data and recruiting participants for interviews. By attending the Bridge Day celebration, I had the opportunity to observe jumpers make a number of important decisions. There are several ways to exit from the bridge, some inherently more dangerous than others, as different methods increase the risk of striking the bridge. In addition to choosing a more daring style of exit, jumpers may also choose to delay parachute deployment in order to increase the degree of risk. These decisions are central to how jumpers perceive and deal with risk, and only by observing these behaviors at Bridge Day was I able to document this rich body of data in the form of fieldnotes.

Qualitative interviews are also commonplace in ethnographic studies on edgework because they facilitate the gathering of “in-depth, qualitative data about individuals’ definitions of problems, opinions and feelings, and meanings associated with various phenomena” (Babbie and Benaquisto 2002: 337). Unlike structured interviews conducted in quantitative research, qualitative interviews seek rich, detailed answers; are more interested in participant’s perspectives; and thus tend to be more flexible because interviewers can depart from the interview guide and follow up on interviewee responses (Weiss 1994). In this project, I used interviewing to examine how BASE jumpers interpreted their own involvement in the high-risk practice of BASE jumping, and how BASE jumping related to other aspects of their everyday/everynight lives. Although the interviews were guided by my research goals and a detailed interview schedule, they were nonetheless quite conversational in that respondents were invited to share stories, tell jokes, and pursue tangents where appropriate.

Lastly, I complemented my field research with an analysis of three distinct textual archives, namely the blogs posted on www.basejumper.com between September 15th and November 15th, 2008, BASE-related images and articles in *Skydiving Magazine* printed between February 2006 and February 2007, and the World BASE Fatality List. Textual analyses usually involve a “careful, detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort to identify patterns, themes, biases and meanings” (Berg 2007: 304). Data were generated through a textual analysis of both the ‘manifest content’ (words and phrases) and the ‘latent content’ (interpretive reading) of the magazines and commentaries posted online (Babbie and Benaquisto 2002). These texts also helped me understand the history of BASE jumping, the intricacies of the parachuting technology, as well as the overlapping and distinct features of the BASE jumping community.

Data Analysis

The sixteen interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim into a Word document. Participants were sent an electronic copy of their transcripts for feedback and correction purposes, and asked to confirm the validity of their statements within a two week period. During this time, I typed my fieldnotes into a Word document, and began reading the magazine articles, fatality narratives, and blogs posted online. Upon receiving the reviewed transcripts, a thematic coding procedure was used to identify emerging themes amongst each of the data sources, followed by a more intensive reading of the images and passages pertinent to the present study.

I used a thematic coding procedure to identify initial themes common among each of the data sources. Then, I noted them in the margins, compared them to the other data sources

and defined them in the coding index (Appendix A). Having constructed an initial coding schema, I systematically applied the framework to each interview transcript. As new themes and distinctions emerged, I carefully refined the schema to ensure consistency. Data were then cut, labeled¹¹ and grouped according to similarities under broader categories, while unique pieces were set aside for future analysis. Finally, I summarized and synthesized the data by creating a thematic chart, which served to reduce the amount of material and facilitate the descriptive and associative analyses. As I developed these ideas, I contacted several respondents for participant validation and clarification. I also asked jumpers to verify their transcripts and omit any statements they did not want included in the final report.

Ethical Issues

Jumpers were advised that participation in this study was entirely voluntary, meaning they were free to withdraw their consent and to discontinue participation at anytime without prejudice. Although I did buy participants a soft drink or beer during the interview, I did not offer an honorarium for taking part in this study in order to eliminate the possibility that jumpers would participate through enticement. Because I included a biographical questionnaire, I was unable to guarantee my respondents complete anonymity. However, information gathered during the study remained strictly confidential. Tapes and documents were identified by a code and were kept in a secure filing cabinet. Although the interview transcripts were kept on my computer, they were password-protected, and the original tapes will be destroyed following the mandatory storage period of five years.

¹¹ Although I opted to use the ‘cut and paste’ method, I noted its original location in the transcripts to ensure recovery.

I did not use any element of deception throughout my research. I remained open about my research goals on the consent form, and continued to do so throughout the study. Most importantly, involvement in this study did not *require* the execution of a jump. My intention was not to put my respondents at risk by encouraging high-risk behavior, but rather, to observe these activities as they occurred naturally. As such, the only anticipated risks of being involved in this study were emotional feelings of unease when asked questions about injury and death during the interviews. Conversely, anticipated benefits of participating included the opportunity to discuss experiences without judgment and the chance to contribute to the scarce body of sociological literature on masculinity and voluntary risk-taking, and to counter negative stereotypes about the sport and its participants.

Appendix C- Consent Form



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Department of Sociology
6303 N.W. Marine Drive
Vancouver, B.C. Canada V6T
1Z1
Tel: 604-822-2878
Fax: 604-822-6161
www.soci.ubc.ca

CONSENT FORM

A Sociological Study of BASE Jumping

Principal Investigator: Dr. Thomas Kemple, Professor of Sociology, (xxx) xxx-xxxx
kemple@interchange.ubc.ca

Co-Investigators: Caitlin Forsey, Graduate Student, (xxx) xxx-xxxx
cforsey@interchange.ubc.ca

Dr. Dawn Currie, Professor of Sociology, (xxx) xxx-xxxx
dcurrie@interchange.ubc.ca

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to explore voluntary risk-taking among male BASE jumpers with the goal of understanding how BASE jumping becomes a meaningful part of their lives. This study is funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), and will be submitted to the University of British Columbia in the form of a Master's thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the co-investigator's degree. You are being invited to participate in this study because you are a man who engages in high-risk sport.

Procedures: Participation in this study involves one interview lasting approximately one hour. The interview will be tape recorded, transcribed and later analyzed for themes. The interview will be conducted in a setting that is mutually agreeable to the participant and the researcher. Questions regarding the procedures may be directed to any member of the research team.

Benefits/Risks: Anticipated benefits of participating include the opportunity to discuss your experiences without judgment and the chance to contribute to the scarce body of sociological literature on voluntary risk-taking. Minimal to no risk of discomfort is anticipated from your participation in this study. Potential discomforts include emotional feelings of unease when asked questions about injury and death during the interview.

Confidentiality: The information gathered during this study will remain strictly confidential. Tapes and documents will be identified by a code and will be kept in a secure filing cabinet. Your biographical data will be stored separately from your interview tapes and transcripts in a secure filing cabinet in order to maintain confidentiality. Although the interview transcripts will be kept on the Principal Investigator's computer, they will be password-protected. The tapes will be destroyed following the completion of the study. Note that only the members of the research team listed on this form will have access to your identity.

Contact for concerns about the rights of research subjects: If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research subject, you may also contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598 or by e-mail at RSIL@ors.ubc.ca.

Consent: You are reminded that your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You are free to withdraw your consent and to discontinue participation at anytime without prejudice.

Your signature below indicates that you: 1) understand the content and goals of this study; 2) consent to being tape recorded; 3) have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Please Check One:

- I have read the above and **CONSENT** to participating in this study and having the interview tape recorded

- I have read the above and **DO NOT CONSENT** to participating in this study

Subject Signature

Date

Printed Name of Subject Signing Above

Appendix D- Interview Guide

Interview Guide for BASE jumpers

Today we'll be talking about some of your experiences BASE jumping, how you became involved in the sport, and your perspectives on risk-taking more generally. I just want to remind you that you are not obligated to answer any questions and that you can stop the interview at any time.

I. GETTING IN-FIRST JUMP

- 1) Tell me where and when you first heard about BASE jumping?
 - a. What were your first impressions?
 - b. At what point did you decide that BASE jumping was for you?
 - c. What factors led to that conclusion?

- 2) Can you remember the first time you went BASE jumping?
 - a. Where were you?
 - b. Who was there?
 - c. How did you learn?
 - d. Did you attend BASE camp?
 - e. Did/do you have a mentor?
 - f. What feelings were running through your body?
 - g. What thoughts were going through your mind?
 - h. What did you enjoy about the experience?
 - i. What didn't you enjoy about the experience?
 - j. How did you know you were ready to jump?

II. RISK WORK

- 3) How did you plan for it?
 - a. What led you to decide to jump from that/this particular object?
 - b. Why not a building, antenna, or cliff?
 - c. How/where did you get your equipment?
 - d. Who taught you how to pack?
 - e. How long did it take?
 - f. Did you have a ground crew?

- g. Did you invite any of your friends to come watch?
- h. Did you tell your family/loved ones?
- i. What did you plan to do if the police came?
- j. How did you prepare for the possibility that you might be injured?
- k. Did you write a will?
- l. How did you prepare for the possibility that you might be fatally injured?
- m. Did you get or do you have life insurance?
- n. What else did you do before you went jumping?
- o. Overall, how much time would you say you spent thinking about the jump?
- p. Overall, how much time would you say it took to prepare for the jump?
- q. What did you do after you went jumping?

III. TAKING RISKS

- 4) What is your earliest memory of yourself taking risks?
 - a. How old were you?
 - b. Where did it happen?
 - c. Who was there?
 - d. How did they react?

- 5) Do you want to talk about issues related to injury and death?
 - a. What is the riskiest thing you have ever done while BASE jumping?
 - b. Is there anything you would never do while BASE jumping?
 - c. Have you ever been injured? If yes, tell me about that.
 - d. What does the BASE fatality list represent to you?
 - e. What perspective do you have on the issue of death in BASE jumping?
 - f. How do you respond to people who accuse you of being crazy or having a death wish?
 - g. How do you define risk?

IV. IDENTITY

- 6) What changes have you noticed in yourself since you started BASE jumping?
 - a. What positive impact has BASE had on your life?
 - b. What negative impact has BASE had on your life?
 - c. How specifically has BASE affected your personal life/relationships?
 - d. How do people react when you tell them what you do?
 - e. Who in your life do you consider yourself responsible for?
 - f. To whom do you consider yourself responsible?
 - g. What philosophy guides your BASE career?
 - h. Has BASE jumping enabled or constrained opportunities in other realms of your life (i.e. work, friendships, family)?

- i. What values and abilities have you learned through BASE that you can transfer to other areas of your life?

V. WRAPPING UP

- 7) Where has/does BASE jumping take/taken you?
- 8) How much money would you estimate you spent on this trip/that jump?
- 9) What percentage of your social network is part of or actively involved with the BASE jumping community?
- 10) What percentage of those friendships is due to your direct involvement with the sport?
- 11) What BASE websites do you like to use for blogging, finding information, and or communicating with other jumpers?
- 12) How much time do you spend on these websites?
- 13) What is more important, doing an easy jump really well or surviving a really difficult jump? Why?
- 14) If you had a jump planned and someone was hurt would you still go?
- 15) If you had a jump planned and your wife or kids said no, would you still go?
- 16) If you could only do one more jump, where would you do it and why?
- 17) What has been the most important lesson that you have learned?
- 18) Who has been the most influential person throughout this entire process?
- 19) Where do you see yourself in 5, 10, 15 years from now?
- 20) Is there anything that could/would prevent you from BASE jumping?
- 21) Is there anything we haven't covered that you would like to mention about risk-taking generally or BASE specifically?
- 22) Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you very much for your time and help with this project.

It is possible that I may want to follow up with you or clarify some points sometime in the future. Could I contact you again to see if you would be willing to answer a few short questions?

- **IF YES, FILL OUT FUTURE CONTACT FORM ON BIOGRAPHICAL QUESTIONNAIRE (TO BE DISTRIBUTED FOLLOWING INTERVIEW)**

Appendix E- Biographical Questionnaire

QUESTIONNAIRE: BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Study Title: A Sociological Study of BASE jumping

Instructions: The following questions are intended to provide some background information about you. Please answer the questions as accurately as possible. If you require clarification, please do not hesitate to ask the researcher.

1. Age: _____(years)
2. Where were you born? _____
3. Where do you currently live? _____
4. How long have you lived there? _____
5. How would you describe your racial/ethnic background? _____
6. What is your highest level of education? (please check one)

Some high school	_____
Finished high school	_____
Some college	_____
College diploma	_____
Some university	_____
University degree (please specify)	_____
Other (please specify)	_____
7. What is your current occupation? (Including part-time work):

8. Please circle the category that gives the best estimate of your **personal** income before taxes:

a. no personal income	g. \$50,000-\$64,999
b. under \$9,999	h. \$65,000-\$79,999
c. \$10,000 to \$19,999	i. \$80,000-\$94,999
d. \$20,000 to \$29,999	j. \$95,000-\$109,999
e. \$30,000 to \$39,999	k. \$110,000-\$129,999
f. \$40,000 to \$49,999	l. \$130,000 and above

9. Please circle the category that gives the best estimate of your **total household** income before taxes:

- | | |
|-------------------------|------------------------|
| a. no personal income | g. \$50,000-\$64,999 |
| b. under \$9,999 | h. \$65,000-\$79,999 |
| c. \$10,000 to \$19,999 | i. \$80,000-\$94,999 |
| d. \$20,000 to \$29,999 | j. \$95,000-\$109,999 |
| e. \$30,000 to \$39,999 | k. \$110,000-\$129,999 |
| f. \$40,000 to \$49,999 | l. \$130,000 and above |

10. Number of years skydiving: _____

11. Number of skydives: _____

12. Please list any other "extreme sports" that you are actively involved in:

13. Number of years BASE jumping: _____

14. Number of completed BASE jumps: _____

15. BASE #? _____(Y/N)

16. Level at which you participate in the sport:

- | | |
|--------------|-------|
| Advanced | _____ |
| Intermediate | _____ |
| Novice | _____ |
| Student | _____ |

If you agree to be contacted in the future, please indicate your preferred method of contact and sign below.

Phone: _____

Email: _____

Signature

Date

Appendix F-Behavioral Ethics Board Certificate of Approval



The University of British Columbia
Office of Research Services
Behavioural Research Ethics Board
Suite 102, 6190 Agronomy Road,
Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1Z3

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL - MINIMAL RISK

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Thomas M. Kemple	INSTITUTION / DEPARTMENT: UBC/Arts/Sociology	UBC BREB NUMBER: H08-01186
INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT:		
Institution	Site	
N/A	N/A	
Other locations where the research will be conducted: Consenting participants living in Winnipeg, Manitoba will be interviewed in a mutually convenient location such as a coffee shop or pub. Observations will take place at the New River Gorge Bridge in Fayetteville, West Virginia, USA. Interviews in Fayetteville will also be conducted in a mutually convenient location such as a coffee shop or pub.		
CO-INVESTIGATOR(S): Dawn H. Currie Caitlin Andrea Forsey		
SPONSORING AGENCIES: Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) - "Masculinity and Voluntary Risk-taking: A Structural Analysis" University of British Columbia - "Masculinity and Voluntary Risk-taking: A Sociocultural Analysis"		
PROJECT TITLE: A Sociocultural Analysis of Edgework and Masculinities		

CERTIFICATE EXPIRY DATE: June 17, 2009

DOCUMENTS INCLUDED IN THIS APPROVAL:	DATE APPROVED: June 17, 2008	
Document Name	Version	Date
Protocol: Proposal-Edgework and Masculinities	N/A	June 3, 2008
Consent Forms: Consent Form-Edgework and Masculinities	N/A	June 17, 2008
Advertisements: Poster-Edgework and Masculinities	1	May 21, 2008
Third Party Recruitment-Edgework and Masculinities	1	May 21, 2008
Questionnaire, Questionnaire Cover Letter, Tests: Interview Guide-Edgework and Masculinities	1	May 21, 2008
Biographical Questionnaire-Edgework and Masculinities	1	May 21, 2008
The application for ethical review and the document(s) listed above have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.		

***Approval is issued on behalf of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board
and signed electronically by one of the following:***

Dr. M. Judith Lynam, Chair
Dr. Ken Craig, Chair
Dr. Jim Rupert, Associate Chair
Dr. Laurie Ford, Associate Chair
Dr. Daniel Salhani, Associate Chair
Dr. Anita Ho, Associate Chair