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Dropping Out and Diving In

An Ethnography of Skydiving

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

School of Applied Social Sciences

Durham University

September 2005



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James Hardie-Bick B.A. (Hons), M.A.

Dropping Out and Diving In: An Ethnography of Skydiving

September 2005

Abstract

This thesis provides an in-depth study of the world of skydiving. Particular attention is given to the experiences of becoming and being a skydiver in order to investigate the norms, values and behaviour that typify the social world of skydiving from the inside. This qualitative investigation draws on data generated by conducting fieldwork together with a number of in-depth interviews and describes the sequence of changes that typically occur in a skydiver's moral career. By focusing attention on the social and moral experiences involved in becoming a skydiver I reveal how the neophyte undergoes a gradual process of important transitions before becoming a licensed skydiver. This developmental approach identifies and analyses how individual conceptions and experiences of skydiving change as the neophyte is gradually immersed within the skydiving community. The inquiry considers the significant changes that occur in the ways that novice and experienced skydivers account for their participation before contrasting their perceptions of fear and risk. By describing the gradual process of socialisation that occurs I also examine how entering this social world offers the neophyte a chance to construct a desirable social identity. By investigating the complex stages and social procedures that take the complete neophyte to being a licensed skydiver this research looks beyond the immediacy of excitement and analyses the shifting motivations, behaviours and experiences of those within the skydiving community.

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Contents

Abstract ii

Acknowledgements..... iii

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 The Bird Man..... 1
1.2 The Research..... 5
1.3 Organisation of the Thesis 7

Chapter 2: Conceptual Review

2.1 Introduction..... 13
2.2 The Concept of Risk 14
2.3 The ‘Risk Society’ Thesis..... 15
2.4 A Universal Risk Subject?..... 25
2.5 Voluntary Risk Taking..... 28
2.6 Researching ‘Edgework’ 40
2.7 Situating the Research..... 48

Chapter 3: Methods and Data

3.1 Introduction 51
3.2 Background and Research Design 51

3.3 Participant Observation.....	53
3.4 Access and Field Work.....	56
3.5 Interviews.....	69
3.6 Data Analysis.....	76

Chapter 4: Introducing the Field Work

4.1 Introduction.....	80
4.2 The Drop Zone.....	80
4.3 Options.....	83
<i>The Tandem Jump</i>	83
<i>The Ram Air Progression System</i>	90
<i>The Accelerated Free Fall Course</i>	92
4.4 Back at the Drop Zone.....	94
<i>Reception</i>	96
<i>Canteen</i>	99
<i>Spectators Area</i>	101
<i>Aircraft Hangar</i>	103
4.5 Overall Impressions.....	105

Chapter 5: The Moral Career of a Skydiver

5.1 Introduction.....	109
5.2 The Concept of Moral Career.....	110
5.3 Learning to be Serious.....	113

5.4 Corporeal Transformations	129
5.5 Reflecting on the RAPS Training	136
5.6 Further Training	139
5.7 Career Progression	145
5.8 Vocabularies of Motive.....	156
5.9 Conclusion	169

Chapter 6: ‘Living on the edge and all that’: Skydivers Perceptions of Risk

6.1 Introduction.....	172
6.2 Checked Out and Ready to Go.....	173
6.3 Feeling the Fear.....	185
6.4 Novice Accidents	192
6.5 Dicing with Death?	200
6.6 The Question of ‘Edgework’	210
6.7 The Importance of Safety.....	212
6.8 Irresponsible Risks	216
6.9 Policing the Cowboys.....	222
6.10 Conclusion.....	228

Chapter 7: ‘I think I could live at the drop zone’: Identity, Trust and Communitas

7.1 Introduction.....	231
-----------------------	-----

7.2 The Players.....	232
7.3 Identity Construction	235
7.4 Telling Stories.....	242
7.5 Adopting the ‘Right Attitude’	247
7.6 Keeping Up Appearances	253
7.7 A Sense of Communitas.....	257
7.8 Questioning Trust.....	264
7.9 Recovering Trust.....	270
7.10 Conclusion	272

Chapter 8: Conclusion

8.1 Introduction.....	275
8.2 The Research.....	275
8.3 Skydiving as a Moral Career.....	277
8.4 Perceptions of Risk	282
8.5 Desirable Identities and Communitas	287
8.6 Discussion.....	291
8.7 Limitations and Future Research	296

Appendix 1: R.AP.S. and A.F.F. Progression Levels	301
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Appendix 2: Interview Questions.....	304
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Bibliography	306
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1

Introduction

1.1 The Bird Man

During the early morning hours of the 31st of July 2003 the Austrian skydiver Felix Baumgartner started to prepare himself for attempting the first unassisted flight across the English Channel. By 3am, Felix had begun his journey to Louis Blériot Airport, appropriately named after the first person to successfully cross the English Channel in an aeroplane. Felix considers the French aviator Louis Blériot to be his predecessor. Like Louis's record-breaking success in 1909, Felix was also attempting to conquer the English Channel and insisted on starting his challenge from the same airfield. Unlike Blériot, however, Baumgartner planned to achieve the unthinkable: to fly above the clouds like a modern day superman and reach speeds of up to 220 miles an hour before making a safe landing in another country. Rather than being enclosed within an aircraft, all Baumgartner had to rely on was his aerodynamic jumpsuit, a 1.8 meter carbon wing strapped to his back, an oxygen tank to breath and a parachute to make a safe landing. After rigorously preparing himself for over three years, the anticipation is almost over. The numerous delays that occurred during this time ensured that his preparation had been extremely meticulous. Each passing minute brought him closer to testing and challenging both himself and his equipment by jumping out of a plane 30,000ft above Dover and literally flying for 22 miles to Cap Blanc-Nes near Calais, where his support team, girlfriend, emergency services and over 30 journalists would be awaiting his arrival.

The conditions for such a dramatic venture needed to be perfect. Fortunately the meteorologists reported ideal weather conditions and Baumgartner's team together with over 40 journalists were waiting for him to arrive at the airport. After repeatedly being questioned by the journalists he informs them that he is too focused to even know if he feels nervous. The plane takes off at 5.10am and Felix mentally prepares himself during the short flight to the drop off zone above the cliffs of Dover. The countdown has begun, and in a few minutes everyone will finally know if the difficult construction work on his 'wings' and the overall preparation have been thorough enough. Felix himself, however, is in no doubt. He is extremely confident in his equipment and his own ability.

The plane is now approaching the drop off zone. Only a couple of minutes to go before he dives into the clouds below to start his record-breaking challenge. Suddenly, only 30 seconds before he was planning to jump out of the plane, his cameraman collapses and is lying motionless on the floor of the aircraft. He had temporarily taken the oxygen breathing tube out of his mouth in order to get a replacement part for his camera, situated in the aircraft's hold. Even though he only took the oxygen tube out for a few seconds, performing such a manoeuvre at 30,000ft in a cabin that is not pressurised turned out not to be such good idea. Baumgartner's team immediately provided him with oxygen and the cameraman regains consciousness. Despite this unexpected event, Felix tries not to break his concentration. He had no choice but to remain focused. He needed to keep to his schedule and despite such events he jumped at exactly the right moment:

A push, a step, and I'm falling. Then a loud roar. And more than anything else: the incredible cold. After the first minute, I lose the feeling in my fingers, my lips are stiff, I have a hard time speaking on my radio because my lips are so numb. But it's a magnificent feeling. I no longer feel the falling. I just feel the flying. Like a bird. It's the best thing I've ever felt.

(Felix Baumgartner cited in redbullusa.com)

Felix claimed that the high levels of concentration required for his flight over the channel resulted in him losing all track of time. It was only when he finally saw the lights from France below that he knew he had almost accomplished his latest challenge. At 1000ft Felix pulled his rip cord in order to deploy his parachute. Events suddenly took an unexpected and dramatic turn. Although the parachute had successfully deployed above him, his feet were now caught up and entangled in the lines of the parachute. Less than 1000ft and Felix is upside down, rapidly approaching the ground below. Felix had one of two options. Either to make an emergency water landing and therefore fail to achieve his record attempt or, and this was probably the only option Felix was willing to consider, to carefully cut through the lines, hopefully disentangling his feet, and successfully completing the challenge. Felix immediately retrieved a hook knife¹ from his jump suit. After a few nail biting seconds he had successfully cut through the lines that entangled his legs and the problem was solved. The emergency services would not be required after all. Felix makes a safe landing to rapturous applause. Felix reached speeds of up to

¹ A hook knife is a small knife with a protected blade used by skydivers for dealing with situations such as entanglements.

220mph during his flight and the entire crossing lasted roughly 14 minutes. 14 minutes of being totally alone, completely at the mercy of both his equipment and skills, before having to deal with a life threatening situation by himself. Any mistake could have clearly had fatal consequences.

The conditions and circumstances that Felix strives and lives for are precisely the kind of fateful circumstances that most people desperately try to avoid (Goffman 1969). But Felix is not alone. Although this record-breaking challenge deserved all the media attention it received, thousands of other people in the United Kingdom are also attracted to jumping out of planes in their spare time. Many individuals who have never been subjected to media attention also enjoy the numerous challenges that skydiving provides, the focused concentration required for pushing themselves to the edge of their ability together with the sense of freedom that accompanies the experience of free fall. As skydiving is only a relatively new sport², individuals such as Felix Baumgartner will constantly be expanding the boundaries of skydiving and creating new, improved and exciting innovations. Such innovations, such as the invention of the square or 'ram air' parachute which has now largely replaced the traditional round or 'drag' parachute, will eventually filter down and become part of the everyday, familiar equipment bought and used by skydivers. Although the over whelming majority of skydivers are not necessarily exploring the technological, psychological and physiological boundaries of skydiving in the same way as Felix Baumgartner, such enthusiasts still claim that skydiving provides

² In 1912 Albert Berry made the first parachute jump from an aircraft over Kinnoch Field, Ohio. However, the first jump with a manually operated parachute did not occur for another seven years. On the 28th of April 1919 Leslie Irvin secured his place in the record books by successfully free falling before opening his canopy. The canopy deployed perfectly although he did sustain a broken ankle from an awkward landing.

them with a 'magnificent feeling' that is hard to put into words. Like Felix Baumgartner, skydivers also risk having their legs or arms caught up in the parachute lines together with a whole range of other life threatening contingencies that could occur during each descent. Despite warnings from clinicians and researchers (Amamilo, Samuel, Hesketh and Mounihan 1987; Davison 1990; Lee, Williams and Hadden 1999; Straiton and Sterland 1986) of the dangers involved, skydiving is increasing in popularity. From their humble beginnings in 1962, the British Parachute Association now has over 30,000 members with roughly 35 affiliated parachute clubs throughout the county. Even outside the United Kingdom, skydiving is more popular than ever. Although parachuting was not recognised as an aeronautical sport until the 1950's (see Donaldson 2000) it now forms the largest internationally represented aeronautical sport within the Federation Aeronautique Internationale (FAI).

1.2 The Research

This empirical investigation researches the routine activities that take place at one BPA affiliated parachute centre in the United Kingdom. It focuses on skydivers who are not engaged in extraordinary events such as jumping from 30,000ft, using oxygen or jumping with the assistance of 6ft wings strapped to their back. Although none of the participants in this study sought or believed they warranted any form of media attention³, the pursuit of skydiving does deserve the attention it has been given by sociologists interested in exploring an interesting contradiction. As Lyng (1990) has pointed out, there is a contradiction between the public agenda of risk reduction on the one hand, and the

³ During this research the skydiving community did receive a considerable amount of media coverage due to the death of Stephen Hilder. The effect this suspicious incident had on skydivers is discussed in chapter 7.

willingness of some individuals to actively seek out high-risk activities on the other. Indeed, one of the aims of this thesis is to reveal whether these two features should be seen as contradictory. The qualitative investigation of this question has involved interviewing and observing a number of experienced informants who are extremely dedicated and committed to the world of skydiving alongside an investigation of the attitudes and experiences of novice students in order to reveal how individual conceptions of skydiving gradually change as students become immersed within the skydiving community.

The title of this thesis emphasises how learning to skydive involves 'dropping out' and 'diving into' a new social world. In this context, 'dropping out' is used to draw attention to the contrasting attitudes of those within, with those outside the skydiving community. Whilst Reith states that individuals who seem to purposefully threaten their own personal safety are often 'regarded as the height of irresponsibility' (2005: 230) and generally thought to be involved in either 'excessive' or 'abnormal' behaviour, skydivers have a different view of their own management of risk. Rather than risk as being a problem to be avoided, skydivers confidently embraced risk and believed it to be a positive rather than a negative aspect of the sport. 'Diving In' refers to how individuals 'dive in' to a new and completely unfamiliar social world of shared experiences and technical language. As I will suggest, the complete neophyte undergoes a gradual process of socialisation and deliberately internalises the skydiving ethos. Rather than being a strange and unfamiliar environment, many experienced informants claimed the drop zone was almost like a second home, a place where they could socialise and skydive with other like minded

individuals. Internalising the skydiving ethos therefore allowed individuals to differentiate themselves from those outside the skydiving community, create a sense of belonging and offered the chance to construct a new 'desirable' identity as a skydiver.

The title also refers to the trajectory that takes the complete neophyte to being a competent skydiver. All the novice interviewees in this research enrolled on a Ram Air Progression System Static Line Course. This course instructs students how to climb out on a short 'step' attached to the aircraft whilst holding on to the wing strut. When their instructor shouts 'Go', the student lets go of the wing strut and literally drops from the aeroplane. Nevertheless, as the student becomes more competent in their level of ability, their technique for exiting the plane dramatically changes. Rather than precariously holding on to the wing strut and cautiously climbing out on to the 'step', advanced students and skydivers 'dive' head first out of the plane. Those who exit the plane by 'diving' have successfully completed the various stages of student progression and become competent skydivers as opposed to novice parachutists. The progressive stages and social processes involved in *becoming* and being a skydiver will be explored throughout the thesis.

1.3 Organisation of the Thesis

The following chapters provide an in-depth study of the social world of skydiving. Chapter 2 situates the research by providing a detailed conceptual review. This chapter explains how risk has been conceptualised within social theory, and particular attention is given to the work of Beck and Giddens, the two main advocates of the 'risk society'

thesis (Lupton 1999b). Although their work has been extremely influential, some critics have questioned whether the importance of risk is overemphasised in people's every day lives (Elliott 2002). Critics have also pointed out how speculations about the 'risk society' are advanced without grounding their theories in the actual processes of everyday life (Alexander 1996). What becomes apparent in the discussion of the 'risk society' theorists together with those who are critical of such 'sweeping generalisations' (Lupton and Tulloch 2002: 319) is that a thorough analysis of voluntary risk taking is generally absent from the overall debate. Since high-risk activities have the potential to increase our understanding of how individuals view and understand risk (Ferrell et al. 2002) in a society that is supposedly obsessed by risk, (Boyne 2003) this oversight is both remarkable and surprising. The most notable exception to this omission can be found in Lyng's research on 'Edgework'. As I demonstrate, Lyng's work has now encouraged an increasing number of sociologists to investigate risk-taking in a variety of social contexts (see Lyng 2005). Finally I explain how this research takes an alternative approach to investigating the social world of the skydiver and why I believe a developmental approach can make an important contribution to the existing literature.

Chapter 3 justifies and explains the methods used during the research. In order to analyse the behaviours, motivations and experiences of both novice and experienced skydivers the primary sources of data consist of in depth semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observation. This chapter highlights the initial advantages and disadvantages of adopting these methods for conducting research. I also address particular theoretical and practical issues and reflect on various methodological dilemmas

that occurred during the research. By focusing on the overall research process, I explain the particular techniques employed in order to gain trust and built rapport with informants, the dilemma I faced when 'coming out' and becoming an overt as opposed to a covert researcher as well as commenting on the overall interview process. The chapter concludes by describing the inductive approach I adopted to analyse the data and how and why I decided to use the computer software package NVivo to facilitate the process of analysing the data.

Chapter 4 introduces the fieldwork and examines the organisation of social space at the parachute centre where I carried out the research. Here I describe the main areas of social activity at the drop zone and explain the particular areas that are strictly restricted to those with either provisional or full membership to the British Parachute Association. This chapter also provides detailed explanations of the various options available to the complete neophyte interested in taking up the sport. I discuss the important differences between signing up for a tandem jump as opposed to either the Ram Air Progression System (RAPS) and the 'fast track' approach to becoming a skydiver, the Accelerated Free Fall (AFF) course. This chapter also describes the type of aircrafts used at the centre and reflects on my overall impressions of this particular drop zone.

Chapter 5 documents the complex stages and social processes the neophyte goes through before becoming a licensed skydiver. Drawing on data from my fieldwork and interviews this chapter focuses on the social and moral experiences involved with becoming a skydiver. Goffman's (1961) analytical concept of 'moral career' is used to discuss the

students changing attitudes, perceptions and abilities in relation to skydiving. As I demonstrate, the term moral career is particularly useful for highlighting both the progressive stages and the social processes that the complete neophyte goes through before successfully becoming a skydiver. Rather than attempting to discover and reveal what motivates the participants 'high-risk' personality, this chapter suggests an alternative approach by arguing that it is precisely the gradual process of transitions that take the individual from being a student parachutist to a competent skydiver that can be sociologically revealing.

Chapter 6 is primarily concerned with investigating the changing meanings that participants impute to risk and reveals how such meanings relate to skydiving related activities. I present findings from my data in order to show how 'risky' both novice and experienced participants believe skydiving to be, and also to illustrate how changing perceptions of fear and risk can be understood as 'turning points' in the skydiver's moral career. This chapter will provide a detailed description of my first static line jump and accurately describe the various practical contingencies that can and do occur. I will also reflect on a number of dangerous situations that both novice and experienced informants had personally experienced or directly observed whilst at the drop zone. Rather than attempting to draw a distinction between rational and irrational risk assessments, this chapter investigates the meanings that skydivers impute to risk.

Chapter 7 suggests that becoming a skydiver involves far more than learning how to skydive. The findings from this chapter examine the various ways in which identity is

deliberately forged by participating in skydiving. As skydiving is an activity that offers clear stages of progression, becoming a skydiver also offers the possibility of constructing and enacting a new 'desirable' identity. I describe the transitions that occur to the neophyte as they gradually internalise the skydiving ethos. Indeed, the desire to achieve a new identity makes an important contribution to understanding the sheer determination of students to progress through the numerous stages and rites of passage that take the neophyte from being a 'dope on a rope' to a successful and competent skydiver. However, as I suggest, the neophyte's initial attempts at identity construction are often problematic. This chapter also offers a range of examples from my data to examine issues surrounding the importance of trust and how a powerful sense of 'communitas' (Turner 1969) emerges between the regular skydivers. Finally I consider how a high profile skydiving fatality dramatically affected the skydiving community. Not only does such an example highlight the strong bond that exists between skydivers, but this fatality also revealed aspects of being a skydiver that are usually taken-for-granted by those within the skydiving community.

The main findings of this research are summarised and brought together in the concluding chapter. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the arguments made in each findings chapter and to discuss the implications that this research has for understanding the social world of skydiving. This chapter also considers the limitations of the thesis and suggests constructive recommendations for future research projects. As the sustained attractions of voluntarily taking risks may affect far more areas of social life than previously thought, future sociological research may need look beyond obvious

areas of inquiry. As I suggest, in order to determine whether the skills and abilities involved in voluntary risk taking are increasingly valued by individuals in late modern societies, future researchers could provide interesting and insightful data by specifically concentrating on unexpected areas of social life that have been largely ignored by sociologists of risk.

Conceptual Review

2.1 Introduction

William James (1897) argued that it is only by taking risks from one hour to the next that it is possible to experience life. However, in recent decades this positive view of risk has been replaced by the notion that any risk is by definition a problem (Furedi 1999) and as an unwanted feature of life requiring avoidance where possible or control where unavoidable (Fox 1999). This chapter will provide an overview of this latter view of risk and the role it plays in contemporary life. By focusing attention on the 'risk society theorists' I will demonstrate that although thinking in terms of risk has become central to the way in which human agents and modern institutions organise the social world, the analysis of voluntary risk taking is generally absent from the debate. The theoretical considerations given to the current focus on risk avoidance clearly fails to account for the growing numbers of individuals who actively seek experiences that could result in personal injury and even death. This paradox has been adequately highlighted by Celsi et al.: 'Why do individuals who wear seat belts, obtain the best personal and property insurances, use condoms and seek safety and security in the work place' spend a considerable amount of their free time 'risking it all climbing granitic escarpments, hang-gliding or falling earthward at 150 miles per hour in free-fall' (1993: 1). Considering the amount of people who are attracted to taking risks on a voluntary basis, it is surprising that the phenomenon has been largely ignored by sociologists. The most notable exception to sociology's omission has been provided by Lyng's (1990) concept of edgework and, as I shall explain, increasing theoretical attention is finally being paid to voluntary risk taking

in a variety of social contexts. This chapter will seek to explain why voluntary risk taking deserves far 'more serious attention than it has hitherto been accorded' (Boyne 2003: 118), as well as demonstrating why further sociological research is required to explore the previously neglected social worlds of the risk taker. Finally I explain how and why this research adopts a different approach from previous sociological research relating to high risk sports and how I intend to make an important contribution to 'one of the most lively areas of theoretical debate in social and cultural theory' (Lupton 1999b: 1).

2.2 The Concept of Risk

The meaning of the word 'risk' has dramatically changed since the term first began to be used (Luhmann 1993; Strydom 2002). Ewald argues that the notion of risk originally appeared during the Middle Ages and was used to describe the perils associated with maritime expeditions: 'risk designated the possibility of an objective danger, an act of God, a force majeure, a tempest or other peril of the sea that could not be imputed to wrongful conduct' (1993: 226). In this era risk was a term largely applied to natural events such as earthquakes or floods and so excluded consideration of human responsibility. Risk was considered to be a natural occurring (as opposed to a human made) event, and although people could attempt to calculate risks they could not be totally controlled or avoided. The idea of fate being linked to the will of God was strongly associated with the term risk (Lupton and Tulloch 2002a). However, various commentators have argued that by the nineteenth century the notion of fate was replaced with human responsibility (Beck 1992; Castel 1991; Ewald 1993; Giddens 1990). By the nineteenth century the notion of risk was no longer applied only to natural phenomenon or acts of God but was 'also in human beings, in their

conduct, in their liberty, in the relations between them, in the fact of their association, in society' (Ewald 1993: 226). Contingencies and uncertainties were increasingly viewed from a different perspective. The modernist conception of risk assumed that unforeseen consequences were the responsibility of human decisions and actions as opposed to expressing the secret meanings of nature or God (Giddens 1990). Modernist conceptions of risk also incorporated the idea that risks could either be 'good' or 'bad' (Ewald 1991; Douglas 1992). According to Fox, risk became 'a neutral term, concerned merely with probabilities, with losses and gains. A gamble or an endeavour that was associated with high risk meant simply that there was great potential for significant loss or significant reward' (1999: 12). Indeed, at various times risk taking has been characterised as something to be admired in individuals. However, in recent decades risk has been 'co-opted as a term reserved for a negative or undesirable outcome, and as such, is synonymous with the terms *danger* or *hazard*' (Fox 1999: 12, original emphasis). There is now a tendency to represent risk as something that should be avoided at all costs (Furedi 1999; Heimer 1988).

2.3 The 'Risk Society' Thesis

Much of the academic literature on risk implies that individuals living in 'late modernity' are living in fear, being continuously attacked by feelings of anxiety and uncertainty about the risks they are exposed to in their everyday lives. The 'risk society' theorists focus their analysis on processes such as individualization, reflexivity and globalisation and are mainly concerned with how risk relates to the conditions of late modernity. Ulrich Beck (1994, 1995, 1998) formulates a theory of risk that is more detailed than other sociological approaches (see Adams 1995; Douglas and Wildesky 1982; Castell 1991; Luhmann 1993) that attempt to investigate

risk environments in contemporary society. Beck's book *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (1998) has had an 'enormous influence' and is 'already one of the most influential European works of social analysis in the late twentieth century' (Lash and Wynne 1998: 1). As Elliot (2002) has suggested, Beck's sociology of risk is increasingly relevant for sociologists who are concerned with comprehending the complex temporal and spatial figuration of hazards that are invisible to the lay observer such as global warming and culturally induced diseases such as Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE). The recent work of Giddens (1990, 1991, 1994) has also been particularly influential concerning the role of risk in society. In a similar way to Beck, Giddens highlights the distinctive form that reflexivity has taken in late-modernity and acknowledges how personal identity is created through the reflexive shaping of our own biographical narratives. As Lash and Wynne state, there is a 'remarkable parallel between Professor Beck's work and the recent work of Anthony Giddens' (1998: 7) even though 'the major part of this parallel development has been quite independent' (1998: 8). Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens should therefore be considered to be the two main advocates of the 'risk society' thesis (Lupton 1999a).

Ulrich Beck has offered a highly detailed theory of risk and maintains that the notion of risk is having an increasingly prominent role in contemporary society. According to Beck, individuals in contemporary Western societies are now living in a transitional period, a period in which 'industrial society' is becoming a 'risk society'. In this transitional period the production of wealth is accompanied by that of risks which have proliferated as an outcome of modernisation. The main problem for contemporary Western societies should no longer be seen as the *production* and distribution of goods such as wealth and employment, but rather the *prevention* of

'bads' or dangers. The concepts of wealth and power that differentiated classical modernity have been replaced by risk and uncertainty (Boyne 2003). Evidence of increasing uncertainty can be found by observing the debates surrounding risk that have begun to dominate public, political and private arenas. Beck draws attention to both public and private debates that constantly feature discussions relating to risks: 'Everyone is caught up in defensive battles of various types, anticipating the hostile substances in one's manner of living and eating' (1994: 45). Not only do people have a far greater awareness of risk, but they also have to deal with the consequences of risk on an everyday basis.

Beck separates the notion of risk from danger or hazard. Although the hazards of pre-modern society such as famines and plagues clearly had disastrous consequences, no notion of risk can be found in pre-industrial society. No matter how devastating, hazards and dangers in pre-industrial society were experienced as external forces that could not be controlled by human beings. It was only with societal attempts to take control of the steering wheel and head towards a destination that assured predictable security that the consequences of risk become a political issue. Dangers and hazards in late modern societies are now seen as humanly generated and therefore have the potential to be either altered or avoided. It is precisely such intervention that has transformed incalculable hazards into calculable risks.

Beck specifically uses the term 'risk society' for the contemporary era and identifies several distinct features of risk in late as opposed to early modernity. Beck claims that since the middle of the twentieth century, industrial society has been confronted with threats to human life on an unprecedented scale. Due to the global nature of risks,

risks are becoming increasingly difficult to measure, prevent and avoid. The rise of the risk society is caught up with the new electronic global economy where no-one understands the possible global risks and dangers that individuals may be exposed to. Many hazards such as air and water pollution, ionizing radiation and toxic chemicals are open-ended events that have the potential to be far more apocalyptic than in previous eras. Due to their non-localised nature and possible long term effects, risks in late modern societies are not easily calculable, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to compensate those who are affected. As Beck states: 'the injured of Chernobyl are today, years after the catastrophe, not even born yet' (1996a: 31). The result is a 'world risk society' which is caught up with the development of instrumental rational control which extends into all areas of our everyday lives. As Lupton (1999b) has recognised, by presenting an apocalyptic vision of how hazards and dangers have the potential to annihilate the human species, Beck's work is extremely critical of the increasingly hazardous nature of life in late-modernity.

Unlike Habermas, Marx, and various mainstream sociological theories, Beck refuses to associate modernity with industrial society. As Lash and Wynne have suggested, Beck does not subscribe to or share this kind of 'utopic evolutionism, whether its motor be communicative rationality, the development of the means of production, or structural differentiation and functional integration' (1998: 2). For Beck, contemporary society is in a transitional period between industrial society (simple modernization) and advanced modernity (reflexive modernization). Reflexive modernisation is an automatic side affect of modernity rather than 'an option which could be chosen or rejected in the course of political debate' (1996b: 28). Beck therefore defines risk as:

a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernisation itself. Risk as opposed to older dangers, are consequences which relate to the threatening force of modernisation and its globalisation of doubt. They are *politically reflexive*' (1998: 21 original emphasis).

Risk and reflexivity are inescapably linked because anxieties about risks lead to questions about existing practices. As individuals become increasingly aware of the consequences and dangers of risk 'society becomes self critical' (1996b: 81). Reflexive modernization contains two phases (Lupton 1999a). The first phase relates to the automatic transition from simple to advanced modernisation. During this stage risks have not become the subject of sustained public and private debates or political conflict. The next stage consists of industrial society viewing itself as a risk society and recognising the dangers involved with modernity. Such critical reflection upon the dangers of modernity is the difference between industrial society and risk society. Nevertheless, reflexive modernisation is not only about risks, it is also about choice. As Elliott states 'For if risks are an attempt to make the incalculable calculable, then risk monitoring presupposes agency, choice, calculation and responsibility' (2002: 298). In the process of reflexive modernisation an increasing amount of areas are disembedded from the restraints of tradition.

The concept of individualization is central to Beck's view of the risk society and reflexive modernisation. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1996) maintain that modern life is transforming God, science, truth, nature, technology, morality, love and marriage

into what they describe as 'precarious freedoms' (1996: 24). The word transforming is important as they state that there is no such thing as an individualised society, but rather that individualisation 'should be seen as designating a trend' (1996: 24). Individualization is governed by a dialectic of disintegration and reinvention (Elliot 2002). The loss of tradition and the dissolution of previously existing social forms such as fixed gender roles and inflexible class positions suggests that people are increasingly engaging with areas of their lives that were previously dictated by tradition and taken for granted norms. Human beings are now faced with a whole range of possible choices. Opportunities, dangers and uncertainties that were once predefined within the family association, the village community, social estates or classes are now acted upon and negotiated by individuals. Beck sees individualization disintegrating 'the certainties of industrial society as well as the compulsion to find and invent new certainties for oneself and others without them' (Beck 1994: 14). An individual's life course is conceptualised as increasingly flexible and open. Beck (1998: 135) refers to this as 'reflexive biography' and maintains that it is a biography that is self rather than socially produced. People must now produce their own biographies in the absence of fixed, obligatory and traditional norms and certainties. Traditional ways of 'coping with anxiety and insecurity in social-moral milieus, families, marriage and male-female roles are failing. To the same degree, coping with anxiety and insecurity is demanded of the individuals themselves' (Beck 1998: 153). People have to increasingly rely on themselves to discover their own path for a more rewarding life by reflexively constructing their own biographies. Such a 'do-it-yourself biography', Beck argues, is always a 'risk biography' and therefore in a state of permanent danger: 'All metaphysics and transcendence, all necessity and certainty is being replaced by artistry. In the most public and private ways we are becoming –

helplessly – high wire dancers in the circus tent. And many of us fall' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1996: 24).

Individualisation therefore involves a proliferation of new demands placed upon people. Individuals are held responsible for their own lives in areas such as procreation, education, health, work, future welfare and security. People are expected to create their own destinies instead of relying on either traditional expectations or the vagaries of fortune. Bauman captures the increasing demands individuals now have to contend with:

If they stay unemployed, it is because they failed to learn the skills of winning an interview or because they did not try hard enough to find a job or because they are, purely and simply, work-shy. If they are not sure about their career prospects and agonise about the future, it is because they are not good enough at winning friends and influencing people and have failed to learn as they should the arts of self expression and impressing the others (2001: 47).

An interesting example offered by Beck concerns personal relationships. Due to the processes of individualisation, there are now greater conflicts between individuals in intimate partnerships as each pursue their right for autonomy and self-improvement at the same time as maintaining the relationship. The expansion of experimentation and choice is therefore accompanied by high levels of anxiety and insecurity. As Beck maintains, there are both positive and negative elements to the process of individualisation. Rather than being understood as the outcome of broader social

processes, inequalities have become individualised and perceived as 'psychological dispositions: as personal inadequacies, guilt feelings, anxieties, conflicts and neurosis' (Beck 1998: 100). To choose the wrong university degree, mortgage, pension, health insurance, intimate partner, or occupation is now believed to be the fault of the individual. Everyday life now offers a variety of choices and possibilities that have to be defined, planned and revoked accordingly. A 'tightrope biography' has therefore replaced the pre-ordained and unquestioned ties of earlier times (Beck 1999). The previous certainties and securities have been shattered and fragmented into questions that are 'spinning around in people's heads' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1996: 29).

Giddens (1990, 1991, 1994, 1998) has also written at length on the risk and uncertainty that accompany individuals living in 'late modern' society. Giddens agrees with Beck in seeing late modernity as being characterised by transformations in traditional habits and customs, having a radical effect on the meaning of everyday life. Giddens describes the work of Beck in relation to risk as 'quite accurate' (1991: 28) and states that:

Modernity is a risk culture. I do not mean by this that social life is inherently more risky than it used to be; for most people that is not the case. Rather the concept of risk becomes fundamental to the way both lay actors and technical specialists organise the social world. Modernity reduces the overall riskiness of certain areas and modes of life, yet at the same time introduces new risk parameters largely or completely unknown to previous eras (1991: 3-4).

Giddens refers to the 'double edged character of modernity' (1990: 10), or the risks associated with the drive for progress and states that: 'It is a society increasingly preoccupied with the future (and also with safety) which generates the notion of risk' (1998: 27). Hazards and dangers are now conceptualised as 'risks' that humans have the potential to control. The difference refers to human responsibility. In the present era, fears are usually linked to the perception that the actions of humans, rather than Gods, demons or fate, have bought these catastrophes upon themselves (Giddens 1991). Giddens displays a similar position to Beck on the nature of risk in relation to hazards and dangers and how they differ substantially from previous eras. For Giddens, the central features of modernity are institutional and individual reflexivity combined with the reorganisation of time and space and the expansion of disembedding mechanisms which take social relations out of their specific time/space contexts and apply them in wider locales. Disembedding mechanisms are responsible for creating a unique 'risk profile'. Risk is now global in intensity and events now may have potentially disastrous effects that are far more wide-reaching than in previous eras.

Giddens describes modern reflexivity as being different from the reflexive monitoring that has always formed an important part of human activity. Modern reflexivity, for both individuals and institutions, involves awareness of the contingent nature of expert knowledges and social activity (Lupton 1999a). Giddens (1991) recognises that late modernity has a plurality of centres rather than a determinate authority. Religion and other forms of traditional authority have simply become authorities among many others. Society therefore has an 'indefinite pluralism of expertise' (1991: 195). People can no longer simply rely on local knowledges, tradition, religious precepts, habit or

observation of others' practices to provide structure and certainty to their own lives. Rather than following a pre-ordained course, individuals lives are now open to contingencies: 'Living in a "risk society" means living with a calculative attitude to the open possibilities of action, positive and negative, with which, as individuals and globally, we are confronted in a continuous way in our contemporary social existence' (1991: 28). Disputes about risk pervade every aspect of everyday life and individuals are now forced to decide among various possible courses of action by assessing their predicted outcomes. As the self is seen as a reflexive project in late modernity, individuals are increasingly responsible for reflecting upon and altering their own life trajectory. There are an increasing amount of diverse choices to be made: 'the self, like the broader institutional contexts in which it exists, has to be reflexively made. Yet this task has to be accompanied amid a puzzling diversity of options and possibilities' (1991: 3). The concept of lifestyle has become ever more important to selfhood and forces people to constantly negotiate among a range of possible options.

Although there are various significant differences between the work of Beck and Giddens (see Lupton 1999a; Strydom 2002), their theorising of risk in the context of late modernity displays important similarities. Despite writing from 'very divergent backgrounds' (Lash and Wynne 1998: 8), both maintain that the risks produced under conditions of late modernity have changed in character, become globalised and are increasingly difficult to evaluate and prevent. Both theorists also recognise that risks now have serious implications in their impact across space and time. Beck and Giddens are also interested in the political aspects of risk, maintaining that reflexivity should be seen as a primary response to uncertainty and insecurity in late modern societies. Risk is an integral part of a society that has come to reflect upon and

question itself. Rather than being the outcome of fate or destiny the risk society theorists maintain that risk is now a human responsibility. As I have demonstrated, Beck and Giddens mainly focus their attention on the ways in which risk is produced and managed at the macro-structural level of society. Both theorists argue that the risks produced by the technologies of late modernity have increased in magnitude and their work provides a detailed consideration of both the political and social implications that necessarily arise.

2.4 A Universal Risk Subject?

The work of Beck and Giddens on the nature of risk in contemporary societies has undoubtedly been extremely influential. Both theorists have clearly provided interesting insights into the structural and political features that risk has taken in late modern societies. As Elliott has noted:

In the wake of the Chernobyl disaster and widespread environmental pollution, and with ever more destructive weapons as well as human-made biological, chemical and technological hazards, it is surely the case that thinking in terms of risk has become central to the way in which human agents and modern institutions organise the social world (2002: 299).

Nevertheless, Elliott remains sceptical and questions whether the conception of 'risk society' over emphasises the relevance that risk has in people's everyday lives. By extending Turner's (1994) criticisms of the idea that risk has dramatically changed

over the past three centuries¹, Elliott wonders whether the assessment of risk should really be considered as 'the ultimate plight of individuals' in contemporary society (Elliott 2002: 300). Although the speculations of Beck and Giddens are important, neither theorist has considered the diverse ways in which lay people react to risk and their work requires translation into the context of everyday practices. Their perspectives on risk both adopt a broadly macro-sociological approach (Lupton 1999a) and they have been criticised for their view of the overly rationalised and individualised human actor and for their tendency to generalise without considering the role played by gender, class, nationality, age, and ethnicity in the construction of a variety of different risk knowledges (Alexander, 1996; Lash, 1993; Scott et al. 1998). Lash (1993) argues that it is vitally important to take into account how people respond emotively and aesthetically to risk as members of cultural sub-groups rather than atomised individuals. Arguing against the individualisation thesis, he states the importance of group membership, traditional conventions, moral values and social categories for understanding how people respond to risk. Another serious problem with the 'grand theories' of Beck and Giddens is that they have not attempted to test their work empirically. Consequently, their work has been criticised for making broad claims with 'little concern for empirical data' (Williams and Bendelow 1998: 104). Specifically referring to the work of Beck, Alexander maintains that 'Broad tendential speculations are advanced about infrastructural and organisational processes that have little grounding in the actual processes of institutional and everyday life' (1996: 134).

¹ Adams (1995) also criticises Beck for exaggerating the distinction between modern 'risk' and the old-fashioned danger or hazard. According to Adams, risks were no more visible in industrial society.

There is now a growing amount of empirical research (Wynne 1989, 1996; Michael 1996; Lupton and Tulloch 2002; Lupton 2005) that challenges sociological conceptualisations of risk that lack 'a strong empirical base' (Scott 1998: 690). Critics such as Lash (1993) and Wynne (1996) have suggested that the way individuals react to risk should be understood as aesthetic, affective and hermeneutic phenomena grounded in their everyday social relationships. Research conducted by Wynne (1996) has suggested the importance of recognising the way in which lay actors use their own situated knowledge of the world in constructing risk understandings over the course of their everyday lives. Macgill's (1989) research is also interesting in this respect. By investigating the alleged link between radioactive discharges from a nuclear processing installation with the increase of Leukaemia and other cancers among children in the surrounding area, her findings revealed a diverse range of attitudes concerning the supposed risk. According to Macgill, individual risk positions not only resulted from their particular location within the social milieu, but they also served to position them within such milieu. Macgill's study highlights how risk positions support social cohesion and reflect an individual's sense of identity as part of a social group. Concerns about risks can also generate political alliances between people (see Klein 2000), who often unite to fight against those agencies they believe responsible for generating risks such as environmental pollution. Rather than responding as individual agents, research by Wynne (1996), Magill (1989) and Michael (1996) has demonstrated the ways in which people act as members of social groups and social networks in response to risk. Such research therefore challenges and exposes some of the sociological weaknesses of the 'risk society' thesis, and demonstrates the need to address 'issues that bring together theories on risk with empirical research' that moves beyond the idea of a 'universal "risk subject"' (Lupton 1999b: 6) that tends to appear

in the 'risk society' perspective. Nevertheless, even the growing body of empirical research that seeks to question sociologists who make 'sweeping generalisations' about how individuals respond to risk has yet to incorporate any thorough sociological analysis of voluntary risk taking to launch their critique. Indeed, for societies that are imagined to be obsessed by risk, it certainly does seem surprising that 'we find an almost total absence of rigorous inquiry into such activities' (Boyne 2003: 78). As Ferrell et al. have recognised, such activities clearly have the potential to shed 'some critical light on the strong present-day focus on risk avoidance' (2002: 180).

2.5 Voluntary Risk Taking

Although an examination of the general field of risk analysis concentrates on both the assessment and management of technological and natural hazards, thorough analysis of voluntary risk taking is generally absent from the debate (Boyne 2003; Lupton 1999a). As I have suggested, much of the academic work on risk maintains that risk anxiety has become a pervasive feature of everyday life and that individuals are increasingly attacked by feelings of anxiety, vulnerability and uncertainty in relation to the risks they are exposed to. Risk has become a term that is used to describe negative or undesirable consequences and it is precisely this new position towards risk that explains why previously commonplace activities are now treated as a safety issue. Risk has acquired a new cultural prominence (Douglas 1990). As Furedi states 'hardly a week now passes' without the introduction of 'some new risk to the individual being reported, and another safety measure proposed' (1999: 1). Furedi argues that personal safety has become a growth industry:

Every public and private place is now assessed from a safety perspective.

Hospital security has emerged as a central concern of health professionals.

Concern for protecting newborn babies from potential kidnappers indicates that a preoccupation with safety can never begin too soon (1999: 1).

Experts are constantly drawing attention to what people should be fearful of and suggesting various strategies to ensure that people are as safe as possible. Consequently individuals are now specialists in detecting and managing risks on an everyday basis (Elliott 2002). There are concerns over whether mobile phones can cause brain tumours, whether people can trust their own General Practitioners and environmental pressure groups are continuously warning of the potential disastrous effects of global warming and the depletion of the ozone layer. More general health issues also comprise an area which is dominated by debates about risks. Health promoters continuously warn against smoking, drinking alcohol, eating fatty foods and encourage taking regular exercise. People are urged by health promotion authorities to evaluate their risk of succumbing to disease and to change their lifestyle accordingly. Children's safety is also at the centre of risk anxiety (see Scott, Jackson and Backett-Milburn 1998) and an increasing amount of schools have now adopted a 'comprehensive range of cameras, swipe cards and other security measures' that has unnecessarily resulted in schools looking 'more like minimum security prisons' than educational institutions (Furedi 1999: 2). Concerns relating to the exposure of risk range from banning conkers and snow ball fights in schools to 'a wave of near hysteria' (Jackson and Scott 1999: 88) concerning paedophiles and the resulting vigilante behaviour. Public reactions to the satirical programme *Brass Eye*² confirmed

² Although the 'main target of the programme was the reaction to, and media presentation of, paedophilia and the public attitudes thereby encouraged' (The Guardian 05/03/02) the programme caused widespread anxiety and became the most complained about show in British television history. Channel 4 received over 2,000 calls, with a further 1,000 viewers logging complaints with the ITC. The programme also received fierce criticism from children's charities and politicians. The Home Office minister Beverly Hughes claimed the

such hysterical anxiety. Anxiety about food, health, crime, paedophilia and the environment, together with an endless variety of new risks have now become associated with nearly every mundane human experience. As Beck states, even the threat of terrorism should only be considered as the latest risk 'in the evolution of global risk society' (Beck 2004: 144).

Taking into account the strong emphasis placed on avoiding and detecting risk it is hardly surprising that those who actively seek out *unnecessary* risks on a *voluntary* basis are generally viewed as careless and irresponsible individuals who are 'dangerously out of control' (Ferrell 2005: 77). As Lupton (1999a) contends, deliberately taking unnecessary risks reveals an inability to regulate the self. What makes voluntary risk taking so interesting is that such activities are attracting an increasing number of participants who appear to be attracted to risk situations. Although individuals will usually take effective measures to reduce 'the eventfulness – the fatefulness – of his moments' and manage their personal time so that 'courses of action can be managed reliably and goals progressively and predictably realised' (Goffman 1969: 128), there are many activities 'that are consequential, problematic and undertaken for their own sake' (Goffman 1969: 136). Goffman prefers the term 'action' to describe activities where individuals take a practical gamble. For Goffman, 'serious action is a serious ride' (1969: 199) and 'is to be found wherever the individual knowingly takes consequential chances perceived as avoidable' (1969: 145). According to Goffman, there is a romantic division of the world:

programme was 'unspeakably sick' even though she admitted that she had not even watched the programme. The then Home Secretary David Blunkett also condemned the show as 'not remotely funny' before being fully briefed (The Guardian 06/09/01).

On the one side are the safe and silent places, the home, the well regulated role in business, industry and the professions; on the other are all those activities that generate expression, requiring the individual to lay himself on the line and place himself in jeopardy during the passing moment (1969: 204-205).

Although most individuals do take effective measures to reduce the 'eventfulness' of their moments, there are others who are clearly prepared to wager their 'future estate on what transpires in the seconds to come' (Goffman 1969: 137).

Such a practical gamble becomes a routine and mundane aspect of everyday life for individuals whose occupation exposes them to chemicals, equipment, practices and environments which are dangerous to their physical well being (Hunt 1995). Criminals, prostitutes, miners, fire fighters, high steel ironworkers, body guards, social workers, police officers, soldiers, war correspondents and prison officers are all typical examples of occupations where problematic consequences can be faced on an everyday basis. The important point here is that these individuals cannot voluntarily decide to withdraw from chance taking without serious consequences for their occupational status. Nevertheless there are also many fateful activities where:

The individual is under no obligation to continue to pursue once he has started to do so. No extraneous factors compel him to face his fate in the first place; no extraneous ends provide expedient reasons for his continued participation. His activity is defined as an end itself, sought out, embraced, and utterly his own. His record during performance can be claimed as the

reason for participation, hence an unqualified direct expression of his true makeup and a just basis for reputation (Goffman 1969: 136).

There are a variety of 'extreme', 'adrenalin' or 'high-risk' sports (Celsi 1992; Shoham, Rose and Kahle 2000) that are purposely sought out for the experience they provide. As Vidal has accurately observed, we are now living in a society where 'Grannies are parachuting, secretaries are bungee jumping... accountants are big-cliff jumping, doctors are happy to hang-glide and desk bound civil servants dream of spending their time off doing deep powder skiing' (Cited in Boyne 2003: 78). Activities that seek to test the limits of human endurance include a diversity of pursuits such as skydiving, white water rafting, B.A.S.E. jumping (an acronym for Buildings, Antennae, Spans and Earth), swimming with sharks, para-gliding and rock and ice climbing. The actual pursuit of danger purportedly has social psychological benefits (Goffman 1969, Lyng, 1990, Mitchell 1983) and risk is often viewed as a positive feature of the activity. In the words of one extreme sports enthusiast:

It's one thing to be a really good basketball player...But imagine if every time you missed a basket, someone would shoot you in the head. It would be a lot more exciting, right? (Cited in Koerner 1997: 2)

Although extreme sports may not be as dangerous as this quotation suggests, the possibility of actual bodily harm and even death is a very real possibility. Indeed, many participants claim that the risk of death is an exciting challenge to be managed and controlled through their own individual capabilities (Lyng 1990). As Holyfield has recognised:

A growing number of consumers are moving beyond the atmosphere of theme parks...Abandoning the structured terror of mechanization, today's risk connoisseurs seek more settings that allow them to contribute, however real or perceived, to the inherent emotions of fear and excitement (1999: 4).

The main attraction of 'extreme sports' is the courting with danger, fear and excitement together with a sense that they have tested their own personal boundaries and challenged their own 'comfort zone'. As a devoted bungee jumper stated: 'Humans are born to experiment or die' (Cited in Bane 1998: 108) and it is precisely this type of experimentation that supposedly allows the individual to learn about the meaning of existence (Lyman and Scott 1989, Simmel 1997b). Taking risks also allows the chance to challenge and resist the expectations of others. The risk taker may be viewed as an individual who possesses courage in their deliberate contravening of social norms. A person like Ellen MacArthur who sailed around the world single handed, or the mountain climbers Joe Simpson and Simon Yates, who climbed the previously unconquered west face of Siula Grande in the Andes, are seen as unique and rather extraordinary individuals who enjoy the challenge of testing their own abilities and exploring their own personal boundaries. Even eccentric entrepreneurs who make their fortunes by taking financial risks are often admired for their courage and strength together with their determination to confront risks and gamble with uncertainty. Nevertheless, if the risk taker is unsuccessful, admiration can be replaced with hostility and their actions are often seen as being irresponsible. As Lupton (1999a) maintains, the current emphasis on the regulation of self and body and the acquisition of control and personal responsibility has turned risk into a moral enterprise. Alan Robert enjoys the challenge of climbing the world's tallest buildings

without ropes or any other safety equipment; his specialist equipment consists of tape for his fingers and an old pair of climbing boots.

Mr Robert's climb presented a safety risk to the 45,000 people who worked in the tower, any one of whom could have been hit by his body if he had fell off or traumatised by the sight of him hurtling to the ground.

(The Guardian 19/10/02)

Although he has successfully climbed the Eiffel Tower, the Empire State Building and more than thirty skyscrapers world wide, this failed attempt at climbing the tower at Canary Wharf infuriated the owners who described him as 'irresponsible'. Clearly the public response depends on the individuals' success.

Aside from increasing attention and media interest in such high-profile examples, there has also been a dramatic increase in the number of people who regularly participate in high-risk leisure activities. Wheatley makes the following observation:

Walk down any high street and check out the number of adolescents wearing No Fear! caps. It may be hard to risk your life in Milton Keynes...but the aspirant willingness is there.

(The Financial Times 23/05/97)

Such willingness should not just be associated with male adolescents. Not only are more people actively seeking out and experiencing these activities, but their demographics include a vastly growing number of female and older participants (Celsi, Rose and Leigh 1993). At the same time the industries that serve these

particular activities have also grown. This has resulted in vast improvements in the materials which has not only increased safety, but has also lowered the financial costs. For example, skydivers were previously forced to rely on army surplus equipment which provided little control and hard landings. According to Aran, 'being harnessed to a big, heavy parachute that makes mobility without help practically impossible' made the jumpers appear 'somewhat ridiculous' (1974:129). However, such an observation would no longer be appropriate. Skydivers now design and produce their own light weight and attractive parachute equipment together with a vast array of fashionable accessories. A parallel also exists with many other 'extreme' sports. For example, the boats used for white water river rafting are 'stronger and safer than ever before' (Holyfield, Jonas and Zajicek 2005: 176) and the ropes and harnesses used by climbers are safer and more resistant, the equipment lighter and the specific clothing is both warmer and waterproof.

The increasing popularity of 'high-risk' sports is also reflected in various marketing strategies. By incorporating images of risk taking to market their products, companies can appeal to the audiences desire to be different than the average consumer. According to the disillusioned mountain biker Joshua Fruhlinger: 'Like MTV consumed alternative music, every firm in the U.S. is trying to digest extreme sports' (The Financial Times 23/05/97). Alongside prominent youth brands such as Coca-Cola, Pepsi-Cola and Nike, other brands such Honda, Phillips, Guinness, Nissan, Volvo, Audi and Saab have also used the imagery surrounding extreme sports in some of their advertising campaigns. Jeremy Chatterton, a partner in the sports marketing agency *Sports Vision*, explains the appeal of using imagery surrounding extreme sports:

Guinness is using surfing to position the brand to an audience which might be in its forties but is still attitudinally youthful...The same is true of Audi's involvement in wakeboarding and Saab's association with parasailing. It's about linking their brand to people who want to maximise their time on the planet.

(Cited in Campaign 2002: 15)

The magazine *Adventuretime* claimed that in the U.S. alone, extreme sports were generating hardware sales of more than three billion dollars a year, with more than two million participants. Extreme sports are big business. For example, *Eurosports* weekly extreme sport show *YOZ* has a regular audience of 250,000 across 54 countries, and is a fundamental part of its programming and revenue streams. It is no exaggeration to state that the images associated with voluntary risk taking have now invaded everyday life:

Mainstream fashions reflect the close-fitting aerodynamics and bright colours of biking, skiing and climbing clothes. Everyday speech is punctured with clichés that urge us to “go for it!” Daily, the media presents us with images of extreme skiing, bungee jumping and hang gliding...whether one is an actual participant or an individual living vicariously with consumer goods as life-style props, the style and colour of high-risk sports have become a badge of our times. We are all admonished to “just do it”, and “play hard” for “life is short” (Celsi et al. 1993: 2).

Adventure holiday companies such as *Guerba*, *Spirit of Adventure* and *Big Rock* have also become increasingly popular and involve extreme physical endurance and bravery. These type of holidays allow individuals the opportunity of climbing mountains with little or no previous experience or to engage in 'risky' situations such as camping in the Amazon, skiing down the remotest mountains in Tajikistan or even enduring a night in the most dangerous areas of a city like New York. A recent article suggests that such holiday packages are booming:

Every year, thousands of British vacationers hand over good money only to be left wet, cold, hungry and sore. Some have been ripped off by dodgy package tour operators selling holidays in concrete hell-holes on the Mediterranean. But for a select minority, being drenched, frozen, starved and bumped is the point of the whole thing.

(The Economist 10/10/2002)

Stephan Howe of *Outward Bound* says that between 1995 and 2001 the number of adventurers coming to their camps rose from 8,000 to 26,000. *Explore Worldwide*, Britain's largest operator of adventure holidays abroad, maintains that the market has grown by 10-15% a year for the past five years or so. This is a significant increase, especially when compared with the 4-5% growth of the traditional sun, sea and sand holiday packages. According to James Swankie from the outdoor leisure company *Snow and Rock* 'People might choose to go white water rafting in the Himalayas or the Andes – or surfing and windsurfing in Hawaii, where there are 80ft waves. It's being able to have a complete adventure'. Mick Tyler from *The Breakaway Survival School* also boasts that their visitors have doubled over the last three years. He

explains why there has been such a dramatic increase in the popularity of living of the land, jumping of cliffs and white water rafting by suggesting that people are fed up with ordinary holidays. According to Mr Tyler, individuals no longer have any need to think for themselves in everyday life and people are surprised to discover how they were so unaware of the world around them (The Economist 10/10/2002).

The increasing popularity of these activities suggests a growing fascination with the pleasures and excitement involved in voluntarily taking risks. Despite the threat of serious injury and even death, there is no doubt that 'dangerous' or 'risky' pursuits are becoming increasingly popular. Even serious physical injury does not act as a deterrent. A journalist describes the health of a committed high-risk participant:

He has broken various bones: his head, his shoulders, his legs, his fingers, his hands, his teeth. His most serious accident in 1987 when he was hospitalised with his right leg paralysed – seven fractures. 'Accidents have never stopped me', he says. 'Once healed, I always go back to the mountains'.

(Cited in Le Breton 2000: 6)

The BMX enthusiast Matt "The Condor" Hoffman has broken 45 bones and had at least 14 operations. When asked if these injuries have ever made him reconsider he stated:

I figure that if you want to experience all the pleasures and successes life has to offer, you have to be willing to take all the failures and pain. This is why

all the injuries I've sustained have never slowed me down. They are just part of the larger goal.

(Cited in RideBMX On-Line)

As Le Breton has pointed out, part of the satisfaction of engaging in such demanding activities comes from resisting 'the temptation to give up' (2000: 1) and provides a powerful sense of personal mastery and achievement. Various academics have written of the social psychological benefits of engaging in emotionally and physically demanding activities. For example, Csikszentmihalyi (1975) has described the production of 'flow' which occurs when an individual becomes totally engaged in a demanding activity. Csikszentmihalyi describes flow as a state in which:

Action follows upon action accordingly to an internal logic which seems to need no conscious intervention on our part. We experience it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next in which we are in control of our actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment; between stimulus and response; or between past, present and future (1975: 58).

Flow is described as a fluid state that seems atemporal, where one moment flows into the next as personal action and situational demands synchronise and become one. Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi (1988) suggest that flow allows for an individual's true self to emerge. The necessary involvement in the demanding activity overrides the participant's self awareness, provides a release from conscious constraints such as self doubt and results in the temporary realisation of an

unencumbered self. Although flow may be found in ordinary everyday events such as a game of chess, as Holyfield (1999) has noted, being in a 'natural' rather than an artificial purpose built environment may provide the emotional backdrop required to provide a sense of authenticity to the experience. Mitchell (1983) located the 'flowlike' qualities of mountain climbing as existing somewhere between the poles of boredom and anxiety, and could only be achieved when personal skill levels were challenged. As Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi (1988) maintain, for flow to occur the context must not over or under tax the individuals abilities. The ideal situation for flow to occur is when an individual is free to enter a situation and has complete autonomy over their actions (Mitchell 1983). High risk sports provide such opportunities as individuals can participate in a manner that approximates their respective levels of skill and according to Csikszentmihalyi, it is due to the attainment of 'flow' that motivates participants to engage in such activities.

2.6 Researching 'Edgework'

Although there has been extensive physiological³ and psychological⁴ research on high-risk behaviour, voluntary risk taking has only recently caught the attention of

³ Physiological research has primarily focused on the respiratory, circulatory and neuro-endocrine systems and has attempted to measure the effect of stress and fear on participants engaged in high-risk pursuits (see Anfilogoff et al. 1987; Lipscombe 1998).

⁴ There has been extensive psychological work that has attempted to explain the phenomena. During the first part of the nineteenth century, risk taking was viewed as evidence of pathology (Adler 1930; Deutsch 1926; Fenichel 1939) and such characterisations 'of the psychologically irrational-abnormal-pathological genre are still applied with considerable regularity to high-risk activities and to those individuals who engage in them' (Lyng and Snow 1986: 158). The first attempts to examine the willingness of some individuals to take unnecessary risks relied on the existence of personality types. Personality types that either actively sought or retreated from high-risk activities have been conceptualised as the 'narcissistic' and 'anaclitic' (Freud 1957), 'extrovert' and 'introvert' (Jung 1971), 'schizoid' and 'cycloid' (Kretchmer 1936) and 'counterphobic' and 'phobic' (Fenichel 1939). Other writers have used concepts such as 'arousal-seeking' (Kerr and Svebak 1989) or 'eudaemonists' (Bernard 1968) to solely focus their analyses on the personality types that actively seek high-risk experiences. Zuckerman (1971, 1974, 1979, 1994) prefers the

sociologists. As Heimer (1988) noted, the question of *why* individuals decide to engage in high-risk pursuits was largely considered to be outside the domain of sociological enquiry. Apart from the work of Goffman (1969) and Mitchell (1983) few social theorists recognised the increasing significance of voluntary risk taking. The most notable exception to 'sociology's omission' is the work of Lyng (1990, 1998, 2005a, 2005b). Although various sociological studies have now investigated various high risk pursuits (see Holyfield 1999; Hunt 1995; Lois 2005; Reith 2005) much of this work has been directly influenced by Lyng's sociological approach which questioned the assumption that it is possible to explain high-risk behaviour by discovering and identifying 'internal' forces within the individual. As the 'factors which motivate people are also socially determined' Lyng maintained that the self

construct of 'sensation-seeking' which has been extremely influential for examining individuals who need varied and novel experiences that incorporate thrill and adventure (see Corin 1991; Goma 1991 and Straub 1982). Zuckerman argues that individuals have varying needs for sensation and people will therefore attempt to seek differing amounts of stimulation that is necessary to avoid boredom or lack of arousal. Zuckerman uses the Sensation Seeking Scale (SSS) to measure such willingness to take physical and social risks, and subsequent research has also suggested that there are differences among individuals in their tolerance and preference for high levels of stimulation (Farley, 1985; Feiji, Orlebecke, Gazendam and Van Zuilen 1985). The Sensation Seeking Scale has been criticised for failing to explain why people only take risks in certain areas of their lives, and for ignoring the 'role played by the desire for achievement and mastery' (Slanger and Rudestam 1997: 356). However, the main criticism of this type of research is that assumes risk takers to be predisposed towards this kind of behaviour and is subsequently treated as if it has no interdependence with a historically specific and sociocultural environment (Lyng and Snow 1986; Lyng 1990). Researchers such as Balint, (1959) and Klausner (1968) are all critical of Zuckerman's theory of 'sensation seeking' and have attempted to provide alternative explanations by identifying various psychological, physiological and neurological factors that give rise to high-risk behaviour. Klausner (1968) uses the term 'stress seeking' which is defined as 'behaviour designed to increase the intensity of emotion or level of activation of the organism' (1968: 139). Stress seeking is used by Klausner to describe behaviour that places individuals in dangerous or threatening situations to satisfy a need for arousal in order to develop capacities for competent control over environmental objects. Farberow (1980) maintains that it is necessary to conceptualise high-risk activities as 'indirect self destructive behaviour' (ISDB), which originates from Karl Menninger's development of Freud's 'death instinct'. According to Menninger, activities such as drug and alcohol addiction, self mutilation and forms of anti-social behaviour should be considered to be unconscious forms of self destruction. Farberow (1980) extended this conceptualisation to include leisure pursuits that involve risk-taking and characterises risk taking as typically hedonistic and narcissistic whereas other researchers (Achte 1980; Filstead 1980; and Litman 1980) all maintain that such activities provide a defence mechanism against depression and despair.

should be seen as a social product that cannot be understood apart from 'one's social environment' (Lyng and Snow 1986: 161). Taking this into account, Lyng and Snow believed that much of the psychological research should be viewed as problematic:

virtually all of the [psychological] variants are rooted in a common pre-supposition: that the tendency to engage in high-risk behaviour is ultimately a manifestation of deep-seated "motive forces" in the human psyche, forces that may have a biological or neurological basis (1986: 159).

Unsatisfied by the numerous psychological approaches to understanding high risk behaviour, Lyng proposed 'an alternative social psychological theoretical framework' to explain the attraction of taking risks on a voluntary basis (Lyng 1990: 854). Such an alternative attempted to conceptualise 'the proximate causes of high-risk behaviour in terms of general social psychological variables rather than idiosyncratic motives or personality characteristics' (Lyng 1990: 854). The classifying concept of 'edgework' was originally suggested in order to provide a much needed sociological alternative. The term 'edgework' is taken from the late Hunter S. Thompson (1967, 1980, 1993) who used the term to describe a whole range of human experiences: 'I could see he was on the edge. That fearful intensity that comes at the peak of a mescaline seizure' (Thompson 1993: 48). Thompson's journalistic and ethnographic work vividly explored the boundaries between consciousness and unconsciousness, sanity and insanity and life and death. He also provided highly descriptive work relating to his own drug induced experiences. An example of one such edgework experience specifically refers to the deliberate consumption of illegal substances:

I just like to gobble the stuff right out in the street and see what happens, take my chances, just stomp on my own accelerator. It's like getting on a racing bike and all of a sudden your doing 120 miles per hour into a curve that has sand all over it and you think "Holy Jesus, here we go", and you lay it over till the pegs hit the street and metal starts to spark. If you're good enough, you can pull it out, but sometimes you end up in the emergency room with some bastard in a white suit sewing your scalp back on.

(Hunter S. Thompson cited in Lyng 1990: 858)

By focusing attention to aspects of high-risk pursuits that had previously been neglected, the concept of edgework allowed Lyng (1990) to generate important theoretical implications of risk taking in contemporary society. Lyng (1990) argues that it is possible to categorise two types of edgework. The first category involves an attempt to discover the endurance limits of specific technology and the second category involves testing the limits and exploring the boundaries of both body and mind. The individuals who participate in these activities must have the ability to avoid being paralysed by fear and possess the capacity to focus attention and action in order to survive the experience. As Thompson maintained, edgework involves skilled performances: 'you have to be good when you take nasty risks, or you'll lose it, and then you're in serious trouble' (cited in Lyng 1990: 858). Activities that can be described as edgework involve a direct and observable threat to an individual's physical and mental welfare:

The archetypical edgework experience is one in which the individual's failure to meet the challenge at hand will result in death or, at the very least, debilitating injury.

(Lyng 1990: 857)

The challenge of edgework is to sustain control over a situation that the majority of people would consider uncontrollable. The definitive edgework experience involves death or at least serious injury if the individual fails to meet the challenge. Specifically referring to rock climbing without safety equipment, a specialist in climbing explains that:

When climbing solo, you experience moments of intense stress and you manage to dominate them...I would carry on doing solo just for the pleasure of this feeling of freedom and the unique or even extreme sensation that goes with climbing without safety equipment.

(Cited in Le Breton 2000: 4)

Although the characteristics and sensations vary in their intensity from one type of edgework to another, the feelings are clearly more dramatic in life and death situations. According to Lyng (1990), some edgeworkers enjoy the challenge of searching for more purified forms of edgework. Climbing without safety equipment or skydiving whilst under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs are both relevant examples and highlights the commitment that some individuals have to move as close as possible to the edge without falling. Edgework should therefore be understood as 'a

type of experimental anarchy in which the individual moves beyond the realm of established social patterns to the very fringes of ordered reality' (Lyng 1990: 882).

The first attempt to empirically analyse voluntary risk taking conceptualised as edgework was undertaken by Lyng and Snow (1986) who studied a group of skydivers. Jumping out of a plane at 13,000ft was clearly considered to be a variant of what Thompson referred to as edgework. As Lyng and Snow state 'jumping under the influence of drugs, experiencing and dealing with parachute malfunctions, jumping into landing areas that are geographically restricted, deploying one's canopy at a low altitude' are all examples of how the individual jumper has the opportunity to move 'a little closer to the "edge."' (1986: 169). This phenomenologically informed research suggested that individuals engaged in high-risk behaviour because they found 'the experience to be seductively appealing' (2005: 18). Risk was actively sought out as 'an end in itself' rather than 'a means to an end' (2005a: 5) and could be seen as a response to the overly determined character of modern social life (Lyng 1990).

A general feature of activities that can be described as edgework is that they all involve the use of specific individual capacities. None of the skydivers that Lyng and Snow (1986) studied referred to skydiving as a form of 'edgework', but they did believe in the existence of a certain type of individual. Such individuals believe they have the skills required for "crowding the edge" (Lyng and Snow 1986: 171), an experience which produces 'a sense of "self-realization," "self-actualization," or "self-determination"' (Lyng 1990: 860). Indeed, edgeworkers generally considered the opportunity to use their personal skills the most rewarding aspect of the overall experience. Edgeworkers referred to their specific aptitudes as a distinctive form of 'mental toughness' (Lyng 1990) and is often believed to be an innate ability. This

research also suggested that those who are involved in these activities have a high regard for their own capabilities compared to those outside edgework circles. These observations are supported by Wolfe's (1979) journalistic ethnography of the test-pilot subculture. According to Wolfe, pilots refer to individuals possessing the 'right stuff' when they consider an individual to have a basic survival instinct. His study of individuals who intentionally place themselves in danger revealed that test-pilots believed those with the 'right stuff' would be protected from serious accidents. If a fatal crash occurred, the pilot clearly did not possess the right stuff in the first place. Lyng and Snow observed a similar attitude within the skydiving community. According to their research, death and serious injury are not considered to be the results of risks that were outside anyone's ability to manage and control. For the skydivers in their sample, it indicated that not everyone possesses the innate survival capacity required. Such beliefs are associated with an elitist orientation amongst edgeworkers who argued that only a select minority have the unique edgework qualities. Participation in activities that can be described as edgework therefore allows individuals the opportunity to develop their skills and experience 'intense sensations of self-determination and control' (2005a: 5).

In an overly rationalised social world where everyday life is full of suffocating routines and mundane rituals (Cohen and Taylor 1993), the innate character of focused concentration in edgework can be seen as a rare and possibly unique experience. People feel self-actualised when they experience a direct sense of personal authorship over their actions and when their behaviour is not directed by the normative or structural constraints of their particular social environment. The influential concept of 'edgework' has now been applied to investigate a diverse variety of social phenomena outside the realm of high risk leisure activities. A recent

edited collection (Lyng 2005) demonstrates the potential of 'edgework' to account for a wide range of situations that have the potential to transgress everyday boundaries. The sociology of voluntary risk taking has now incorporated investigations into anti-globalisation protestors, juvenile delinquency, drug use, intellectual and business risk taking and terrorism (see Lyng 2005). The analysis of voluntary risk taking, in all its forms, has now been placed firmly on the sociological agenda. Although the 'uninitiated' may adamantly believe edgeworkers to be immature and unfocused misfits who are 'intent on their own imminent destruction' (Ferrell 2005: 77), a growing amount of empirical research has revealed that individuals are attracted to high-risk behaviour for the qualitative experience that is its central feature. Ferrell's (2005) work on the relationship between edgework activities and anarchism is particularly revealing in this respect. As Ferrell points out, participating in activities that can be conceptualised as edgework often incorporates far more than the pleasure and excitement that accompanies such activities. Not only do edgeworkers receive 'a body blast of intense pleasure' but participation in such activities can literally invert 'the usual hierarchies that govern daily life' by constituting "visceral revolts" against the order of things, sensual uprisings against boredom, tedium, alienation, and regulation.' (Ferrell 2005: 84). In this respect, Ferrell argues, the activities of a diverse range of edgeworkers who are attracted to extreme experiences (such as skydivers, graffiti artists, sadomasochists and anti-globalisation protestors) offer a type of resistance to the dehumanising constraints and routine degradations of everyday life. Moments of human engagement are therefore invented to provide individuals with an experience they are usually denied: an opportunity for creative and self-realising action (Ferrell 2001, 2005; Lyng 1990, 2005).

2.7 Situating the Research

Even though political institutions in Western societies have attempted to reduce the risks of injury in the workplace and in nearly all other areas of social life, a growing number of individuals attempt to remove society's safety harness and actively search out new and exciting activities. Indeed, it is this contrast between the public agenda to reduce the risk of injury or death with some individual's private agenda to increase such risks that originally persuaded Lyng (1990) to encourage and convince sociologists that this area of social life deserves attention. Despite the growing amount of research relating to voluntary risk taking, such activities warrant far more attention from ethnographers and qualitative sociologists (Boyne 2003). The majority of work on high-risk sports has primarily relied on questionnaires and surveys to investigate the phenomena (see Jack and Ronan 1998; Lipscombe 1996, 1998, Shoham, Rose and Kahle 2000; Sterlini and Bryant 2002). Such methods inevitably create specific questions *before* collecting data from individuals and can easily neglect the very meanings and understandings the subjects, rather than the researchers, employ. Without the benefit of conducting participative fieldwork it is difficult to adequately explore a social world where members actively construct and negotiate their own meanings in relation to their chosen activities. The ethnographic research conducted by Lyng and Snow (1986) is clearly an exception to this criticism. Nevertheless, as this research primarily focused on the attitudes of experienced participants there still remains a tremendous opportunity to add significantly to what is already known about this social world.

This research will look beyond the immediacy of excitement and adrenalin rushes and analyse the motivations, behaviours and experiences of individuals who voluntarily

seek high-risk activities in specific social contexts. The examination will be given substantive focus through the empirical investigation of skydiving, which has obvious prominence as high-risk behaviour. Building upon previous sociological research that has explored high-risk activities, the following chapters of this thesis consider the various reasons why individuals are attracted to an activity that is close to the metaphorical edge by adopting an alternative approach. The work will describe the complex processes and stages an individual has to go through before becoming a licensed skydiver. Drawing on data generated from conducting fieldwork, together with a number of in-depth interviews, I will seek to examine what previous sociological research has overlooked: the embodied techniques and procedures that take the individual from being a complete novice to a competent skydiver. This research will also adopt a different approach than those studies that claim to have uncovered the various personality types and individual predispositions that motivate certain people to participate in high risk sports (see Bernard 1968; Klausner 1967; Ogilvie 1974). By focusing attention on the social and moral (Goffman 1961) experiences involved in becoming a skydiver I intend to reveal the ways in which the neophyte's attitudes towards skydiving change as they become immersed within the skydiving community.

Adopting a developmental approach (Becker 1953) will also allow an investigation into the participants changing perceptions of fear and risk and to consider the extent to which novice and experienced skydivers recognise their activities to be particularly dangerous or extreme. Nevertheless, I will not attempt to draw a distinction between rational and irrational assessments of risk. Adopting a similar approach to Tulloch and Lupton (2003) I will be concerned with investigating the meanings that are imputed to risk and how these meanings relate to skydiving related activities. Rather than

viewing risk as static or objective phenomena, I intend to highlight how perceptions of 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' risks are constantly negotiated and serve to maintain symbolic boundaries within the skydiving community. Particular attention will therefore be given to current debates concerning identity in order to consider the importance of group membership in structuring responses to risk. Here I will be concerned with the gradual process of socialisation that occurs to the neophyte when they enter the social world of skydiving in order to examine how participation provides the opportunity to construct and actively negotiate a desirable social identity. As I shall demonstrate, becoming a skydiver involves far more than learning to skydive. The positive social relationships formed at the drop zone not only encourage continued participation but also ratify participants identity as a skydiver and provide a strong sense of 'communitas' (Turner 1969) that has the potential to transcend everyday life. This research aims to determine how successful Lyng's classifying concept of 'edgework' is for understanding high-risk behaviour and also intends to make an important contribution to the limited empirical research that challenges sociologists who tend to make generalisations about how individuals respond to risk in their everyday practices. The following chapters aim to make an important empirical contribution to the contemporary debate.

Methods and Data

3.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to describe and justify the methods that have been employed to conduct this research. Specific attention will be given to theoretical and practical issues relating to ethnographic observation and semi-structured interviews. Here I will be concerned with outlining the initial advantages and limitations of using these particular methods as well as reflecting on several methodological dilemmas that occurred during the research. I will therefore be focusing upon the overall research process, the techniques employed in order to gain access and build trust at the drop zone, the transition that occurred after 'coming out' in order to conduct overt rather than covert research, and ethical issues inherent in the research. Finally I seek to describe the inductive approach I adopted to analyse my data and to explain how and why I used the computer software package NVivo to facilitate this process.

3.2 Background and Research Design

This research adopts a constructionist epistemology and seeks to provide an interpretive understanding of the world of skydiving. Rather than believing that an objective truth or meaning is somewhere 'out there' waiting to be discovered (see Addelson 1990; Lyman 2002; Rorty 1999), a constructionist epistemology focuses on how the meanings that social actors employ to understand the world are socially assembled and constantly negotiated throughout the course of everyday life. From this perspective, all meaningful reality is viewed as being contingent on intersubjective human practices, and is actively constructed in and through interaction between

human beings and their environment (Crotty 1998). This epistemological position informed the combined research methods I employed in order to describe and analyse all levels of the skydiving experience.

Three main methods were used throughout the research. Participant and non-participant observation was conducted at a local Drop Zone for a period of fifteen months (March 2003 – June 2004). This strategy allowed the opportunity to be a direct witness to relevant events, appreciate the skills and routines skydivers need to master and to generally build rapport with skydivers at the parachute centre. A considerable amount of time was also spent with skydivers away from the drop zone. Informal gatherings proved to be a rich source of data (see Celsi et al. 1993; Lyng and Snow 1986) as it was precisely in such settings that skydivers expressed their feelings and motivations for their prolonged participation. In addition, fourteen in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted varying in length between one and three hours. The participants ranged from 20 to 53 years of age and five of the interviewees were women. This sample reflects the high proportion of male skydivers at the drop zone. Data from my fieldwork was therefore supported by a series of interviews and the data from both my fieldwork and interviews were used to ‘illuminate the other’ (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 131). This strategy complimented my active membership role (Alder and Alder 1987) and enabled me to ‘tease out participants background expectancies and systematically question their routinised understandings’ (Monnaghan 2002: 697). The interviewees were specifically chosen to represent the differing stages of progression within a skydiving career and the recruitment of interviewees was facilitated by gaining the trust of informants whilst conducting

fieldwork. All interviews were based on the principle of informed consent (Homan 1991) and guided by the B.S.A. Research Ethics Code.

Finally, documentary sources such as the British Parachuting Association reports, manufacturer's brochures, skydiving magazines, skydiving related websites, training films and skydiving videos and DVDs. These secondary sources provided 'checks' (Neuman 1994) on the data provided by interviewees together with my own observations whilst conducting field work.

All interviews, field notes and documentary sources were continually analysed for categories and emerging themes. Analysis of transcripts and field notes was facilitated by the use of NVivo software, and the analysis was an on-going process throughout the period of the research following the interviews and field work. In the next section of this chapter I describe the practical achievement of data collection and analysis in more detail.

3.3 Participant observation

From the outset I appreciated that this research required a selection of methods that would enable a thorough exploration of the world of skydiving in order to explain, reveal and understand the meanings that skydivers use to make sense of their pre-occupation. As skydivers constantly manage, manipulate and negotiate meanings and interpretations which are often concealed from the viewpoint of outsiders (see Douglas 1976), I needed to focus on the everyday life as seen from the perspective of the skydivers themselves. To investigate and uncover this 'fundamental reality' (Jorgensen 1989), it was necessary to directly immerse myself in the world of skydiving and assume the role of the actors being researched. As Fontana maintains,

'becoming involved in the phenomena to be studied is generally the only effective way to penetrate the fronts that often hide the actions of human beings' (1980: 173). Despite the various criticisms of participant observation (see Easthope 1974; Brown 1973) no other method would have allowed such access to the social world of skydiving (Suttles 1967) or to generate findings and theoretical insights directly based on concrete human realities (Benson and Hughes 1983). In contrast to the survey, which necessarily is planned on the basis of what the researcher expects to discover, participant observation creates possibilities for encountering unexpected and unanticipated discoveries. Participant observation also provides more flexibility than other methods such as questionnaires. Not only do the latter methods fail to capture how individuals behave in real life situations, but they also restrict the informant's responses by insisting on a set of pre-arranged responses or by imposing limits upon the amount of space for a response. As Whyte (1984) has recognised, the method of participant observation can offer learning opportunities and insights that cannot be duplicated by any other method.

My role as a participant observer was to explore the dynamics of taken for granted behaviour and to discover, observe and understand the values, norms, rules of conduct and categories that typify the skydiving community from the inside. This research is therefore grounded in the point of view of those within the skydiving community rather than the result of theoretical contemplation. The methodological decision to 'get inside the defining process of the actor in order to understand his action' (Blumer 1986: 16) was not taken lightly. Capturing the here and now of typical, routine and mundane everyday life at a drop zone would require a serious commitment over an extended period of time. Whilst that was always my guiding commitment, I was fully aware that the first days and even weeks in the field would provide little or no data of

lasting value (Whyte 1984). It would also take time and energy to adjust to an unfamiliar environment, make contacts and generally gain the acceptance and trust of the skydivers at the centre. Even after the field work had been completed, I was under no illusion concerning the months of analysis that would still be required after my initial observations. I was aware of May's warning that participant observation could be 'the most personally demanding and analytically difficult method of social research to undertake' (1997: 138), but as far as I was concerned it was the only approach that could 'get close' to the social world of skydiving in order 'to know what is going on in it' (Blumer 1969: 38). Lyng (1998) has also highlighted the importance of participant observation for penetrating the meanings surrounding high-risk activities. Reflecting on his research on 'edgework', he recalled how skydivers were unsympathetic to his initial enquires:

When I asked him to talk about the freefall experience, he responded, "If you want to know what it's like, then do it!" It became clear that the nature of my study would dictate the use of research methods orientated to the lived experience of my subjects. I would have to become a participant observer in order to penetrate the meaning structures surrounding these activities (1998: 222).

In a similar way to Lyng, I also found that many skydivers believed that the unique experience of skydiving was ineffable. Not only was it an experience that could not be put into words, but skydivers firmly believed that only other skydivers could possibly understand their experiences. One of my informants actually stated that the only reason he was talking to me was because I was 'learning to do it' myself. Although I

would have to overcome my fear of heights, and I might have to engage in situations that could compromise my safety, such a strategy was essential throughout my research for gaining trust with both neophytes and experienced skydivers at the drop zone.

3.4 Access and Field Work

Although other researchers (see Hammersley and Atkinson 1995) have experienced serious problems negotiating access, to a certain extent gaining access to the local drop zone was a matter of 'turning up'. Nevertheless, whilst no process of negotiation was required in order to enrol for the R.A.P.S. training course, access is rarely as straightforward as it may initially appear (Burgess 1984; Douglas 1976). As Hammersley and Atkinson explain:

The problem of access is not resolved once one has gained entry to a setting, since this by no means guarantees access to all the data available within it. Not all parts of the setting will be equally open to observation, and not everyone may be willing to talk (1995: 79).

I recognised that simply turning up was only the first stage of a complex and drawn-out process of gaining access to this particular research setting. The first dilemma I needed to resolve was whether I should adopt an overt or covert strategy to conduct the field work. After much deliberation I finally decided that I would start my research by adopting a covert strategy as I believed that telling the whole truth at this stage could influence the behaviour of the skydivers at the centre. Even though I almost felt that I should reveal my intentions from the start of my research, I decided not to 'come out' in order not to interfere with the 'normal' course of activities at the

drop zone (also see Humphreys 1970; Wallis 1977). After registering for the R.A.P.S. training course the Chief Central Instructor believed that I was simply someone who was interested in taking up skydiving. As the following extract from my fieldnotes demonstrates:

I was tempted to explain that I was carrying out research on skydiving, and I was prepared to offer a detailed explanation of my research interests. No one else was waiting to speak to him. He was enthusiastically explaining the various disciplines of skydiving and asked me why I was interested in taking up the sport. This was a perfect opportunity for being completely open and honest. I resisted the temptation. I decided against providing a detailed summary of my research and informed him that I had always liked the idea of skydiving, that it was something that I had wanted to experience for years but never got round to. Such an account was far from the truth, and I certainly would not be signing up for a static line parachute jump if it was not for my research. I felt my deceit was justified and my justifications were similar to many other ethnographers. I did not want to be treated differently from anyone else and I was worried about causing any unnecessary suspicion.

Although I was aware of the serious ethical issues concerning covert research (see Bulmer 1982, Erikson 1967, Murphy and Dingwall 2001, Rosenhan 1973) I reassured myself that I would not be adopting a covert role throughout the whole of my fieldwork. Aside from ethical concerns, the adoption of a covert role for the entire

research would have also placed severe constraints on my findings. I would have access only to situations in which I directly participated and I would not be in a position to arrange any interviews. Using a similar technique to Wallis (1977) my covert role was an initial, temporary and convenient strategy for understanding the ways in which the complete novice is processed and how they are treated by other skydivers at the centre. For the first nine weeks I adopted a covert role. I attended the training course, talked and listened to other students and skydivers, made several static line jumps and asked as many questions as possible. Although Wolf (1991) admitted to asking too many questions whilst conducting research on bikers, the majority of skydivers and instructors expected such questions from enthusiastic students, and as far as I am aware my continuous questioning did not cause any suspicion. I adopted a 'participating-in-order-to-write' approach (Emerson et al. 2001: 356) and orientated my 'consciousness to the task of remembering' significant events (Lofland and Lofland 1995: 90). I trained myself to make mental notes of my surroundings, impressions, and conversations in order to write up detailed fieldnotes. Whilst in the field I also secretly made jotted notes (Emerson et al. 1995) in order to assist my memory for writing up detailed accounts. Such jotted notes consisted of particular scenes, key words, specific terminology and even phrases. Thankfully I did not have to resort to the toilet to make these notes (see Ditton 1977). On one occasion I used an unused classroom at the drop zone, but I usually made notes in my car which I always parked away from the main hangar to avoid detection. I justified my short absences in a variety of ways: 'I'm just going to get my sandwiches from the car'; 'I'm just going to make a quick phone call'; 'I think I left my gloves in the car, back in a moment'; 'I've left my money in the car' etc. I learned how to jot down important notes extremely quickly, and such a strategy was useful for recalling

information and reconstructing events at the end of the day. My observations as a covert researcher generated pages of detailed fieldnotes and I started to successfully build rapport with other students at the centre.

After several weeks I was also on first name terms with some of the instructors who viewed me as a committed student, willing to attend the revision training even though the weather restricted the opportunity to jump. Nevertheless, apart from the occasional brief conversation with several of the regular skydivers, my observations were largely restricted to the training procedures, other novice students and various instructors. In order to gain access to the regular skydivers I would have to take my research to the next stage and adopt an overt approach to my fieldwork. Making this transition generated a certain amount of anxiety as I was worried about how my fellow students, instructors and skydivers would react when they knew I was conducting research. I spent a considerable amount of time thinking up an appropriate and convincing 'telling' story (Goffman 1989) in order to make this necessary transition as smooth as possible.

I needed to work out a telling story that was not an 'absolute lie' (Goffman 1989: 127) and would not make my informants unduly suspicious (see Hamm 2005). I found Douglas's (1976) suggestions particularly interesting in this respect. According to Douglas there are various non threatening strategies a researcher can adopt. One such strategy involves deliberate misperception:

One can play the boob to look like he's no threat and to flatter their pretensions to intelligence. This misperception is enhanced by using the hair-brained academic ploy, which consists of the researcher telling them he's

doing a theoretical study that is so abstract it could never hurt or help anyone – and couldn't even be understood by anyone except hair-brained academics. It is especially effective to tell them in some detail how, "We're doing a phenomenological-ethnomethodological reduction of your natural attitude in order to display and document the invariant interpretive procedures which are constitutive of the transcendental-ego and hence of intersubjective cognition." If that isn't good enough, the researcher can tell them that he will, of course, submit all of his findings to the members for "triangulated member validations" and the conclusions, once cleared by them, will have no substantive or practical relevance to anyone (Douglas 1976: 170).

Although I felt confident that I could successfully adopt this strategy, I needed to convince skydivers that the research was interesting so they would agree to be interviewed. As I had already adopted a covert role, I also felt that I should now be more open about my research rather than deliberately generating confusion surrounding my intentions. Nevertheless, I did not want the skydivers to realise that I was only interested in studying them as I could be denied access to certain social settings, activities, and conversations. Here Douglas' advice is particularly helpful:

...we have found that probably the most effective way of convincing the members that one is not a major risk to them is to use the various ploys of indirection. The best way for a researcher to gain entrée when they are afraid of research is to convince them that he is not really studying them, even though he is seeking permission to do just that. He tries to show them that he is studying them only because he is really studying something else with which they are slightly involved (1976: 170).

Taking Douglas' advice, I devised a telling story based on indirection. I would inform the skydivers that I was studying extreme sports as opposed to skydiving itself. As I was researching this area, I would claim that I had decided to participate myself and skydiving seemed like the most obvious and accessible choice. I would still maintain that I had always been attracted to skydiving, but simply add that as I was researching extreme sports I now had a perfect opportunity to 'give it a go'. If I was asked why I had not informed anyone over the past nine weeks, I would claim that I had not decided whether my central empirical focus should be on rock climbing, white water rafting or skydiving, and although it was a hard decision, I had finally decided that skydiving had the most potential. This technique would allow me to ask skydivers if they would be willing to be interviewed, but they might also believe that the world of skydiving was only part of my research. Such an approach seemed plausible, although I felt uncertain as to how successful this story would work in practice. I convinced myself of my own story and rehearsed it until I was confident enough to convincingly use it during my fieldwork. It was now just a matter of waiting for the right opportunity.

Such an opportunity took me by surprise and occurred shortly after I finally settled on my story. After my fourth jump one of the skydivers approached me and explained how I had flared the parachute slightly early and asked me other questions relating to my jump. Such coaching was not unusual and as this skydiver (Steve) worked in the reception, he knew how many times I had jumped and had previously offered encouraging comments relating to my progression. He informed me that my technique was 'pretty good' for my fourth jump and asked if I was staying around for a drink in the bar. Such an invitation had not previously occurred. I casually replied 'yeah' and

stated how I deserved a drink after jumping out of a plane. As I removed my parachute from my back and took off the skydiving overalls I knew that this was the opportunity I had been preparing myself for. I rehearsed the story in my mind as I watched a group of skydivers come in to the main hangar after the last lift of the day. I started to feel increasingly nervous about what I was about to do. I tried not to think about the potential, and possibly disastrous, consequences. As it was Sunday, there were only a few skydivers in the bar. I bought a drink and pre-occupied myself by looking at the various skydiving photographs scattered around the bar. After a few minutes Steve came over and sat on a stool next to me. He ordered a drink and we continued our conversation about skydiving. He then asked me why I decided to take up the sport. My response was direct and to the point: 'Well, I'm actually carrying out research on extreme sports and I've always liked the idea of skydiving so I thought I'd give it a go'. Steve reacted positively and I provided a brief summary of my research interests. He asked if I had interviewed anyone at the drop zone and I explained how I intended to approach skydivers over the next few weeks. I asked him if he thought skydivers at the centre would agree to being interviewed: 'Yeah, I mean some won't, but most skydivers I know are pretty egotistical! I don't think you'll have a problem getting people to talk about themselves.' Steve agreed to being interviewed and said that he was intrigued as to what kind of questions I would ask. He also mentioned the names of various skydivers who I should talk to: 'Have you met X, he'll be good to talk to' - 'How about Y, he had a really dangerous malfunction the other day' etc. I certainly was not expecting such helpful advice, and I hardly had to use any of my telling story to justify myself. Steve actually seemed to be interested in my research and I was pleased that I had not decided on using Douglas's 'hair-brained academic ploy'. Steve introduced me to two other skydivers in the bar. They asked me

how many jumps I had made and told me to 'stick with it'. Although I had confessed to Steve about my research, I did not feel that it was necessary to suddenly tell everyone I met. Now that Steve knew, I was confident that the word would gradually spread around the drop zone. He also said that he was willing to introduce me to other skydivers who might be interested in taking part the following Saturday. I felt satisfied with the progress that I had made. I would no longer be conducting covert research and I had made a good contact with someone who was clearly willing to introduce me to other skydivers. Although I had made a positive start, this was only the beginning of my overt role, a role I was soon to realise that made some of the skydivers suspicious of my actual intentions.

When I returned to the drop zone the following weekend I knew that my overt role would bring a new dimension to my research. As Steve worked at the drop zone and clearly knew many of the regulars, I felt as if the tables had turned. Not only did I want to know about them, but the skydivers would now also want to know about me, who I was and why I wanted to interview them. I would now have to be prepared to answer questions relating to my research, and I could be questioned by anyone at any time. Now that I had voluntarily taken off my disguise I felt exposed as I could no longer simply pretend to be 'one of them'. The first noticeable difference as an overt researcher occurred as I was trying on various skydiving overalls with two other students in the main hangar. This was the stage just before 'getting kitted up' in the flight line ready to jump. I was therefore beginning to feel extremely nervous, trying to reassure myself that I could remember all the important safety procedures. I noticed Steve walking over with another skydiver. He was laughing at my jump suit which was clearly too small. I smiled, made a gesture to confirm that it looked ridiculous,

and started to find a larger one: 'That's the problem' Steve stated 'those things only come in two sizes. Too small and too big'. I agreed. He then introduced me to Paul and informed me that he had done 'loads of jumps'. I stopped trying to find another jump suit and looked interested. Paul confirmed that he had been jumping for years before asking about my research: 'So you're doing research on extreme sports?' I agreed and he looked confused, 'What do you want to know about skydivers then?'

Although I had tried to prepare myself for this type of question, the last thing I wanted to do was to explain about my research just before I was going to jump. My usual pre-jump ritual involved focusing my attention on what I was about to do and trying to deal with my increasing nerves by concentrating on my breathing. Such techniques were not available now. I had to explain myself to Paul. I also noticed how the other students who were trying on jump suits had overheard his question and looked intrigued. I provided a brief synopsis of my overall research, although I mainly focused on how I was interested in exploring skydiver's perceptions of risk. I explained that I intended to interview skydivers with varying degrees of experience and how I hoped that some people at the drop zone would be willing to take part. By this stage the other students were waiting for me wearing their skydiving jump suits. I continued talking whilst searching for a jump suit and it was obvious that I was holding the other students up. Although Paul clearly had other questions about my research, they both wished me luck for the jump and left me to get prepared. I finally found a jump suit that roughly fitted and walked over to the flight line with the other students who were also asking about my research. Like Steve, these students were positive about my intentions and informed me of various dangerous scenarios that they had heard about. I was openly talking about my research, and apart from the very

direct question from Paul, I did not feel that the other students were at all suspicious. I believed that I had successfully started to make the transition from a covert to overt researcher, and I looked forward to being introduced to other skydivers and trying to arrange some interviews.

That evening I met several of the regular skydivers. As promised, Steve introduced me to a couple of regulars who were drinking with a group of skydivers in the bar. Steve introduced me to Stewart, whose response demonstrated that he had been briefed. The following fieldnote captures the scene:

ahh, *you're* the extreme sports guy. He then proceeded to inform the whole group that I was the guy who's doing research on extreme sports, 'He wants to interview everyone!!' His humour and the overall group response were not hostile and I laughed with them. 'If that's OK with you' I light-heartedly responded. 'Oh hold on' Stewart states, 'has the interview started yet' he is now raising his voice, making sure that everyone can hear 'are you secretly recording this, am I being interviewed now'. I confidently tell him that the interview had 'definitely not started'. Stewart laughed at another skydivers' suggestion that I should be 'frisked' before introducing people to me. I explained that I was notoriously bad at remembering names and sat down with the group.

That evening I spoke to many different skydivers about my research and listened to their experiences. The majority of skydivers were forthcoming about their views relating to the risks associated with skydiving, and seemed pleased to provide

humorous examples such as how one skydiver recently 'did a beach jump' and landed on a sunbather in Jersey. I also learned that Stewart had no interest in 'doing base' (B.A.S.E. jumping) but liked the idea of jumping from a hot-air balloon, how Andrew was saving up to 'jump in California' and how Paul refused to believe that skydivers were 'just a bunch of adrenalin addicts'. I also received advice about how to progress and learnt about the various stages I would have to complete if I was to become a licensed skydiver. I was pleased to receive such advice as I was determined to be seen as both a researcher and a committed student. By the end of the evening several of the skydivers had agreed in principle to being interviewed. Even though some skydivers were clearly indifferent to my research I considered the evening a success. One skydiver even said that I could only interview him in the plane whilst climbing to altitude and that I was not allowed to take any notes. Other skydivers laughed at his unreasonable conditions and although he was only joking I knew that he was not interested in taking part.

That evening was a matter of talking about my research in order to generate enough interest so that some of the skydivers would be willing to be interviewed. Our conversations therefore focused on skydiving related issues and I answered various questions relating to my research. Nevertheless, over the course of my fieldwork I attended various 'socials' both at and away from the drop zone, took part in drinking games and explored subjects completely unrelated to skydiving. Although the main topic of conversation would always revolve around skydiving, I also discussed a diverse range of topics with individual skydivers - films, television comedies, President George. W. Bush, music, motorbikes and even philosophy. I started to develop friendships with some of the skydivers and exchanged views and opinions on

a number of different topics. One of the skydivers studied philosophy at Cambridge which resulted in various interesting discussions. Our first discussion concerned the possibility of time travel:

He seems to be roughly my age and after roughly twenty minutes we both realise we shared an interest in philosophy. He is particularly interested in the possibilities of time travel, especially travelling back in time. He explained various paradoxes about what would happen if you could travel back in time and kill your grandfather, and made more general comments about free-will and determinism. I asked him if he had read any novels by de Beauvoir or Sartre. Unfortunately he was less than enthusiastic about my interest in existentialism: 'Thing is, that stuffs just out there'. I laugh with him. I'm not about to get into a heated debate. We talk about the division between analytic and continental philosophy and he informed me why there definitely should be one. We soon found common ground with Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy*, and discussed Russell's views of various philosophers such as Heidegger and Dewey. After this brief interlude we are back to the subject of time travel again and he provides further interesting examples out of films such as *The Terminator*, *The Matrix* and *The Time Machine*.

Other diverse topics included discussing the music of Marilyn Manson and Nirvana (I managed to gain credibility with two skydivers as I saw Nirvana play live shortly before the lead singer committed suicide), writing lyrics and playing acoustic guitar,

as well as trying to give constructive advice to one skydiver who suffered from depression. Talking about subjects which were not related to skydiving provided a perfect opportunity to build relationships and gain the trust of my informants. Despite gaining the confidence of many skydivers Stewart continued to refer to me as 'the extreme sports guy' for the duration of my research and as an overt researcher I always felt that I was never totally accepted. I would always feel awkward when Stewart shouted out 'It's the extreme sports guy' or 'how's the research going?' whilst I was completing my revision training with other students or walking out to the plane to make another jump. I felt that such comments would only encourage suspicion amongst other skydivers. On one occasion two of the students who I had trained with whilst conducting covert research confronted me in the canteen: 'You know when you asked us how we felt before doing our first jump? You weren't actually concerned at all were you, you just wanted to know because of your research'. This required a diplomatic response. I tried to assure both students that I was actually concerned about how they felt, and that although I was a researcher I was also a student, feeling the same fears and both seeking and providing the same reassurances that everyone else does. I felt that I was only partially successful in regaining their trust. As an overt researcher I still preferred to make jotted notes in private although I could now directly ask skydivers to clarify particular information or explain terminology without feeling suspicious. Indeed, I felt that my fieldwork was a continuous balancing act between my two roles of a committed parachute student and inquisitive researcher. Both of these roles were essential to my research and also ensured against a particular ethnographic dilemma: that of becoming either a 'non-participating observer' or a 'non-observing participant' (Johnson cited in Whyte 1984: 28-29).

3.5 Interviews

Qualitative interviews can provide important and detailed data directly from those who participate in the social world being studied and can therefore compliment ethnographic research projects based on participant observation (Hopf 2004). To have solely relied on participant observation would have caused unnecessary drawbacks. For example, subcultural understandings that are simply known by informants may remain unspoken and could result in valuable data being lost (Monaghan 2002). Interviews can also assist the researcher in gaining access to situations that would otherwise be left unexplored by the participant observer. As Burgess has suggested, the decision to conduct interviews has three distinct advantages: first, interviews can be used to 'gain access to the biography of an individual or to obtain a career history'; second, 'they can be used to obtain details of situations which the researcher did not witness'; and finally interviews can be used to 'obtain details of situations' where those under study do not wish to be observed (1984: 106). The interview can therefore enable the researcher to fully explore 'closed' situations and critically question the meanings that interviewees place on their actions (Heyl 2001). As with all strategies of research, there are various limitations of conducting interviews that the researcher needs to be aware of (Bailey 1994). One of the limitations concerns the amount of time required to conduct a number of interviews. Arranging interview locations and times, rescheduling appointments and transcribing the interviews were all extremely time consuming processes. One of the main criticisms concerns the danger of bias creeping into the interview process. Borg highlights some of the problems that can occur:

Eagerness of the respondent to please the interviewer, a vague antagonism that sometimes arises between the interviewer and respondent, or the tendency of the interviewer to seek out the answers that support his preconceived notions are but a few of the factors that may contribute to biasing of data obtained for the interview (1981: 87).

Gavron was also aware of the dangers of bias whilst conducting interviews with young mothers: 'It is difficult to see how this can be completely avoided, but awareness of the problem plus constant self control can help' (1966: 159). As long as the researcher is aware of such criticisms and avoids asking loaded questions, interviews do have the potential of providing detailed and highly illuminating data. The main advantage of the interview is its adaptability. It allows the possibility of adapting to each interviewee, to follow up ideas, probe responses and investigate motives and feelings. The tone of voice, facial expression, hesitation, together with other factors that occur during a face-to-face interview can provide information that would be concealed by a written response. As Bell (1989) has noted, questionnaire responses have to be taken at face value, but a response in an interview can be developed and clarified. Moser and Kalton describe the interview as 'a conversation between interviewer and respondent with the purpose of eliciting certain information from the respondent' (1971: 271). Although this may appear to be a straightforward process, Moser and Kalton do emphasise that the attainment of a successful interview is far more complex than their statement suggests. This complexity is captured by Wiseman and Aron (1972) who compare the interview process to a fishing expedition, an analogy that has been developed by Cohen who stated that 'like fishing, interviewing is an activity requiring careful preparation, much patience and

considerable practice if the eventual reward is likely to be a worthwhile catch' (1976: 82). Such advice prepared me for the process I was about to undertake, although I still needed to address the various practical and theoretical concerns relating to the type of interview that I should carry out.

There were essentially three different types and styles of interview that I could have employed to conduct this research. The fully structured interview would not have been appropriate for this research as having a pre-determined set of questions suggested that I already understood the social-cultural world of the skydiver. As Cohen and Taylor noted in relation to their work on prisoners 'The men knew much more about the territory than we did and to constrain them within our categories would have been presumptuous' (1972: 35). The opposite of this technique is the unstructured and completely informal interview. Although this strategy was more appealing than the structured approach I needed to make sure that each interview covered similar topics in order to make comparisons between the interview data. I therefore decided upon conducting several semi-structured interviews which had the potential to reveal previously unforeseen insights into the social world of the skydiver. Like the structured approach, the semi-structured interview also involves constructing various questions in advance, but it also allows the freedom to modify questions depending on individual responses. This particular technique provided the flexibility to modify the order of questions according to the particular context of the conversation, provide explanations and to leave out particular questions that no longer seem relevant or may have been revealed by previous questions. The amount of time given to each topic was determined by the interviewee, and the sequencing was largely determined by their individual responses to the previous question. The majority of my questions were open questions (Robson 1993) being prefixed by

words such as who, where, what, why and when. Asking open as opposed to closed questions provided the necessary scope and depth for generating interesting data. As Cohen and Manion suggest:

They are flexible: they will allow the interviewer to probe so that he may go into more depth if he chooses, or clear up any misunderstandings; they enable the interviewer to test the limits of a respondents knowledge; they encourage co-operation and rapport; and they allow the interviewer to make a truer assessment of what the respondent really believes. Open-ended situations can also result in unexpected or unanticipated answers which may suggest hitherto unthought-of relationships and hypotheses (1980: 313).

I worked out a number of open interview questions (Appendix 2) and topics to explore from ideas and themes that had emerged from analysing my field notes. My interview questions covered a range of topics including issues relating to their skydiving career, how their friends and family reacted, whether they believed skydiving to be a high-risk sport and if they believed that skydivers were misunderstood by those outside the skydiving community. Fortunately, I had already completed much of the ground work in seeking permission to interview certain individuals and I was now in a position to arrange dates and times with key informants and start the interview process.

In order to ensure my sample represented the different levels of experience I carried out fourteen in depth semi-structured interviews with individuals who were at different levels of their skydiving career. Although two of the interviews could not be recorded as they were spontaneously arranged at the drop zone, twelve of the

interviews were all recorded and fully transcribed. Despite Bell's (1989) warnings concerning how long it takes to transcribe an interview, all the recorded interviews were transcribed and I became extremely familiar with the data. This was a useful process for identifying particular themes relevant for analysis. Recording the interviews clearly has additional benefits to simply relying on taking notes during the interview. Not only could I lose valuable data, but eye contact would be infrequent and the interaction would be affected by the pauses that would inevitably take place in order to write down what the interviewee said. Notes are also open to doubts about validity since respondents are not usually invited to check the accuracy of what note-takers have recorded.

The use of qualitative interviews as a data generation method raises several general ethical issues (Mason 2002). For example, the interview process can be a rather daunting prospect for some informants and it was necessary to employ various strategies to make the respondents feel that they had some degree of control during the interview (Oliver 2004). At the start of each interview I provided a brief summary about the aims of my research; explained that they could ask me to stop or turn off the mini-disc at any point during the interview; ensured my interviewees total confidentiality and how I would use pseudonyms throughout the research. Before each interview I also explicitly asked their permission to record the interview and explained that I would be the only person to listen to the interview for the purposes of transcription. No one objected to this process and interviewees quickly forgot that they were being recorded.

Interviews were conducted in a variety of locations including the university, the personal homes of the interviewee, pubs, cafes and the drop zone itself. Although I initially thought the majority of interviews would take place at the drop zone, most of my interviewees preferred an alternative and more private location. Interviewees believed that other skydivers might 'take the piss' and may even intentionally disrupt the interview. After conducting my first interview at the drop zone I also decided it would be more beneficial to find other locations. Despite conducting the interview in an apparently unused room at the drop zone, skydivers still walked in and out of the room to collect equipment and consequently made jokes at the interviewees expense: 'don't believe anything he says' 'careful what you say, it'll be used as evidence' etc. I felt that such comments disrupted the interview and the interviewee would stop mid sentence when someone walked in. We would therefore have to wait before returning to the interview and I would usually have to remind him about what he was previously talking about. All the other locations worked well and took place without any unnecessary disruptions. I tried to suggest quiet venues which were convenient and relaxing for the interviewee, and always asked if the interviewee would prefer to meet somewhere else. The aim of the interview was to create 'an agreeable form of social intercourse' (Webb and Webb 1932: 139) in order to ask questions about topics that required further examination. I had to listen carefully to the respondent, retain a critical awareness of what was being said and probe the respondents' answers in order to elicit 'thick descriptions' (Geertz 1973). During each interview I adopted the role of 'acceptable incompetent' (Neuman 1994) in order to ask questions relating to the taken for granted experience of skydiving. Conducting field work clearly helped the interview process as interviewees could use specific terminology or talk about situations that I was aware of. Often answers would begin with 'as you know' or 'as

you'll find out' and one interviewee stated how he was pleased not to have to describe their experiences to someone who 'didn't have a clue' about jumping. On certain occasions I even received advice about how to deal with particular situations such as a malfunctioned parachute and general tips on how to progress and strategies concerning how to cope with the fear of jumping. As I ensured total confidentiality, some interviewees confided in me sensitive information in relation to skydiving such as discussing other skydivers who they would not jump with. Some interviewees also imparted information that was not even related to skydiving such as dissatisfaction at work or at home.

As Burgess has noted, unlike the structured approach the researcher conducting an unstructured interview can be viewed as 'a friend and a confidant who shows interest, understanding and sympathy in the life of the person' being interviewed (1984: 103). Indeed one of the advantages of ethnographic interviewing is that the researcher has had time during fieldwork to build up on-going relationships with the key informants who have agreed to be interviewed (Heyl 2001). During my field work I had clearly built up enough trust for informants to confide in me during the interviews, and such trust was beneficial for revealing insightful and sensitive data in relation to their experiences at the drop zone. As I had developed relationships with my informants, at the end of the interview I could also ask what they thought of the questions and if there was any topic that they thought I failed to explore in enough detail and expect an honest answer. This technique was interesting for generating new and different questions as well as generally finding out their overall impressions of the interview. One of my interviewees (Adam) positively stated 'I didn't know it was possible to ask so many questions about skydiving!' and another interviewee (Karl) stated that the

interview gave him 'a lot to think about' and that he would be 'thinking about those questions for days'. Some of the interviewees claimed to enjoy the interview and I was pleased that the majority of interviewees not only provided feedback, but also found being interviewed an interesting and thought provoking experience. Overall I found that the interview process removed some of the mystery surrounding my presence at the drop zone. Interviewees now knew the type of questions I was interested in and would occasionally add to their initial responses after the interview had been conducted. Some of the skydivers also became genuinely interested in my research and asked to be kept informed about my findings.

3.6 Data Analysis

As Charmaz and Mitchell (2001) have recognised, grounded theory can offer useful guidelines in order to enhance the ethnographer's conceptual understanding of empirical phenomena. Guided by Glaser and Strauss's (1967) inductive approach to analysing qualitative data, all interview transcripts, fieldnotes and secondary sources were continuously analysed for categories and emerging themes. Much of the analysis occurred alongside the gradual accumulation of data and consequently guided the direction of the study. Analysis was facilitated by the use of NVivo software (Gibbs 2002), and the analysis was an on-going process throughout the period of research. Despite criticisms of using such software for conducting qualitative research (see Kelle 2004, Silverman 2000), NVivo had the distinct advantage of allowing large amounts of data to be coded, filed, retrieved and displayed. This process saves valuable time and allows the researcher to spend more time to develop new analytic ideas. Searle has pointed out a number of advantages concerning the use of computer software for qualitative researchers:

...the speed at which programs can carry out sorting procedures on large volumes of data is remarkable. This saves time and effort which might otherwise be expended on boring clerical work, perhaps involving mounds of photocopied paper, colour coded, sorted into piles on the floor, cut up, pasted and so on. In turn, this gives the data analyst more time to think about the meaning of the data, enabling rapid feedback on the results of particular analytic ideas so that new ones can be formulated. Qualitative data analysis then becomes more devoted to creative and intellectual tasks, less immersed in routine (2000: 155-6).

To have relied on cut and paste techniques for organising textual passages into card indexes would have been unnecessary restrictive and time consuming (Kelle 2002). As this research accumulated large amounts of data, NVivo was particularly useful for storing and displaying interview transcripts and fieldnotes as well as writing memos about the data. Most importantly the NVivo software allowed for rigorous analysis and played a major role in the analytic process. In accordance with an inductive based analytic strategy I coded my fieldnotes and transcripts into relevant categories and discovered which segments represented each category or categories. Once coded the NVivo software rapidly recovered all the data relating to a particular category and enabled constant comparisons to be made between new and existing data (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The deliberate construction of abstract categories allowed for the constant analysis of emerging themes. Fielding demonstrates the importance of coding data:

The role of coding is to stimulate the identification of analytic themes, organise the data so that the strength of its support for those themes can be determined, illustrate themes by providing quotable material, and support data reduction by representing its key features and identifying redundant, peripheral or irrelevant data (2001: 456).

Coding data should therefore be viewed as a fundamental part of qualitative analysis and an interesting tool for thinking about the meaning of the data, developing theoretical categories and reducing the amount of data gathered. I initially read through my fieldnotes and interview transcripts and made memos about what appeared to be particularly interesting or significant. This process was a beneficial technique for reducing the data into manageable amounts (Coffey and Atkinson 1996). Coding the data involved re-reading and refining my general observations and remarks into relevant categories. This procedure involved understanding key words used by informants and coding themes, topics and categories as they emerged. This enabled the bringing together of different segments in the data and the creation of categories that had some common property or element (Coffey and Atkinson 1996). As Miles and Huberman (1994: 56) maintain, coding is a process that enables the data analyst to recognise and interpret meaningful data. Rather than attempting to plan a set of codes before analysing the data, codes were generated from the actual discourse of my informants. The codes emerged from the data, instead of data emerging from pre-existing codes (Glaser 1992).

As this process developed I reviewed the codes and removed or exchanged particular codes that were either unnecessary or had been used to describe the same phenomena.

The process of coding enabled me to recognise and collect examples of relevant phenomena in order to analyse commonalities, differences and patterns within the data (Seidel and Keele 1995). Once the data had been coded, the time saving element of using computer software became even more apparent (Reid 1992). NVivo could instantly recover all the data pertaining to each category. The data were then interrogated (Delamont 1992) and transcripts and fieldnotes were printed out. I systematically explored the data for themes, similarities, contrasts and irregularities (Delamont 1992) before generalising and theorising from the data (Coffey and Atkinson 1996). This was an important process in order to analyse the similarities, differences and relationships between the existing codes and for considering the overall significance of my findings. The findings of this research were continuously reflected upon, interpreted and theorised through repeated interactions with the data (Bryman 2001).

Introducing the Fieldwork

4.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the fieldwork by drawing on descriptive field notes and a number of interviews with novice and experienced participants. Specific attention is given to my first impressions of the drop zone and to the various options available to the complete novice. Here I clarify the important differences between the tandem jump, the Ram Air Progression System (RAPS) static line course and the 'fast track' approach to becoming a skydiver, the Accelerated Free Fall (AFF) course. The chapter also examines the organisation of social space at the drop zone. I describe the main areas of social activity and explain the particular areas that are restricted to those within the skydiving community. Finally I reflect on my overall impressions of the parachute centre and explain how I gradually became increasingly familiar with my new surroundings together with the specialist vocabulary used within the skydiving community.

4.2 The Drop Zone

This research was carried out at one of the twenty three civilian parachute centres (drop zones) in the United Kingdom, all of which are affiliated to the British Parachute Association and the only places where individuals can legally do a parachute jump. Although the centre where I chose to conduct my research is comparatively small compared to some of the other centres in the United Kingdom, it is open all year on weekends and Bank holidays and occasionally during the week on

Wednesday and Friday afternoons. The centre can also open for parachuting seven days a week by prior arrangement. Skydivers are provided with all the important facilities such as a rigging room, where skydivers pack and prepare their equipment, an equipment shop, canteen, and most importantly two aircrafts: a Cessna 182 and a Turbolet 410. The centre has on-site parking, indoor training facilities, a weekend bunkhouse which can sleep up to twenty four people and a licensed bar. Individuals are also invited to bring their tents or caravans on to the grounds free of charge. In fact the centre's advertisement in the British Parachute Magazine created a particular visual impression, although my first visit failed to live up to my expectations:

After driving for over half an hour, I eventually saw a small sign for the airfield at the side of the road. I took the next left hand turn and drove through what seemed to be an industrial estate. How and why would a parachute centre be located in an industrial estate? I carried on driving past discount furniture stores and commercial warehouses until I saw the sign that I had been patiently looking for. An old faded blue sign reading *The Parachute Centre* reassured me that I had finally reached the place that would become increasingly familiar during the period of my research. I drove up the unmade gravel road, and parked by three other cars. Immediately in front of where I parked stood a large blue building which I believed to be the main aircraft hangar, and the reception, a small blue portakabin, was situated to the right of the car park. I was expecting to see various people dressed in their brightly coloured skydiving clothes carrying the appropriate equipment, various tents and caravans scattered around the premises, planes flying

overhead or waiting on the runway, official instructors walking around with an air of authority, nervous parents, on lookers, and friends standing around drinking tea and coffee frequently looking up at the sky. I even thought I might see a number of skydivers parachuting down back to the centre, successfully executing dangerous manoeuvres and making fast, impressive landings. I was certainly surprised to only see four men in red overalls, who had now stopped painting the main hangar to stare at me. I locked my car and started to walk towards them, when one of the men shouted 'can I help'? I carried on walking towards them so I didn't have to shout, before replying a simple 'yes'. I explained that I was interested in attending the next training course, which immediately justified my presence. The man smiled, put down his paint brush, and wiped his hands on his overalls whilst the other men turned away and continued painting. 'We are closed today', he informed me, 'but come to the reception and I'll talk you through the options'. We walked together towards the reception and I enquired as to why they were closed: 'the planes are currently being serviced, but they will be back next week'

During my conversation in the reception I discovered that this member of staff was the centre's Centre Chief Instructor¹ (CCI). He explained that the 'options' available for the complete novice include a one off Tandem jump (course and jump £220.00), a Ram Air Progression Static Line (RAPS) jump (course and first jump £170.00) and

¹ The CCI is responsible for the overall parachuting operation at the centre. All CCI's have to be experienced skydivers and have qualifications beyond those required to be a normal instructor.

the Accelerated Free Fall (AFF) course (£1,399.00). Although prices vary, most of these courses are offered at all of the BPA affiliated centres throughout the United Kingdom. He also explained that the centre only used the latest ram-air canopies as opposed to the more traditional round or 'drag' canopies². Clearly my visual image of a parachutist descending towards the earth under a round canopy was no longer accurate. Before describing the parachute centre in more detail, the following section will provide a detailed description of each of these options.

4.3 Options

The Tandem Jump

A tandem jump involves being attached to an experienced skydiver and is commonly advertised as the perfect way to experience the exhilaration of free fall without the necessary experience. The equipment used for the tandem jump is highly specialised and the canopies used are larger than the regular student canopies. By using a parachute system which contains both the main and reserve ram air canopies together with a specially developed passenger harness, a tandem instructor can take a novice to altitude (7,500ft or higher) without hours of training. The ground training for the tandem jump only lasts between forty and ninety minutes which is considerably

² The parachutes used by the majority of skydivers are commonly referred to as 'square' or 'ram air'. As Donaldson (2000) has pointed out, over the past decades there has been a revolution concerning the design of parachuting canopies. Since the 1970's, the ram-air design has been adopted by sport parachute manufactures and available commercially as an alternative to the round or 'drag' canopies which were limited in their speed and manoeuvrability. The materials have also changed. The ram-air parachutes are constructed of nylon rather than silk. The nylon manufactured for sport parachuting is called 'ripstop' and has the ability to resist tearing and other minor damage. The overall performance of the ram-air design is significantly better than the traditional round canopies (see Poynter & Turoff 2004).

shorter than either the RAPS or AFF. The tandem system is also fitted with a drogue³ parachute which prevents excessive speed and ensures stability. This is deployed by the instructor shortly after exiting the aircraft and is used to decrease the acceleration to roughly 120mph (as opposed to 180mph without the drogue parachute) and will therefore protect the instructor, passenger and equipment from the damage caused by a hard opening. After roughly thirty seconds of free fall, the instructor opens the special parachute designed for two people at roughly 5,000ft. Opening the canopy at this height allows enough time to deal with any deployment problems that may occur, and it also allows the student to enjoy a long canopy ride back to the drop zone. Once the instructor is satisfied that there are no problems with the canopy, they will usually hand a pair of dual controlling toggles to the passenger so they can help to fly the canopy.

This option is very popular with people either doing a one off parachute jump such as a charity jump, or those who have health problems or a physical injury and would therefore not be allowed on either the RAPS or AFF course. Also some people who are interested in taking up the sport decide to do a tandem jump before committing themselves to the other courses. The tandem jump allows individuals to place an initial "side bet" in favour of skydiving. Becker (1960) describes a side bet as an investment in money and time small enough to be abandoned with no significant loss to the inquisitive individual. After the tandem jump the individual might decide that the experience is not one that they would like to repeat. On the other hand, they might decide that they would like to increase their bet. I was put in touch with Angela, a young woman who had a memorable experience whilst on holiday in Australia. She

³ A much smaller canopy deployed on tandem jumps to slow acceleration and help stabilise their decent.

provides an appropriate example of someone who decided to cut her losses rather than increasing her bet:

Basically, I thought I was going to die. I was alright in the plane and jumping out, well I mean that was terrifying, but it was also exhilarating. But then he [the instructor] opened the parachute and I thought, you know, that we would just fly around a bit until we landed. But a few seconds after he opened the parachute he shouted something in my ear. But I couldn't make out what he said. Suddenly we were falling again. I thought the parachute must have broken, or something bad had happened and I screamed as the ground was rushing towards me. It was a terrifying experience. I just thought that was it. Then the other [reserve] parachute opened, I think I was in shock or something for quite a while after I landed. I was really shaking. I even get goose bumps when I talk about it now. It was the most terrifying thing I've ever done and I'd never do it ever again, even if someone paid me.

Angela is describing her first and only tandem jump. Although she did not feel particularly nervous during the ground training, climbing to altitude, jumping out of the plane or free falling towards the earth at roughly 120mph, she still had a 'terrifying experience'. This was due to a malfunction⁴ with the main canopy. After free falling for roughly forty seconds, the tandem instructor deployed the main canopy and realised that he would have to operate the reserve. In this situation the instructor has to 'cut away' and jettison the main parachute before opening the reserve. As soon

⁴ The complete or partial failure of the canopy.

as the main parachute was jettisoned, the instructor and student started to fall again. She describes the ground 'rushing towards her' as speed appears to increase with proximity to the ground⁵. During the few seconds between cutting away the main parachute and the reserve canopy opening Angela thought she was going to die. Although having to cut away the main parachute and deploy the reserve canopy is a rare occurrence, the ground training teaches students about such occurrences, to almost expect the unexpected. After reflecting on her experience she remembered that the reserve drills had been explained during the brief ground training provided prior to the jump. Nevertheless, when the malfunction actually occurred she clearly did not understand the emergency drills that are involved. Angela found the tandem jump a traumatic experience, an experience never to be repeated. However, I talked to two passengers at the centre shortly after they had completed their first tandem jump who provided a completely different account of their experience:

'Have you jumped yet?' I asked

'Yeah, it was amazing, I wasn't scared though'

'Really'

'No, it was weird'

'You jumped out of a plane at 13,000ft and you weren't scared'

'No, but, you know, you're strapped to the instructor which probably makes the difference'.

'What's it like up there?'

'It's really nice actually. The instructor asked where I lived'

⁵ This sensation is described by skydivers as 'groundrush' and refers to the apparent acceleration of the ground during free fall. Groundrush usually occurs when skydivers deploy their parachute below a safe opening altitude.

'What, whilst you were in free fall?'

'Yeah, he's right behind you so you can talk. He was pointing out where I lived and stuff'

'Cool'

'Yeah, I really want to go up and do it again now.'

'Yeah, so do I' her friend says who is standing next to her.

'How fast do you fall?' I asked

'I don't know, how fast do you reckon we fall' she asked her friend

'I think it's about 150 mph, my goggles nearly came off'

'Really'

'Yeah, I had to hold on to them'

'And how long do you fall for'

'I think it's about 45 seconds, but it doesn't seem like it, it goes really quickly'

'Are you both going to come back', I ask

'Definitely' she replies

'Yeah', her friend says, 'we can do the static line course [Ram Air Progression System] for half price now that we've done the tandem jump'

'Oh, that's good'

'I've got all the information, look [shows me various leaflets], it would be really good to learn how to do it by yourself'

As these field notes suggest, some passengers are so impressed with the overall experience that they want to learn how to 'do it by themselves'. Unlike Angela who

decided to cut her losses, these two passengers decided to increase their bet and 'do the static line course'. Another common example is provided by Andrew. Although he initially thought that the tandem jump would only be a one off experience to satisfy his curiosity, as soon as he landed he had decided to sign up for the Accelerated Free Fall course and therefore significantly increase his bet:

I honestly thought it was going to be a one off just to say that I had done it and tried it, erm, I didn't realise how hooked I would get on it. I decided that I wanted to do the AFF course pretty much as soon as I had landed erm and I signed up basically half an hour after I had landed.

Andrew did not require much prompting to describe his experience:

It was just totally mind blowing. The tandem in itself is a bit of a weird experience because it's not really something that you do it's more something that happens to you. Certainly, as the tandem jump is usually the last one out because of deployment, heights and things, I was the last out of the plane with my instructor and the cameraman and it's a really weird sensation to see someone open the door on a plane and seeing everyone else get out and at that point the tandem student doesn't really do anything. The instructor sort of edges you towards the door and it's almost surreal at that point. You see the door coming closer and you're thinking, is this really happening and before you know it you're out of the plane and it's one hell of a rush.

Describing the experience as 'one hell of a rush' captures the initial appeal of the tandem jump. Statements such as 'that was intense' or 'that was the most amazing thing ever' were common descriptions of passenger's experiences at the drop zone. The tandem jump allows individuals a 'quick fix' and was accurately described by one instructor as the 'ultimate fairground attraction' as the passenger has no control over the situation. Such trust in the competence of other people constantly surprises many skydivers. Chris Donaldson, an advanced instructor/examiner for the British Parachute Association remains perplexed:

The complete lack of fear exhibited by most tandem passengers is startling! Bearing in mind that they sometimes only meet the instructor ten minutes or so before boarding the aircraft, the willingness to surrender all their imagined safety to a stranger has always surprised me (2000: 50).

The very idea of doing a tandem jump terrified one of my experienced interviewees. I asked Anna if she was ever tempted to do a tandem:

No. I was never interested in that. The problem with tandem jumps is that you put your own life in somebody else's hands and so that's the scary part and you can't do anything about it. All of your trust has to be in that person. One of the attractions of skydiving is that you have to trust yourself to make the right decisions. I mean it can be your best friend being a tandem instructor but you know when it comes down to it, it's your life as well.

One of the major attractions of both the progression system and accelerated free fall is that individuals can learn to jump on their own and do not have to place their trust in someone else, someone they have never met before. As Holyfield's research has suggested, a growing number of consumers are no longer satisfied with the 'cotton candy atmosphere of theme parks for their adventure cravings' and 'seek more interactive settings that allow them to contribute, however real or perceived, to the inherent emotions of fear and excitement' (1999: 4). Both the RAPS and AFF courses cater to these requirements. Students are responsible for their own actions and as one of my instructors said, 'there's only one brain under the canopy'. Therefore students are responsible for making their own decisions and unlike the tandem jump they are not attached to an instructor. Emily, a student who had made three static line jumps explained why she chose not to do a tandem jump:

I prefer doing it on my own and I like to feel as though I've done it... and also there's the hope that at some point I'll do the skydive on my own and if I do do that, then having done a tandem would have taken that first thing that you might get with the first skydive. It's the same as riding a bike and having a backy, you're just not going to learn how to ride a bike that way. I mean, yeah, it's going to get you down and you'll have the experience but I just wouldn't want to do it. I just want to do it myself. I wanted to do it, I didn't want to have it done. I mean I wanted to do it.

The Ram Air Progression System

The Ram Air Progression System Static Line course initially includes a full day's training and one jump. Each consolidation jump for the static line student costs a further £35. The student is therefore in control of the amount of money they spend on skydiving and can progress at their own rate. As long as the student returns to the centre within three months after their training, they will receive revision training⁶ free of charge. If they fail to return to the centre within this time period, they will have to attend the full days training course again. The training for the RAPS course will be discussed in detail in chapter five. Undoubtedly the most popular course among student parachutists, it was also the chosen route for most of my interviewees. All static line students at the centre jumped from the Cessna 182 as opposed to the larger Turbolet 410, which only carried skydivers and Tandem students. Although it is possible for skydivers to jump from most types of aircraft (see Poynter and Turoff 2004), some are clearly more suited to their particular interests. The Cessna 182 and Turbolet 410 are both high-wing aircrafts that allow skydivers greater downward visibility. The Cessna 182 offers useful aids for the RAPS student to exit the aircraft such as a wing strut to grip and a step to stand on whilst holding on to the wing strut. The first few jumps involve a static line to ensure that their parachute automatically opens. The static line is securely attached to a 'strongpoint' in the aircraft and is checked by both the student and instructor before take off. As soon as the student parachutist exits the aircraft the static line opens the parachute container and pulls the bag and lines out into the airflow. Due to the parachutist's weight, the suspension lines are stretched and the canopy is pulled out of the bag. From this point the main difference between a static line and free fall deployment concerns the actual deployment bag. Instead of being attached to the top of the canopy, the deployment

⁶ Revision training lasts for roughly half an hour and has to be attended by all student parachutists before they are allowed to jump at the centre.

bag remains attached to the static line. This is pulled back into the aircraft by the instructor (jumpmaster) before the next student is allowed to get into position for exiting the aircraft. Static line students jump from 3,200-3,500ft and only progress to free fall after at least five perfect static line jumps⁷. After each jump the student will be debriefed and the student's progression will be determined by the instructor.

The Accelerated Free Fall Course

Both the accelerated free fall and the ram air progression system allow the student to reach BPA category 8 and therefore become a licensed skydiver in the same amount of jumps. Nevertheless, the AFF course is considered to be the 'fast track' approach to becoming a skydiver. It is literally an *accelerated* teaching method which relies on a high instructor student ratio. According to one AFF instructor: 'AFF is only a start but, in my opinion, the best start you can get' (cited in BPA Starter Magazine 2003). Although the AFF student wears a similar rig to the static line student, from their first jump they are jumping with a free-fall system equipped with a rip cord which they will eventually learn how to pull themselves. The only disadvantage with the AFF concerns the cost - the centre charged £1,399.00 for this course. I interviewed one of the few students who had chosen the route that most of the students couldn't afford. He explained the main differences between the two courses:

Well, with the RAPS [Ram Air Progression System] static line course
it's a progression system which starts off with basically no free fall

⁷ Although this is possible, it is extremely rare. Most students have to do a considerable amount of jumps before free fall. Most people that I talked to had jumped at least 12 times before they were allowed to jump without the static line. One student I interviewed only reached free fall on his 42nd jump. Again, this is also rare, and he had a reputation at the centre for 'being a crap student'.

time and then slowly builds up until you're doing a full minute of free fall and because of that it's not that instructor intensive, you've got one instructor for a maximum of twelve students. With the AFF it's the other way around. You're actually doing a full minutes worth of free fall on your first jump, but to keep you safe you're doing it with two instructors, one on either side of you, and they're holding you all the way down and for your first few levels you're still just doing practice pulls and stuff in free fall and once you have demonstrated that they can let go of you and you can fall down pretty much straight between them without tumbling, without spinning or anything you will drop down to one instructor and start doing all the moves that you do later on in the RAPS course, back loops, turns, tracking⁸ and this kind of stuff and eventually they're just jumping out after you and just watching you. Instead of the full sort of 18 jumps that you get in the RAPS course, there are eight jumps in the AFF until you graduate from the training programme but there are another ten jumps that you have got to do on your own, which are just sort of consolidation jumps. There is no sort of set you must accomplish this this and this on jump number whatever, it's just get out, enjoy it and if you think you've lost it on something, go out and play with it.

I: Why is it more expensive than the static line course?

⁸ Tracking involves moving fast horizontally to achieve separation from other jumpers before deploying the parachute.

Because it is more instructor intensive than the static line course, it is very expensive. Also, you're not just paying for the instructors time, you're paying for the fact that, instead of just say one slot on the plane for the instructor to supervise four, five or six students, you've got two slots on the plane plus your own slot for every jump, so my first AFF jump, including the ground school was about £390 pounds and I paid about £1,400.00 for the entire course.

(Andrew)

After a full days training, the first AFF jump is from around 12,000ft with two instructors on either side of the student to ensure stability and who are therefore able to correct any mistakes. The two instructors are there to correct the student's body position and to generally help and train the student whilst in the air. Both the Ram Air and AFF progression systems are effective methods for becoming a skydiver. As Donaldson notes: 'They should be considered as two roads that climb the same mountain, reaching the top by different routes, but ultimately achieving the same objective' (2000: 46). The main reason the RAPS course is more popular is because students can participate in the sport without having to make such a large financial commitment at the start of their training. All subsequent jumps after the initial training are paid for individually and allow students the chance to progress at their own rate. Table 1 and Table 2 (Appendix 1) outline the complete levels and requirements for both the RAPS progression system and accelerated free fall respectively.

4.4 Back at the Drop Zone

Although I had unintentionally made my first visit to the parachute centre when it was closed, the CCI briefly explained all of the above options and gave me a Skydiving Information Pack. He recommended that I should start with either the RAPS static line or the AFF course rather than a tandem jump. He explained that the tandem jump would allow me to jump with an experienced skydiver and therefore have the skydiving experience on my first jump, but the other courses would allow me the possibility of skydiving by myself. After I explained that my personal finances restricted my choice, he focused on the RAPS course, and pointed out how this method would enable me to eventually progress on to skydiving: 'You need to do about eight jumps and you also need to demonstrate your ability to complete particular manoeuvres before you can apply for your licence'. He then gave me the official British Parachuting Association skydiving magazine: 'We usually only give these out once you have completed your course, but you can have one now'. He told me to complete the forms and return them as soon as possible in order to guarantee a place on the next course. He then suggested that I should watch a short video which showed some of the training and people doing their first static line jump. I agreed. 'I'll leave you to watch the video then', he said, 'if you have any other questions I'll be painting outside'. I thanked him and started to watch the video by the charity Cancer Research. The video showed how individuals could raise money by doing a parachute jump, and briefly showed some of the training procedures and some very nervous people jumping out of the plane for the first time. When the video had finished, I collected all the information I had been given and walked out of the reception and returned to my car. I drove down the unmade road and pass another old blue sign reading 'call again soon'.

The following weekend I did call again, although on this occasion the centre was open. As soon as I drove up the drive I could tell that the centre was extremely busy. This time the car park was full, so full that I had to park on a grass verge behind a van from Madadventure.com. I could see a queue of people outside reception, and the Cessna 182 and the Turbolet 410 were situated outside the main hangar. As I walked from my car I could see people wearing jump suits talking in small groups, others were walking from their cars to join the queue outside the reception. I passed another group of people standing around with wearing blue and white Cancer Research t-shirts and holding clip boards. The tannoy system announced important information regarding the times of courses, and informed people that they needed to manifest⁹ if they wanted to ensure a place on the first lifts of the day. After several visits to the parachute centre I became more familiar with my new surroundings and I soon located the main areas of social activity: The reception, the canteen, the aircraft hangar and the spectators area.

The Reception

The reception is where all transactions take place, forms are completed¹⁰ and people manifest. The reception consisted of a small room with two red benches, a tall metal filing cabinet and a television attached by brackets in the top left hand corner. The

⁹ If you have manifested it means that you have signed your name on a form in the reception so that the manifestor can organise the jump order and allocate the right amount of jumpers for each 'lift'. The form also requires information relating to the number of jumps you have made, if you are a static line jumper and if you require revision training.

¹⁰ When new students arrive at the centre to do their first parachute jump they have to provide their personal details such as name, address, age, weight and the name and contact telephone number of someone to contact in the case of an emergency. The student also has to sign a legal waiver that verifies that the student is aware that skydiving is a high risk sport. The forms also include a medical statement that includes questions relating to cardiac or pulmonary conditions or diseases, diabetes, fainting spells, nervous disorders, high or low blood pressure or any disability which might effect their ability to skydive. In some cases a medical letter from their doctor may be required before they are allowed to jump at the centre.

television provides a list of all jumpers on each lift. The staff who work at the centre and the public are divided by a glass partition. Several skydiving posters with the slogans *Just Do It* and *It Takes Two To Tandem* together with other general information about course price lists, wind information, how to do a sponsored skydive, fitness and insurance cluttered the walls. Underneath the glass partition there were sweatshirts and other items to consume such as mugs, caps, log books, key rings, gloves, altimeters, hook knives and a selection of skydiving magazines¹¹. Such consumable items reminded me of Goffman's (1959) work on how individuals maintain their 'front'. The items that can be purchased from the reception can serve to support an individual's 'front' and confirm an actor's identity claims. As Mitchell maintains, 'souvenirs' lend credibility to verbal accounts and 'allow actors symbolically to bring the action home' (1983: 117). On the left hand side were two skydiving helmets locked inside a glass cabinet. The first poster to catch my attention read *SKYDIVING CAN RESULT IN SERIOUS INJURY AND EVEN DEATH*. This poster clearly didn't make people reconsider or change their minds. Every Saturday and Sunday morning there would be a steady slow moving queue of people patiently waiting to sign the forms that accept personal liability so that they could start their training. As people often spent a long time in the queue, people would usually start to talk to one another about the course that they were enrolled on, and discussed their expectations about the prospect of jumping out of a plane:

¹¹ Skydivers and parachute students can buy log books to record every jump they have made and write down the feedback which is provided by their instructor. Feedback is given after each jump and a form is filled out by the instructor and kept at the centre. For example, notes from my first jump stated that I failed to arch my back enough and that I kicked my legs. Such information allows the instructor on your next jump to see if you have improved. The log book enables students to have this information themselves, as well as at the centre. If they decide that they would like to jump at another centre they can then take the log book with them. An altimeter is a mechanical device which is used for measuring altitude. The altimeters sold in reception can be worn on the hand, although students have to have them on their chest strap until they move on to free fall.

I parked the car and walked towards the reception to join an orderly queue of nine people, patiently waiting to register for the courses on offer. I joined the end of the queue by the picnic benches and took out my cheque book and card. 'Here we go, God, I can't believe I'm doing this' said a young woman who was taking out her cheque book and completed forms out of her bag. 'My friends can't believe it, but I'm here, I'm looking forward to it actually'. I suggested that it was a good day to jump 'the views will be incredible' I said reassuringly as she studied her surroundings and looked at the sky 'yeah, but I'm really nervous, are you jumping today?' I informed her that I have a full days training and so I probably won't jump until tomorrow. She looks slightly confused 'but my training only last half an hour' 'so you're doing a tandem jump' I reply. 'yeah, aren't you?' 'no, I'm doing a static line course which involves a full days training before we can jump....'

This type of confusion was quite typical as people usually assumed that everyone was enrolled on the same course. Some people also assumed that everyone in the queue were also students. Emily made what she described as a 'mistake' in the queue by assuming that one of the skydivers was also a novice parachutist:

There was this girl that came up behind me in the queue and I said something like you don't have to wait or something, I can't remember what I said, but she was obviously experienced and I made the mistake

of not knowing she was experienced and she put me right, she made sure that I knew that she was experienced

I: What did she say?

I can't remember now, but you've got to kind of respect the more experienced and you've got to show them respect.

Unfortunately such confusion is inevitable due to the reception being extremely busy on both Saturday and Sunday mornings. Experienced skydivers are waiting to manifest and students (RAPS, AFF and Tandem) are patiently waiting to sign the appropriate forms and pay for their courses. Also, not all skydivers would necessarily be wearing their jumpsuits when manifesting, making it harder to distinguish students from the regular skydivers.

The Canteen

The canteen appeared to have been recently decorated and has a pool table and three televisions held by brackets on the wall. Two of the televisions were used to show the names of the skydivers and the jump order. The other television usually showed videos of skydiving and would be used to show students a video recording of their jump¹². Chairs, armchairs and sofas are scattered around and there is a bar at the far end of the room. There is a large poster on the wall of a parachutist about to jump from a cliff next to a picture of the Red Devils skydiving in formation. There are

¹² The drop zone offered this opportunity for students. At an extra cost, a skydiver would video their entire experience which includes the briefing, aircraft ride, free fall, canopy ride and landing.

various photographs on the walls of people jumping out of various planes. Solo and formation skydivers, tandem jumpers, people diving out of planes with their thumbs up and others looking completely terrified as they exit the plane. In the canteen it is possible to locate several distinctive groups of people sharing the same facilities. First of all there are the student parachutists, who usually appear quite nervous and occupy themselves by filling out and reading their forms, and by talking to others that are also training to do a parachute jump. Students are told to wear warm clothes as the main hangar can be quite cold and trainers. When students jump they wear a blue jump suit provided by the centre, which according to one skydiver, made the students all look like clones. Another group of people are visually distinguishable as skydivers. They are usually wearing their individualised jump suits, sitting around or standing at the bar¹³ ordering soft drinks or food. The first time I visited the canteen I overheard a few skydivers complaining about the weather, and informing others that the forecast was not good for the next day. For from being the usual mundane topic for conversation, for skydivers the weather determines whether or not they will be allowed to jump. It is possible to distinguish the skydivers from the students by their 'uniform' which is one of the 'symbolic sources of differentiation' (Cohen and Taylor 1993: 41) used to provide a certain level of status at the centre. They are not the students who are doing a one off parachute jump for charity, or the novice parachutist who has only jumped a few times. This is their chosen sport. They appear to know each other well, shouting out each others first names, talking and laughing. Apart from the instructors, interactions appear to be limited between the novice parachutists

¹³ Although there is a licensed bar at the centre, if anyone orders alcohol they are asked if they are jumping. This is strictly monitored, and individuals will not be permitted to jump if they consumed alcohol. If caught breaking this rule they will be grounded which effectively means that they will not be allowed to jump at the centre. Alcohol consumption takes place at the end of the day and in the evenings. There are various social events held at the weekends such as discos and bands playing in the bar throughout the year.

and the skydivers. Aside from the student parachutists and the skydivers are the friends and family members of all ages who can be categorised as spectators, together with the staff who work at the centre.

Spectators Area

Aside from the canteen, the main area where the spectators gather is by the six picnic benches outside the front of the reception. From here they can watch everything from a group of students being taken through their revision training to their friends or family members landing. I would often overhear conversations stating how their friends or partners and so on were 'really brave' or 'completely mad' and how they could never do what they were about to do. At the weekends this area could become very crowded. The following section from my field notes describes the area on a typical weekend:

Today, unlike last Wednesday¹⁴, the spectator's area is very busy. Families have bought chairs, thermos flasks, cameras and video recorders with them as a permanent visual reminder. I listened to their nervous conversations, as they patiently look up at the sky, trying to find the plane which turns out to be much harder than one would imagine. 'There it is' a middle aged women shouts 'look, follow my finger, oh no, hold on, it's just gone behind a cloud, hold on...there, there, can you see it, look, it's directly above us'. Some people are now standing on the picnic benches, finding it easier to look for the

¹⁴ Due to work commitments most skydivers cannot jump during the week. Most of my research at the centre was therefore carried out at the weekends although Wednesdays and Fridays were good for arranging interviews at the drop zone.



plane through their camcorders or binoculars. Others are just waiting, holding their cameras, waiting for their loved ones to fall from the sky. I follow the women's directions and look directly above me. It takes me a few seconds to locate the plane. My neck starts to ache as I continue to watch, keeping my eyes fixed on the plane, determined not to let it out of my sight. Suddenly I can make out a few dots, as if the plane has given birth to numerous black 'specks' which are now scattered in the sky above. Of course, these minute black dots are skydivers freefalling towards the earth at roughly 120mph. There is much excitement around me, as people point up at the sky whilst others are becoming increasingly frustrated as they can't see the little dots in the sky that everyone else is marvelling at. After about forty seconds, the first skydiver opens their parachute and within the next ten seconds all of the skydivers have opened their canopies, and are spiralling above us in the clear blue sky. There are nine parachutists above, some are clearly visible as tandem jumpers. 'Is that granny' a child asks. 'Yes look, there she is' [she passes her binoculars to the child] 'everyone wave at grandma'. The children jump up and down, tugging on their parents jackets, and the rest of the family wave excitedly. I can see an elderly woman waving back as she comes in to land. She holds her legs up and the instructor flares the parachute. When they land the instructor falls on her. It is a hard landing. The woman is lying on her back, she is not moving. She looks like she has hurt herself. Two instructors immediately run out from the reception to help. They kneel beside her and gently unclip her harness. They are

talking to her, trying to reassure her, but she continues to lie on the ground. The two instructors help her up and she tries to walk, unsuccessfully. Fortunately, it looks like she has only sprained her ankle. Both instructors take one arm each and help her back to the centre. The spectators cheer and applaud as she is helped to her feet, and carry on filming her until she is out of sight. 'I could do that' a man said to his partner who is standing next to me. 'What, you think you could jump out of a plane' she said smiling 'Yeah' he replies, 'doesn't look that hard, does it'. She finds it hard to contain her laughter 'Talk is cheap, my love, talk is cheap'.

The Aircraft Hangar

The hangar is a hive of activity, although it is a restricted space open only to those with provisional (students) or full (Skydivers) membership to the BPA. Unlike the reception, canteen and spectators area, the area surrounding and including the aircraft hangar is strictly monitored. Students are informed that they must carry their BPA membership card at all times. My first observations of the aircraft hangar occurred during the RAPS training course:

I followed the instructor with the rest of the students into the hangar. Up to this point I had no idea what awaited us inside. I immediately saw four people packing their parachutes on the floor, and other people generally getting ready for what I assumed to be the first lift of the day. Skydivers were constantly walking in and out laughing and talking frantically. One small private plane was situated in the middle of the

hangar and two micro-lights on the left hand side. Training harnesses, cushioned mats for practicing parachute landing falls and a simulated wooden aeroplane which I soon discovered was for practicing exit manoeuvres. 'When you are in here, you must not touch anything' Mark [one of the instructors] said seriously 'The equipment in here is extremely expensive and dangerous'. At the back of the hangar there are twelve wooden lockers where students return their parachutes after their jump. Outside the hangar the Turbolet 410 was being refuelled, and a few skydivers were starting to congregate in the flight line, where they check each others equipment and wait until the plane is ready for the next lift. The flight line is located outside the main hangar and consists of four wooden benches where students 'get kitted up' and nervously wait until they walk out to the plane. Helmets and altimeters are lined up on the last bench. Mark points over to the flight line: 'That is where you will wait before your jump. Don't worry, your equipment will be checked by an instructor before you are allowed to board the plane. Once you've been checked by an instructor you will not be allowed to leave the flight line'. Outside the hangar I can see a group of student parachutists standing in a circle with their hands raised as if under arrest. Their instructor shouts 'go' and the group shout together 'one thousand, two thousand, three thousand, four thousand, check canopy'. The instructor then shouts 'you have a bad canopy' and the group start to shout again 'look, locate, peel, punch, push, arch, check canopy'. They are going through the actions as if they were in the air, punching and pulling at the pads on their training

harnesses. I can hear the same sequence repeated over and over again as I follow my group back to the classroom.

4.5 Overall Impressions

I have provided sections of my fieldnotes to describe the parachute centre where I carried out my research. All of the fieldnotes I have used so far describe the centre at the weekend when it was relatively busy, although occasionally I also visited the centre during the week on Wednesday or Friday. Although the centre was much quieter during the week, it was still possible to jump and talk to experienced skydivers. At the weekend the revision training sessions were usually attended by roughly eight students. But during the week it was not uncommon to be only two or three other students, and on one occasion I attended the revision training session with the CCI by myself. Such occasions were obviously beneficial to my research as I was literally receiving one-to-one tuition and it was possible to ask questions about skydiving that were not specifically relevant to the training. Even when the weather was not good enough to skydive, people could be found in the main hangar practising from the mock aeroplane, packing parachutes for students or simply socialising with other skydivers. I soon realised that my field work did not simply depend on the weather. One of my interviewees described why she enjoyed going to the drop zone:

It's a place where you don't have to worry about anything else, you know the drop zone is a, well, all the people there talk about skydiving, different sorts of skydiving, different sorts of canopies but it's all skydiving you know, there are planes, but they're skydiving planes. So you know, it's very much an escape from normal life. You don't tend

to worry about other things when you're there. If you were getting really worked up about something you know just to go there is a way of getting away from it all. There's no one to say how's work going.

(Anna)

Such camaraderie between skydivers will be discussed in chapter seven. But this quote also demonstrates why it was important to attend the drop zone when 'the weather was rubbish'. Informal gatherings at the drop zone were a rich source of data (Celsi et al. 1993; Lyng 1990) and it was precisely in these settings that skydivers openly talked about their feelings and motivations in relation to skydiving. Although at the start of my research I had certain reservations due to the size of the parachute centre, I soon realised that this enhanced rather than restricted the research. Within the first month of my fieldwork I became confident with my surroundings and talked with people in the canteen, spectators area, the hangar and reception. My knowledge of skydiving and the skydiving community increased with each visit and I started to be able to distinguish between the skydivers and instructors, students and spectators, the manifestor, the drop zone controller¹⁵, the CCI, the pilots and other members of staff at the drop zone. I also began to be able to differentiate between the different types of equipment used by skydivers such as altimeters and the different types of rig used by skydivers and novice parachutists. I soon realised that many skydivers owned their own highly individualised equipment and that the colours and design of their jump suits and canopy together with the canopy size were important choices to be made by the skydiver. I started to recognise some of the controversial issues that skydivers would often debate and discuss such as whether the automatic activating device

¹⁵ The manifestor is responsible for compiling the names of each skydiver or parachutist on each lift. The drop zone controller is responsible for all parachuting and skydiving at the centre and reporting on any accidents that occur.

should be made compulsory, their views on the death of Stephen Hilder, and their opinions on the latest skydiving equipment and skydiving related web sites. The unfamiliar gradually became familiar: I now understood the lists of names on television screens in the reception to be a group of skydivers preparing to go airborne; I could distinguish between the different styles and types of skydiving shown in the pictures displayed in the canteen and understand why people only ordered soft drinks in the fully licensed bar; I now realised that the groups of students standing in a circle shouting the same words over and over again were actually receiving their revision training and that other students sitting on picnic benches listening to their instructor were receiving important feedback concerning their last jump. Specific terminology constantly used by the skydiving community also became increasingly familiar. Before my initial training an instructor asked me if I had manifested, and I literally did not have a clue what he was referring to. But relatively early on in my fieldwork I began to understand comments such as 'I'm on eight second delays' or 'I've got the dreaded unstable exit to do today', and words such as 'dummy pulls', 'hook knife', 'cut away pad', 'automatic activating device', 'end cell closure', 'hook turns', 'twists', 'tracking', 'slider', 'risers', to name a just a few, became part of my new vocabulary. It was essential to comprehend such terms and phrases for conducting in-depth interviews with skydivers and for engaging in detailed conversations whilst in the field.

An experienced skydiver who had jumped at various centres all over the country reassured me that I had chosen an interesting centre to conduct my research. I asked him what he thought of the centre:

Well I think, I think we've got a very good centre. Certainly I think we've got probably the friendliest centre in the country you know if not one of the best around, it really is a great place to be. It doesn't matter who you are, what level you're at, whether you're about to do your first jump or your thousandth jump you know.

(Paul)

Certainly my fieldnotes support this quote and suggest that people were usually both friendly and approachable. Although I experienced a certain amount of nervous anticipation concerning access after reading Lyng's (1990, 1993, 1998) research on edgework, my fears turned out to be unfounded. The majority of skydivers seemed to enjoy the chance to talk about their overall experiences of skydiving, their initial motivations for taking up the sport, and the processes involved in becoming a skydiver (chapter five). They talked at length about their perceptions of risk, personal situations that could be described as dangerous, mistakes they'd made whilst in the air and whether they believed that skydiving should be considered a high-risk sport (chapter six). They also insisted that I needed to understand the camaraderie that existed between individual skydivers, enthusiastically describing why they believe skydivers have a special bond and why they chose to socialise with other skydivers on a regular basis (chapter seven). According to Stewart, at some of the larger drop zones such interactions would have been extremely hard: 'Oh yeah, at some drop zones if you haven't done a thousand jumps or something they don't want to know you'. Fortunately, as my field notes and interviews demonstrate, that was not my experience.

The Moral Career of a Skydiver

5.1 Introduction

The question of why anyone would voluntarily place themselves in a situation that could result in serious injury and possibly death understandably has perplexed a number of psychologists (Blau 1980; Delk 1980; Jack and Ronan 1998; Klausner 1967, 1980) and sociologists (Brannigan and McDougall 1983; Lyng 1990; Mitchell 1983). Building upon previous sociological research that has investigated activities close to the metaphorical 'edge', I will suggest an alternative approach. Rather than solely concentrating on experienced skydivers (Lispscombe 1996; Lyng 1990), this chapter will describe the complex processes an individual goes through to become a licensed skydiver in the United Kingdom. Drawing on data from my fieldwork I will explore the processes and procedures that take the individual from being a novice parachutist to a competent skydiver. By focusing attention on the technical, social, and moral experiences involved with becoming a skydiver, this research will also adopt a different approach than those studies that claim to have uncovered the various personality types and individual predispositions that motivate certain people to participate in high-risk sports (Bernard 1968; Klausner 1967; Ogilvie 1974). Goffman's (1961) analytical concept of moral career will be employed to examine the students changing attitudes and abilities in relation to their chosen recreational pursuit. I will demonstrate that the term *moral* career is particularly useful for examining the both the progressive stages and the social processes that an individual must go through in order to successfully *become* a skydiver.

5.2 The Concept of Moral Career

The earlier Chicago School usage of 'status passage' (Glaser and Strauss 1971) originated in ideas originally used in the anthropological work of Arnold van Gennep (1908) to describe important transitions in an individual's passage through life. This concept was adapted and expanded (see Glaser 1968) to study occupational and organizational mobility, socialisation and career progression (Crawford 2003). Concepts of 'status passage' and 'career' came to be associated with sociological research investigating both the individual and collective development that occurred within formal organisations. According to Becker, the 'concept of career has proved of great use in understanding and analysing the dynamics of work organizations and the movement and fate of individuals within them' (1952: 470). The term career specifically refers to the 'patterned series of adjustments made by the individual' and are 'typically considered in terms of movement up or down between positions differentiated by their rank in some formal or informal hierarchy of prestige, influence and income (Becker 1952: 470).

However, rather than being solely restricted to an individual's occupation, Goffman (1961) noted how the term career can be used to describe any form of social progression. As Cohen and Taylor have argued:

We are caught up in the career of our marriage, how well is it going at the moment, its prospect for survival... 'Did John really mean what he said last night about a divorce?' We are involved with the educational career of our children, our leisure career, and the state of excellence that we have attained

at golf or amateur dramatics. At times we will allow our mind to wander over the state of our sexual career – are we still as active as we were, is our interest declining or increasing? (1993: 38)

As this quote suggests, the concept of career can be extended to apply to the most mundane aspects of everyday life. Rather than limiting the concept's relevance to investigating an individual's occupational career, the term can be used to 'refer to any social strand of any person's course through life' (Goffman 1961: 119). Becker's (1953) study of marijuana users is interesting in this respect since he documented the various stages a marijuana user goes through in order to describe 'the set of changes in the person's conception of the activity and the experience it provides for him' (1953: 235). According to his research, no one can become a user without:

(1) learning to smoke the drug in a way which will produce real effects; (2) learning to recognise the effects and connect them with drug use (learning, in other words, to get high); and (3) learning to enjoy the sensations he perceives. In the course of this process he develops a disposition or motivation to use marijuana which was not and could not have been present when he began use, for it involves and depends on conceptions of the drug which could only grow out of the kind of actual experience detailed above. On completion of this process he is willing and able to use marijuana for pleasure (1953: 242).

Becker's research examined the changes in people's attitude and experiences of using marijuana for pleasure. Therefore Becker was interested in what could be described as

the various *career* stages that individuals go through in order to 'define the sensations as pleasurable' (1953: 240).

The concept of career has also been employed in studies of a diverse range of social identities including dance musicians (Becker 1951), football hooligans (March 1978), wheelchair runners (Patrick and Bignall 1987), unwed mothers (Rains 1971) and two recent studies investigating football (Jones 2000) and ice hockey (Crawford 2003) supporters. Goffman employs the concept of *moral* career in his widely influential research carried out at St Elizabeths Hospital in Washington D.C. For Goffman (1961), the career stages of the 'mental patient' include the pre-patient (at home under the supervision of their general practitioner), the in-patient (voluntarily or forcibly hospitalised) and the ex-patient phase. Goffman found the term career useful as it allowed him to focus on the 'regular sequence of changes' that typically occur in the 'person's self and in his framework of imagery for judging himself and others' (1961:119). Goffman defines moral career as follows:

The moral career of a person of a given social category involves a standard sequence of changes in his way of conceiving of selves, including, importantly, his own. These half-buried lines of development can be followed by studying his moral experiences – that is, happenings which mark a turning point in the way in which the person views the world... (1961: 154).

For Goffman moral aspects are involved in the fact that patients come to understand themselves to be a failure rather than a success, an incompetent rather than a

competent human being. The patient is denied autonomous control over their activities, their personal space is constantly invaded, institutional uniforms are issued and personal names are disregarded. The 'passage from civilian to patient status' is marked by humiliating 'status degradation ceremonies'. The patient can therefore be seen to experience 'civil death' as their previous human rights and liberties as citizens are no longer relevant. As Goffman states, 'the new inpatient finds himself cleanly stripped of many of his accustomed affirmations, satisfactions and defences, and is subjected to a rather full set of mortifying experiences' (1961: 137). The whole social organisation of the hospital serves to create an image of personal failure.

Adopting a similar approach to Patrick and Bignall's (1987) study of wheelchair runners, this research will make use of the term career to investigate a recreational pursuit. Whereas the moral career of patients 'typically begin with the experience of abandonment, disloyalty, and embitterment' (Goffman 1961: 125), the moral career of the skydiver typically involves excitement, curiosity and a sense of adventure. The novice enters a social world full of new opportunities, where the rites of passage celebrate personal success and encourage the individual to become a competent skydiver. The transition that occurs to individuals as they become accepted members of the skydiving community deserves sociological attention. As Atkinson and Housley maintain, it is precisely this process of becoming that should be seen as 'the very stuff of social life' (2003: 89).

5.3 Learning to be Serious

You see the list of ten things to do before you die and it's always on there. But I firmly believe that life is pretty short in the grand scheme

of things and I don't want to be one of these people who gets to fifty and thinks shit, what the hell have I done with my life. I want to try as many different things as I can so from that point of view it is unusual and it's certainly one hell of an experience so I thought yeah, lets see what this is like.

(Andrew)

Although many friends and acquaintances commented on my research by stating that they had always liked the idea of experiencing a parachute jump, they often added that it was not something that they had actively considered. Various reasons, such as fear or not being good with heights, were usually provided as justifications for not pursuing the idea further. Another reason given was the cost of participation. An interesting example is provided by Andrew who became increasingly frustrated by his friends' lack of commitment:

There was a group of us and we all said yeah we'll go and do that and when I started work and I had the money I basically said right we've always said we were going to do it let's feel the colour of your money and lets go and do this and a lot of them either made excuses like I haven't got time or maybe next weekend. Basically for one reason or another they all didn't want to do it so I thought nuts to this, I'm not going to miss out just because people who I was going to go with had basically bottled out so I just did it on my own.

Individuals like Andrew who are determined to experience parachute jump on their own have to go through a full days intensive training to ensure that they will be able

to appropriately respond to any dangerous situation that might occur. Not only does the training cover the necessary skills of the sport, but students are also taught how to survive in an emergency situation. The general sport skills include knowledge of how to deal with the routine sequence of a parachute or skydive descent. On the other hand, the survival skills deal with a variety of non-routine situations that may occur. Such skills include knowing how to deal successfully with a malfunctioned canopy, what to do in an aircraft emergency and how to avoid hazards that may be encountered below canopies such as electricity pylons, fences, motorways, houses etc. Although students are taught that such situations are extremely rare, the instructor has to be confident in the student's mental and physical ability to deal with such contingencies.

The following field notes describe some of my experiences during the RAPS training course and highlight the techniques used by the instructors to make sure the students took the sport seriously and to ensure concentration throughout. No-one in my group had experienced a parachute jump before, and out of a group of eight students, four were sponsored by various charities to do their jump. I was told by the CCI to arrive early in order to complete the relevant forms and sign a waiver that releases the parachute centre of liability in case of serious injury or even death. Whilst queuing in the reception I talked to other students who were enrolled on the same course. After signing the waiver and paying for the course in the reception, I walked over to the canteen with two other students:

Whilst talking to two other students about why we had decided to do a parachute jump, and what we thought the days training might entail,

our conversation was suddenly interrupted: 'OK, can all of those who are on the static line course follow me to the training room' shouts a short, thin, confident man who carries his voice well. I follow him along with sixteen other students through a door at the side of the bar, and walk up the stairs to a large training room where another instructor is waiting. In the middle of the room there are various objects: an old looking helmet, skydiving overalls, a packed parachute, and other skydiving equipment that I do not recognise. 'Right, just gather round. OK, you're a large group so we need to break you into two smaller groups of eight.' My group is then led to class room one. The room is small, cramped and brightly lit with twelve plastic chairs with clip boards and a pen on each chair. There is a white board at the front of the room and a projector at the back which I assume is for showing slides. In the right hand corner there is a television and video recorder. We sit down, clip our forms on the clip boards and wait. The room is silent in anticipation, all eyes are on the instructor, waiting for him to start. 'Right, welcome to the centre. My name is Mark, and this [pointing to the back of the room] is Nick. We are going to be your instructors for the day. Now we all know that skydiving is dangerous, living on the edge and all that, but this course is about teaching you how to reduce those dangers, and if we are not convinced that you have learned the techniques and procedures that we teach you today you won't be jumping, simple as that.' He explains that there is quite a lot of technical information to take in, so we need to pay close attention. He then takes us through our fitness forms and another form on which

we fill in our personal information, emergency contact numbers and the date of the course. We are informed that this will be kept at the centre so they have our details, and keep a record of how many jumps we have made. We then have to sign our declaration of fitness forms and sign and witness the form for the person sitting next to us. Mark informs us that if our Body Mass Index is too high we might not be able to jump until we have lost some weight. He asks if everyone understands that. One of the students falls in to this category and puts up his hand. Mark informs him that as long as he's not over 15 stone he should be alright, but asks the student to remind him so that he can have a 'special' parachute. He then makes sure that no one else has any questions. 'Right then, this is an aerial picture of the airfield which you need to familiarise yourself with.' Nick turns off the lights and puts on the slide. Mark then explains where we should aim to land, and points out the various dangers such as the industrial estate, fences, and nearby houses. He assures us that it is hard to miss the airfield¹, but that it can happen so we need to be aware.

The above fieldnotes describe the first orientation session. After being briefed on the documentation and the general rules of the centre we were shown an aerial picture of the airfield and the potential hazards that needed to be avoided. This first session emphasised the importance of safety, a theme that was repeated throughout the course. Whilst the instructors acknowledged that skydiving was a dangerous sport,

¹ Various students did actually miss the airfield. During my research one student landed on the roof of a warehouse in the industrial estate next to the parachute centre, someone else landed on a barbwire fence and another student landed in a farmer's field. A search party was sent out after the pilot located him from the air.

they also emphasised that the training taught everyone how to reduce such dangers. By the end of the first session it became clear that students had to listen carefully and concentrate. The students also understood that they had to follow the instructor's rules. The rules stipulated by the centre's 'high priests' (Aran 1974) were not to be broken or verbally challenged. An example of this was provided by one of the students who sat next to me in the classroom. Towards the end of the first session the student opened a can of soft drink, which he then proceeded to drink. The instructor immediately shook his head: 'Somebody's not been listening have they? Yeah, I'm talking to you. What did I say at the beginning of this session [this question is asked to the whole group, not just to the one student. A couple of students reply by stating that they're not allowed to drink in the class rooms] That's right, and what are you doing [the student apologises and puts his can of drink on the floor] No food or drink OK, that's what the canteen is for.' Although this was only a minor rule violation, the instructor made it clear that any breach would not be tolerated. All rules at the centre were to be taken seriously, no matter how trivial they might appear.

As parachuting occurs outside the realm of ordinary experience and is clearly set apart from the everyday (Goffman 1974), this example demonstrates how the instructors are keen to present the appropriate emotional tone for 'serious leisure' during the first session (Stebbins 1982). The orientation session also allowed the instructors to build respect and trust with the students and allows instructors to use 'their personality to the full as they impart information' (Donaldson 2000: 51). The instructors must also engage in the appropriate emotional labour, giving the students their full attention and embodying the excitement that the students are anticipating. One experienced skydiver informed me that he had no intention of becoming one of the instructors,

who he called the 'drop zone bitches'. The term reflects the fact that the work of instructing was extremely repetitive and my respondent explained how such mundane work would bore him to death. But even if instructors do find teaching repetitive and boring, they must still engage in the emotional labour necessary to provide each student with an enjoyable and challenging experience. The training should result in an experience that the student will not only tell their friends about, but hopefully want to repeat. As Nick said to the group at the end of the first session: 'We want you to enjoy it and we want you to come back. You all know that this is a progression course. You're not here just to do one jump, otherwise you would be doing a tandem jump. As far as we're concerned this is just the start of your skydiving career.'

The next session involved using the television and video recorder to demonstrate exactly why students needed to pay 'close attention' to their instructors. As these fieldnotes suggest, emotion management is an essential aspect of the instructors work:

'This', Mark informs us, 'is what we will be learning how to do, and tomorrow, weather permitting, this is what you will be doing.' He smiles as if he is remembering his own nervous anticipation. Nick turns off the lights and presses play on the video. The video shows students doing their first static line jump. The first student on the video precariously climbs out of the plane on to what appeared to be a wooden plank which resembled a large skateboard. I felt nervous just watching, as the student slowly climbed out, firmly holding on to the wing strut. I could sense that most of the students in the group could not quite believe that this is what they were training to do. The students

are now watching with increased concentration, listening to the sound of the wind, and looking at the ground 3,200ft below and the student balancing outside the aircraft. Suddenly the instructor shouts 'GO.' 'One thousand Two' is all I can hear the novice parachutist shout as he falls from the wing. 'That', says Mark 'was a good exit. That is what we will be training you to do. Any questions?' 'Yes' I said 'the board that you step out on to looks quite thin [general nods of agreement from the other students]. Have many people fallen off?' 'No' [looking unimpressed with my question]. 'If I asked you to balance on that board on the ground you would have no problem. Why should it make a difference if you are a bit off the ground.' His answer failed to satisfy my increasing anxiety. Another student asked if it was difficult to balance with the wind against you, but Mark assured him that when people jump, the plane slows down and the winds are only seventy mph 'When you're driving down the motorway you can put your hand out of the window and move it back and forth can't you.' Another student asks 'when you're out there, on the board, what happens if you decide you don't want to jump.' Mark states that it is very dangerous to bring the student back in once they are on the step. He explains that once you are out you really have to jump, but that if they thought that you might have a problem like that, they would not allow you up in the first place.

Showing the video straight after the orientation session allowed students to watch exactly what they were expected to do. Whilst watching the video, students clearly

displayed increased apprehension and their growing amount of anxiety soon became vocalised concerns. On the first tea break, the main conversation between the students concentrated on what appeared to be the rather elaborate procedure that students were required to follow in order to climb out on to the step. As one student said 'I can't believe we've got to do *that*, I thought I could just shut my eyes and jump.' The video served as a 'wake up call' for the students, who were now ready to listen carefully to the instructors in order to take in as much information as possible. The following training session involved learning about landing procedures. This effective training technique was repeated throughout the day:

'We like you to have a chance to play around out there, but once you get to 1,500ft, we want you to start your landings manoeuvres. So the first height that you need to remember is 1,500ft.' [He writes down each figure on the board]. 'When you get to 1000ft, you need to be coming over the boundary of the airfield. At 800ft you need to turn across the wind and at 500ft, turn into the wind to start to land. If you feel that you might not land on the airfield, you need to either use your brakes, or do small S turns. When you are at 100ft you must stop turning and finally at 15ft you need to flare.'² He then explains that if we flare too early, we need to keep the parachute flared otherwise it could be dangerous. Mark rubs out the heights from the board and questions everyone at least once until he is confident that we have memorised the heights that we need to be aware of.

² To flare literally means to put on the brakes to ensure a soft landing.

This type of approach was adopted by both of the instructors. In each session specific information relating to the equipment, emergency procedures, heights, and safety checks was provided by the instructors and each student in the group answered at least one question. Students who failed to answer a question correctly were made to feel quite awkward whilst others were only too keen to demonstrate that they had taken in the information:

Mark explained to the group that the next lesson concerned the various safety checks that we need to go through once we have jumped out of the plane. After explaining each of the checks for roughly fifteen minutes he starts to question us. 'OK, you at the back, what is the first thing we need to check.' The student confidently replies 'we need to check whether the canopy is large, rectangular, and controllable.' Mark then chooses another student 'What's next?' 'We need to see if the lines are tangled' he replies. 'that's right, and if they are what do we do' [pointing to another student] 'kick them out by turning' she replies. 'OK [pointing at me] what's the next check?' 'We need to flare twice' I reply. 'And then' [pointing to another student] 'all round observation.' His answer sounds more like a question. 'Yes', Mark says diplomatically, 'but what comes before that?' [the student does not know] 'can anyone who *was* paying attention help him out?' 'Do we need to check our safety equipment?' 'That's right, just check to see if the cut away pad needs to be velcroed back on, you don't want that getting in the way. This is extremely important. If you don't remember this you could release your emergency parachute by

mistake. *Then we need to do all round observation.* 'What's next' asks Mark 'locate the drop zone' a student replies 'and finally, at the back?' 'Access the drift' says the student behind me. Mark checks to make sure that everyone is clear on these checks and procedures, and the room is full of reassuring nods.

The other students were determined to demonstrate that they were paying attention and the instructor clearly has the class on his side. Another student tried to explain to the instructor why he got a question wrong during the equipment familiarisation session. The instructor didn't accept his explanation of being confused and suggested that the only reason that he couldn't answer the question was because he had his 'head up his arse' when he should have been listening like everyone else. Nevertheless, such a remark was intended to be humorous, and the accused individual along with the rest of the group laughed at the instructors comment. Throughout the course humour was used by both the instructors to reinforce social order (Powell 1977). One instructor at the centre justified their strict approach to training by stating that it is designed to make people take parachuting seriously. He explained that some individuals are interested in parachuting for the wrong reasons. Such 'wrong' reasons were seen as a constant nuisance. Individuals who attend the RAPS training course can be classified as 'hedonistic consumers' (Arnold and Price 1993; Havlena and Holbrook 1986). This term suggests that the students expect intense but enjoyable events to happen which are outside their usual everyday experiences. In other words they are searching for an 'extraordinary experience' (Arnold and Price 1993: 2) which will provide a sharp contrast with their usual everyday activities (Lipscombe 1999). This can cause a problem for the instructors, as some groups can be impatient with the hours of

training and information and who 'just want to get out there and jump'. A recurring problem concerned groups of 'lads' who the instructors perceived as having mistaken expectations about parachuting:

Groups of lads can be a problem. They just think that they're tough, you know, that this is a macho thing to do. Some of them might have even done a jump before, so then you have the problem of showing off. They don't take it seriously, they don't ask questions and they don't listen. That's why we have so many tea breaks. Men tend not to want to ask questions in front of others, but they might come up to you on their own in a break. Women don't mind asking questions though, especially if they think it could save their life. But if we have a problem we just tell them that they can't jump. We don't have any problem about giving their money back here. We don't want to have any fatalities.

(Michael – Instructor)

The regular skydivers at the centre are also aware that some people are attracted to the sport due to inaccurate stereotypes. Skydivers at the centre confirmed the instructor's observations by also commenting on how some people are attracted to skydiving for completely inappropriate reasons. However, rather than seen as a problem, such behaviour is seen as entertaining and is a constant source of amusement for the regular skydivers:

There was one guy here only in the summer. We always laugh at the big macho guys you know, big mouthy things, you know strutting round flexing their muscles, 'cos they think they have to be macho to do it. And we always laugh 'cos we see them on the [flight line] bench totally silent. And you think, ah here comes the nervous silence. Understandable, don't get me wrong, I'm not knocking it. And when he came down the poor guy was shaking like a leaf. I think some people have expectations of what a skydiver is and how they should be. Like this guy, you know strutting around all day on his course. You know, it's not only me. I heard others say, who does he think he is, I bet he doesn't even jump.

(Karl)

Anna also commented on how she liked to observe 'the cocky ones' (students) who would often be seen after the training 'crying their eyes out' before their first jump. Although regular skydivers at the centre found such individuals amusing, the instructors were forced to rely on interesting and effective techniques in order to neutralise inappropriate behaviour and to ensure that all the students took the training seriously. An important technique involved both instructors emphasising the potential dangers of the sport and a considerable amount of the course focused on how dangerous parachuting can be if you 'get things wrong'. For example, it is vitally important to understand how to climb out on to the step and to exit the aircraft using the correct technique. Up until the next session, we had only been shown students making 'good' exits from the plane. Although I still found watching the supposedly 'good' exits quite terrifying, at that stage we were not shown students suspended by

their static line under the plane, spinning uncontrollably or falling from the plane without a parachute because their static line had not been attached securely to the strong point in the aircraft. Up until this session I was not even aware of such possibilities:

Mark informed us that we are now going to be shown a video of good and bad exits from the plane. The group watch as Mark provides a running commentary 'That wasn't bad was it' he says after the first student has jumped. The next student literally falls off the end of the step without embracing the drop position, looking in at the instructor or shouting the safety count. 'Jesus' says Mark. Nick is shaking his head. 'That is an instructor's nightmare. It's so dangerous. If you fail to pay attention today, that could be you.' We watch various other students making bad jumps before following our instructor to the main hangar to practice 'exits' in the mock aeroplane. We gather round Mark who is sitting in the mock aeroplane as he explains the procedure. 'When you do your first jump, and you climb out on the step holding on to the wing strut, you ARE going to be shitting a load' Mark says smiling [general laughter from the group] 'So it is important that we practice exiting from the plane, until we are confident enough to do it 3,200ft in the air.' We watch him as he reaches out from the plane with his right leg, puts his left followed by his right hand on the wing strut and slowly pulls himself up. His left leg then goes over his right so his legs are crossed, and then his right leg is held out behind him. 'Your left leg should now be at the edge of the board. Make sure both your arms are

holding on to the wing strut past this black tape³. Then you look at your instructor who is in the plane. Remember, you DO NOT jump until he says so. The instructor needs to check that everything is attached and that your static line is not caught or tangled. When your instructor says go, step to the side and make the biggest arch possible.' We take it in turns practicing until Mark is entirely satisfied. 'Is everyone happy about this?' asks Mark 'I need to know that you are all confident' 'Could I just have one more go?' asks a student. 'Of course you can' Mark replies 'It's just that I don't want to die' she replies. The group laugh and watch as the student climbs back into the mock aeroplane and into position. Mark does not find her comment humorous 'She just said that she didn't want to die' Mark says with a serious tone, projecting his voice so he could be heard above the laughter. 'I don't know why you're laughing, if you get this wrong, that is a very real possibility.' The laughter immediately stops, and the students are looking serious again, carefully watching the student as she practices her procedure. 'That's good' Mark says to reassure her. He seems satisfied that the students are taking the training seriously again. After checking to see if anyone else wanted to have another practice we are told to make our way back to the class room.

Notice how Mark starts the session in the mock aeroplane in a humorous fashion by stating that students will be 'shitting' themselves when they climb out of the plane on to the step. Information is often presented in a humorous fashion when weak listening

³ This is to ensure that the student's hands do not hit the step when they jump from the aircraft.

by the student could unnecessarily result in a life-threatening situation (also see Holyfield 1999 and Holyfield and Jonas 2003). Humorous comments provided students with temporary but important breaks from the serious nature of the training. Another example can be provided from the equipment familiarisation session, when Mark put on a parachuting helmet. He encouraged laughter from the group before saying 'although you will feel like a dick wearing this, everyone's going to look just as stupid, and this thing [helmet] can save your life.' However, humorous situations that are not initiated by the instructor may not be tolerated. When the female student asks to 'have one more go' in the mock aeroplane and justifies her request by stating that she doesn't want to die, the instructor is keen to display how inappropriate he believed the groups response to be. The instructor provides his own definition of the situation, and the group return to carefully watching the student practice with the seriousness that is clearly expected from them. Humour was strategically used by instructors throughout the training. The emotional labour of the instructors work is clearly evident. Whilst earlier work on emotional labour (Hochschild 1983; Leidner 1993) has specifically concentrated on how worker's emotions are managed in the working environment, this research highlights the relevance of emotion management in relation to high-risk pursuits. By suggesting that the students could literally 'die' if they failed to follow the correct procedures, the instructor is purposely inducing particular feelings in order to produce 'the proper state of mind in others' (Hochschild 1983:7). As Holyfield and Jonas (2003) note in their research on white water river guides, various strategies of 'emotion management' are specifically used by the river guides to either 'inflate or deflate the statuses of customers' and to shape the participants 'emotional experiences' (Holyfield, Jonas and Zajicek 2005: 176). In a similar way to white water river guides, the instructors at the centre also relied on

various techniques to control inappropriate behaviour and maintain an appropriate emotional climate.

5.4 Corporeal Transformations

The 'embodied' nature of parachute training is clearly evident from this research. As Leder (1990) has emphasised, human beings should be understood as corporeal beings and that the body-as-a-whole is present in all our engagements:

I receive the surrounding world through my eyes, my ears, my hands. The structure of my perceptual organs shapes that which I apprehend. And it is via bodily means that I am capable of responding. My legs carry me toward a desired goal seen across the distance. My hands reach out to take up tools, reconstructing the natural surroundings into an abode uniquely suited to my body (1990: 1).

Although previously absent from empirical work on high-risk sports, as the body-as-a-whole provides the enabling ground for all activities, human corporeality should not be absent from such investigations. Indeed the 'lived' body should be seen as playing a formative role in a skydiver's career. Skydiving requires an active body and throughout the training the body is continuously worked upon by both the instructor and student. For example, the mock aeroplane is repeatedly used by students in order to learn how to climb out on to the step correctly. Each student practices the 'correct' technique following the command of the instructor. The first command the instructor shouts is 'On The Step'. When hearing this command the student places their right leg out of the mock aeroplane on to the step before placing their left hand on the wing

strut. Following this, the student places their right hand on the wing strut next to their left hand in order to pull themselves out of the plane and on to the step. They then move their left leg in front of their right leg and place their left foot on the edge of the step. Their legs are now crossed. The student slides both hands up the wing strut so they are directly in front, about a shoulders width apart. The student then moves their right leg off the step and holds it out behind. The instructor will then shout 'look in'. On this instruction, the student looks to the left as if they were looking at the instructor holding the static line in the plane. Finally the instructor shouts 'Go'. The student pushes off to the right and shouts the safety count 'One thousand, two thousand, three thousand, four thousand, check canopy'. Whilst the student shouts the safety count, their backs are arched, legs slightly bent, arms out and their head looking up. If students do not have the right 'drop position', they could have an unstable exit from the aircraft. During this quick succession of movements the instructor would occasionally shout additional instructions such as 'stay low' or 'tight grip, remember the wind will be about 70-80mph up there' to the student whilst they are climbing out. During the safety count the instructor physically corrected all the students' body positions, pulling their shoulders back, pushing their arms up, making sure that their legs are slightly bent etc. Students would also constantly monitor each others movements. Occasionally a student would make so many mistakes whilst climbing out that the instructor insisted that they start again, until they 'get it right'. During my training, every student practiced this sequence at least four times. As Leder asserts, a skill has to be 'acted out, rehearsed and repeated' (1990: 32) in order to pervade the individual's own corporeality.

Such structured forms of bodily activity should not simply be viewed as learning 'patterns of behaviour'. As Crossley (2004) maintains, structured forms of bodily activity embody a practical understanding and meaning and orient to pre-reflexive principles. Crossley provides an appropriate example:

To learn to swim...is not merely to learn to perform a fixed set of movements but rather to grasp, in a practical and pre-reflexive way, principles of buoyancy, water displacement etc. It is to develop an understanding of 'deep water' sufficient to allow one to stay afloat and move around within it. Moreover swimming embodies a purpose and thus meaning (i.e. staying afloat and moving in a desired direction) and is performed for this purpose (Crossley, 2004: 38).

In a similar way, skydiving also embodies a purpose and meaning. The students are taught how to use, move, shape and transform their body in order to climb out on to the step, to stay stable during freefall so that their parachute can deploy safely and effectively, to steer the canopy in the right direction and to make a safe landing. The practicality of pre-reflexive awareness is of central importance. One instructor explained that the emergency drills should become 'second nature', so that 'if something does happen, you'll react automatically'. The following fieldnotes describe how students are taught the emergency drills which have to be learned in case of a malfunction.

'Nick is now going to demonstrate the technique for operating the reserve.' Mark shouts 'bad canopy' and Nick shouts 'Look' [looking down at his harness] 'Locate' [placing his hands on the on the reserve

handle and the cut away pad] 'Peel' [he peels the cut away pad]
'Punch' [he punches down towards the ground with the cut away pad
in his hand. This removes the main parachute] 'Push' [with his left
hand he pushes the reserve handle with activates the reserve parachute]
'Arch' [arches his back in to the drop position] 'Check canopy'. 'OK'
Mark states, 'now Nick will do it in real time' and Nick shouts
'LOOK, LOCATE, PEEL, PUNCH, PUSH, ARCH, CHECK
CANOPY.'

There are four main reasons why a canopy can be described as 'bad'. The first safety check that students are taught refers to whether they believe that the canopy is large, rectangular and controllable. In some extremely rare cases there might not even be a canopy above the students head. Such a 'total malfunction' could only happen to a static line student if the static line was not connected to the 'strongpoint' on the plane. The second type of malfunction students are taught to recognise is the 'streamer' in which the parachute fails to inflate. In the third main type of malfunction a 'line over', the parachute has inflated, but one side has inverted under a line group, and there are lines trapped over it. As Steve informed me 'if it [the canopy] looks like a bow tie, then you've got a line over.' Finally students are taught to look for 'damage on the canopy' (rips in the nylon or damaged suspension lines). Such checks must be accomplished simultaneously in a matter of seconds. In all of these situations the student must cut away the main parachute and deploy the reserve. Although students are repeatedly informed that such situations are rare, all the scenarios given by the instructor are realistic.

'We are now going to teach you this so if the situation arises, you will operate your reserve instinctively'. We follow Nick down to the main hangar where he provides each student with a practice harnesses which are hanging up outside the mock aeroplane. Nick demonstrates how the harnesses work, and explains how to put them on. We stand in two lines of four, facing each other. Mark stands at one end and Nick at the other. 'We're now going to practice various scenarios' Nick says. We stand, holding our arms out in front as if we were holding on to the wing strut. Suddenly Nick shouts 'Go'. All the group arch their backs with their legs bent and their arms raised as if we were all being arrested. We shout together 'One thousand, two thousand, three thousand, four thousand, check canopy' Nick shouts 'malfunction' 'Look, Locate, Peel, Punch, Push, Arch, Check Canopy' we shout together. Both Nick and Mark look unimpressed. 'I can shout louder than all of you put together' Nick says and gives a demonstration. He proves himself right. 'Right, let's try that again, but this time I want you to really shout.' We continue to practice with different scenarios such as good canopy (go through the basic safety checks), bad canopy or malfunction (reserve drills), arms or legs caught in the lines (shake arms or legs to retract from the lines), lines are tangled (kick our legs, pretending to 'get out of the twists'), suspended by the static line beneath the plane (place hands on head) etc.

On each command students must understand 'how to do' the appropriate sequence of actions. During this session a number of students made mistakes that could result in

death or serious injury if made 'in the air'. For example, when I pulled my reserve handle before peeling the cut away pad, the instructor informed me (along with the rest of the group) that I had just died. I learnt that I had just made a serious mistake. He explained that if I made this mistake during an actual malfunction, the reserve parachute could become entangled with the malfunctioned canopy - the reserve canopy would not deploy. Thankfully, I only made this mistake once during the training. Two other students also made life-threatening mistakes. Although the least common type of parachuting emergency, a static-line hang-up results in a student hanging underneath the aircraft after exit. This can happen if the student has a fouled static line which has passed through some of the student's equipment. If this situation does occur, students are taught to place their hands on their head. This indicates to the instructor that they are conscious and aware of this particular emergency procedure. The instructor will show a knife to the student before cutting the static line. As soon as the static line is cut, the student must go through the reserve drills to operate the reserve parachute. The instructions for this scenario were 'You have left the aircraft, but you find yourself suspended underneath.' All the students place their hands on their heads apart from one student who shouts 'look, locate, peel, punch, pull, arch, check canopy.' The instructor allows the student to finish before casually informing him that he has just killed himself. Not only has he killed himself, but he has killed everyone else in the plane. We are informed that if a student opens their reserve in this situation 'it will bring the plane down 'cos we're only jumping from the small Cessna.' The instructor then informs us that if we were jumping from a larger plane, the student would have been ripped in half. The instructor gives the same scenario again and this time everyone places their hands on their heads. Then the instructor shouts 'Right, I have shown you the knife and I have now cut the static line.' Instead

of shouting out the emergency drills like everyone else, one student starts to shout the safety count 'One thousand, two thousand, three thousand, four thousand, check canopy.' The instructor immediately shouts 'What canopy are you checking?' The student looks confused. 'What have I just done?' The student still doesn't reply. The instructor explains that he has just cut the static line and therefore the main canopy will not be deployed. On the third attempt all the students demonstrated to the instructor that they understood 'how to do' the correct sequence of moves.

Crossley's (2004) research on circuit training offers interesting and relevant insights. Crossley maintains that participants knowledge of what comprises various body techniques 'is a matter of practical bodily know-how rather than conceptual know that. Furthermore, it is to be able to do it at the right moment, without first having to think about it. The agent must respond automatically' (2004: 45). As I have already suggested, the instructors aim for the students to 'react instinctively' to the training scenarios, without having to think about what they are doing. During the training Nick told a story about how he walked up behind a skydiver in the bar and shouted 'Malfunction' in his ear: 'It cracked everyone up. He suddenly started going through the drill, you know LOOK, LOCATE. You can catch skydivers off guard like that'. In the corporeal transformation that evolves during the skydivers career, the emergency procedures develop and 'sediment into fixed habits' (Leder 1990: 32). Furthermore, an orientation to physical items (such as the cut away pad, reserve handle and rip cord) becomes incorporated into the skydiver's body and can be located without having to see or touch them. The following example highlights this point. Karl described one of his jumps when he spun out of control:

I spun out of control the other day. I just started spinning. I knew I was out of control. What they tell you to do in such a situation is to pull. Just pull [the rip cord]. It's part of your body. You know it's there. No panic.

This research also agrees with Crossley in that the training is about 'knowing how' to perform the correct sequence of actions on the instructors specific commands. Nevertheless, although the skydiving student clearly needs to demonstrate practical bodily know how, students are also required to show that they have the conceptual background necessary to 'know that'. Indeed a large part of the course concentrates specifically on this background. A trainee parachutist must conceptually 'know-that' they have a malfunction or a good canopy together with the practical bodily 'know-how' to do the emergency drills.

5.5 Reflecting on the RAPS Training

I have provided typical examples from the full day's RAPS training course. During the training I also handled all the parachuting equipment, learned about 'nuisance' factors such as line twists and end cell closure⁴, practiced Parachute Landing Falls (PLF) to ensure a safe landing, learned how to arch my body in 'the stable position' after exiting the plane, what to do in case of aircraft emergencies, how to control the canopy, repeatedly shouted at the top of my voice the safety procedures and emergency drills, and endured an uncomfortable ten minutes suspended in a training harness in order to practice various emergency scenarios. The last session of the day

⁴ Line twists and end cell closure are referred to as nuisance factors as they should not be considered as serious problems. Students are taught how to 'kick out the twists', and how to make sure the canopy's end cells are inflated.

was the much anticipated written exam, although it only turned out to be a series of eighteen multiple choice questions. Everyone in the group passed although one student only answered twelve questions correctly. The instructors made sure he knew where he went wrong and were eventually satisfied that he understood. The good news, as far as I was concerned, was that we would not be jumping at the end of the day. Thankfully the weather was not good enough. The instructors informed us that the weather would also be bad the next day, and that we should therefore return to the centre following weekend in order to make our first jump⁵. I felt relieved. My back ached and my head was pounding. I certainly did not feel prepared enough to jump there and then. I needed time to take in and remember all the important information. Although I came to trust both of my instructors, I felt even more nervous about the prospect of jumping out of a plane. Not only did I still find the idea of climbing out of the plane a daunting prospect, but I had clearly failed to realise that so many aspects could go wrong. I understood that they were very unlikely to happen, but the fact remained that they could happen. On my first jump I might have to operate my reserve parachute, even though I wasn't entirely sure if I could determine whether I had a malfunction. I could be suspended under the plane waiting for the instructor to cut the static line with his emergency knife. Another possibility involved landing on the various obstacles surrounding the drop zone such as the motorway, the industrial estate, electricity pylons or even a barbed wire fence which our instructor warned 'can rip off testicles'. Such thought processes were hardly comforting. Emily, a novice parachutist, recalled her experience of the RAPS training in a similar fashion:

⁵ On successful completion of the training course all students are issued with a jump ticket which is valid for three months. Revision training during this period is free of charge and the three month period is automatically extended for a further three months from the date of any revision training attended. If a student does not attend for the revision training after three months they will be charged £50.00 for any revision training required. After twelve months of the original training and the student has not jumped or attended any revision training the full course must be taken again and they will be charged the full fee of £170.00.

The training was really scary. It was exhausting. It's really intense and they cover absolutely everything, every incident and I was more scared at the end of the training than I was at the beginning of it for sure. They take you through everything, they take you through landing on pylons and the sea and so on and things that I hadn't thought about. I just thought about my parachute not working, but they just sort of bring out everything, you know, the lines twisting, which again I hadn't thought about. All these things can go wrong, and also they showed us a video that scared me, because they showed how people have to walk out of the plane and when I saw that I didn't want to do it. I learnt that when you put it all together a lot of things can actually go wrong. Like your lines might not untangle and when you actually realise all the things that can go wrong its actually pretty amazing that things go right because you could end up with a line that doesn't really hold your canopy right and so on and you static line might get tangled up before you even go out or it hasn't been packed properly, or even more basic things, you might not even have the harness on properly maybe something gets caught up in what you're wearing your arm or leg gets caught up in the lines or you hit the plane as you jump, I don't know if that is possible but it certainly seem like it should be possible. And where you land, all kinds of things can go wrong there, gusts of wind. I mean the plane might not even work, and it might crash [Laughs] so all sorts of things can actually go wrong.

Although some people were disappointed not to jump at the end of the training and returned to their cars complaining about the weather, most of the students on my course were pleased to have time to digest all the information. I interviewed Tim a week after he completed his training course:

Initially we thought that we were going to be jumping at the end of the day after the training had finished, and I didn't feel that I had mentally prepared myself enough for this, so I was pleased in a way that I didn't jump on Saturday. I jumped on the Sunday morning and I probably had the entire night to think about it. I actually thought about it whilst trying to get to sleep, and whilst driving down to the drop zone in the morning. I knew the distances and everything else. So I was quite reassured that I could remember the training. That made me feel more secure, and that my mind had not gone blank because you take on so much information that you just fear that your mind might go blank.

5.6 Further Training

All students at the centre have to attend the revision training before they are allowed to jump. When I arrived at the centre to attend the revision training I assumed that everyone else would also be training to do their first jump. I was trying to remember the correct procedures and body positions, the emergency drills, safety count, and the various scenarios that the training focused upon. I was also trying *not* to think about climbing out on to the step, a thought that still made me feel incredibly anxious. Even though I was sure that I had not remembered all the important information, I felt

assured that everyone else would be in the same position. I soon learned that this was not the case. Unlike the initial training, most of the students who attend the revision have usually jumped several times, and will therefore be at different stages of the progression. Whilst some students might be anticipating their first jump, others could be on dummy pulls, five, ten or fifteen second delays, dive or unstable exits etc. The following fieldnotes provide a detailed description of the first revision training that I attended:

I walked over to the reception and joined a small queue of people waiting to enrol for the static line training course that I had attended the previous weekend. Whilst this group were busy filling out their forms, I asked one of the members of staff if I needed to give him my jump ticket. 'Yeah' he replied, 'I'll take that from you. All you need to do is sign in on this sheet, and tick that box [pointing to a sheet of paper on a clipboard] which confirms that this is your first static line jump.' After a few minutes my name, along with another five students, is called over the Tannoy system and instructs all students to meet our instructor in the main hangar. As soon as all the students are together, the instructor takes a register and asks us to put on a practice harness 'don't worry, you're not going to be suspended today' he says, laughing to himself, as we walk over to the mock aeroplane. As I put on my harnesses I start talking to one of the other students. To my surprise, he casually informs me that he has jumped a couple of times before. Another three students over hear our conversation and inform me that they have also jumped before, several times. 'What, this is

your first jump?' one of the students asks me appearing surprised 'Yeah' I reply, and the only female student also says 'same here'. The four students who have jumped before smile at each other knowingly. Although they are novice parachutists, I sense that their limited experience is very important to them. I feel that they know something that I am currently unaware of. The instructor [Tony] then introduces himself and explains what we will be covering. First of all he takes us through the safety procedures. 'Like any other machinery or vehicle things can go wrong with the plane. [pointing to a student] what would I shout out if we have to make an emergency landing?' 'Brace, brace, brace' one of the students replies. 'And what position would you adopt?' Everyone falls to their knees and curls up in a ball. 'Good, that protects your teeth for the dental records' [general laughter]. Once we land, walk away from the plane until you reach a safe distance. Now remember, your static line will still be attached, so as you walk away your canopy will be deployed. Just keep walking. If the canopy is inflating and you feel it could be dangerous, what can you do?' The instructor points to a student 'cut away the parachute' he confidently replies. Tony is satisfied with his answer and immediately points to another student 'What else could I shout in an emergency'. 'Exit, exit, exit' the student replies. 'That's right. If I shout that you will be exiting the plane one after the other. Don't slowly walk out on to the step. Just dive from the step and do the biggest arch possible. Remember, in this situation we will all be in close proximity to one another, so be careful.' We then take it in turns to practice our exit from the mock

aeroplane. Tony is satisfied with our exits and tells us to gather in a circle on the mats in the middle of the hangar. After acting out various scenarios we take off our practice harnesses and he informs the group about the weather conditions. He explains that we should not jump in winds over 15mph and that at the moment the winds are bordering on 20mph. 'It's too winding for novices at the moment, but hopefully this afternoon will be OK.' The instructor takes a large aerial photograph of the drop zone and places it on the floor. He explains where he thinks we will be dispatched and explains where we should aim to land. 'I think this is right' the instructor says 'but the wind conditions might have changed before you make your jump. I don't think it will change much though. You'll be briefed on this just before you jump, so don't worry.' Finally he reminds us where to go when we are called, and where to find the all-in-one skydiving overalls. I thank Tony with the other students and make my way back to the cafeteria.

There are obvious similarities between the full day's training course and the revision training. A great deal of emphasis is placed on safety procedures and the same scenarios are provided by the instructor. Questions are asked about landing procedures, heights aircraft emergencies, canopy safety checks and the emergency drills. Like the RAPS training, the students are not supposed to answer any questions unless they are asked directly by the instructor. Occasionally this rule would be broken by an over enthusiastic student keen to demonstrate their recently acquired knowledge. In one such situation the instructor firmly reminded the student not to 'call out' the answers by stating that the training 'is not a competition'. The revision

concludes with the instructor informing students about wind speeds and answering any questions that might arise. Throughout the revision students have to wear training harnesses to demonstrate that they understand the correct sequence for pulling the cutaway pad and pushing the reserve handle. The more experienced students wear training harnesses which also have a 'dummy pull', so that they can practice 'pulling' during the training session. When shouting the safety count, students have to assume the correct 'arched' bodily position until each scenario is over. At the start of this particular revision training, the instructor informed the new comers that they 'won't be suspended today'. Here the instructor is referring to the RAPS course, where students are suspended from a training harnesses to demonstrate that they can deal with different emergency situations and general canopy control whilst 'in the air' and to know roughly 'how it feels to be suspended under the canopy'. The revision training does not attempt to cover all the topics covered on the RAPS course, or provide nearly as much detail. However, the revision training does cover the all main areas covered on the full days training and condenses such information so that the students are refreshed and ready to jump after roughly half an hour.

Although there clearly are similarities between both the RAPS and revision training, it is important to recognise the differences. The most obvious difference concerns the students in the group. Unlike the RAPS course, the majority of the students who attend the revision training have jumped before and have moved beyond the first few progressive stages. The questions and scenarios are therefore less problematic. Such students have already formulated recipes for the types of behaviour required for each of the scenarios provided by the instructor. Students more advanced in their skydiving career had developed habitual embodied techniques for each scenario and react

automatically to the instructor's commands. Nevertheless, as some students are attending the revision training to make their first jump they have not acquired enough common sense knowledge (Schutz 1964) to know how to act in each situation. During the revision training described above, there were certain questions that I could not have answered. I therefore found myself trying to avoid contact with the instructor's eyes so that I could escape being asked particular questions. I also found myself copying the actions and bodily positions of other students in various situations such as rolling up in a ball for the emergency landing as well as the particular sequential order required for the reserve drills. In this respect I had to replicate the actions of others who had built up their highly specialised general stock of knowledge. During the revision training the students, without instruction, would order themselves in a semi-circle around the instructor. Keeping a certain amount of distance between each student to have enough space for each training scenario was also managed by the students themselves and students would automatically adopt the correct bodily positions without specific instruction. Whilst the structure of the training during the RAPS course was completely determined by the instructors, the revision training was also structured by the students themselves. Although I strictly adhered to the commands of the instructor and conformed to my particular role, some students would feel confident enough to deviate from the correct procedures. The most common deviation occurred during the safety count. During one revision training session instead of shouting 'look, locate, peel, punch, push, arch, check canopy' one student started the safety count with the words 'fuck, shit, peel, punch...' Although this would have been unacceptable during the RAPS training, on this occasion the instructor laughed with the rest of the group. The instructor also admitted that when he first had a malfunction, he did not shout the word 'locate'. He gave the group a

clue by saying that that the word he shouted began with an S and ended in a T. The instructor commented that he did not care what words were used 'in the air' as long as they were followed by the correct actions. Another example was provided by a student who was on fifteen second delays, and therefore extremely familiar with the revision training. At the end of the safety count, instead of shouting 'check canopy' he shouted 'change underwear'. Another student, after successfully practicing the reserve drills with the rest of the group, looked up at his pretend reserve canopy and shouted 'no, that canopy is fucked as well, game over.' Although both the instructor and group also found his statement humorous, the instructor reassured the students that this was extremely unlikely to happen. Whilst most students adhere to the correct formulas for each scenario, some advanced students were confident enough to deviate from the prescribed formulas. Such deviations demonstrate that they have acquired enough stock of specialised knowledge to know how and when to provide 'humorous breaks' from the various pre-determined scripts. As the majority of possible deviations would not be accepted by the instructor (not adopting the correct bodily position, answering questions without being directly asked by the instructor, confusing the order of the emergency drills or landing heights etc), knowing both how and when to provide acceptable deviations served to demonstrate their familiarity and increasing expertise in relation to their skydiving career.

5.7 Career Progression

At an early stage of their skydiving career, students become increasingly aware of the progressive stages they need to complete before becoming a licensed skydiver. As I have tried to make clear, during the revision training students who have never jumped are training alongside other students who are at different stages of their skydiving

career. Conversations between students before and after the revision training often focused on how many jumps each of the students had made. The following fieldnotes describe a particular conversation between students waiting to start the revision training. As these fieldnotes suggest, the number of jumps became an important indicator for determining each student's limited experience:

I am handed a training harness by another student. 'When did you last jump?'

'Last week' I replied, 'but I've only done one jump. How about you?'

'I'm on five second delays'

'Really, what's that like?'

'Excellent. You can see the ground rushing towards you. It's incredible'

'Is it hard to stay in the arched position?'

'No. The wind kind of naturally puts you in that position anyway'

'What about finding the rip cord?'

'You know it's there' she confidently replies 'You practice on the ground so much. It might not be exactly where you think it is, but you don't panic, just feel around and you'll find it.'

'So how many jumps have you done to get to five second delays?'

'I've done sixteen jumps. I just thought that I should really try to progress. I used to get really scared climbing out on to the step, but I've conquered that fear now 'cos I've been doing a lot of jumps recently.'

'I've heard that you can really progress if you do several jumps in one day, instead of just one jump a week.'

'Yeah, that's true. That's what I've been doing. It's really good if you can do two or three jumps in one day.'

Another student has been overhearing our conversation whilst putting on his training harness.

'So you're on five second delays are you?' he asks the other student.

'Yeah. It's really amazing. How about you?'

'Oh I'm on fifteen seconds'

'Oh right' she replies

'Really' I say. We both sound impressed with his achievement.

'Yeah, I was looking around as I was falling. It was intense (facial impression to imitate how exhilarating the sensation was)

Students attending the revision training would usually discover how many jumps each student had made before the training started. Whilst taking the register, the instructor would also clarify how many jumps each student had previously done:

Our instructor for the revision training (Andy) starts to take the register. 'So, who's Mick?' the instructor asks. The student raises his hand. 'Right, so you're on fifteens, Sarah, you're still on five second delays. Jason and Dave, you two have only jumped once before haven't you.' The instructor reminds both of these students to take a harness without a dummy pull. 'James, you're also on static line' 'Yes' I reply, my tone suggesting that I was not prepared to jump without

one. The instructor laughed before confirming with Gary, the last student in the group, that he is on his first dummy pull. 'Hopefully we'll also get you onto dummy pulls after today' the instructor says to me as he hands me a training harness.

Conversations between the students usually focused on what stage they had reached, and the instructors would also provide specific information relating to the different stages on an individual basis. Students were eager to progress in order to demonstrate their abilities both to themselves, and to other students and instructors. I talked to one student (Neil) after we had jumped out of the same plane together. I asked him how his jump went, and described some of my own experiences. Although he was looking forward to his jump, and talked positively about his expectations prior to jumping, he now seemed frustrated and incredibly impatient: 'I just want to know how it went, that's all. I'm not sure if my exit was good enough. I think it was, but I just don't know, do you know where Keith [our instructor] is? I thought we were going to get some feedback, but I think he's taken some other students up. I can't believe it, why can't he just tell us.' Neil's last jump was his third dummy pull. In order to progress on to the next stage (three second free fall) the student has to make three successful dummy pulls. The first three second free fall must also take place within twenty four hours of the last jump. As this stage requires the student to open their own canopy, the instructor must be completely satisfied of the student's ability. Neil was frustrated because he had intended to complete his first three second free fall the same day. Otherwise he would have to wait until the following weekend and therefore do another dummy pull before being allowed to deploy his own canopy. Students receive feedback from their instructor after each jump. However, when the centre is busy

students would occasionally have to wait for their feedback until their instructor became available. Much to Neil's annoyance, on this occasion we had to wait for over an hour. Neil was even more frustrated when he learned that his jump was not good enough to progress on to the next stage. The instructor informed him that he de-arched when he pulled the dummy pull and explained the various dangerous situations that could arise. On that occasion my feedback was also not particularly positive:

Although my climb out was confident, I failed to arch my back enough. 'Your arch was quite flat, and you kicked your legs. It's only natural, it's quite common actually. You know what you're doing don't you, you're looking for the ground, but the ground's not there. So you need to make a conscious effort not to kick your legs and you need to practice arching your back. You just need to break it down, that's all. Once you've climbed out into position, then you're on to the next stage. After you have left the plane and arched properly, then you're on to the next stage, have I got a malfunction. Believe me, if you have, you'll deal with it. Don't try to think about everything at once. The thing is, you're becoming aware of what you are doing now. I bet you can't even remember your first jump. Like everyone else, you were shitting yourself. At the end of your first jump, you were just pleased to be alive. But now you are more aware that you are jumping from a plane, so you need to control that. That's the good thing about this sport, there's always something you can improve on.' 'So it wasn't a good jump' I said. 'Well, it wasn't brilliant, but it was safe, and that's the main thing. I've seen exits that are just not safe and all of those

exits today were safe. You're all alive, so as far as I'm concerned, that's a good day at the office. Were you talked down?' 'No, I was told to flare, that's all.' 'Excellent,' he replies, 'I shall write down on your card about de-arching and kicking your legs, but I'll also put that you have good canopy control.' Unlike two of the other students in my group, I would not be progressing on to dummy rip pulls for my next jump. I felt frustrated that I had kicked my legs and not arched my back enough. I would now have to wait until the following week to try again. I felt determined to achieve this on my next jump.

During the feedback instructors would usually find something positive to say about each student's jump, even if the overall feedback was negative. Although I failed to arch my back and kick my legs, I was also informed that I climbed out well and that I had good canopy control. Feedback was important for the students. Not only would the instructor evaluate their performance and advise students how to overcome any mistakes, but the students would only be confident to comment on their performance after they received feedback from their instructor. Occasionally feedback would just be positive and extremely brief such as 'excellent climb out, good arch, no problem, you can go on to dummy pulls for your next jump OK.' As the above fieldnotes demonstrate, feedback can also be extremely detailed. A brief summary of the feedback is written on each student's individual form and is kept at the centre. This allows each instructor to know exactly how many times each student has jumped, and to know what stage of the progression system they have reached. When the instructor asked if I was 'talked down' I confidently replied that I was only told to flare my parachute. All students at the centre have to jump with a radio on their first few

jumps. An experienced skydiver or instructor instructs the student whilst looking through powerful, tripod mounted binoculars. Apart from making sure that the student has completed the safety checks and is facing the right direction they also help with landing which is hard to judge, especially for the novice parachutist. On this particular jump the only instruction that I received concerned the landing. After the first few jumps, the instructors encourage students to jump without the assistance of the radio. As one instructor informed me, 'we try to wean students of the radios, after a few jumps there's no reason why they have to jump with one.' Nevertheless, some students are not confident jumping without one, even after jumping a number of times. One experienced skydiver remembered his own anxiety of jumping without instruction from the radio:

I just didn't want to jump without it. I think I was on about my ninth jump or something, and everyone was telling me that I should jump without one, but I wasn't having any of it. So I jumped, with it [the radio], but no-one talked me down or told me when to flare. After that I never jumped with a radio. That gave me the confidence to know that I could do it by myself.

(Jason)

Having the knowledge and confidence to jump without the assistance of the radio was an important part of the career progression and instructors would often recommend students to jump without the radio after their first few jumps. Students would also be equally as keen to demonstrate that they could jump without one. Feedback encouraged students to progress to the next stage and provided the next challenge to overcome.

The feedback sessions also allowed the students to talk about the various stages of progression, to comment on their own fears and anxieties and look back over their progression to see how much they had improved. I talked with a student who I had just received feedback with. Students would often hear stories about the 'dreaded' unstable exit where the student is quite literally pushed out of the plane:

I asked Karl what his next stage was. 'Well, my back's a problem at the moment. My parachute opened up straight away on that last jump and it fucking hurt. It's still killing me, but I know I'm impatient so at some point today I might just say fuck it, and go up again. I could get my category eight in a few jumps. I wanted to get it done this weekend. Look at the weather, perfect. I think I'm just going to get up there anyway.' 'So what's your next stage' I ask again. 'The unstable exit' he replies 'I have to get out on to the step and hold my leg with my right hand. Depending on the instructor, you can get kicked off the step. Apparently they really enjoy it. Then you've got to spin for at least five seconds before you're allowed to arch. Apparently it's your best jump you know, 'cos it gives you loads of confidence.'

Such conversations together with the feedback sessions encouraged one of my interviewees to progress. I asked her if she was interested in working her way through the progression system:

Yeah, definitely. Although when I did the training I didn't think about that at all. It was just to do it for the first one jump and I thought I was going to be happy with that really. But on the first day somebody, oh I can't remember, oh yeah that's right, during the feedback that they gave us there were more experienced people who were better and had done more jumps and that encouraged me because it made me think, ah, you can move on, you can get better. I think that's the key to why I want to progress. And also it's really good, because you see people who really are better and really good at it and you think oh wow, and you want to do it. My next stage will be dummy rip pulls, which involves pretending to pull the parachute yourself. I could be at that stage in a few more jumps.

Although Emily was only initially interested in doing one jump, the feedback session and the general interaction with other students encouraged her to progress. Another experienced interviewee also commented on how he initially thought he would only do one jump. Again the feedback sessions encouraged Andrew to progress all the way through to category eight:

The first time I did it I just thought it was absolutely brilliant, but after the feedback and talking to other more experienced students, I realised that that was just the beginning. It's about learning new skills all the time, after the first few jumps it's not about just getting out of the plane and living it, it's actually learning to do stuff in the air. You've

got dummy pulls, five, tens, fifteens and then you start wearing an alti⁶ [altimeter] and actually using the alti to pull rather than counting to pull. And then you do turns, three sixty left, three sixty right, back loop, back loop is fun. Unstable exits, which is even more fun, dive exits and tracks and then you have to put them all together.

Initially the student aims to climb out onto the step correctly, arch their back to maintain the correct bodily position for canopy deployment and land on their feet instead of using the parachute landing fall technique. These are all important challenges to overcome, but such challenges are 'only the beginning'. Even though most students had not previously entertained the idea of progressing, their exposure to the revision training and feedback sessions together with interactions at the drop zone with other more advanced students encouraged students to progress further than they might have previously anticipated. Even when students have particular difficulties with certain stages of the progression system, most students simply referred to such problems as obstacles to overcome:

I had problems getting past three and five second delays because I was a bit crap. I couldn't stay stable. But once I got over that the one that I remember that was really nice was my first ten second jump. That was the first time I actually got flat facing to earth because it takes about eight seconds to get horizontal. And then you actually start to feel the

⁶ Students start with an altimeter attached to their chest strap. However, as they start to progress, the altimeter is worn on the hand as it is easier to see during free fall.

wind rushing into your face, because obviously your speed has increased as well.

(Steve)

A skydiver's career involves successfully completing each level of the progression system, but it also includes 'the notion of career contingency, those factors on which mobility from one position to another depends' (Becker 1963:24). In order to progress to the next level of progression the students have to meet certain requirements. As I have previously discussed, not satisfying the instructor enough to progress to the next level can create much frustration amongst the students. Nevertheless, such frustration only served to make the student even more determined to reach the next stage. Certain stages are celebrated in ritual fashion (Celsi et al. 1993). The most celebrated stage for students to pass is their first free fall, as this particular stage demonstrates the student's progression towards becoming a competent skydiver. Karl describes the reactions of both the instructors and the regular skydivers after his first free fall, or what skydivers refer to as 'hop and pop'.

Everyone makes such a big deal about it when you've done your first free fall. The instructors and skydivers have so much admiration 'cos you've got to that level. 'Cos they say that if you haven't done a free fall you're not a skydiver, you're a parachutist. It's the fact that you've jumped out of the plane and opened your own parachute, and that's what it's all about. You've done it all yourself. I was buzzing afterwards. I don't think I came down from about 10,000ft until about Wednesday. I was on a high for days. I was like phoning everyone, and

telling everyone and I was threatened with violence if I told anyone again [laughs].

Whilst at the drop zone I observed students also being congratulated by their instructors after successfully completing other progressive stages, from their first static line jump (where students are awarded with applause together with a certificate certifying that they have made a static line parachute jump) to the unstable exit and the first fifteen second delay. Nevertheless, as Karl states, the first free fall is a milestone in the students skydiving career. Once the student has completed their first 'hop and pop' they are considered to be a novice skydiver rather than a student who enjoys parachuting. The novice apprenticeship has been successfully completed. As Karl informed me, he was no longer considered to be a 'dope on a rope' (static line student) by the regular skydivers. The instructors and skydivers also make a 'big deal' when students pass their category eight and achieve the status of a licensed skydiver. On such occasions the student would usually wait until the evening to celebrate their success in the bar. During my fieldwork three students actually put enough money behind the bar to buy everyone at the drop zone a drink. As the CCI informed me, when students achieve their category eight they are almost expected to 'get the beers in'. Such rites of passage mark the acceptance of the student into the skydiving community.

5.8 Vocabularies of Motive

As the novice skydiver progresses they enter a new social world. Unfamiliar terms are now understood and topics of conversation that once would have been considered mundane (such as weather conditions, specialised equipment, types of plane, canopy

size) are now of serious importance. The student learns to speak the technical language of skydiving and as their career develops the student begins to feel 'at home' with their new surroundings. In a similar way to the wheelchair runners described by Patrick and Bignall (1984) the skydiving world is also a world of shared experience. Students initial curiosity about what it is like to skydive has been satisfied, and the extraordinary actions of jumping out of a plane gradually become as ordinary and taken-for-granted as other areas of their everyday lives. The transition that occurs can be explored by considering the different vocabularies of motive provided by novice parachutists and experienced skydivers. As Mills recognised, in order to provide adequate grounds for their own conduct people 'vocalise and impute motives to themselves and to others' (1940: 904) when questioned about their behaviour. Such motives should not be understood as fixed or abstract forces within the individual. Mills provides a sociological approach by arguing that motives should be understood as external products that individuals employ to provide adequate and meaningful descriptions of their own behaviour. In this respect such meaningful descriptions are understood as 'accepted justifications for present, future or past programs or acts (1940: 907). Adopting a similar approach, Lyman and Scott (1970) explain how social actors provide 'acceptable utterances' to 'account' for action that is considered untoward. Lyman and Scott define an account as 'a linguistic device employed whenever an action is subjected to valiative inquiry...Moreover, accounts are "situated" according to the statuses of the interactants' (1970: 112). Lyman and Scott focus on two types of accounts:

There are in general two types of accounts: excuses and justifications. Either or both are likely to be invoked when a person is accused of having done

something that is “bad, wrong, inept, unwelcome, or in some other of the numerous possible ways, untoward.” Justifications are accounts in which one accepts responsibility for the act in question, but denies the pejorative quality associated with it...Excuses are accounts in which one admits that the act in question is bad, wrong, or inappropriate but denies full responsibility (1970: 113-114).

Lyman and Scott are primarily concerned with linguistic forms offered by social actors to account for untoward action. As skydiving can result in serious injury and even death, jumping out of a plane as a form of recreation is often considered untoward by non-participants (Alvarez 1973; Brannigan and McDougall 1983; Lyng 1990). As Farrell (1967) recognised, non-participants often regard the act of skydiving to symbolise a death wish, a form of behavioural irrationalism which attracts individuals who have suicidal tendencies. Vanreusel and Renson have also suggested that such negative labelling can ‘lead to the ascription of social stigma to the participants of dangerous sports’ (1983: 188). Skydivers are aware of some of the negative stereotypical assumptions held by those outside the skydiving community. Experienced interviewees commented on how some of their friends thought they had a death wish and how the media constantly portrays skydivers as reckless individuals who purposely seek out unnecessary risks. Skydivers believed that the stereotypical views suggesting that skydivers are a ‘bunch of narcissistic adrenalin addicts’ or that skydivers’ had to be ‘mad dare devils and completely nuts’ were totally inaccurate. As one of the instructors at the centre informed me:

The stereotype is that we're just crazy, on the edge, that there's no rationale to our behaviour. Apparently we're all adrenalin junkies who are just a bit weird. Some of the really negative stereotypes say that skydivers are people who are not happy with their lives, that we're bored, you know, that we're not satisfied with normal things and so on. And I don't think that's true at all.

(Paul)

As 'Most people one meets from day to day would never dream of jumping' (Donaldson 2000: 9), many skydivers were keen to account for their actions during 'question situations' (Mills 1940: 905). Skydivers justified their continued participation by asserting 'its positive value in the face of a claim to the contrary' (Lyman and Scott 1970: 120). Nevertheless, there is a fundamental difference in the vocabularies of motive or justificatory accounts offered by novice parachutists compared with experienced skydivers. According to Lyng and Snow:

When novice skydivers are asked to account for why they keep coming back to make more jumps, they typically express bewilderment. Some run through a list of stereotypic answers – they find it thrilling, they like being a daredevil – but most will candidly admit that they do not know why they do it or simply say that "it's fun" (1986: 164).

Novice interviewees would often provide stereotypic answers to account for their continued participation. During my fieldwork I asked one student why he came back to do his second jump: 'I just love it. My friends think that it's dangerous. They say why do I want to do that. But I say why don't I want to do it. It's just completely

mad.' Another novice parachutist casually explained that it was something to do on a Saturday morning, whilst others focused on the 'thrill', 'buzz' or 'dream like' quality of 'just being up in the air' and the 'high' they get 'as soon as the adrenalin kicks in'. Emily, who had made three jumps at the centre, provided a typical response:

It just looks crazy. Same way as I look at snowboarders and other people who do extreme things, you know, people that kind of do white water rafting in those tiny little matchstick boats and stuff. It's just the thrill of it, it looks so out there, on the edge.

I interviewed another novice parachutist after his sixth jump. Again, Karl's account focuses on the thrill of jumping, and also the adrenalin:

I think the craziness of it attracts me. I don't know if you've heard anyone say it, but people who don't jump tend to say it to you, I don't see the point of jumping out of a perfectly good working aeroplane. And I thought, yeah, that's one reason why I do it because it's not normal you know. I get nervous, but I also want that rush, that adrenalin rush, that thrill, you know to me that's the ultimate. Now I've done lots of things, but I would say that's the ultimate. Nothing as far as I'm concerned can knock throwing yourself out of an aeroplane.

However, not all the accounts from novice parachutists were stereotypical as Lyng and Snow suggest. For Simon it was something that was both exciting and different, and it was also something he had wanted to do 'for ages'. He commented on how it

literally took him years to convince his wife who believed skydiving to be 'too dangerous'. Simon was certainly not 'bewildered' or surprised when I asked him to explain why he jumped:

I decided that I wanted to try some new things in my life, and skydiving just seemed like the obvious thing to do. You know, if you want to push yourself to the limit because I suppose it has that perception of being about as on the limit as you can get.

Novice justificatory accounts often focused on how they wanted a new challenge to overcome to enhance their lives (Schreyer, White and McCool 1978). Whilst waiting at the drop zone for the weather to improve I talked to a student before her first jump. Sophie admitted to being extremely nervous and felt relieved that the adverse weather conditions restricted the possibility of jumping. When I asked her why she had decided to do a parachute jump, she also focused on how parachuting was a personal challenge for her. Before her thirty fifth birthday she swam with dolphins and she had decided that by her thirty sixth birthday she wanted to jump out of a plane: 'I decided to set myself a new challenge each year to make my life more exciting. My challenge for next year is to do some voluntary work in Vietnam or Cambodia.' Tim also vocalised how parachuting provided him with a personal challenge.

It's just the experience of putting myself in a position of jumping out of a plane, that's the hurdle for me personally, it's not the parachuting itself. It's actually putting myself in that plane and jumping, that was the thing, that's what it's all about really for myself. It was a kind of personal challenge.

Although not all the accounts provided by novice parachutists are stereotypical, there remains a stark contrast between their accounts when compared with the accounts provided by the experienced skydivers. Skydiver's justificatory accounts still incorporated the importance of having personal challenges:

I think it [skydiving] is a way of pushing yourself and seeing what you are capable of whereas taking up something like golf really wouldn't be that much of a challenge. And I think it's important to have challenges. Unless you have seen how far you can go, how far you can push yourself, where your own limits are, from a personal point of view I don't think you've explored your life that well.

(Andrew)

Nevertheless, the initial challenge of jumping out of a plane clearly becomes less relevant:

Skydiving isn't just jumping out of a plane. I mean if you were just to jump out of a plane, wait for sixty seconds of free fall and then pull the rip cord, then yeah, you can get bored of it. But there are so many different disciplines and it's impossible to do all of them.

(Andrew)

The challenge for skydivers is to improve their skills in relation to the sport. Steve also commented on how it was extremely unlikely that skydivers will become competent in all the disciplines. In other words, there is always a new challenge. When I interviewed Adam he was focusing on formation flying and admitted that he still had much to learn in that discipline. He explained that he had therefore not been

attempting to engage with other disciplines like free flying, although he believed that he would engage such disciplines later in his skydiving career. Paul, an experienced skydiver with over three hundred and fifty jumps, explained that his motivation for jumping had nothing to do with adrenalin. Paul's motivation for jumping also related to all the different aspects of the sport skydivers can learn to enjoy:

If I want to I can just jump out and do summersaults or whatever. Formation flying is fun as well. I enjoy that, jumping with friends. But I just don't get the adrenalin anymore. It's not about that, it's about exploring what you can do. Sometimes I just like to have a long canopy ride, like my last jump. I pulled the parachute early, and had a long ride down. I spun all the way, it was excellent. I really enjoyed it. But sometimes it's not as good. I suppose it's like football, sometimes you have a really good game, other times not.

Here Paul likens what some novice parachutists describe as a crazy thrill or buzz to a game of football. Such a mundane comparison reveals that adrenalin is no longer an important factor for him. Like Paul, Andrew also dismisses adrenalin as a factor for his continued participation:

Anyone who says that when they jumped out of a plane for the first time and didn't get a bit of a kick out of it is really not being truthful with themselves. But I certainly don't get an adrenalin kick out of it anymore. I mean I wasn't getting a major adrenalin high after about the

first forty jumps. It's much more about the freedom and putting things into perspective.

Freedom and putting things into perspective were common themes amongst the experienced skydivers. Nevertheless, when I asked skydivers to clarify what they meant by freedom, apart from stating that they found skydiving peaceful, relaxing and even therapeutic, most simply stated that they could not 'put it into words'. Fortunately Andrew attempted to articulate what he implied by the word freedom:

It's one of those things that's really hard to describe. You can control your movements completely in three dimensions. You can go up and down relative to someone who is falling with you, side slipping, backwards, forwards, back loops, all this kind of stuff and there are no constraints, you're just up there in the sky with the odd cloud around.

Interviewees found it easier to articulate what they meant by their claim that skydiving has the ability to 'put things in perspective'. I was informed that at the drop zone 'you don't have to worry about anything else' and how 'skydiving is very much an escape from everyday life'. Family, work, relationships, financial difficulties are all insignificant whilst at the drop zone. Consider the following quotes from four experienced skydivers:

It's very much relief from anything else you know. A lot of people do find it sort of puts things in perspective, you know, no matter how much trouble they're having at work during the week say, you know,

tedious boss and they don't like the job and they're not certain whether they want to continue doing this job. All these things are just not important when you're there.

(Stewart)

I know people who have got huge problems in their life and it's a very good way of forgetting about everything and letting go of things and relaxing. It puts things in perspective as well. When you are in free fall you can see the plane that you just got out of and you see the world two or two and a half miles below you. It definitely puts things into perspective. Whatever is stressing you out in life suddenly seems insignificant, it just doesn't matter at all.

(Julia)

People can get stressed about all sorts of things, deadlines or whatever, you do a skydive and it really does put things into perspective. You very quickly realise that, not really in the air because you're only really thinking about the skydive when you're in the air, but certainly when you get back to the ground, you very quickly realise that as long as you've got a roof over your head and food on the table nothing else, well apart from getting jump tickets, really matters and in this day and age it's very difficult to end up completely homeless or whatever so deadlines or whatever really don't matter that much. People can get really wound up thinking that it's the be all and end all in life if I don't

get this in on time or if I don't win this contract or whatever, but in actual fact, is it really that bad if it goes wrong.

(Andrew)

People tend to run away from problems but I come up here and I realise that things can be sorted. And I'm sure if you asked other people they would say the same thing. It prioritizes things. Like the things that you think are really big and important, like can you pay your credit card bills or whatever, suddenly you walk away from a jump where you've just confronted death from twelve thousand feet and you think, well hold on, it doesn't really matter that much.

(Steve)

As these accounts suggest, skydiving offers these interviewees the opportunity to prioritise certain aspects of their lives. Whatever area of their everyday lives is causing stress 'doesn't really matter that much' in the grand scheme of things. According to Steve skydiving is not simply about 'running away' from problems. Skydiving enabled him to 'prioritises things' and realise that any problems 'can be sorted'. Becoming a skydiver changed Steve's general philosophical outlook:

It [skydiving] has changed my outlook in life. I am not bothered by other people's views anymore. Coming from a background where I had a good education and even was in like a career in law in London you know, it doesn't bother me that I've now got out of that. Some of my friends might look at me and say you know, you've not been that

successful 'cos I haven't got lots of money or whatever, but I know exactly what I want to do with my life and those opinions simply do not matter to me anymore. I think because it helps you prioritize what is important and what is not you spend less time on things that don't matter and more time on things that do, and so with one or two exceptions, I'm doing pretty much exactly what I want to do at the moment with my life. And I am sure that skydiving has helped, definitely.

Like Steve, Adam also claimed that skydiving has changed his attitude towards life. Skydiving has also provided him with the confidence to not be restricted by other peoples' expectations. Adam explained that skydiving enabled him to realise 'what's important' and provided him with the confidence to do 'exactly what I want to do, instead of thinking what other people think I should be doing with my life.' I asked him if he believed that skydiving has changed his life:

Oh yeah. Oh yeah. My outlook, dealing with problems, the way I look at other people. It's changed my life in so many ways. Even what I want to do in the future. I mean 12 months ago I would have been stuck in the normal rat race routine, but now I'm preparing myself for living a completely different kind of lifestyle which 12 months ago I wouldn't have even considered.

Such constructive rationales of self-fulfilment can be seen as 'a particularly modern type of justification' (Lyman and Scott 1970: 123). In a similar way to claims of self-

development made by Lyman and Scott's LSD users and homosexuals living in the Haight-Ashbury district in San Francisco, experienced skydivers often vocalised how skydiving literally has the potential to change lives. Skydivers constructive rationales of 'putting things into perspective' and 'self-fulfilment' are clearly absent from the accounts provided by novice parachutists. As Mills recognised 'Shifts in the vocabularies of motive that are utilized later by an individual disclose an important aspect of various integrations of his [sic] actions with concomitantly various groups' (1940: 908). An important aspect of such 'shifts' reveals how both their conception and experience of skydiving has changed dramatically. These changes should be understood as moral in the respect that the experience of skydiving has provided a 'turning point' in the way they view themselves and the world (Goffman 1961).

Whereas novice parachutists constantly referred to the craziness of jumping and concentrated on the thrill, buzz and adrenalin, the vocabularies of motive provided by experienced skydivers no longer relied on such stereotypic responses. As I have shown, experienced interviewees strongly rejected such justifications. Not only is adrenalin not considered to be a factor for their continued motivation, but many skydivers actually claimed that they no longer even 'get an adrenalin fix' from jumping. For the novice parachutist the initial challenge involved simply jumping out of a plane. But the challenge for skydivers becomes incorporated into the various disciplines of the sport. The initial challenge of jumping is certainly no longer a factor for their continued participation. The vocabularies of motive for experienced interviewees focused on the different disciplines and the endless array of new challenges that the sport is seen to provide. Experienced interviewees also talked about the challenge of entering different competitions or obtaining different

qualifications such as the individual canopy, canopy formation and freeflying qualifications or of becoming an accelerated freefall or static line instructor. The accounts of experienced skydivers demonstrate a desire to develop and master technical skills in relation to the sport (also see Branningan and McDougall 1983; Celsi et al. 1993; Arnould and Price 1993). The shifting vocabularies of motive reveals how experienced interviewees' justificatory accounts are subculturally acquired (Monaghan 2002). The changing accounts that claim to mediate action should therefore be seen to be incorporated in the process of becoming a skydiver.

5.9 Conclusion

This research has provided an alternative approach to many current commentaries on 'high risk' sports which attempt to 'discover' what motivates the seemingly problematic 'high-risk personality'. A common suggestion is that participation in activities such as skydiving is a reflection of personality traits which pre-date participation. High-risk participants may be portrayed as 'stimulus addicts' (Ogilvie 1974), 'thrill seekers' (Greenburg, 1977; Klausner, 1967) or 'sensation seekers' (Corin 1991; Hymbaugh and Garret 1974; Jack and Ronan 1998; Zuckerman 1979, 1994). However, the search for 'real' motives is misguided. As Mills recognised the 'imputation and avowal of motives by actors are social phenomena to be explained. The differing reasons men [sic] give for their actions are not themselves without reasons' (1963: 439-40). Rather than attempting to reveal any firmly entrenched 'motive force' (Lyng and Snow 1986) within the individual, I have instead, suggested that the vocabularies of motive or justificatory accounts offered by novice and experienced skydivers demonstrates how desirable motives are socially constructed within and through the processes of becoming a skydiver.

This chapter has employed the analytical concept of moral career, in order to highlight the typical transitions that occur as individuals progress through the early stages of becoming a skydiver. I have focused on various changes that occur as the individual is transformed from an outsider to an insider. As the novice associates increasingly with other skydivers, their aspirations are reinforced, reflected and substantiated by other enthusiastic members of the skydiving community (also see Brannigan and McDougall 1983). As Becker argued, by adopting such a developmental approach, it is not necessary to identify individual 'traits' that 'cause' certain types of behaviour. Developing on the work of Mead (1934), Becker justifies such a theoretical position in relation to his study on marijuana:

...the presence of a given kind of behaviour is the result of a sequence of social experiences during which the person acquires a conception of the meaning of the behaviour, and perceptions and judgements of objects and situations, all of which make the activity possible and desirable. Thus, the motivation or disposition to engage in the activity is built up in the course of learning to engage in it and does not antedate this learning process (1953: 253).

I have shown that the disposition to engage with skydiving is learned as the novice progresses through the particular stages of their skydiving career. As individuals change from novices to experienced skydivers they acquire reciprocal perspectives and adapt to their new roles within the skydiving community. The individual starts to read the major skydiving magazines, watch DVD's of world class skydivers, order

equipment from specialised catalogues, visit skydiving related web sites and chat rooms on a regular basis. The opportunity for the development of new networks of affiliations is clearly evident. The implications that this has on the self will be discussed in detail in chapter seven. Before concentrating on current debates concerning identity (Williams 2000), the next chapter will continue with the concept of moral career to investigate the individuals changing perceptions of risk and whether skydivers think that their sport should be classified as extreme. In this respect I intend to contribute to the small but growing body of empirical research (Wynne 1989, 1996; Michael 1996; Tulloch and Lupton 2003) that challenge sociologists who 'tend to make sweeping generalisations about how "late moderns" respond to risk' (Lupton and Tulloch 2002a: 319).

‘Living on the Edge and all that’: Skydivers Perceptions of Risk

6.1 Introduction

In chapter 2 I explained how the concept of risk has been conceptualised within social theory and specifically focused on the work of Beck (1994, 1995, 1998) and Giddens (1990, 1991, 1994) on the emergence of the ‘risk society’. Both have written about the ‘risk society’ of late modernity, a society in which people are seen to be increasingly worried about risks and highly critical of the institutions that produce them. The risk society theorists have mainly focused their analysis on structural factors to explain why risks produced under conditions of late modernity have become more difficult to manage and avoid. In many of these accounts human actors are portrayed as vulnerable and anxious, desperate to acquire the latest knowledge to avoid becoming another victim. Yet despite the focus on risk and risk aversion in the social sciences there is increasing evidence that high-risk activities, such as those involved in extreme sports, are becoming more popular (Palmer 2002; Stranger 1999). Even in a land of seatbelts and safety helmets, the leisure pursuit of danger is a growing industry (Roberts 1994: 50). Although risk awareness has clearly become central to the way in which human agents and modern institutions organise the social world, there are a growing number of individuals who actively seek experiences that could result in serious injury and the ultimate sanction of death (Vanreusel and Renson 1983). What makes high-risk sports interesting is that participants consciously take risks without coercion. Instead, and as Goffman notes, such activities are ‘consequential, problematic, and undertaken for their own sake’ (1969: 106). This chapter will present findings from my data to determine the extent to which

participants recognise their activities as risky, and to explore how changing perceptions of fear and risk can be understood as 'turning points' in the skydivers' moral career (Goffman 1961, 1963). I will also consider Lyng's (1990, 1998) research to determine how useful his classifying concept of 'edgework' is for understanding high-risk behaviour. This chapter will not attempt to draw a distinction between rational and irrational assessments of risk; instead, adopting a similar approach to Tulloch and Lupton (2003), I will be concerned with investigating the meanings that are imputed to risk and how these meanings relate to individuals activities. Before focusing on these issues, this chapter will provide a detailed description of my own experience of a static line parachute jump.

6.2 'Checked Out and Ready to Go...'

The only possible way to be certain I had successfully learnt the correct training techniques and that my mind was not 'going to go blank' was to voluntarily commit myself to a static line parachute jump. As a complete neophyte I knew that I 'was about to perform for the first time in a role that calls for certain skills never yet publicly tested' (Lyman and Scott 1970: 187). No matter how hard I tried to convince myself otherwise, I still found the idea of jumping out of a small plane an extremely daunting prospect. One of my fellow students captured my growing anxiety: 'I was thinking. Learning to skydive is a bit like taking a theory test for driving and then suddenly being put on the M25 at 150mph.' In retrospect this analogy is clearly exaggerated, but at the time his comparison seemed particularly relevant. I became increasingly aware that my decision to conduct empirical research on skydivers could have devastating consequences. Although extremely rare, I could be seriously injured

or even killed¹. The realisation that I could become 'another statistic' encouraged me to meticulously rehearse the training and emergency procedures away from the drop zone. Due to adverse weather conditions, I managed to spend two weeks contemplating the act of climbing out 'on the step', practicing the correct body position for jumping and rehearsing the various safety procedures that covered a number of contingencies. Exactly two weeks after the RAPS training course I returned to the centre. The weather conditions were perfect, the wind socks were hardly inflated and there was not a cloud in the sky. Unless there had been a serious accident or the planes were being serviced, I knew I would have to confront and hopefully overcome a fear which had been gradually escalating in my mind. I knew this would be unlike anything I had previously experienced. I arrived at the centre, ticked the appropriate box on the form in the reception and waited in the spectator's area. Although I didn't recognise any familiar faces from the RAPS training course, I could overhear and observe various students talking to their families and friends who were patiently waiting with their cameras and video recorders. 'Well, this is it, now or never I suppose, hope I survive another one' a student shouted to one of his friends as he walked over to the flight line.

Most of the spectators are now looking up to the sky, trying to spot the small Cessna 182 flying above. Although the children are complaining that their necks ache, they are refusing to take their eyes off the plane. I watch until I can see the first parachutist jump. Some of the spectator's are frantically taking pictures of the parachutists who are now making their way back to the drop zone. I watch their techniques, thinking about the wind direction and the safety procedures that I will shortly have to

¹ Since 2003 there have been nine fatalities in the United Kingdom. One student died on her first jump (skydive.fatalities.com).

remember. Various questions start to invade my thoughts - What happens if I have tangled lines or even worse, what if my legs or arms are caught up and entangled in the lines? Will I have enough knowledge to determine if I have a 'malfunction' and whether I need to activate the reserve parachute? Will I be able to avoid all of the various 'obstacles' surrounding the drop zone such as roads, houses, factories, power lines and so on? The list of important and potentially life saving procedures to remember seemed endless. I continued to watch the parachutists coming in to land until my name, along with two other students, is called over the loud speakers. We are asked to meet the instructor at the back of the reception to start our revision training. As the weather conditions were perfect for jumping, the instructor concluded the revision training by informing us that we needed to choose a jump suit from the main hangar and meet back in the flight line in five minutes. The following fieldnotes provide a detailed description of my first jump at the parachute centre. I attempt to capture the phenomenological aspects this high-risk sport generates by describing my personal thoughts, feelings, concerns and observations before, during and after the jump. The fieldnotes conclude by describing the 'feedback' session provided by the instructor after the jump:

I walked over to the flightline wearing my all-in-one blue jump suit and sat down on one of the benches. 'I think you'll be needing one of these' says someone holding up a parachute. I stand up as he puts the parachute on my back. It is heavier than I imagined and feels uncomfortable. I tighten up the straps between my legs before being passed an altimeter and radio which I attach to my chest strap. 'Is that tight enough' I ask. 'That's probably too tight, you don't want it to

restrict you doing your arch when you jump.' He loosens my chest strap and tells me to find a helmet. He is young and looks more like a student than an instructor. I ask him if he has done many jumps. 'No, I've only done 36' '36, that's quite a few isn't it?' 'No, that's nothing compared to some people.' As I try on various helmets I am approached by someone who looked official. He was wearing a multi-coloured jump suit and informed me that he will be my instructor in the plane. He carried out various safety checks on my equipment, making sure my leg straps are tight enough, that the automatic activating device is set at the correct height and that the parachute is attached securely to my back. Whilst I am being checked the pilot warns me about how strong the wind is: 'remember, the wind is bloody strong up there. You need to prepare yourselves for that.' The students, including myself, look concerned after hearing the pilot's advice. The instructor walks over to the other students and takes roughly five minutes to check their equipment before announcing that we are all 'checked out and ready to go'. The instructor then shows us where we will be dispatched in relation to the drop zone and confirms the heights that we must start our landing procedures and when to turn in to the wind. 'Everyone OK with that?' We nod. 'Any questions then....no, are you sure? OK, follow me.' We walk over to another mock aeroplane at the side of the flight line and practice climbing out on to the step with the weight of our parachutes. I climb out first and balance on the edge of the step. 'This is where I will be' the instructor says kneeling in the door of the mock aeroplane 'When you are ready, look

at me, and only jump when I say GO.' We walk back to the benches and wait. I am not feeling particularly nervous, although I keep reminding myself of the emergency procedures and familiarising myself with the exact location of the cut away pad and reserve handle. I am very aware that the small red cut away pad and silver reserve handle could save my life.

After only a few minutes of waiting the instructor says 'OK, let's do it'. We stand up and follow him on to the runway. There are going to be five of us in the plane. The pilot, the instructor, Nick [a student who has jumped several times before] Emily [first jump] and myself. Nick will be jumping first, then myself and finally Emily. As we walk up the runway the instructor casually lights a cigarette and asks me if I feel nervous. 'Yeah I am definitely nervous, but not as much as I thought I would be. It's strange. I'm really looking forward to it.' I don't admit to feeling slightly numb, however. The instructor tells us that we must approach the plane from the rear on the right hand side. 'When we get to the plane, I will tell you where to sit.' 'The plane looks really small' I said 'Cosy is the word you're looking for, It's very cosy in there' the instructor smiles as he continues to smoke what I keep thinking could be his last cigarette. Although we are talking with the instructor, the three of us all seem to be concentrating on what we are about to do. Emily suddenly admits to being extremely nervous and the instructor attempts to reassure her: 'Listen, this is a static line jump. Whatever you do, there will be a big parachute opening above you shortly after

you jump. I'll bet my house on it. Now that parachute may have a malfunction, I'm not saying that it will definitely be a good canopy, but you will have a parachute above your head.' He emphasises that the most dangerous parts of the jump are exits and landings 'that's when things can go seriously wrong. Make sure you have a good exit and land as we have told you to. Legs together, knees bent OK.' We approach the plane and stand by the right wing. 'Who is number one' the instructor asks. Nick stands forward. For the first time Nick looks very nervous, as if he suddenly realised what he was about to do. He looked at me and slowly shook his head muttering 'Fuuuck' under his breath. The instructor took his static line from the back of his parachute and attached it to a metal clip inside the plane. He asks Nick to also make sure it is secure and Nick pulls it to check. Nick is told to kneel next to the pilot. 'Number two'. I walk towards the instructor and he attaches my static line which I also check. I feel excited rather than nervous as I climb in the plane and sit with my back against the pilot's chair. There are windows all around me and I am looking forward to the views. Emily climbs in and sits in front of me, and I have to be careful not to touch her parachute with my feet. The instructor then climbs in and kneels behind Nick, facing the pilot, beside myself and Emily. The instructor talks to the pilot and confirms where we are going to jump from. I look around the aircraft, there are a couple of skydiving stickers inside the plane *It takes two to tandem* and *Skydivers do it in the air*. 'Everyone ready' the pilot shouts, and then starts up the engines. The instructor stretches his arm over where the

door should be and holds on to a handle to make sure Nick can't fall out. The engines are loud and the smell of aviation fuel is almost unbearable. Clearly we will have to shout in order to communicate with one-another. We take off, make a dramatic turn to the left and slowly start our climb to roughly three thousand two hundred feet.

I start to run through the safety procedures in my head as I look out of the windows. There is no turning back. I seem to be checking my altimeter every couple of minutes. I look to see if Nick still looks nervous, but I can't see his face. The instructor shouts over to me and Emily 'can you see the runway, look, you can just make it out, see it, easy to see isn't it'. We both nod. Music comes through our radios. A song by David Gray with the lyrics 'If you want it, go and get it, crying out loud'. This seemed to motivate us, although I'm not sure if this song was selected for that purpose. The instructor is waving his arms about and nodding to the music. We seem to be quite high now. The instructor taps my altimeter to remind me that I can actually see how high we are. We are nearly at two thousand five hundred feet. I'm still not feeling as nervous as I imagined and continued to nod my head to the music and enjoy the views. We are now flying over the sea. I continue to go through the safety procedures in my head. I am feeling confident that I have remembered the most important information. The dial on my altimeter is now just over three thousand feet. The instructor is talking with the pilot, although I can't hear what he is saying. I can see Nick, who seems to have his eyes closed, mentally

preparing himself for what he is about to do. I have a good view of the sea as we make a sharp turn to the right. 3,300ft. Any minute now and Nick will have to climb out onto the step. The instructor checks Nick's static line and holds it in his hand. He then says something to the pilot, and then to Nick. The instructor shouts 'CUT'. Suddenly the noise of the engines is not as intense. 'ON THE STEP'. Although I can't see Nick climb out on to the step, I can see his arms holding on to the wing strut of the plane. After a few seconds the instructor shouts 'GO' and leans his head out of the plane to watch Nick as he falls. The instructor pulls his static line back into the plane, says something to the pilot and the noise of the engines returns. Suddenly I feel dizzy and extremely nervous. My stomach is convulsing. I know that I am next. I can't seem to look out of the window as the plane makes a sharp right turn. The instructor looks at me and tells me to roll over and kneel in Nick's position. I'm feeling faint. I look out of the plane and contemplate climbing out on to the step. Such contemplation only served to increase my symptoms. I feel I have turned very pale. The instructor looks at me and genuinely asks if I am OK. I tell him I am, although I know that my response is unconvincing. 'How long have I got to prepare myself' I ask. 'About twenty seconds' he shouts in my ear. All I can do is stare at the horizon, and try not to look down. I concentrate on my breathing, slowly inhaling through my nose and out through my mouth. I tell myself to be confident, and that it will be no problem, but I'm not sure my body will move when I need it to. I try to distract myself by looking at the aircraft controls in front of me. I can feel the

instructor checking my parachute, pulling and pushing me back and forth. The instructor leans over me to talk to the pilot before shouting 'CUT'. He then shouts in my ear 'I want you to arch your back for Britain OK'. I nod. Then I hear those dreaded words – 'ON THE STEP'. I take my left hand and hold the handle by my head and firmly place my right hand on the door frame behind me. I stretch my right leg out of the plane, and on to the step. Even though I had been warned, fighting against the wind is harder than I had anticipated. I am very aware that it is vitally important that I get this right. My right leg is now on the step. I take my left arm off the handle and take a firm grip of the wing strut. 'Really tight grip' the instructor shouts. I then remove my right arm from the door frame and place it next to my left arm on the wing strut. I pull myself up, placing my left leg over my right to the edge of the step. I slide my hands up the wing strut until they are over the black tape [both hands must be over the tape in order not to hit the plane when jumping]. After a few seconds I am in position. My right leg is out behind me, left leg on the step and both hands are holding on to the wing strut. I turn to look at the instructor, who looks me straight in the eyes and shouts 'GO'. I immediately let go. 'One thousand, Two...' Something hits the back of my head, I am no longer counting, just falling towards the earth. I don't seem to have my back arched either. Everything is white, I can't see the sky or the sea, the plane or the ground. Suddenly I seem to stop falling. My canopy had successfully opened. I looked up and realised that my lines were tangled. I kicked out and untangled them like I had been shown in

training. The steering toggles were just above my shoulders and easy to find. I inserted my fingers through the left and right nylon loops and pulled down both toggles to make sure I could control the canopy. I concentrated on the safety checks, trying to think clearly over the adrenaline pumping through my body. I looked around, I could see the sea to the left, and roads, houses, factories and fields below. I can literally see for miles. Finally I located the parachute centre, and watched the cars driving below. I imagined how I might look to those driving along in their cars before pulling down the right hand toggle and turning to the right. I've now lost the drop zone. I look around, pull down the left hand toggle and it is in front of me again. It is so quiet and peaceful, with only the sound of the canopy above my head. I looked at my altimeter, I was already at two thousand feet. In five hundred feet I would have to make my first landing procedure. I tried turning to the left and then to the right. One of the instructors watching from the ground started to give me instructions via the radio. I could hardly hear him. All I could hear was 'Number two, Number two, Number two...' but I could not hear what my instructions actually were. It sounded fairly urgent though. I looked at my altimeter, and I realised that I should now be over the drop zone (which obviously I wasn't). I made my way across, making turns and occasionally trying the brakes by pulling both steering toggles. I could see all the people looking up and pointing from the parachute centre. Then I turned cross wind. 'That's good number two, you're doing well'. The radio seemed to be working now, and I felt reassured by the instructors comment. At

roughly 500 feet I turned into the wind and prepared my self for landing. 'Number two, do S turns'. I turned to my left and then to my right 'that's it number two – good.' I continued making turns and felt confident that I would land on the airfield as opposed to the factories or roads that surround the drop zone. At one hundred feet I stopped making turns in order to go at full drive. The ground is rushing up towards me, and it is hard to judge when I should flare the parachute. 'Number 2 Standby, Standby....Standby...FLARE'. I immediately pulled both toggles down to my waist in order to flare the parachute, keeping my legs together and knees bent. I fell to my side when I landed and lay on my back. All I could hear was the sound of my heart pounding. 'Number 2, stand up and wave if you are alright'. I stood up and waved. 'Thank you number 2'. I collected my parachute in my arms and turned around. Nick was waiting for me. 'He told you to flare too early' he said, 'that's why you had a hard landing. It's because he can't really see you from over there.' 'What an experience' I said as I watched Emily come in to land. She flew over us both and made a safe landing. We waited for her and then walked back to the main hangar together. I felt a sense of achievement. I had faced and overcome my fear, and I was pleased to know how I had reacted in an unknown situation.

We walked back together and talked about our different experiences. Nick seemed friendlier now that we had also made a jump. Something had changed. We put our parachutes back in the main hangar and sat at

one of the picnic benches. 'I'm not sure if I arched my back enough, and something hit my head. I don't think it was the plane'. 'No, It was probably the static line' Nick said 'that can happen sometimes'. 'How did your jump go' I asked him. 'Not sure, but I'll find out when we get our feedback'. I sat there thinking about what I had just done, trying to remember what had happened and how I felt. 'I couldn't put my leg out on to the step to start with, the wind was too strong' Emily said, 'I wasn't expecting that' she continued. 'You were both looking out of the windows weren't you' said Nick. 'Yeah' I replied. 'I don't know how you do that, I can't look out, I just shut my eyes until I have to jump. I'm not very good with heights' he said with an ironic smile. We walked over to the reception area and waited to get our feedback. A few minutes later our instructor walked past us and said 'OK follow me'. He sat down and lit another cigarette, and pushed his sunglasses on the top of his head. He had our forms in front of him. 'Right, who went first' 'I did' said Nick. 'OK then, tell me how you think you did' Nick explained that he thought it went OK, and that it was better than his last jump. 'This is your fifth jump isn't it?' Nick nodded 'Yeah, I'm happy with that, for your fifth jump that's pretty good' The instructor wrote something on Nick's form and then said 'OK, James, how did it go?' 'I think it went OK. I walked out on to the step quite well, but I don't think I arched my back enough' I said. Emily then reminded me that something hit my head. 'Yeah', I said 'I'm not sure what that was'. The instructor confirmed that that was the static line 'It can happen' he said. 'Anyway', I continued 'I think it was OK, what

did you think?’ ‘You kicked your legs when you jumped’, he said, ‘but it wasn’t bad. I’ve seen much worse. Do you think you’ll be back?’ he asked. ‘Yeah, definitely, I’ll be back next weekend’. ‘Good. Your second jump is really your first. Today you were just worrying about whether or not you were going to die, you know what I mean?’ We laughed and agreed with him. He then moved on to Emily, and said that she did well. Keith [the CCI] bought over two skydiving ‘Starter’ magazines and two certificates which he handed to the instructor. He signed the first certificate and presented it to Emily. Everyone clapped and cheered. He then signed the other one and presented it to me and shook my hand. ‘Today you have both done something that most people will never do, and would never dream of doing. Well done.’ I thanked the instructor and agreed to meet Emily and Nick the following weekend. I walked back to the car with my skydiving magazine and certificate. I needed time to think about what I had just done. I needed time to reflect by myself.

6.3 Feeling the Fear

I experienced high levels of fear during my first jump. As I informed the instructor, jumping out of a plane was the most terrifying act that I have ever voluntarily experienced. Thankfully I experienced what I can only describe as a mild form of nervous anticipation before Nick jumped from the plane. I remember feeling confident about the safety procedures and enjoyed the music and views from the aircraft. Nevertheless, as soon as the first student jumped I felt my heart rate

dramatically increase². When I was instructed to 'get into position' I literally did not know if I was going to faint or if my body would move. I feared that I might suffer from fear paralysis (Fenz 1974) and be forced to come back down in the plane (see Haward, 1969). During my research I learned that this happened more than I imagined. One instructor commented on how he 'felt sorry' for one student who had refused to jump three times over three consecutive weekends. Even though this student was determined to overcome his fear of jumping, after his third failed attempt he decided to call it a day. During my fourth jump one of the students turned around to the instructor and said 'I can't do it, I can't do it, I'm not going to jump, I can't do it'. The student was relieved to land in the plane. Even some of the experienced skydivers were not ashamed to reminisce about the early stages of their skydiving career when they also refused to jump. According to one of my respondents, some of the students are so nervous about jumping that most of the instructors have had 'vomit in their face at some point':

People sit there saying I'm going to be sick, I'm going to be sick, I'm going to be sick, but as I say there's no roller coaster feeling, there's no reason to be sick because there's nothing to make you feel sick apart from your own fear and convince yourself that you're going to be. But you know, most of the instructors have had a face full of vomit because generally they [the students] turn round and say I'm going to be sick and throw up facing their instructor which is just evil! And of course they have to carry on with a face full, it's just horrible. It's deeply unpleasant, it doesn't happen often, but it does happen.

² Research has demonstrated that parachuting significantly increases physiological activity. For research relating to physiological changes during a parachute jump see Anfilogoff, Hale, Nattness, Hammond and Carter, 1987.

(Louise)

Despite high levels of fear, the majority of students do manage to make a successful first jump. Nevertheless, some students have no intention of repeating the experience. I talked to one student who I trained with after he had jumped. I asked him how it went: 'It was alright, but I wouldn't do it again. It's so dangerous, I didn't feel in control at all.' He clearly didn't want to talk about it and left the centre straight away. His instructor asked where he was so he could give him his feedback, but he had already left. Jason, an experienced packer³ at the centre, explained how surprised he is by some peoples reactions:

I see everybody when they come in and I've had people coming up to me and I've said how did it go, did you enjoy it and they've just looked at me and said I won't be doing that again. I hated it I hated it. I hated every minute of it. And there are some people that I've been totally surprised by that said that.

Tim was also surprised by one of the students who attended his RAPS training course:

There had been two people in the group that had been really, really nervous. Two women. One of them was really, really young. I think she was 18 or 19 and she was very, very fearful before going up in the plane and there was an elder women who was about 45 and she had been very good during the training but she had expressed some fear, she was very nervous, I mean I know that everyone is nervous about jumping but she was really anxious. I reassured her several times, and

³ Paid by the centre to pack parachutes. This is a good way for skydivers to get their jump subsidized.

told her to be positive and so on. I think she singled me out for reassurance actually. Anyway, the younger girl froze, and had to be coaxed out of the plane and I think the older one was in the next plane and was really nervous prior to jumping. But both of them really enjoyed the experience after they had jumped and everybody in the group apart from one person really enjoyed the experience and said that they wanted to do it again. The only woman who didn't enjoy it was quite confident during the training but it sounded like she didn't have a good experience. Her lines were really twisted, and it was clearly a very frightening experience for her. She really didn't enjoy it at all. She really enjoyed the training, but she was quite adamant that she would never do it again.

As Tim suggests, some of the students are quite terrified by the experience of jumping out of a plane. Although Tim also felt 'extremely nervous' before his first jump, he had a positive experience and assured me that he would 'definitely like to do another jump'. He described his experience of climbing to altitude:

Being in the plane was rather like being in an old beaten up transit van, it really was, there was dodgy bits of carpet on the floor, you know, and it was uncomfortable. Probably in some respects I was hoping that we would never reach the height at which we jump. I was up like a pole cat you know, on my knees, and the pilot, who you know, was just a young scruffy guy who doesn't look like a pilot at all, it's like he's driving a tractor you know, he turned around and he gave me this kind of friendly wink and smile, and you know, I can read these kind of

things, they know that you're in a situation, and you probably look very fearful, you know you're beaming delirious and you're eyes are like pins or whatever you know they can probably register that you're shitting yourself. And then the instructor shouted look at this and leaned his head out of the plane and his face was all kind of flapping around. It was scary in a way but also fun. I remember, I stuck out my hand to feel the wind and my arm nearly smacked him in the face, it was taken by the wind (Laughs).

Tim explained how his instructor 'stuck his head out of the plane' and made amusing faces against the wind. A similar tactic was used during my first jump when the instructor waved his arms around dancing to the music. Although humour may be employed by the instructors in an attempt to relieve students of some of their pre-jump anxiety (see Davis 1979), both examples only provided temporary relief. Like Tim who admitted to being extremely nervous, Emily also experienced high levels of fear on her first jump:

The fear kicked in when I was walking to the plane. I started having bad thoughts. I was thinking shit (laughs) and my heart started pounding and I was trying to remember the drill and I wasn't very good at it but I just carried on walking. And in the plane I panicked a bit because I still couldn't remember the [emergency] drill. But then, as we were going further up and up, I started thinking OK I'm going to have to do it (laughs). And then the fear started kicking in a bit more. A lot more. I think I needed the loo, and my thoughts were all over the place even though I was trying to concentrate. There was so much

noise, the vibration of the plane. I mean you're up there and the plane's kind of wobbling. Oh, and the other thing that I was really scared off was the static line. I'm scared of it either not being secured properly on the plane or when I'm sat there I'm scared that somebody else's static line is going to whip me out (Laughs). But I got really nervous just before the first person was about to jump. The instructor shouted cut and I can remember my stomach just going weeeeerah, I just hated it, my stomach just went bluorgh. I mean the fear is big at that point, you know they're doing it and you know that you're about to do it, and that's the other thing, you know that when that person has gone you know that you are sooner⁴. And then you hear the instructor say go, and then there's this big flapping of the chute opening up. When it was my turn, and the instructor said cut, my fear levels went even higher, much higher, I mean they just shoot right up and that's probably the worst point and that's probably when all my levels of fear go as high as they can. When I hear the word cut, that's my ultimate fear which I have never reached other than there.

All respondents experienced a considerable amount of fear on their first few jumps. Some interviewees claimed that their second jump was even worse as they were 'more aware of what they were doing'. Interviewees talked about their first few jumps being 'horrendous'. Karl admitted to praying for the weather to dramatically change so that he didn't have to jump. Anna declared that she was extremely fearful on her first jump and remembered thinking that she 'could be nothing' and

⁴ The jump order depends on your weight. Both Karl and Tim were the first to jump although as Emily was the lightest student she was the last student to jump on her plane.

Adam stated that on his first few jumps he 'crapped' himself 'all the way to altitude'. Taking this into account, students would usually allow each other to mentally prepare themselves for jumping. It was not unusual for students to sit quietly in the flightline in order to focus on what they were about to do. Nevertheless, on one occasion this tacit agreement between students was seriously breached.

'Oh my God, we might never come back' Josie says laughing. She is clearly very nervous. She pretends to shout to her partner who is in the spectator area 'I love you, bye, its been good knowing you'. She laughs again. She leans over to me and whispers 'In a few minutes we could be dead'. Although she is only joking, her sense of humour is not shared by myself or the other student who looks at me shaking her head and raising her eyebrows. 'Right, follow me' the instructor says, taking a cigarette from behind his ear and lighting it as we walk down to the runway. Sarah walks with me. 'God, I thought she was never going to shut up. She just shows no consideration with how other people deal with nerves.'

Such a violation was considered 'completely selfish' and after the jump Sarah claimed that because of Josie's behaviour she didn't have enough time to mentally prepare. Sarah also stated that she still tried to talk to her in the plane. Josie was sitting behind her shouting comments such as 'What are we doing?' 'We must be mad' and 'I don't want to die'. Sarah admitted to feeling extremely frustrated: 'I

just wanted to turn around and say shut up, I was feeling really annoyed. But I didn't, I tried to ignore her. I tried to block her out so I could remain focused.'

6.4 Novice Accidents

It is hardly surprising that novice parachutists experience high levels of fear on their first few jumps. As I discussed in the previous chapter, the RAPS training course focused on the various factors that can realistically go wrong. Such contingencies include having a malfunction and avoiding various obstacles whilst under canopy such as motorways, houses, factories and electricity pylons. Before my first jump I remember being particularly concerned about falling off the step and being suspended underneath the plane. During the training the instructors had provided dramatic descriptions of a 'static line hang up' and their descriptions had left a vivid image in my mind. The prospect of injury and death has not been 'stripped away' from this activity (see Palmer 2002). Emily was extremely aware of the various factors that could go wrong when a student jumps from the plane:

When you actually put it all together I think a lot of things can actually go wrong. Like your lines might not untangle and when you actually realise all the things that can go wrong it's actually pretty amazing that things go right because you could end up with a line that doesn't really hold your canopy right and so on and your static line might get tangled up before you even go out or it hasn't been packed properly, or even more basic things, you might not even have the harness on properly maybe something gets caught up in what you're wearing, your arm or leg gets caught up in the lines or you hit the plane as you jump, I don't

know if that is possible but it certainly seems like it should be possible.

And where you land, all kinds of things can go wrong there, gusts of wind. I mean the plane might not even work, and it might crash [Laughs] so all sorts of things can actually go wrong.

Although the instructors always emphasised that accidents were extremely rare, accidents do occur⁵. One of the instructors informed me that the majority of injuries occurred on landings: 'you do get a lot of landing injuries, ankle breaks and that sort of thing, we've had people who have had to go to the accident and emergency at hospital.' During my field work a student was taken to hospital with a broken leg after flaring his parachute too early and I saw another student after her first jump with blood over her face and jump suit. I learned that she had hit her face on the step when exiting the aircraft. Several students landed off the airfield and on one occasion a student landed in a tree. Although I did not injure myself during my fieldwork, on my second jump I narrowly avoided landing on a barbwire fence, and on my sixth jump I nearly landed on the roof of the reception. I also developed colourful bruises after being hit by the static line on two occasions. Steve described his first 'near miss':

I think it was on my third jump that I nearly crashed into a factory [laughs]. Yeah it was kind of erm, I was coming into land, and I'd just got the whole trying to control where I was landing completely wrong.

So I ended up heading over the err, cabin where the reception is on the

⁵ Research conducted in the United Kingdom claims that the likelihood of death is 1 in 55,000 jumps (Davison 1990), although a Danish study suggests 3 in 55,000 (Ellitsgaard 1987). The most recent statistics from the British Parachute Association cover a period of fourteen years (1990-2004). Out of a total of 3,042,114 jumps, there were 37 fatalities. 12 fatalities occurred on student jumps and 5 students were killed on their first jump. Novice injury rates of 0.43 – 1.1% are much higher than those of experienced jumpers which range from 0.05 – 0.13%. A staggering 84-87% of injuries occur on landing (Amamilo et al. 1987; Davison 1990; Ellitsgaard, 1987; Straiton et al. 1986). As one of my informants suggested, once the canopy has successfully opened the most dangerous part of the skydive has just begun.

left hand side towards the car park and realised I was going to land on a car, so I sort of hooked it left and then found myself facing the factory with a blue roof. And I basically just found myself heading straight for it, what I should have done was turn left again taken a downwind landing onto the D.Z., but I didn't have enough knowledge at the time. And I thought shit I'm going to hit it. I landed about a metre short of it. And I just thought damn I'm going to break my leg because there were a couple of big rocks in the grass in front of it, and I was more concerned about hitting them. But actually I just landed short. The canopy went over the roof of the factory, but I was completely uninjured [laughs]. I think at the time I didn't realise quite how dangerous that was.

Another dangerous incident occurred to Karl's wife (Becky) on her first jump. Karl admitted that he had been trying to convince her to 'give it a go' for several months prior to jumping. After several unsuccessful attempts, Karl decided to book her a place on the RAPS course as a surprise birthday present. Becky did not return to make a second jump. Karl described her landing:

It was really bad. She was about 2ft from the floor and the wind took her up and brought her back over on to her head and shoulder and she damaged the muscles and everything in her back so badly the whole of her back was just a swollen lump. Not a little lump in her back, you couldn't see her spine or her ribs or anything and it really put her out for about 2 months. It wasn't even that windy. It was a freak gust that

lifted her up and brought her back down on to her head. It lifted her about 10ft into the air. It was nasty to watch as well.

The most serious novice accident occurred to a student on her first jump who was fortunate to survive with just a fractured vertebrae. I interviewed her instructor who informed me that she had actually created the malfunction herself by exiting the aircraft incorrectly. Not only did she create a malfunction, but she also 'failed to act correctly' by not activating the reserve parachute. Even though the instructor talking her down via the radio could clearly see that she needed to cut away her main canopy, instructors are not allowed to inform the student of a malfunction⁶. All he was permitted to say was 'No. 2, Check your canopy', over and over again. The instructor informed me that the student simply 'froze in the air' and maintained that the student 'had a real panic attack'. Even though the instructor knew the student could not hear him after she has jumped, he admitted shouting 'chop it'⁷ from the plane, and described feeling completely helpless: 'That's the problem being an instructor, you train them on the ground, but once they leave the aircraft they're on their own'. Paul provided a detailed account of the incident during his interview:

We had that incident at the drop zone recently. That was probably one of the most serious injuries we've ever had and the girl was lucky to survive, I still can't believe she did. She had a malfunction in the canopy overhead because she exited the aircraft incorrectly. Basically she did a bad exit, you've probably seen the video on the [RAPS] course, you know the good exit and the really bad, well occasionally you'll get someone whose exit is so bad that it causes problems and

⁶ The decision to activate the reserve canopy has to be made by the student.

⁷ Skydiving slang for jettisoning the main parachute and deploying the reserve.

she basically ended up with one of the brake lines wrapped up in the reserve tray which caused the canopy to spiral down. Had she cut away and employed her reserve she would have been fine but she didn't, she didn't do anything to save her life. She spiralled down and landed in the middle of a roundabout on the A1.

I: So she was lucky to land on the roundabout.

Yes, oh very lucky I mean honestly we, when she hit the ground we assumed that she was dead and well the chevrons going round the edge of the roundabout you know could have sliced her in half. But she landed in the middle of the roundabout, amazing.

Accidents do occur and the actions of students in such situations can have disastrous consequences. Nevertheless, as Steve stressed, such occasions are:

Very, very rare. It's very rare that you get serious injuries. People are injured, we get a lot of first time jumper injuries in the way of sprained ankles and that kind of thing because they're unprepared as they approach the ground and they perhaps land a bit funny, but it's very rare that you get student malfunctions.

Steve informed me that the worst novice accident happened 'years ago' and resulted in the student being paralysed, but they have never had a student fatality. Despite such stories, it is important to emphasise that the majority of students walk away from their

jump completely unharmed. Like many of my interviewees, Andrew believed that one of the main factors for students not returning to the centre after their first few jumps concerns fear:

As for the people that do a few jumps and then leave it, probably the major factor is fear. Particularly after the first few jumps you start to know more and more and it starts to seep in about how many things could potentially go wrong. People do get very scared. But at that point you do know enough to know a lot about what can go wrong, but you don't know enough about the training and the equipment to know why a lot of those things aren't going to happen.

Interviewees explained that fear was something that they initially had to overcome. After his fourth jump Karl stopped jumping for three months, but he was determined not to let fear 'get the better' of him

I just thought about it, you know, just getting on the step and I thought why on earth do I want to do that. I became scared of jumping basically, really nervous and it took me a few months to overcome the fear and then I jumped again end of July, beginning of August this year.

Skydivers talked about a gradual transition that occurs during the early stages of their career. This transition involves viewing fear as a positive rather than a negative aspect of the sport. As Adam stated, 'it wouldn't be positive if I was still as scared as on my

first jump, if I had to do that every jump I think I'd probably have quit by now'. Respondents talked about how fear was important as it ensured they didn't become complacent. Steve believed the importance of 'embracing' and living with fear. He provides an example from the Chuck Palahniuk's (2001) novel *Fight Club*:

You know where he pours the acid on his hands and says 'embrace the fear'.

I: Yeah.

There's something about embracing the fear as well, you know living through the fear. I know that I am going to jump. As a student I bottled out of a couple of jumps because I didn't feel that I was capable of what I had to do. But now that I know that I can do what I have to do I know that I'm never going to not jump, so fear in a sense doesn't matter. You just have to live with it. I mean if you didn't have any fear at all, then what's the point [laughs]. You might as well go cycling instead.

Although Paul is an experienced instructor at the centre, he still claimed to occasionally feel a bit 'on edge' before jumping:

You are throwing yourself from a plane from fourteen thousand feet I mean you do, I still get it now, but I don't have any fear like you get from the first time jumping which, that is, that's something I really,

really miss. Like I love it when there's students in the plane with me or when there's tandems in the plane with me because I can feed off them.

Other studies (Hargreaves 1997; Stranger 1999) have also demonstrated that voluntary risk taking is often pursued for the sake of facing and conquering fear and displaying courage. The challenge is to prove to themselves and to others that they have successfully controlled their fear and feelings of susceptibility and anxiety. Voluntarily placing oneself where personal boundaries are tested clearly has social psychological benefits (Csikszentmihayli 1975; Goffman 1969; Lyng 1990; Mitchell 1983). As Goffman stated, 'serious action is a serious ride' (1969: 199), a ride that is also seen as being good for one's character (Holyfield and Fine 1997). Skydiving is seen as psychologically profound (Farrell 1967) as the emotions of terror, joy, fear and exhilaration are all experienced simultaneously. The participant's first challenge is to see how they will respond to the 'emotional intensity' produced by the 'dialectic of fear and pleasure' (Le Breton 2000: 4). Nevertheless, as I have pointed out, there is a transition that takes place that involves transforming fear into pleasure. This is one of the first 'turning points' (Goffman 1961) in a series of personal adjustments in a skydiver's moral career. This turning point became extremely apparent whilst I was waiting in the flightline before my forth jump. Whilst quietly waiting with two other students on my lift, I observed a group of skydivers who had just finished the safety checks on each others equipment. Rather than concentrating on what they were about to do, one skydiver suddenly decided to teach everyone salsa dancing. The other skydivers were suddenly enthusiastic dance students, spinning around and trying not to step on each others feet. As they boarded the plane their new dancing teacher agreed to continue the lesson after the jump. Rather than being seen as displays of

courage, such actions showed how experienced skydivers become almost indifferent to the once terrifying prospect of jumping out of a plane at 14,000ft. They have successfully learned how to manage the high-risk context. Rather than being viewed as something to be dreaded, fear is actively seized and embraced by skydivers. What was once experienced as terrifying becomes normalised and fear recedes (Lipscombe 1988). The act of jumping out of a plane is something to be enjoyed rather than a challenge to overcome.

6.5 Dicing with Death?

On the 13th of June 2004 a skydiver was killed at the drop zone. This was the first fatality at the centre since 1992, when a skydiver collided with 20,000 volt power cables and was immediately electrocuted. The local newspaper *Sunday Sun* reported the incident under the headline 'Man dies in Plane Plunge' and described how his parachute jump went 'horribly wrong'. At 11am the skydiver, along with his open parachute, was discovered by the owner of High Crow's farm one mile away from the drop zone. Eye witnesses reported seeing his parachute open correctly, and only began to be concerned when they saw him veering away from the drop zone as he was coming into land. I spoke to one of the instructors at the centre about the incident:

It happened last weekend, but he didn't have a mal [malfunction] or anything. His parachute opened and everything was fine until he came into land. Basically he misjudged it. We found out that he was jumping with a canopy that was too small for him, and came into land much too fast. He just couldn't control it.

Paul also informed me that if he had been a regular they would have been in a better position to determine his level of ability: 'The problem was no-one knew him. He'd never jumped at the centre before. We just knew that he had done over a hundred jumps. He came from a military background and he seemed confident about what size canopy he wanted to jump with'. All the skydivers at the centre I talked to about the fatality believed that the fault was with the skydiver rather than the equipment. No one admitted that the incident has made them reconsider their pre-occupation. Although those outside the skydiving community may believe that a fatality confirms skydiving to be an uncontrollable and unacceptable risk, all my informants believed that this incident could have been avoided. Other research on high-risk sports also explains how participants can marginalise the risks associated with their sport by emphasising the possibility of control (Celsi et al. 1993; Doka et al. 1990). This fatality contributes to the growing list fatalities in the United Kingdom over the last two years. Paul was clearly concerned about the 'negative' press that skydiving received in the mass media.

Often, often things which happen like the death of that woman in Australia, she was a UK skydiver, and to understand why she died you need quite a bit of technical knowledge which obviously not everyone has and so for the general public it would just be that one, this person is a skydiver and two, this person died, and that's all they get. And especially because the only skydiving news that would make it to the general public is deaths, it understandably gives them a very one-sided view of skydiving because all you see are the bad or the extreme, the extremely bad ones.

Skydiving is an activity where the 'stakes are high' (Lipscombe 1999) and individual decisions can have serious consequences. As Steve explained 'if you do cock it up, basically, you're in big shit whereas if you make a mistake playing rugby or whatever it's not such a big deal'. Although the general public may not have enough technical knowledge to have an informed opinion, such incidents do confirm why skydiving should be understood as an extreme sport. According to Giddens 'hazardous sports' such as skydiving should be understood as 'institutionalised risk environments' that provide individuals with the choice 'to risk scarce resources, including their lives' (1991:124). Nevertheless, Giddens provides little sense of the details and complexities of these risks and the various ways in which they are managed and controlled by participants. Although all my respondents insisted that they were not 'doing something crazy' they did not try to deny that there are serious dangers that everyone must be aware of. Consider the following quotes:

Everyone thinks skydivers are dangerous and crazy. I think people think skydiving's extreme and definitely before I did it I would have said that it was an extreme sport because it is really dangerous and everything. But now that I have done it I see it quite differently. There are dangers, but I'm not doing something crazy. It's extreme, but it's not extremely dangerous.

(Karl)

It's fair to say that a lot of people view it as an extreme sport. It depends on how you define extreme. If you define extreme as being something that is very risky, erm potentially, it's one of those sports

that if you treat it with respect, not necessarily do it by the book, but be cautious about what you do you are very very safe and you are very unlikely to get hurt, but if you do start pushing things too far or not giving the sport the respect it deserves it can and does bite hard.

(Andrew)

Well I suppose people are terribly frightened of the idea of jumping out of a plane. I mean there's always the possibility of dying. Every time you jump you are putting your life at risk so yeah I would probably say it is an extreme sport.

(Adam)

Most people wouldn't consider getting out of a perfectly good aeroplane and they would defiantly see it as being far too dangerous. There's obviously a danger element involved, and I suppose I would say it's an extreme sport because you know there's no sort of denying that but I think there are more dangerous things to do. There's no reason why you shouldn't live every time and come away uninjured.

(Stewart)

As these quotes suggest, skydivers do not deny that there are risks involved with skydiving. Every time a skydiver jumps they have to deal with 'extreme heights' and 'extremely hostile conditions' and sometimes it can and does 'bite hard'. All the novice parachutists I interviewed were unaware of any statistics relating to the amount of deaths there were in the UK from skydiving. Unlike experienced skydivers who regularly checked related web sites and specific magazines, and would want to know exactly why a fatality occurred, novice parachutists claimed to have 'no idea'. Nevertheless, Andrew did know exactly how many fatalities there were. Even at an

early stage of his skydiving career Andrew spent a considerable amount of time finding out about fatalities and serious injuries around the world. Andrew curiosity was aroused when he directly witnessed how skydiving can have devastating consequences.

While I was still doing my course one of my instructors did a low turn and got killed. It nearly put me off. I mean I was having a hard time anyway. I was having problems doing turns in free fall and I was pretty much ready to jack it all in because I just couldn't get it right and then that happened. I was so close to just jacking it in completely. I didn't jump for about a month after that. But after the first two weeks I caught myself looking out of the window of the office on numerous occasions thinking I need to be in the air. I think I had done about ten jumps by that stage, during my training I was particularly terrified and there were about four jumps where I completely bottled it and ended up landing in the plane. You know, the door would open, everyone else would get out and I would be in the corner going there is no way that I am getting out and one of the things that I found helped me get over that was finding out as much as I could about the sport so at a kind of rational level I could say well you know all these things that could happen are so statistically unlikely that I'm OK.

Andrew studied the available evidence and made a 'rational' decision to continue. Not only would Andrew know about the amount of fatalities but he would also try and learn from their mistakes. Since his instructor's death, Andrew has tried to gain as much knowledge about the sport as possible. He explained that although people

assumed skydiving to be dangerous, he believed the act of jumping out of a plane to be a calculated risk. Although Andrew acknowledges that the risks can not be completely eliminated: 'The amount of research that has gone into producing the equipment has significantly reduced the risks. Anyone who knows the statistics knows that it's really unlikely that you're going to end up dead.' Karl also believed skydiving to be a calculated risk:

I suppose I think of it as a calculated risk. You know you get all the training, you know the training works, you see all of the equipment, you have faith and confidence in the equipment you've got. To me dangerous is, you know, I used to do a lot of climbing. I'll use that as an example. Now I always climbed with ropes because then although it is high risk, there is a safety net there. I also know lads that don't climb with any ropes at all. Now I would consider that as dangerous, if you fall, there's no safety net and you are basically dead. You know the heights that I'm talking about you know, 100's of feet, 1000's of feet. Now that's something I consider to be crazy and dangerous.

Here Karl provides an interesting example by comparing skydiving to climbing without ropes. For Karl, climbing without ropes is 'dangerous' and 'crazy' because unlike skydiving there is no safety net. If one of his friends made a mistake, in all probability they would be killed. Skydivers always jump with two (main and reserve) canopies. If they have a malfunction, they can activate the reserve. Also, as I shall discuss in detail later, most skydivers jump with an automatic activating device (AAD) which will automatically open the reserve canopy at a pre-determined height. This is in case any unforeseen events that may occur such as being knocked

unconscious during freefall. Obviously the AAD might not work and the reverse canopy may have a malfunction, and that is precisely why skydiving is considered to be a calculated risk. Karl has faith in his equipment and in his own ability. If he had a malfunction, he is confident in his ability to deal with the problem. Although Karl had not experienced a malfunction, he has had problems during deployment:

There's been a couple of times that I've had a bit of a problem and I've actually looked down to check where my pads are to make sure that they are where I want them to be and I've looked back up and I thought right am I going to have to cut away, and at one point I even had hold of my pads ready to cut away. This only happened about 3 weeks ago. I jumped out, at 3,000ft I pulled my main parachute and the lines went up and the parachute stayed in the bag and it was above my head and then it gradually started to come out and then it twisted so I checked my alti. and I've gone down to about 2,000ft by this point and I still had loads of twists so I'm kicking them out and kicking them out and the parachute is still not opening properly and by now I'm roughly at 1500ft and I thought right If it gets to a 1000ft I'm going to cut away. I was getting down to 1200ft and I still had a couple of twists and just as the twists came out I looked and I was just above a 1000ft. But even if there was just one twist left in it I would have cut it away at 1000ft. No panic, it was all calm, I knew exactly where my pads were I knew exactly what I was doing.

Although Karl was clearly in a life threatening situation, he still remained calm and focused. Elaine emphasised the importance of control for skydivers: 'That's one of the main things I like about it. It's all you, it's all down to you.' Stewart described his malfunction, which was the most dangerous malfunction out of my informants. Stewart claimed that before his malfunction he was uncertain as to how he would react. He explained that he had his own private insecurities about how he would deal with a malfunction, whether he would be calm and collected or panic and 'just start pulling at anything' he could get his hands on. Thankfully Stewart remained calm in the extreme circumstances produced by a high speed malfunction:

Mine was a high speed malfunction. I was still going at a hundred and ten miles, a hundred and twenty miles an hour towards the ground, most people usually have something above their head [their main canopy], it might be spinning but it's still slowing down the rate of descend. Mine was like one of the fastest ones to deal with but it was then and there, that was it sort of thing...it's really nice to know that in that situation you can cope.

Stewart explained that when you have a problem at one hundred and twenty miles an hour, when 'things don't go quite according to plan', you have to do 'what everyone is trained to do in such a situation. Diagnose the problem and deal with it.' I asked Steve if he had ever had to pull the reverse:

Yeah. When I opened my parachute I was in really bad spinning twists, and I felt very much out of balance so I knew immediately that something was wrong. But I kind of focused on getting the twists out and hoping that the twists would resolve themselves. They did but

when I looked up through the lines which were now clear I could see that the canopy was deformed, basically it looked like a bow tie. It had what is known as a 'line over' which is when one of the lines goes over the top of the canopy. So obviously it's not as big as it should be and it's not going to support you. Once I saw that I just knew straight away that I would have to like do it and went through it and I didn't feel particularly scared or anything like that. I remember that time seemed to be a lot slower, and the whole process of doing the reserve drill seemed to take an age actually as did the period between finally cutting away the reserve handle and the reserve parachute actually opening. And I remember, I've got an image in my mind of the reserve pilot chute being some where up there because obviously you are vertical rather than horizontal so when you throw your head back in an arch you're going to see the reserve pilot chute coming out above you. So I remember seeing that. And then the next thing I can remember basically is seeing a big white canopy above my head and I was thinking woohooo I'm alive.

Steve's malfunction allowed him to prove to himself that he was capable of dealing with a life threatening situation. His individual capacities were challenged and control was maintained. For skydivers a malfunctioned main parachute 'can be sorted' and is therefore viewed as a controllable risk: 'Whatever happens it's down to me. I know there's factors that can happen but even if something happens you're still in control. Sorting out a problem has got nothing to do with anyone else, it is all down to you.' Informants maintained that they were far more concerned of the risks of something

going wrong with the plane than having a malfunction. Some skydivers literally 'hated' being in the plane below one thousand feet, because if anything went wrong with the plane they were too low to jump out. This was a risk that was beyond their control, an uncontrollable risk. The following three quotes make comparisons to bungee jumping, a rollercoaster and horse riding respectively.

If you compare it to bungee jumping, I mean there's no skill jumping off something. You've got a couple of guys who strap a piece of elastic to your ankles erm and you throw yourself off the front of the cage. The thing about a bungee jump is that you are at the mercy of those who are organising it. All you've got to do is let go. If you don't let go you're not going to fall. But with skydiving, it's all about you. Your own preparation, your mental preparation, it's all down to you.

(Karl)

You're in control, it's like you've got that control, with a roller coaster ride you do nothing, ninety-nine point nine, nine, nine percent of the time you just sit there and enjoy it, there's nothing you can do to stop it, if it goes wrong there's nothing you can do, it's basically just there, you are there for the ride whereas parachuting you're not there for the ride, you're the pilot, if that makes sense.

(Stewart)

I went horse riding a few years ago and fell off. I really injured my back. The horse just went out of control. But with skydiving, if you injure yourself it is your own fault, it's not down to anything beyond your control.

(Nick)

As these quotes suggest, skydivers dislike voluntarily placing themselves in life threatening situations that they can not control. Rather than being at the mercy of others or the structured terrors of mechanization (Holyfield 1999) one of the main attractions of skydiving is that it offers the opportunity to be the pilot rather than a passenger who has no control over the situation. As I discussed in chapter 4, the tandem jump was described by one instructor as the 'ultimate fairground attraction' precisely because the passenger has no control over the situation. Skydivers are not interested in 'putting their life in somebody else's hands'. Even at an early stage of their skydiving career, novice students are keen to learn how to pack their own parachutes, rather than being forced to rely on the competence of people they hardly know. Unlike the character in Luke Rhinehart's novel *The Dice Man* (1972) who decides to make decisions by relying on the 'square shoulders of the dice', skydivers do not value random chance. As Celsi et al. (1993) also recognised, skydivers seek controllable risk contexts where their individual capabilities can be challenged and tested.

6.6 The Question of Edgework

Over the past decade increasing theoretical attention has been paid to voluntary risk taking described by Lyng (1990, 1993, 1998, 2005) as 'edgework', the ability to 'maintain control over a situation that verges on complete chaos, a situation that most people would regard as completely uncontrollable' (1990: 861). As I explained in chapter 2, Lyng borrows the term 'edgework' from Hunter S. Thompson (1969, 1980, 1993) to describe those who voluntarily participate 'in life threatening or anomie-producing activities' in order 'to see how far one can go and still successfully

negotiate life-and-death situations' (Lyng and Snow 1986: 169). Edgework is used as a 'classifying category' (Lyng 1990: 855) and describes activities that:

involve a clearly observable threat to one's physical or mental well-being or one's sense of ordered existence. The archetypical edgework experience is one in which the individual's failure to meet the challenge at hand will result in death or, at the very least, debilitating injury (Lyng 1990: 857).

Edgework should therefore be understood as 'a type of experimental anarchy in which the individual moves beyond the realm of established social patterns to the very fringes of ordered reality' (Lyng 1990: 882). A common feature of activities that can be described as edgework is that they all involve the use of specific individual capacities. Such individuals have the capacity to exercise the skills required for 'crowding the edge' (Lyng and Snow 1986: 171), an experience which produces 'a sense of "self-realization," "self-actualization," or "self-determination"' (Lyng 1990: 860). Indeed, edgeworkers generally considered the opportunity to use their personal skills the most valuable aspect of the experience.

Lyng's classifying concept of edgework has attempted to provide 'an alternative social psychological theoretical framework' in order to 'account for participation in high risk behaviour' (Lyng 1990: 854). The concept of edgework is useful as the act of skydiving does involve individuals placing themselves in life threatening situations and as I have noted, the opportunity to test and challenge their personal skills and capabilities is clearly one of the main attractions. Nevertheless, Lyng's suggestion that edgeworkers 'tend to search for more purified forms of edgework' by artificially

incapacitating themselves is extremely problematic. Such purified forms of edgework can be achieved by skydivers 'increasing the risks', by jumping under the influence of mind altering substances, deploying one's parachute at a low altitude and/or jumping in marginal conditions. Lyng maintains that such patterns suggest a 'commitment to get as close as possible to the edge without going over it' (Lyng 1990: 862). This notion of 'purified' edgework needs to be examined further. The overwhelming majority of my informants simply did not agree that a 'common pattern among risk takers is to increase the risks of dangerous activities'. As Mitchell (1983) and Celsi et al. (1993) also note, individuals actually *delimit* high-risk contexts to a manageable level. As I will suggest, my informants did not choose to jump in threatening weather conditions or generally attempt to increase the risks of skydiving.

6.7 The Importance of Safety

Safety was extremely important for all of my informants. Karl even insisted that it would be hard to 'find a more safety conscious sport'. Karl stopped bungee jumping⁸ due to the lack of safety involved. I asked Karl if he participated in any other extreme sports:

No not any longer. No, I don't do any snowboarding, white water rafting or anything. I've done bungee jumping. I've done 107 bungee jumps. But that's in the past now and it is certainly something I will not be doing again.

⁸ One of the founders of the Bungee-jump suggests that 'the aim is to touch the ground with your hand when the elastic is fully extended before starting the upward bound that takes you back up 50 or 100 meters' (Hackett cited in Le Breton 2000: 8).

I: Was that before you started skydiving?

Yes. And I've said this to a lot of people, now I've took up skydiving and I can see what safety emphasis is put on, I would never do another bungee jump again. Now I consider bungee jumping as dangerous and irresponsible. I've done bungee jumps with a whole different number of organisations who set up jumps and some of them are a lot more professional than others, but you don't think about it at the time, but when you see what emphasis is put on safety in this sport, and I think about how some of them would set up the equipment and their organisation and I think, I could never do another bungee jump. Some one asked me to do another bungee jump a couple of months ago, he phoned me up, and he said Karl, do you fancy doing a bungee jump for charity, and I says No. He says why not, and I told him that there was not enough safety in it. He says, but you jump out of aeroplanes, but the safety's there. To me that's important.

Karl also explained that he was never interested in progressing to more 'extreme' forms bungee jumping where individuals attach the elastic to their legs after they have jumped. According to Karl such an activity was 'extremely dangerous' and 'extremely stupid'. Safety was also extremely important for Andrew. He commented on how some of his friends outside the skydiving community assumed that he would eventually take up B.A.S.E. jumping, an acronym for Buildings, Antennae, Spans and

Earth⁹. Andrew was adamant in his refusal and surprised his friends by stating 'I don't want to die!':

Even if you get a mentor who will take you through and make sure that you are as safe as you can be, it's still extremely dangerous. If you look at BASE jumping videos, 90% of people in the videos are dead. I was watching a programme on BASE jumping the other week and during the course of filming one guy got killed, another guy got paralyzed and two guys ended up really really really smashed up. So it is bloody dangerous. But I would like to do a balloon jump or a helicopter jump, though, which are quite safe. The things that get you dead in BASE jumping are the fact that you are jumping from such a low altitude and also there is usually a damn big cliff face that you can fall into.

Karl does not show a 'willingness to take unnecessary risks' (Lyng 1998: 227) and Andrew's reflections on BASE jumping suggests that he is not tempted to experiment or engage with more extreme forms of voluntary risk taking. Such reflections certainly contradicts Lyng's suggestion that 'risk takers' gradually progress 'toward more extreme and varied risks' (1998: 230). I asked Anna if she believed skydivers took safety seriously:

Every one is pretty safety conscious...I mean most skydivers have an interest in fatal accidents, not because they are particularly morbid, but

⁹ BASE jumpers acquire subcultural status by having jumped from all four locations (see Ferrell 2001).

because they want to know exactly what happened in order to learn. I and quite a few other people at the drop zone spend a lot of time looking at these forums. The more time you look at them the more you learn and the more safety conscious you become.

This extract suggests a progressive movement towards safety rather than increasing risks. I asked Andrew if he was tempted to push himself 'in more ways that might be more dangerous':

Not particularly, in fact pretty much the reverse. The more experienced I get the more potential problems I know about. I spend a fairly significant amount of time reading incident forums and gearing rigging and safety and training and this kind of stuff and you get to see all the mistakes that other people have made and things to look out for and I would definitely say that it has made me a lot more cautious about what I do and it gives me a whole new list of extra things to check before I do a jump.

Andrew, like all my informants, emphasised the importance of safety. Andrew was not interested in taking unnecessary risks and spent a considerable amount of time learning how to reduce rather than increase the dangers. Stewart explained his ritualised 'ten point check' that he would strictly follow before each jump:

There's a specific ten point check I do when I'm wearing the equipment. And I typically do that when I've just put the equipment

on. Then when I'm in the flight line I'll get somebody else to check me out. Then I'll check myself again. After I've got in the plane when I get to roughly a 1000ft, I check myself again and when we get to about 10,000ft, when people start moving around putting their goggles and helmets on and this kind of stuff, I'll do another full check on myself. There's also an additional set of checks that I do on myself before I put it on. There are quite a few things that you can't check when you have put the equipment on. When I have the equipment on I'll check that the main pin, that can become dislodged if you're leaning against something or whatever, it can push the pin out and if the pin comes out prematurely, it can be a serious situation so quite often, the way I pack it, I can feel with my thumb exactly where the pin is and so just my putting my hand behind my back and feeling I can tell if it's about to come out or not, and if I'm uncertain I can get someone else to check it for me. And then I would generally sort of touch my handles again and make sure where everything was, I can feel where my toggle is, it's not slipped inside the pouch or anything. And that I can feel my reserve handles are where I expect them to be.

6.8 Irresponsible Risks

According to Lyng and Snow, skydiving offers the opportunity for individuals to get as close to the edge as possible:

Jumping under the influence of drugs...jumping into landing areas that are geographically restricted, deploying one's canopy at a low altitude are all

examples of how the individual jumper has the opportunity to move 'a little close to the "edge"' (1986: 169).

All of the above examples were referred to as 'irresponsible risks' by my informants. Adam informed me that the majority of skydivers do not try to increase the risks by 'pulling low', 'doing hook turns' and he knew no-one who took drugs to enhance their experience. Informants maintained that they 'want to get to the ground safely' so they can 'go up and do it again'. As Julia stated:

I want to push myself to my ability limits. Push and challenge myself...but to the actual danger limits they're, they're already there and I don't need to push them any further, I know they're there. I don't want to increase them.

According to Emily, skydivers are 'definitely not dicing too much with death' because 'they're never doing something which is beyond their level...I mean in some ways they could make it more extreme, but they're not doing that. They're still playing it safe'. I asked Karl why he wasn't tempted to move 'a little closer to the edge':

Well frankly I want to live, I don't, you know, I don't want to die, I don't want to be injured you know and I think that's it, you call skydiving an extreme sport and you have to ask yourself what do you mean by extreme? I call extreme pushing things to the limit, some people say extreme sport is something that's on the edge dangerous-

wise you know I don't necessarily see that it is dangerous, I don't see that it is reckless you know.

Taking drugs was certainly viewed as reckless and irresponsible behaviour. The majority of my interviewees were surprised that I even had to ask. I explained that previous research had suggested that some skydivers enjoyed the challenge of jumping 'under the influence of intoxicating substances' (Lyng 1998: 225) and that 'It was not uncommon for a group of skydivers to "blow a joint"' (Lyng 1998: 228) together as they climbed to altitude. Rather than providing a 'seductive way to "stay in the action"' (Lyng 1998: 230), I was informed that such behaviour would ensure no 'action' at all. I asked Paul if he had known anyone to use drugs to enhance the skydiving experience:

I've not heard of anything like that, no I've never heard anyone do that at all. I mean drugs and alcohol are a big no-no in skydiving you know and if I thought that anyone was taking drugs or drinking before skydiving then they certainly wouldn't be on my plane because they're a danger to me as well as themselves and you know we keep an eye on that. We have a bar but if you go and buy a [alcoholic] drink in the bar, you'll never get on the list because the guy at the bar will make a mental note.

I asked Stewart the same question:

I can tell you there are people that do smoke weed at the drop zone.

I: Really, what, before they jump or in the plane or..

Oh no, no, not at all. It's basically considered like if you see anyone or if you know that anyone smoked or had been drinking or anything it's like anyone even if they like weed smoking themselves they will say get off the lift [plane]. They don't want to see you hurting anyone or whatever. But I think I have sort of heard, I can understand what you mean because there's a film called Fandango.

I: Oh I haven't seen that.

It's an early Kevin Costner film, but there's this bit, I think it's set, I think it's from the mid-80's or something but they do [use drugs], he does his first static line jump. He gets some stupid training and he gets on this plane and the plane's quite obviously like a, just a weed mobile because it's all like dressed up in like other colours on the inside and the guy's smoking a spliff while he's flying it and stuff like that and speaking to some of the old blokes like who've been around a long time, they always say it sort of, so it does sort of ring a chord to actually what it was like in the 80's and stuff. I think, or it's like there's a lot of truth in that film and I can sort of see it really from the stories I hear from old timers, it does seem like skydiving was far more extreme back in like early 80's and 70's because there were so few people so they, they did everything they could.

Here Stewart provides credibility to Lyng's research which was carried out in the early 1980's. Nevertheless, Stewart believed that skydiving has now become far more orientated around issues of safety. Although he knew people at the drop zone to 'smoke weed', jumping under the influence of legal or illegal drugs was not tolerated. Not only would the skydiver place herself in danger, but they would also create unnecessary risks for everyone else on the 'lift'. Another example of an 'irresponsible risk' concerns individuals who jump without the Automatic Activating Device (AAD). The AAD is a mechanical or electronic back up system that compares ambient air pressure with the skydivers decent rate. The AAD will initiate the reserve deployment at a pre set height and therefore serves as a 'back up' rather than a 'substitute for a good manual reserve drill' (Donaldson 2000: 53). Even during the initial RAPS training course, students are informed that the AAD should not be relied upon. Like any other piece of machinery it can go wrong and should therefore be viewed as a life saving back up device. If a skydiver loses altitude awareness or is knocked unconscious during free fall, the AAD can literally save peoples lives. One of the instructors informed me that a world champion skydiver was knocked unconscious by another skydiver who collided with him. In that case an AAD would have automatically opened his reserve and saved his life. Only two of my informants jumped without an AAD. Both maintained that they would jump with an AAD if they could afford one. Karl strongly believed that such individuals were 'irresponsible':

There's people that won't jump with an AAD. The main reason of course is cost. But to me that's irresponsible you know you're putting yourself totally at risk and at the mercy of your equipment, but if things were to go wrong you know, one reason for the AAD is, not everything is in your control. Say if you've got an inexperienced

skydiver who smashes into you because of their inexperience, you get kicked in the face and knocked out, there's nothing there to protect you. You know, there are things there to help protect you.

Jumping without an AAD clearly offers skydivers the opportunity to increase the risks and move closer to the edge. However, as I have suggested, the majority of skydivers do not attempt to increase the risks. Indeed, those few individuals who do take unnecessary risks were described as being 'irresponsible' or simply 'stupid' for not recognising that 'things can and do go wrong'. As one of the instructors informed me, 'imagine being smashed into at 150 or 200mph. If you didn't have an AAD you're basically dead.' My informants acknowledged that some risks were beyond their ability to manage and control. As the following quote suggests, the AAD provides an essential back up, a 'safety net' for circumstances beyond their control:

If I considered the sport to be dangerous then I would not do it. I value my life. I want to enjoy the sport and I also want a safety net there, a bit of a back up, because I understand that things can go wrong. Anyone who does a jump and thinks that nothing's going to go wrong shouldn't really be doing it in my opinion.

(Andrew)

According to Lyng (1990) skydivers overestimate their abilities to control risk and are therefore their calculations are subject to an illusion of control. Drawing on the work of Langer (1975) Lyng explains how individuals in pure chance situations usually gain familiarity with the overall risk context and as a consequence their confidence increases. For example Langer's subjects incorrectly believed that they had a much greater influence over lotteries when they were allowed to choose their own personal

numbers. In other words they behave as if they have control over events that are completely chance determined. Although this certainly seems plausible, such an example is not relevant for skydiving. Experienced skydivers have an accurate idea of their ability levels and they are under no illusion regarding the risk of injury or death. This suggests that Langer's examples of illusion of control do not necessarily apply to high risk sports. Although skydivers do give high priority to the development and use of skills (Lyng 1990), the fact that the majority of skydivers jump with an AAD questions the idea that skydivers have an innate survival capacity, and that their personal 'survival skills will ultimately determine the outcome' (1990: 872). As I have explained, the AAD is used as a 'back up' for factors that are not believed to be within the skydiver's ability to control. Although the AAD is not relied upon it is viewed as a life saving device for unforeseen circumstances. Such circumstances (being knocked unconscious during freefall by an inexperienced skydiver) are recognised to be beyond their control.

6.9 Policing the 'Cowboys'

If you're careful about what you do, have a well maintained kit, there's no real reason for it to be dangerous at all, in fact it can be extremely safe. It's when you start taking unnecessary risks, or not looking after your kit or doing things that are beyond your capabilities that it can be extremely dangerous. People get dead when they push the limits.

(Andrew)

As I have suggested, the overwhelming majority of skydivers were extremely safety conscious. As a result skydivers would often claim their sport was actually 'safer than driving to the drop zone', and that they were more likely to have 'a fatal accident on the way to the drop zone than actually on it' (Skydive Starter Magazine 2002: 27).

Although some respondents commented on how certain individuals 'are just too cautious' by jumping with a canopy that was too large and not 'pushing themselves enough' their main criticism was reserved for the minority whose behaviour was inexcusable. Some interviewees admitted to knowing a couple of 'cowboys' who they believed to voluntarily take 'unnecessary risks'. Although such unnecessary risks did not involve intentionally pulling their canopy at a low altitude or taking mind altering chemical substances, cutting other skydivers up 'in the air', flying and landing in front of other skydivers, 'bombing' formations and doing hook turns are all extremely dangerous practices. According to one of my instructors 'most skydivers are killed by initiating hook turns'. The following quotes explain why hook turns were considered to be an unnecessary risk:

It involves doing an intentional low turn to get a lot of speed, but you have to judge it very well so that you come out of the turn before you hit the ground and if you get it wrong and you're too high, fair enough, but if you get it wrong and you're a few feet too low, you're in serious trouble.

(Steve)

Some people aren't content with jumping that will get them to the ground safely, they want them to be speedy and fast and fun. But even experienced skydivers sometimes make mistakes. I make mistakes, everyone makes mistakes, and if you turn too low to the ground you're going to die if you reach the ground at serious speeds. At seventy, eighty, ninety mile an hour, you're going to be killed.

(Paul)

There's a couple of regulars who the other regulars cringe a bit when they see them coming into land, they tend to do low hook turns, which is one of the ways you can quite easily kill yourself if you get it wrong. When you're coming into land there are kind of three important things to focus on. One is finding a nice clear place to land. The second is landing into wind rather than downwind. The third is having the canopy level. Of those landing into wind is the least important, having a clear space is probably the most important, but probably equally important is having the canopy level. If you're turning, erm, as you come into land all sorts of things can happen. Basically if people get hook turns wrong what tends to happen is that they pull up at the last moment and get slammed into the ground really, really hard.

(Andrew)

Successfully executing a hook turn involves skilful judgement and one of my informants claimed that he would like to 'pull it off' because it 'looked cool'. However, as even experienced skydivers occasionally make mistakes, most of my informants decided that it was an unnecessary risk, a risk they were not prepared to undertake. Death or at least serious injury are realistic consequences of a misjudged hook turn. But unlike some risks, the devastating consequences of an unsuccessful hook turn only effect the individual undertaking the manoeuvre. It is considered to be an individual act since it does not place anyone else in danger. The informants expressed far more concern regarding those whose actions subjected others to unnecessary danger:

There are one or two people who I think need to be brought down to earth a little bit. They are a little bit above their station, but then again I don't think I should be judging them because they are more experienced than me. But I have mentioned this to more experienced skydivers and they have said no, you know we feel the same about these certain individuals, 'cos there a couple of people here who I would not jump with, and if they asked me I would have to say no thanks. It's the way they are in the air. If things go wrong things go wrong but I don't want someone putting me into a position where things didn't have to go wrong. I don't want anyone who can't control their flight through the air and come crashing into me. I know it can happen, and sometimes it is unavoidable, but there are a couple of people here who have got no real control while they're up there and that scares me. There was a situation a couple of weeks ago where someone decided that it would be funny to fly right in front of somebody else, and I don't want anybody to do that to me. It can be really dangerous and it's that kind of irresponsibility that I'm not to keen on. You know, Keith was away and I don't think it was reported. If Keith was here he would be grounded.

(Karl)

Clearly there are both formal and informal mechanisms at work here. If the CCI directly observed any dangerous behaviour such as bombing formations or intentionally flying in front of another skydiver they would be grounded. Such behaviour was not tolerated, as the CCI informed me 'we don't want any unnecessary accidents here'. But if the CCI failed to notice 'irresponsible behaviour', actions were

generally not reported. In such situations other informal mechanisms were employed by the skydivers. Skydivers would casually inform the accused individual that they were not prepared to jump with them.

You know people who aren't as safety conscious as they should be, you know, people do stupid things. Stupid things in the air you know, some people are dangerous, there's one guy who I'll never jump with again and he knows that. I said I'm not jumping with you any more, you're not coming near me because you're dangerous and I wasn't the only person who said that to him. He was dangerous in freefall you know, you go out and he tells everyone he's a good free flyer and everything and you know he was doing a formation one day and decided that he wasn't pulling his weight and he decided to just bomb for the formation, just fly you know and ripped it apart you know. That's not safe, people's safety is at stake, you don't want someone reckless like that around you. He's dangerous under canopy as well you know he wants to jump canopies that are too small, too fast for him. And he does stupid things under canopy and you know, the way he turns and prating around on the way in [to land] you know. Just being an idiot and you know he's been known to sort of get it wrong whatever but he's walked away well you know, one day he won't.

(Karl)

Other informants also admitted that they have refused to jump with certain individuals. They were described as 'arrogant' and 'stupid' for 'jumping with a canopy which is far too small' and who 'doesn't have the experience to handle it'.

One of my instructors informed me that he only jumped with people he felt safe with because he 'wanted to do it again'. Julia claimed that skydivers 'didn't have a problem' with being open and honest by saying 'sorry mate, I don't think you're safe to jump with. I think you cut people up under canopy and I don't trust you'. Stewart was convinced that such techniques had positive effects on the accused behaviour:

There's one guy down there, now, he's got a bit of a better reputation for himself because people said, no, we're not jumping with you, and a lot of people said that to him and now he's starting to think right, well I'm not going to be able to jump at this rate, I'm going to have to start switching on. And he's sort of, he's switched on a bit more so he can carry on [jumping].

Hunt's research on deep sea divers also found that those individuals who took unnecessary risks received negative sanctions and often became subject to ridicule. Divers who violated the cultural constructions of normal risk were labelled as 'assholes' and 'accidents waiting to happen' (Hunt 1995: 452). In a similar way to Hunt's divers, skydivers who were seen as irresponsible were also subjected to rumour and gossip. Nevertheless, as I have demonstrated, skydivers would also explain exactly why they refused to jump with them. Both formal and informal mechanisms served to restrict such activities, especially when individual behaviour endangered other skydivers. Whether or not such mechanisms are successful, they do emphasise how the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable constructions of risk are learned and negotiated throughout the skydivers career.

6.10 Conclusion

High risk sports are not for the faint hearted (Palmer 2002) and skydiving provides an experience that goes beyond the usual everyday activities of the recreationist (Lipscombe 1999). The initial fear and anxiety of jumping is soon transformed into an emotion that is positively 'embraced' and 'used'. A significant turning point in the skydiver's moral career involves learning how to positively use fear and accept risk. Rather than being stripped away from the activity, the possibility of death and serious injury are part of the risk that participants knowingly undertake (Lipscombe 1998) and skydivers have developed specific procedural responses to the various contingencies that may occur. Rather than being denied, the possibility of death 'is what gives power to the experience. Without the feeling of risk-taking, the undertaking would give neither the enjoyment, nor have such an effect on personal life' (Le Breton, 2000: 8). Indeed, risk is understood as a positive feature of the activity (Lyng 1990; Mitchell 1983). The following two quotes are particularly revealing in this respect:

To me risk is part of living, if there was no risk in it, you can't wrap yourself up in cotton wool and sit indoors or you wouldn't be living, you've got to go out and take risks and stuff.

(Julia)

I think that we are way too risk averse. You know the way that children seem to be unable to walk or cycle to school now, whereas I used to cycle to school. So yeah, I think it's a terrible thing. People live very sheltered lives. It seems to me to be almost inhuman. We're not designed to be like that. We're designed to be risk takers, it's

something that we should do, and to try to eliminate that is terrible I think. And I think that maybe the reaction to that which we're seeing is that people are seeking out their risks elsewhere because they're being eliminated from them in their everyday lives. One reason why people could be taking up sports such as skydiving is to experience those risks.

(Steve)

Against the dominant discourses on risk that portray it as negative there also exists a counter discourse in which risk taking is represented far more positively. Life without risk would be 'no life at all'. Without risk, life would be intolerably restricted, unable to offer enough challenges for the individual to overcome. This counter discourse represents risk taking as a desirable and pleasurable technique for enhancing the overall experience that life has to offer. Analysing my interview data I became increasingly aware how skydivers viewed the risk of death to be an exciting challenge to be managed and controlled through their own individual capacities. As I have demonstrated, notions of control are vitally important for skydivers. All believed they were capable of managing the context in which they perform, with most leaving what they believed to be a comfortable margin between 'controllable' and 'uncontrollable' risks. Uncontrollable risks were acknowledged to be beyond their own personal capabilities. Not only do such findings shed some 'critical light on the strong present-day focus on risk avoidance' (Ferrell, Milovanovis and Lyng, 2002: 180), but they also highlight how risk epistemologies are bound to specific social cultural contexts in which they are generated (Lupton 1999b). Hunt (1995) has suggested that explorations of extreme phenomenon such as deep sea diving and skydiving can illuminate how risk itself is socially constructed. As Ewald has suggested: 'Nothing is

a risk in itself; there is no risk in reality. But on the other hand, anything *can* be a risk; it all depends on how one analyzes the danger, considers the event' (1991: 199, original emphasis). Rather than being viewed as an objective or static phenomena that can be determined by observation, this research has demonstrated how risks are routinely constructed. Individuals outside the skydiving community may perceive skydiving to be a selfish and irresponsible pursuit, whilst the moral career of skydivers clearly involves the normalisation of such risks and redefines them as acceptable and even pleasurable. Another turning point in the skydiver's moral career involves recognising the difference between what they consider to be responsible and irresponsible risks. The latter are subjected to both formal and informal sanctions and highlight how risk is a constantly modified and collectively negotiated construct. As Douglas (1992) notes, rather than being viewed as the products of individual knowledge, perceptions of risk are shared and serve to maintain symbolic boundaries within a particular community. In order to consider the importance of group membership the next chapter will focus on issues concerning 'identity' and the sense of 'communitas' (Turner 1976) that emanates from shared experiences.

‘I think I could live at the Drop Zone’: Identity, Trust and Communitas

7.1 Introduction

According to Lyman and Scott, we are constantly facing questions of how we think of ourselves and searching for opportunities to ‘forge new identities’ (1989: 53). As Schouten and McAlexander (1995) maintain, the activities and associated interpersonal relationships that people voluntarily undertake in order to give their lives meaning are the most powerful forces in modern life. Such endeavours are not usually realised in the office cubicle, assembly line or local shopping mall (see Ferrell 2005) but are increasingly found away from the relentless demands and dreary constraints of everyday life (Cohen and Taylor 1993). Indeed, to escape the alienating routines of work, home and family life individuals are increasingly seeking ‘ways of living that involve them in situations where they find they can be closer to some primary and basic mode of life’ where they ‘may find individuality, excitement, flexibility and freedom (Neumann 1992: 86). As Gubrium and Holstein have suggested, it is only in such ‘hideaways of experience’ that individuals can ‘sustain a genuine sense of being who and what it is’ (2000: 97). By drawing on my fieldwork and interview data this chapter will examine the various ways in which identity is forged by participating in skydiving, an activity that provides the opportunity to construct, enact and negotiate a new identity (Celsi et al. 1993; Douglas and Johnston 1977). Although both speculative and empirical studies ‘make radically different claims of what identity is’ (Williams 2000: 3), this chapter will largely focus on ‘self-identity’ as an individual’s understanding of their own self, albeit known in ways that

are afforded by collective cultural resources and challenged by the social world (see Fontana 1984). By considering a range of examples from my research I will examine issues surrounding the construction of a desirable identity, the importance of trust and how a powerful sense of *communitas* (Turner 1969) emerges between the regular skydivers. Finally I will consider how a recent high profile skydiving fatality affected the skydiving community in order to highlight the strong bond that exists between skydivers and to reveal what is usually taken-for-granted by the skydivers themselves.

7.2 The Players

Whereas certain individuals may only visit the drop zone for one 'special' occasion (especially the spectators and tandem students) others (AFF and committed static line students, skydivers and members of staff) attended the premises on a regular basis. Rather than being an unfamiliar environment, the instructors and skydivers that I interviewed often described the drop zone a comfortable 'second home' and admitted to being on the premises most weekends and occasionally during the week. Even if the weather conditions restricted the possibility of jumping, skydivers still enjoyed the chance to socialize with one another, patiently waiting for the weather to change so they could seize every opportunity to 'get on a lift'. Like several other skydivers, one of my interviewees even had his own caravan at the drop zone. Aside from obvious issues of convenience, Stewart claimed that having his caravan on 'site' had psychological benefits: 'There's nothing like waking up to the smell of aviation fuel in the morning. You just know you're going to have a good day.' For such individuals skydiving is positively described as a 'way of life' (Stebbins 1979). It is an activity that makes an important contribution to their own social identity and affects how they view others and how others view them. A good example of how skydivers

differentiated themselves occurred whilst I was observing a tandem student preparing to land. Some of the spectators cheered as the student frantically waved and proudly shouted 'I did it.' I then heard one of the skydivers belittling his achievement: 'I don't know what they're all cheering for. He didn't actually do anything'. Even though this particular student may have been exceptionally fearful of heights or even planes and clearly believed that jumping out of a plane at 13,000ft was a personal achievement, the skydivers did not believe that the student had achieved anything particularly significant. As I discussed in chapter six, one of the main attractions of skydiving is having control, and being responsible for making life threatening decisions. A tandem student escapes such responsibility as they are merely 'strapped to an instructor'. If anything untoward does occur during the descent, it is the instructor rather than the student who bears full responsibility for any life saving decisions. Skydivers clearly differentiated themselves from the tandem students. One of the instructors at the centre was particularly critical of people's motivations for deciding to do a tandem jump. He maintained that many tandem students fit into the 'triple F' (Fat, Female, and over Forty) category:

Injuries usually happen to the triple F's because they're not as alert and they're usually unfit. They don't take it seriously enough. In this country we have the phenomena of charity jumpers, no other country has it. They are jumping because a relative has cancer, or someone they know is affected by something they can't do anything about. They're not jumping for the sensation of doing a parachute jump. They're jumping to raise money. That's the wrong reason.

(Michael)

For the individual who has decided to do a tandem jump, skydiving is not an activity that significantly affects their social identity. It is a one-off challenge, and a chance to raise money for a particular charity. On the other hand, the decision to become a skydiver involves a serious financial commitment and a distinct possibility of accumulating considerable debt. As Adam stated, 'That's what the plastic's [credit card] for'. Many of the skydivers I talked to during the course of my research seemed proud to reveal how much money they invested in the sport. Comments such as 'if you take up skydiving, make sure you've got a good job. This is an expensive sport' and 'If my parents knew how much money I had spent on this they'd freak' were not uncommon. A couple of days after I had interviewed Andrew he approached me just after I had completed my revision training: 'I forgot to tell you the other day. The really dangerous thing about skydiving is the amount of money you spend. I checked my bank balance the other day, I've spent over three thousand pounds this year already'. When I asked how that was possible he informed me that he had to buy a second hand kit¹ and a new jump suit. The rest of the money was spent on occasionally travelling to other drop zones, together with an uncompromising commitment to jumping at the weekends. Although Andrew initially thought that jumping out of a plane would be a one-off experience, like all of my experienced informants, he was now keen to demonstrate his new social identity as a skydiver. Andrew was now playing a role that he had never even conceived of playing (Strauss 1969) and had successfully internalised the skydiving ethos. Continued participation in a 'high-risk' sport can be seen to offer an opportunity to construct a new identity

¹ Students who have graduated from AFF or the Ram Air Progression System usually buy second hand equipment. This provides skydivers the freedom to jump when and where they like without having to rely on the club's kit to become available. It is recommended that people buy second hand as opposed to new kits as their needs relating to the size of their canopy will change as they become more experienced. It is possible to buy a decent kit with a reserve parachute from £700 upwards.

(Belk 1988) as it provides clear stages of progression (see Cantor et al. 1986) that the student needs to meet in order to become a licensed skydiver. As I discussed in chapter five, the process of becoming a skydiver is guided by clearly defined benchmarks and rites of passage. For the neophyte, successfully completing their first static line jump is a considerable achievement. After this has been achieved and additional 'side bets' (Becker 1960) are placed, the first dummy pull, free fall, and unstable exit are all equally important benchmarks in the skydiver's career and are often celebrated in ritualistic manner. This well defined context for personal change is therefore attainable with personal effort and commitment. As Celsi et al. have recognised, if an individual is enthusiastic and committed it is possible to become a skydiver in a 'largely meritorious society' (1993: 11). Indeed, the desire to achieve a new identity also makes an important contribution for understanding the determination of students to master each stage in order to become a licensed skydiver. As Anna explained during her interview: 'It's one of those things that people get very, very passionate about'.

7.3 Identity Construction

Although students on the RAPS course may be sponsored by a charity for their first jump, the RAPS course also allows students to progress on to free fall. Unlike the tandem students, RAPS students take full responsibility for their actions from their first jump. Like the AFF, the RAPS course allows students the opportunity of becoming a licensed skydiver within a certain amount of jumps. Although skydivers privately referred to static line students as being 'dopes on a rope', they still recognised that such students had the 'right idea' about skydiving. Indeed, many of the skydivers were also 'dopes' at an earlier stage in their career. After their first

jump, students decide whether to return to the centre to make consecutive jumps in order to progress on to free fall. This is an important decision. Unlike the tandem student, and other static line students who only decide to do one jump, such individuals are not interested in having a one-off experience. Although a one-off experience may provide a sense of 'being different from one's everyday peers' (Celsi et al. 1993: 11), it fails to offer the opportunity to construct a new identity. Although the RAPS course does offer such an opportunity, some static line students are denied the chance to experiment with a new identity due to pressure from partners and family not to take up the sport. On one occasion I talked with a static line student (Andy) whilst waiting to start the revision training. I asked him if he thought he would come back to do another jump: 'It depends how it goes today, if I like it, then yeah, I think I'll come back.' Suddenly his wife intervened 'What? That's not what we agreed, you said to me that you only wanted to do one jump. Make the most of today 'cos you're not coming back.' She then turned to me and explained that he previously agreed only to do one jump, and that was before they were married. Andy looked embarrassed at his wife's assumption that he was now a responsible husband. I suggested that perhaps she should do a jump as well. She did not take kindly to my suggestion: 'There's no way anyone could get me up in that plane. It's too dangerous'. I did not see Andy again during my field work, even though he enthusiastically described his first jump as an 'amazing experience'. Pressure from close friends and family was a significant factor which affected some people's decision not to return and progress on to skydiving. Nevertheless, other individuals were not discouraged by other peoples' reactions. I asked Emily if anyone was particularly concerned with her decision to take up skydiving:

I: It would be interesting to know how your friends and family reacted when you told them that you were thinking of taking up this sport. And your partner for instance, I mean, was there any resistance there at all, or was he generally enthusiastic?

Yeah, yeah, he didn't want me to. He didn't want me to die. He didn't say don't do it of course, but he was concerned. I think everyone close to me was concerned, quite concerned actually. People were asking me have you jumped yet and so on because there was a lot of wind at first and so I hadn't jumped so that was a bit annoying, but actually when I did I phoned them and they were like ah OK, but they umm, they were concerned. My sister was going to come and watch me, the first time, but she didn't want to because she would have to bring her kids and she was concerned that something might go wrong, and her kids would see it. She really did worry and didn't want to watch.

Emily's family and partner were obviously concerned about her choice to take up skydiving. Unlike most other students, no one came to watch or take photographs of any of her jumps. But rather than reassuring her family and partner that skydiving may not be as dangerous as they imagined, Emily did not attempt to change their beliefs about the sport:

I: Did you try to explain that what you were doing wasn't perhaps quite as dangerous as they imagined?

No I didn't actually. I let them. I suppose in some way I like them thinking that I was doing something dangerous, so I kind of let them think that... They don't understand why I do it and that's OK.

I: So you like your family and friends thinking that you're doing something really dangerous?

Yeah, I like it. I do like it.

I: Could you explain why you like it?

I guess because I feel brave, it makes me feel that I'm doing something which is scary, so I'm brave.

Notice how Emily seems to actually encourage rather than correct her family's assumptions about skydiving. Other interviewees also commented on how their friends thought that they were 'mad' and 'crazy' for voluntarily jumping out of a plane. Such assumption are made by those outside the skydiving community as they often believe that there is a plausible correlation between skydiving and the risk of life and limb, a connection that is also continuously reinforced by the mass media (see Vanreusal and Renson 1982). But such stereotypical assumptions failed to restrict students' continued participation. In fact, as the following quotes suggest, the assumption that they were 'mad' for taking up the sport was encouraged and welcomed by many of the students.

My friends just think I'm mad anyway [laughs] so yeah they just expect me to do something odd. I think my parents worry but they don't really say anything about it. I think they just prefer not to know.

(Louise)

They [family] think I'm mad, but they think I'm mad anyway. My mum cringes whenever she watches, 'cos I've got videos of me jumping, you know. I think one of the first ones that she saw was my unstable exit where I was curled up in a ball and thrown out of the door and the instructor came out straight after me so he filmed the whole thing, you know, and just to see me curled up in a ball with the ground 13,000ft below me. It doesn't come as a surprise to her that I did take it up but she thinks it's crazy. Same with other members of my family. My friends just think that it's an extension of other things that I've done and there not surprised but again they think it's mad.

(Karl)

Andrew explained how his friends also believed that he was mad and how his father even offered him money if he decided not to jump:

Some of them [friends] thought that I'd lost the plot completely. I've got a video of my first jump so some of them had seen that and thought, god, you must be mad. Some of my friends said you've got more balls than I have. There seems to be kind of an irrational fear of skydiving amongst most people. They think kind of you know, you're going to get killed or whatever. To do one jump and get away with it

they think oh yeah, OK, but to do another one, well you're really going to get killed now and to do a hundred well you're really playing the odds. When I told my parents they just said, no you're not doing that and my dad actually offered me the £100 deposit, he would pay me the deposit back if I ditched the jump so I just said, no get stuffed, I'm going to do it. And he said well fair enough but I didn't want the fact that you had this money on the line to be the reason for you not to bottle it as it were. But yeah, it's quite interesting actually, he made me phone him back the minute I landed and he was just really relieved that I was OK and he said you know, I'm glad you've got it out of your system, and then I had to tell him that I had just signed up for another jump. He was really quite shocked and then basically said, OK if it is basically what you want to do, fine but if you ever start riding a motor bike we will disown you.

For the novice student, the first stage of identity construction concerns the acceptance and confirmation of their new identity by those outside the skydiving community. Stryker (1980) has demonstrated the importance of impression management in this process. In order to achieve new role definitions individuals will attempt to have their identity validated 'by behaving in ways that elicit validating responses from others' (1980: 64). Although the trainee's initial attempts at constructing their new identity are often problematic, as Donnelly and Young (1988) have suggested, their enthusiastic misidentifications and misrepresentations are usually accepted because they are based on stereotypical assumptions held by those with no knowledge of skydiving. As Brannigan and McDougall have pointed out, stereotypes not only effect

'our perceptions of what we believe high-risk sportsmen to be like but also what we believe others to believe them to be like' (1983: 47). As the above quotations demonstrate, the suggestion that skydivers are completely 'nuts', 'mad', 'crazy' and 'dangerous' are encouraged rather than rejected by students. Indeed, such reactions confirm to the student that they have started to construct a new identity. Students learn to enhance and identify with what they believe to be their new roles (see Vanreusal and Renson 1982).

Another element in the construction of the new identity of skydiver involves changes in visual appearance – in particular, the adoption of particular styles of clothing, both at and away from the drop zone. In a similar process described by Scammon's (1987) horse trainers, the student will start to accumulate specialised possessions to demonstrate their increasing commitment to the sport. During my fieldwork, two students on my revision training wore tee shirts with the following logos - *FEAR IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER (DON'T LET IT BE YOU)* and *FCUK THE PLANE I'VE GOT A CHUTE*. Even though both students had only made several jumps, they had already purchased visual indicators to demonstrate their commitment. Unlike the regular skydivers, students do not have a large array of 'identity markers' (altimeter, parachute, helmet and other personalised equipment) to provide the appropriate visual displays. Nevertheless, one resourceful student was particularly keen to show me his new 'skeleton' jump suit², and pair of skydiving gloves. Although such displays may indicate their commitment (and even though their identity may have been accepted by those outside the skydiving community) having their new identity confirmed by other skydivers had yet to be achieved. As Stone has

² The majority of students wore all blue jump suits provided by the centre.

suggested, one's identity only becomes 'established when others *place* him [sic] as a social object by assigning to him the same words of identity that he appropriates for himself or *announces* (1970: 399). The most valued other in this respect are the regular skydivers at the drop zone.

7.4 Telling Stories

Through a variety of techniques the student will begin to alter and model (see Donnelly and Young 1998; Schouten and McAlexander 1995) their behaviour to conform with other skydivers at the centre. Aside from visual displays or significant 'markers' (Goffman 1963) such as wearing skydiving tee shirts and being seen reading skydiving magazines, students' topics of conversation, general mannerisms and attitudes are also affected. Again, due to their lack of experience early attempts at modelling are often inaccurate as their concept of a skydiver remains stereotypical (Irwin 1973). For example, during the early stages of the skydivers career students are keen to reinforce the 'dangerous' nature of skydiving. This is accomplished by telling each other stories about dangerous situations that have supposedly happened to both students and skydivers. Although the CCI informed me that there had only been two student malfunctions at the drop zone over the last six years, one particular student insisted that they were far from a rare occurrence. The following fieldnotes provide a typical example and took place whilst I was waiting to do my first jump:

I'm looking up at the clear sky and finally I can see two small groups of dots slowly emerging directly above me. I watch until all of the skydivers have opened their parachutes. 'When I first watched them come down, before I jumped, one of them had a malfunctioned

parachute!' 'Really' I replied, slightly surprised by this comment. 'Oh yeah, it happens quite a lot'. This particular student knew that I had not jumped before. Although I remained sceptical, (such stories contradicted what the instructors had told us during the training session) I pretended to be extremely nervous about jumping to see if he would continue trying to scare me about my first jump. He continued in the same fashion: 'Landing is also a problem, when I did my first jump I fell flat on my face. But that wasn't as bad as my friend who landed over there [pointing] on that rusty barbed wire fence'. 'Bloody hell' one of the other students said. 'Yeah', he continued 'and someone else I know landed on a roof in the industrial estate'. He seemed to be pleased to tell us such stories, perhaps he was attempting to increase our anxiety. We all watched the skydivers as they safely landed in the airfield. I asked him if he had ever done a tandem jump. 'No, that's even more dangerous. A lot of things can go wrong. The harness can break for a start. Anyway, once you have jumped on your own and you can control your own canopy, a tandem doesn't really appeal'.

Although this student talked as if he had a great deal of experience, I soon learned that he had only made four jumps. Even though he claimed to know about a number of dangerous incidents that had previously occurred, his experience was extremely limited. Although the majority of skydivers enjoyed telling stories about skydiving, I soon realised that stories which exaggerated the dangers involved came from those students with the least experience. As I discussed in chapter six, skydivers recognised that each and every jump can be extremely dangerous, but they also emphasised that accidents were extremely rare. During my field work I often overheard skydivers

reassuring students rather than trying to increase their anxiety. Emily also commented on how other students attempted to scare her before her first jump. I asked her if she thought that some students intentionally tried to scare her:

Yeah definitely, Oh definitely, definitely. I remember there was this guy who seemed to think that there had been loads of situations where people had to pull their reserve, and I think he had only jumped a couple of times. And I mean I don't even know what the reality is, it was just the way he was talking about it, he sort of made out that he knew the world of parachuting and was teaching us. I doubt very much if he would have even opened his mouth had somebody more experienced been there.

Similar conversations took place on numerous occasions, although it was always the other novice students who would try to convince other students of their expertise. According to Emily 'the less experienced they are the more I think they talk about the dangerous things. I think there is a temptation to play the game and part of playing the game is scaring the less experienced ones and appearing confident at what you're doing.' Emily also draws attention to how the interaction between students would be dramatically different if someone with more experience had been in the group. In such a situation she doubted if the student who claimed expertise would have 'even opened his mouth'. A skydiver's presence would have immediately challenged the student's credibility to talk about such matters. One student (Chris) particularly enjoyed giving advice to others and claimed that he knew many of the skydivers at the centre. The following field notes illustrate how Chris was keen to reveal his knowledge of

skydiving and demonstrate how he knew some of the skydivers at the centre. Again, no skydivers overheard his comments and therefore could not question or validate his claims.

The scariest part is going up in the plane and climbing out on to the step. But you don't really have time. You've got to be really confident and believe in yourself. You've got to believe in yourself, even if you don't'. We talk for a while about the weather conditions, and the difficulties of landing in the wind. 'They won't let you up unless they're sure that the conditions are good,' he said, and we discuss how we trust the instructors to make the right decision. 'They're a good bunch of people' he continues 'I helped to paint the centre a few weeks ago [pointing] I painted that reception. 'You came down here just to help out?' I asked. 'Yeah, it was good. Mark, Andrew and Graham are fun. During the day we painted and in the evening Paul went out and bought some beers and we sat around, made a fire [laughs] and chucked a few aerosols in the fire'. I was aware that he was looking to see what my reaction was. 'So you know quite a few people here then?' 'Oh yeah' he confidently replied. 'Have you seen the guy wearing the teletubbies overalls [I nod] he's a real laugh. You can ask him questions as long as they're not stupid. Otherwise he'll just take the piss out of you'. Although he has only done five static line jumps, he clearly liked to demonstrate how he knew some of the regulars at the drop zone. He was very proud of his achievement. 'Right, I'll see you later. I'm going to go and find Andrew'.

Chris appeared extremely confident and was pleased to advise me on skydiving. He also differentiated himself from other students by emphasising how he personally knew other skydivers at the drop zone. During my interview with Anna I discovered that she also helped paint the reception. I asked her if she knew this particular student and I explained how he had offered me advice about skydiving on various occasions. Anna claimed that Chris was 'the most annoying guy in the world' and a complete 'know-it-all' even though he was only a student.

He's a complete and utter git. He tried to advise me about what equipment I need. I mean for God's sake, he's only made a few jumps, and he thinks he can advise me. He doesn't realise there's a hierarchy, its, I wouldn't presume to know anything and tell people unless I was completely certain and even if I did that I wouldn't do it in a patronising way.

Although everyone would give advice and coach each other, skydivers were extremely critical of students who gave advice when they failed to have the relevant experience. Like various other students, Chris failed to adopt the 'right attitude' and became stigmatised by other skydivers for being a 'know-it-all' to such an extent that Anna even called him 'a complete twat'. Stewart also commented on how some students fail to have the 'right attitude'

I mean when I was low done in my experience I would always talk to people and I would say you know, I'm not that experienced so I can

only talk to you about what I know so far. I would never discuss anything about what I was going to do because I wouldn't know what I'm talking about. But I've heard someone on six jumps talking about what you'll be doing on jump ten. It's a bit scary at times.

As one of my instructors (Mark) informed me, 'if you have a question, make sure you come and find one of the instructors. Doesn't matter how stupid you think it is, it could save your life. Don't take what you hear from other students as gospel.' All of my experienced interviewees also emphasised that advice should only be given by people who have the necessary experience. Students who were known for ignoring this unwritten rule were not only criticised by other skydivers, but their attempts to provide advice were also considered to be potentially dangerous.

7.5 Adopting the 'Right' Attitude

During the early stages of my fieldwork I noted that interaction between students and other skydivers appeared to be limited. Apart from interacting with their instructors, students would usually talk together rather than integrating with other skydivers at the centre. Although the drop zone may have become increasingly familiar for the student, many students still claimed to initially feel excluded from the skydiving community. According to a number of interviewees, there were various 'cliques' at the drop zone. Emily claimed that she was aware of such cliques from 'day one':

Even from day one I noticed it...There was this girl that came up behind me in the queue and I said something like you don't have to wait or something, I can't remember what I said, but she was obviously

experienced and I made the mistake of not knowing she was experienced and she put me right, she made sure that I knew that she was experienced

I: What did she say?

I can't remember now, but you've got to kind of respect the more experienced and you've got to show them respect.

Emily believed that there was a clearly visible hierarchy at the drop zone. She even claimed to feel intimidated by the other skydivers when she started her training:

I feel they are looking down on me as an inexperienced person and I don't like it and I do feel intimidated by it. I feel slightly patronised. I mean I know they are more experienced, but I think they like it that way as well.

Tim's observations also noted what he believed to be an 'obvious' hierarchy between students and skydivers.

Yeah, yeah it's very clear. And you can tell they're in cliques because they're all standing together talking and so on with their jump suits, you know, half down and the more experienced they are the more likely they are to have all the gear and gloves and so on.

Here we are reminded that consumerism has 'as much to do with identity as with material goods' (Jervis 1998: 93). Although Tim was surprised that skydivers would 'care about such things', he observed a variety of props that were intentionally devoted to supporting and confirming a distinctive identity as a skydiver. Experienced skydivers had successfully achieved 'the look' (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Tim was not expecting life at the drop zone to be so hierarchical and cliquy:

It is also a lot more cliquy than I thought it would be, a lot more competitive and I'm quite surprised as well about the gear. I remember the first time I went, I saw all the gloves and goggles and stuff and I think the jump suit is quite important, the type of canopy you have as you progress. I mean there's a real kind of fashion thing going on there. I mean, I kind of thought that these people wouldn't care about such things.

As a consequence many novice students found it hard to talk to other skydivers until they had acquired more experience. I asked Emily if she found it hard to talk to other skydivers:

Yeah, I think that they see me as one of them and not one of us. I do as well. I see myself as different to them. I think it's kind of the feeling of being excluded that makes me feel that I shouldn't approach them because I'm not one of them.

Skydivers at the centre would not be surprised by such observations. Although experienced interviewees agreed that some skydivers act as though they have no time

for students, they also claimed that some skydivers are prepared to give advice: 'some are, some aren't, it depends'. According to Stewart 'some skydivers are more unfriendly than others' but he firmly believed that students should always be able to approach skydivers – 'well that's the theory'. He claimed that the drop zone was a 'very learning orientated' environment, but he also recognised how experienced skydivers might unwillingly exclude others:

You get some people that won't speak to you unless you've got more than a barrel of jumps you know. But, you know, I think those people are in the minority, most skydivers are pretty friendly towards each other and we get on pretty well and you know, I think some jumpers come along, we probably have a really strong relationship between us, we're all very good friends, our own little group, our own little clique you know. Perhaps they find that intimidating but we try and welcome them into that.

Despite the fact that some skydivers make positive attempts to welcome new students into their circle of friends, the topics of conversation can still make students feel excluded. In a similar way to Becker's jazz musicians (1951), skydiving is also a combination of sharing particular experiences and technical language. Life at the drop zone was underpinned by language that only skydivers understood. On numerous occasions I found myself bemused by specific skydiving terms such as aspect ratio, snivel, zoo, boogie, tracking, booties and creeper. Such language together with acronyms such as CSI, IS1, LAC and JM ensured that I felt excluded from certain conversations early on in my field work. Understanding and using the 'slang' of

skydiving was an important method employed by students to demonstrate acceptance and membership. Paul also remembered feeling confused as a student:

Definitely because they're all talking about stuff you don't know. I'm sure you've found this yourself. You know, they're always, always, always talking about skydiving and the more complicated stuff that you don't know. So getting involved in that is really difficult which is why a small amount of energy is needed from the new party to actually get involved and learn things and, but it's also, they also need to be willing to talk to them about what they can learn and stuff. I think effort's needed on both sides. The new people have to look interested and be willing to like talk to people. They have to show interest. And the clique have to be able to accept people in.

Although I was also aware of the hierarchy, I still found many of the skydivers approachable. I also found that particular skydivers would encourage me to progress, provide supportive 'looks' and 'nods' of recognition and frequently asked questions relating to my experiences. After each jump certain skydivers would usually approach me and ask how the jump went, provide feedback about my landing and ask if I was 'going to go up again' advising me that it was 'better to do two jumps in one day than one each weekend'. Even if I was not feeling confident about my latest performance, they would still try to reassure me. Comments such as 'well, it looked alright from where I was standing' or 'you just don't know how the jump went until you get the feedback. You never know, it might have been fine' were offered by skydivers to relieve my frustration as I took off my equipment in the main hangar. If I claimed that

I made a 'bad exit' or that I was worried that I had failed to 'arch my back properly', skydivers would approach me after the feedback and ask 'well, how *did* it go...you see, it's never as bad as you think'. The first time I managed to land on my feet without falling over, a group of skydivers cheered and as I walked past them back to the main hangar one of them shouted that they had never made a landing like that as a student. After my fourth jump I was asked by one of the regulars if I was going to stay around for a drink in the bar. Although I was only a student, I felt included. Conversations would usually start with the familiar question 'How many jumps have you done?' When I admitted to having only made four jumps, one skydiver said 'well, that's four more than most people. You need to get down here often as you can, that's the best way to progress. Don't leave it for a month or anything, try to get down here regularly.'

Perhaps my research had made me adopt the 'right' or 'correct' attitude. I asked questions, listened to their responses and familiarized myself with the technical language. I claimed to know nothing about the sport, and took advice from everyone. Not only did I play the role of subordinate student keen to learn as much as possible about the sport, but also I was an inquisitive researcher who enjoyed listening to their stories and validating their achievements. Karl also believed that he had the right attitude as a student. Although he acknowledged that the drop zone can be 'quite cliquy', he also believed that skydivers are approachable if students have the 'correct' attitude:

Some are quite open and friendly, but I didn't wait for them to talk to me. I'm just straight in there... You know, I want to do something and

they have the experience. I can learn from them so I will find out. So I am really forward about doing that. Unfortunately a lot of people aren't. They just wait for the information to come to them. If you dive in with the right attitude, and the right approach, they will teach you anything. Skydivers are approachable. But some people are afraid to approach them, and they won't come to you. I mean there are cliques here just like everywhere. I think it has a lot to do with your attitude.

7.6 Keeping Up Appearances

Karl provides a good example of a student who adopted the 'right' attitude. Although only a student, he had successfully managed to adopt and construct an identity around his pre-occupation. Karl's new social identity had begun to affect and shape his motivations and responses (see Hewitt 1991). Not only was his identity recognised by those outside the skydiving community, but other skydivers also started to positively reinforce and validate his claims. As a committed student, Karl attended the drop zone every weekend. Even on his days off work, he could usually be found at the drop zone, learning how to pack, talking to other skydivers and jumping whenever the weather permitted. Unlike many of the other students, the instructors at the centre believed that Karl would take up the sport. Once Karl had achieved his category eight, one of the instructors admitted that they knew all along that he had what it takes:

But a lot of these guys are so experienced they know who wants to really be a skydiver and they know which ones are the ones to be aware of. I mean I found this out a bit latter on after I finished my training. There was 12 of us on the course, and it wasn't until I'd been coming up here for months and we were chatting away in the bar and

somebody turned around to me in the bar and said I remember you on your course 'cos we were discussing and we always do discuss the people on the course. And we all said I bet we don't see the other eleven but that Karl, he'll be back, he'll take this up. And I said, how did you know that, and he said oh we can tell. Sometimes we get it wrong he says, but we all said he'll be the one who takes it up. They could tell I was keen and that I wanted to learn.

Karl clearly did want to learn, and his commitment ensured that he was accepted by the regular skydivers at the centre. In his own words, Karl enjoyed 'talking with everyone' and modelled his behaviour and generally conformed to what he assumed to be expected of him (Williams 2000). During my fieldwork I observed Karl giving encouraging advice to students who were at different stages of their progression, and listening and asking questions to those with more experience. Karl was satisfied with his own progression, and maintained that each jump was even better than the last. Nevertheless, on his first dummy pull he surprised everyone by his refusal to jump:

It was the first time I'd seen other people getting out of the plane and that scared me. On my first three jumps I'd always been number one and then I had to move around the plane and I had a fear of falling out of the plane. And the noise of someone jumping out just terrified me and the rocking of the plane and the whole, from taxing out to getting in the plane was just so nerve racking for me 'cos I was nervous anyway and it was my first dummy pull so I was doing something different and it was just all that in my head and it got me. There was three of us [students] and the first two got out [of the plane] and I was

behind the pilots seat and the jump master said right and I said I can't do this, and he said, oh we'll go round again and I said you can go round as many times as you like, I'm not getting out so they radioed down and said that I wasn't getting out and I got some stick. My first reaction was I'm going to get in my car and I'm going home. I didn't want to stay around. I felt ashamed and embarrassed, but I was being a little bit hard on myself. But I'm walking up the runway and somebody gets on the tannoy and starts shouting abuse at me [Laughs] and I was only half way down the runway at this point, and he starts taking the mickey out of me and it made me laugh, 'cos I see the funny side of lots of things and it was that which persuaded me to stay and I took all the stick and I took all the criticism and then because I had built up a good rapport with all the instructors and other people who've got some experience, as the day went on somebody took me aside and said don't be hard on yourself, and they were telling me that it happens you know, I've been like that and it could have been the jump that could have all gone wrong, and you were just reacting on your gut feelings and he said you know there's nothing wrong with that. So it was that kind of encouragement you know, we all go through it, we wouldn't be human if you weren't feeling. It's a lot more common than you think. You always talk about your jumps not your non-jumps. I remember someone said to me, you don't know what everyone's done who's here. But nearly everybody here has refused to jump or have felt that they shouldn't jump.

Karl admitted to feeling 'ashamed and embarrassed' of not being able to jump. As Gross and Stone suggest, embarrassment is caused when 'a person is exposed as having no right to play the role he has laid claim to, because the identity in which his role is anchored is invalid' (1964: 14-15). Embarrassment occurred as his identity claims unexpectedly came under attack (Lyman and Scott 1989). Strauss captures the problematic nature of Karl's predicament:

Having announced or avowed your position, it is not easy to beat a retreat. Often you find yourself in interpersonal situations climbing out on a limb, announcing a position, and then having to live up to it (1969: 95).

Not being able to live up to his reputation meant that he had seriously jeopardised his new identity as a skydiver. Karl's refusal to jump certainly was unexpected. Although admitting to being a 'bag of nerves' on his early jumps, he always managed to confidently climb out 'on the step'. Fortunately Karl decided to take the 'stick' and general verbal 'abuse' from other skydivers instead of immediately leaving the drop zone. As Steve stated, 'everybody gets the piss taken out of them here so as long as you can cope with that kind of thing then you're fine.' Far from excluding Karl, after he had taken the ritualistic 'stick', the 'instructors and everyone else' encouraged Karl to continue. Karl's humbling experience was turned into one of the 'lesson stories' (Jonas 1999) used by skydivers (including Karl) to encourage other students in similar situations to 'stick with it'. Steve was pleased to describe his own experience of when he turned 'white as a sheet' and 'froze' on one of his student jumps'

On my fourth jump I froze, I just told the jump master that I'm not going. There was no way I was jumping out of that plane. I had an

experienced jumper behind me. He just climbed over me and jumped out which scared me even more. When we got down I thought I would just go home. I was so embarrassed, and I knew they would take the piss out of me. Which they did. In fact, they started taking the piss out of me as soon as I walked into the hangar.

Individuals will clearly go to great lengths to demonstrate what they believe to be a desirable social identity. Nevertheless, identities cannot simply 'appear from nowhere' but rather have to be 'recognisable to an audience' (Holyfield and Jonas 2003: 301). Both of the above examples demonstrate how these students lost face as they failed to perform in front of a witnessing audience. In both cases their inability to suppress fear disrupted their ability to perform and after being subjected to a certain amount of teasing, both individuals had to repair and therefore retrieve their challenged social identities. Karl and Steve started to make the necessary repairs by returning to the centre and making successful jumps the following weekend. Indeed, the positive social relationships that develop at the centre served to encourage both students not to give up on their skydiving career (Brannigan and McDougall, 1983).

7.7 A Sense of Communitas

Those that have successfully negotiated the 'right' attitude, and had their new identity validated by those outside and inside the skydiving community professed to experience a sense of camaraderie, or what Turner (1969) has termed 'communitas'. Skydivers claimed to 'party together' and enjoyed spending 'a large proportion of free time' with other 'care free people' who 'practically lived' at the drop zone. As Paul stated: 'I've made good friends here. There's a strong community here. I come up here when I'm feeling down, and when I go from here I'm on a high again'. Stewart

even said that he no longer goes out drinking with his workmates in order to save money for jumping and drinking at the drop zone: 'I think it's the case with a lot of skydivers, there is this very strong community bond that you get from doing it'. Adam maintained that apart from one weeks holiday in Italy the previous summer, he has been at the drop zone 'pretty much every weekend since I got my cat eight...so I'm there a lot. I'm spending a large proportion of my free time at the drop zone with other skydivers'. As Arnold and Price (1993) have suggested, *communitas* constitutes a sense of belonging, and drawing on their own empirical research on white water rafting they demonstrate how *communitas* is devoted to a single transcendent goal. Clearly the notion of *communitas* is also relevant for skydivers who are keen to develop their expertise:

I just want to do this for the rest of my life. At this moment in time this is all I want to do. I want to become an instructor, I want to jump everyday. I want to go around the world and jump. That's what motivates me. You know I've got my B licence, my 50 jumps and my IC1 last Sunday³. And now I'm pushing to get my operators license. My radio operators license and I'll want to try and get my two hundred jumps up. The next stage then is becoming an instructor. And I need my IS1 and my FS1 as well, and I've got a plan of getting that by the end of February, there's no point in hanging about⁴. I want the qualifications to get on. And I'll do whatever I need to do to get that.

(Karl)

³ All qualifications refer to the licensing system used by the British Parachuting Association. To qualify for the B licence skydivers must have completed fifty freefall jumps and accumulated at least ten minutes freefall time. The Individual Canopy Grade 1 (IC1) is a basic qualification that follows on from Category 8.

⁴ FS1 refers to the Formation Skydiving Grade 1 and IS1 refers to the Individual Style Grade 1.

A sense of *communitas* develops when individuals share similar experiences in order to meet such objectives. *Communitas* can therefore be seen to emerge from 'shared ritual' experiences and has the potential to transcend everyday life (Belk et al. 1989). The external roles of individual skydivers become irrelevant and are replaced by the specialised roles they have achieved within the skydiving community. According to Turner (1969) the recognition that everyday statuses are no longer applicable should be seen as the main aspect of *communitas*. As Louise stated: 'it doesn't matter what language you speak, what nationality you are, what background you've got when you're skydiving it doesn't matter'. The following extract explains how the shared 'extraordinary experience' (Shoham et al. 2000) of skydiving can literally transcend everyday life:

But one of the things that impressed me about skydiving, 'cos you think you know skydiving, am I the type of person who can become a skydiver because you get this idea of what skydivers are like. And then you come here and you realise that they come from all different kinds of backgrounds. And the way people are in general is all different. But that doesn't seem to make any difference to what kind of skydiver they are 'cos it doesn't matter what you do away from here. One reason I come up here so often is to get away from everything, you know, it's a little community. It's completely different to anything else that goes on outside this field and there's a few skydivers who think the same way. You just share a common bond. But away from here you have different lifestyles, different kinds of jobs you know. Like I sometimes refer to myself as only a postman. You know, like I'm lower than a lot of

people out in the world. But you know you get postmen but you've also got solicitors and lawyers and a lot of people in high paid jobs. I mean skydiving appeals to so many different types of people. You know you've got the same goals, the same thoughts the same feelings, so I don't think it takes a particular type of person to become a skydiver. I think I could live at the drop zone actually.

Although Karl believes that his external role as a postman is 'lower than a lot of people out in the world' at the drop zone such roles are irrelevant because everyone has the same goals, thoughts and feelings. Whether an individual earned their living as a bricklayer, computer programmer, police officer or academic psychologist were simply considered to be extraneous factors due to the separation of the everyday world from life at the drop zone. As Celsi et al. have suggested, *communitas* results from 'a sense of camaraderie that occurs when individuals from various walks of life share a common bond of experience'. The strong bonds that develop also provide 'a sense of community that transcends typical social norms and convention' (1993: 12). Even on her first static line jump Emily maintained that she enjoyed the sense of camaraderie with other students. She enjoyed the sense of experiencing 'something together':

There is also a sense of camaraderie at the end of it, there seems to be of a kind of togetherness about it which I like. Before you jump it's like you're just individuals in a group and at the end it's like you've all experienced something together

The novice's experience of a 'kind of togetherness' is eventually transformed into 'strange kind of bond' that existed between skydivers. At one of the many 'socials' that took place in the bar at the drop zone, Paul emphasised the strong sense of community among skydivers: 'It's really strong. We eat, sleep, and jump together. As you can imagine, we know each other pretty well.' Due to the shared sense of camaraderie Paul firmly believed that skydiving was not an individual sport. He insisted that I 'needed to understand' the bond that existed between the regular skydivers at the centre. He provided an example by explaining how he was intending to book a trip to France for a group of skydivers: 'When I book it, I'll just book the one room, and all nine of us will sleep in there together. You know, to save money. We are there to jump, not sleep.' Steve provided his own explanation of why skydivers had a strange kind of bond:

I think you're confronting this big scary thing together the relationships that you get tend to be quite firm and strong. I have made some very good friends down there and I think everybody else would say the same thing.

All of my experienced interviewees claimed that they had made good friends at the centre, and Anna even admitted that she 'only' socialised with other skydivers because so much of her time was spent at the drop zone. Andrew explained how skydiving can take over your life:

Yes well I think it's sort of taken over now to the extent that all my friends are skydivers. I spend a lot of time around the drop zone. You get to know them very well, you go up and jump with them, you come

down, you pack, you sit around, you chat while you're waiting for the next jump and you're perhaps there all day, and then you hit the bar and you have a few drinks and you spend a night in the bunk house, and you do that for a couple of days, you're with each other twenty-four hours a day. It takes over your life.

Even away from the drop zone skydivers claimed that when they met other skydivers there is an 'instant bond'. Andrew's chance meeting with an American skydiver in Portugal provides an interesting example:

There's almost a kind of weird bond between skydivers 'cos you have something in common, as I said describing what free fall is like is very very difficult to people that don't jump, and with people that do jump you know exactly what it is like, you know exactly how they feel and that does bring people closer. There's a special bond between skydivers. I mean I was at a conference in Portugal and I was chatting to somebody I met there about jumping, he was asking what it was like and all the rest of it, and there was this guy in front who I had never met before from America, and he suddenly turned around and said, ahh you jump, and I said yeah, and this guy had done 80 or so jumps and had to stop jumping because of back problems and stuff, and we spent the rest of the night talking together, it's just this instant bond, you know exactly what it is like, you share something that the vast majority of the population don't have a clue about.

Skydivers clearly enjoyed the chance of talking about their experience to others but firmly believed that only other skydivers could possibly understand their various experiences 'in the air'. Adam described how he became frustrated with his friends reactions to his skydiving achievements. According to Adam only other skydivers could possibly understand what he had accomplished:

I mean I did my first freefall, it was like yeah but you did your first dummy pull like two weeks ago and it's like that's the same thing to them, like I've done the jump, that's it. I mean like to start with they [non-skydivers] were excited but then they do tend to get bored and you're like right, I'll shut up now, whereas like we [skydivers] can chat for hours about absolutely crap about skydiving sort of thing but we both understand each other and how it all works and stuff, it's a lot easier.

According to all of my informants, being an accepted member of a 'close knit kind of group' who 'understand each other' and 'know each other inside out' was considered to be an additional benefit of becoming a skydiver. As Stewart explained, it's impossible to explain 'to your mates what it's like to jump at fourteen thousand feet.' Although friends outside the skydiving community might be supportive and encouraging, 'the only people who can understand your experience' are those who share the same 'feelings, fears and thoughts'. Stewart admitted that he could only 'relate' to other skydivers because no one else understands: 'They can try [to understand] but until you actually do it you can't actually have that bond that you have with the people that do.' Being a skydiver therefore creates a sense of belonging and enables them to differentiate themselves from those outside the community:

That's the great thing about skydiving, you know what I mean, it's different from what most people would even imagine themselves doing, you know, and I like that about skydiving.

(Karl)

The powerful sense of community and camaraderie that develops ensures that skydivers implicitly trust one another. From leaving their kits around at the drop zone, to checking each others equipment before jumping, skydivers have to trust each other 'a hell of a lot':

Skydiving is a very trusting community. You have to trust the people you're with, both in their abilities and in their intentions. People are giving you a flight line check and touching and playing around with your equipment just prior to getting in the plane so you have to trust that they're not going to do anything dodgy to it otherwise you can die, it's that simple. It's very very common to have a drop zone where people have their kit on the floor of the packing shed, lying around and you kind of trust that nobody's going to mess with it.

(Andrew)

7.8 Questioning Trust

If I do mention skydiving to people that aren't skydivers I mean the first thing they ask about is what they know, which is like the suicide and Stephen Hilder, which is like the first thing they come out with and I go well I don't really know, all I know is what you know.

(Stewart)

The above quotation refers to two skydiving deaths which occurred in the United Kingdom during my fieldwork. Unlike the death discussed in chapter six, both of these incidents received detailed coverage in the national media and were the topic of many discussions at the drop zone. Stewart provided a detailed description of the apparent suicide which took place at the Scottish National Championships. Stewart was the only interviewee who attended the championships.

And the CCI was like no, they called it, no more lifts going to go up, somebody's landed out, I think they're hurt and that was all we heard but there was an eerie sort of silence going on and I was like there's something more than that, and there's people sort of walking past like really, really quiet and I was like no, something's happened and then there was a guy that walked back completely white, just put his helmet down and walked off and I was like that's not right. Then the police turned up and stuff and they said someone's gone in, their parachute's not opened, said he left the plane with the rig on and landed without it. Everything was all cordoned off and they were searching for the body. They didn't find the body until five o'clock in the morning. It was, it was quite scary and someone's got hold of the video. It's not nice to see by the sounds of it. I mean he's left his alti, his gloves and his mobile phone in the plane behind the pilot's seat, jumped out, got into sit with like his best mate, I mean really close mate, same watches and everything like they've been jumping together since they started. He had got into sit, took his helmet off, undid his chest strap, shrugged it

off, stuck two fingers up at the camera then went into head down and just went.

Whilst at the drop zone one of the skydivers suggested that this was a selfish act as the decision to commit suicide whilst skydiving unnecessarily gave the sport 'bad press'. As Adam stated 'It definitely doesn't help the public perception of skydiving' but he also claimed that it was important to remember that it was a suicide, not an accident. A number of skydivers were particularly concerned about the general media coverage that skydiving had received since the tragedy of Steven Hilder.

Stephen Hilder fell 13,000 feet to his death at Hibaldstow airfield in Lincolnshire on the 4th of July 2003. Both his main and reserve parachute failed to open. The police soon announced that his equipment had been sabotaged:

Stephen Hilder grinned broadly at his two friends' shaky camcorder and flashed a thumbs-up as their SMG Turbo Finist light aircraft circled up to 13,000ft where they leaped out over Lincolnshire. For Stephen that was the start of a horrifying plunge reaching 120mph as his sabotaged parachute tore from four deliberately severed straps (The Guardian 22/05/2004).

What the police described as a 'uniquely terrible crime' (The Guardian 22/05/04) resulted in ten months of relentless investigation. Over four thousand skydivers were questioned and three men were arrested on suspicion of involvement in Hilder's death before subsequently being released. Seven months after the incident an article in The Observer (01/02/04) reported that the police still had not charged anyone, and that despite extensive inquiries as far away as Russia and South Africa, the police had

failed to uncover any motive for Stephen's murder. Although the police were initially convinced that he was killed by someone he personally knew (The Guardian 12/07/03), on the 21st of May 2004 Humberside police announced that the death of Stephen Hilder was no longer being treated as murder. New forensic evidence suggested that Stephen Hilder was himself responsible for cutting the cords on both his main and reserve parachute. A microscopic sheaf of nylon, reinforced strap fibres and DNA from Mr Hilder's sweat were found on household scissors discovered in the boot of his car. Similar fibres were only found on the clothes Stephen wore on the fatal day. Such evidence apparently proved that Mr Hilder was undoubtedly present when his parachute was sabotaged. The case has now been reclassified as an unexplained death and detective Superintendent Colin Andrew confirmed that the police were 'not looking for anyone else in relation to Stephen's death'.

All of my interviews and the majority of my fieldwork was carried out before this case had been reclassified by the police. The death of Mr Hilder was therefore believed to be a murder. The tragedy stunned the social world of skydiving and promoted a wave of suspicion among the skydiving community. I asked Steve if he had been following the murder investigation:

Yes. The murder attracted more attention than normal. But having said that, a murder is a murder, it's not really a skydiving fatality as such, that was just the instrument if you like.

Many of the skydivers I spoke to during my research emphasised this point. What happened to Stephen Hilder was a tragedy, but it should not be seen as a skydiving fatality. Unlike the examples provided in chapter six this was not an accident or the

result of faulty equipment. Nevertheless, skydivers often claimed to be asked about the events surrounding Stephen Hilder, and were frequently asked as to whether the incident had made them re-evaluate their pre-occupation:

Well it's something whenever you mention to someone you're a skydiver they will often bring up you know, what about Stephen Hilder but it's not anything that actually bothers me because you know, it was a murder, not a skydiving accident, if you want to cut someone's brakes on a car you go and do it. The fact that it happened to a skydiver is irrelevant to me and it's kind of upsetting that, that someone in skydiving would kill but as a skydiver you put a lot of trust in your friends and the people around you, even someone who you've never met before that you're going to jump with for the first time, when you jump at the drop zone you trust them to check your equipment when you've got it on and when you're in freefall and there's a lot of trust there.

(Paul)

It was precisely issues relating to trust that dramatically affected the skydiving community. The 'trusting community' became suspicious. Two of my interviewees jumped at Hibaldstow shortly after the incident:

Like I said I went down to Hibaldstow a month or two ago and I did put my kit in the kit room because it's locked all the time. I put my kit in there and someone said oh I don't leave my kit in there, I sleep with it, you know, because of what happened.

(Paul)

But it's very much like people round at Hibaldstow were walking round with their rigs on their back, they wouldn't leave them unattended, I mean you do sort of switch on, there was nobody allowed in the hangar, people started keeping their kit on them.

(Stewart)

One immediate difference concerned their skydiving equipment. Before the incident 'kits' would be left in the hangar or in the kit room but skydivers now exercised far more caution. If there was a 'psychopath wandering around wanting to cut everyone's cords' skydivers were determined to make it as difficult as possible. Even away from Hibaldstow skydivers started to take their kits home with them or to keep them locked in the boot of their car if they were staying at a drop zone. The pre-jump checks in the flight line also became far more rigorous:

People were locking up their kit and doing even more checks looking for signs of sabotage. It's really bizarre, it's not what skydiving is all about. There have been cases of sabotage before in other countries and they have been caught. It's very unnerving to know that there is somebody out there who is capable of doing that. Who ever did it knew a lot about skydiving. They knew how to sabotage both canopies in such a way that he would defiantly die and they managed to sabotage it in such a way that it couldn't be picked up with any of the checks in the flight line.

(Andrew)

Adam admitted to becoming overly cautious after the incident:

I went down to the centre and thought that's not how I leave my bridle, because everyone packs differently and I thought well who's been playing with my kit. You know everyone packs differently and to notice that it wasn't how I left it you know kind of makes you jumpy. In the end I looked at it, pulled the parachute out, oh that's fine you know, well I can't be bothered to repack it, I'm sure it's just me having a lapse of concentration.

7.9 Recovering trust

As I have suggested, immediately after the tragedy of Stephen Hilder skydivers became extremely cautious and suspicious. Regular skydivers admitted that they kept an eye out for 'strange people walking round' and made sure their kits were 'kept safe' which usually meant that they were locked in a boot of a car or taken home instead of being left at the drop zone. Skydivers refused to leave their kit lying around the drop zone and the routine safety checks became far more rigorous:

When it first happened I noticed that everyone was putting their hands right in and checking their risers, taking out their throw aways and checking the bridle and then a few weeks after it stopped. All of these kind of extra checks that you don't have to do all stopped you know, people were over the initial shock of it and you can see people leaving their rigs around the hangar again. You have to have faith in the equipment that you're going to use. You can't dismantle the whole thing for every jump so you have got to have trust.

Here Andrew explains the initial reaction of skydivers. Immediately after Hilder's death skydivers became extremely cautious and suspicious, constantly checking their risers, bridle and other equipment before each jump. The way Hilder's equipment was sabotaged would not have been detected in the usual pre-jump safety checks, so it was necessary to carry out such checks to make sure their equipment had not been sabotaged. Nevertheless, he also states that such 'extra' checks stopped within a few weeks. According to Andrew, skydivers were then over the initial shock; equipment could be seen lying around in the main hangar and the usual safety checks replaced systematic attempts to detect sabotage. This point was also emphasised by Stewart: 'there's only so much checking you can do...and when you're at the drop zone you can't walk round with your rig on your back all the time, you have to leave it somewhere. You can't keep it with you all the time.' Steve also pointed out how the general wave of suspicion eased off after a short period of time:

There was a period where people would take out the pilot sheets and inspect them because the pilot sheet was cut but you know it's a bit of a faff every time you want to jump to do that. It's like you know they're [other skydivers] not going to do anything to your kit, so you can quite happily leave it about. The regular jumpers down here are like my best mates, it's like you trust, you do trust your life with them.

It is possible to be aware of what constitutes *communitas* when it is called into question. The affect that Stephen Hilder's death had on the skydiving community demonstrates the strength of *communitas* between skydivers and highlighted what is usually taken-for-granted. Although the death initially caused much suspicion and generated new forms of safety checks in order to detect sabotage, such overly cautious

behaviour was short lived. Even though no-one had been arrested for Hilder's death, which skydivers still believed to be a murder committed by someone within the skydiving community, the initial suspicion failed to break the trust and strong bonds that had been formed at the drop zone. Despite nine months of uncertainty, once over the initial shock trust remained intact and was clearly as strong as before the incident.

7.10 Conclusion

Becoming a skydiver involves far more than learning how to skydive. As Patrick and Bignall have stated, individuals also master activities in order to reflect the identities they wish to become:

We become racquetball players, golfers, bridge-players, and mountain climbers both for the satisfaction we derive from these activities and for the social interactions based on them and the identities that are created by competent performance of them. When we claim competency in a particular area of endeavour, we also establish an identity as one of them (1987: 207).

As I have demonstrated, the skydiver not only derives satisfaction from the 'magical' experience of diving out of a plane at 13,000ft, but also from their interactions with other skydivers who constantly reinforce and sustain each others social identity as a skydiver:

The two main things that I enjoy the most is a) the bond that you get from the other skydivers. I mean we all know each other pretty much inside out, we all socialise a lot and it's such a strong relationship between ourselves. You get to trust each other a hell of a lot so that's

pretty good. And b), that instant when you leave the plane, or you let go of the strut, or you dive out, or whatever. That instant when you leave the plane is just magical.

(Andrew)

The neophyte enters at the bottom of a social world dedicated to the pursuit of skydiving and undergoes a gradual process of socialisation. The process of identity construction begins with experimentation, using a specifically desirable social identity to function 'as a guide to what is assumed to be true of members of the relevant category as well as what may be expected of them in a variety of social and discursive contexts' (Williams 2000: 6). Nevertheless, a neophyte's assumption is usually stereotypical and therefore incorrect. The individual must therefore continuously refine their self-presentations by conformity and modelling and attempt to monitor their own performance by judging the responses of those they consider to be relevant audiences. Those who fail to adequately refine their self-presentations in accordance with the 'valued' audience are stigmatised by other skydivers at the centre. Individuals are therefore attempting to lay claim to a social identity that not only legitimated their actions, but also elevated their status at the drop zone. Such claims can be problematic. As Erikson has pointed out, a sense of identity 'is never gained nor maintained once and for all. Like a good conscience, it is constantly lost and regained...' (cited in Strauss 1969: 109). The social construction of identity is an actively negotiated ongoing process. Rather than being considered as some static, fixed or innate quality, this research has suggested that identity is deliberately constructed, enacted and sustained by positive social relationships with others (Douglas and Johnson 1977, Kotarba and Fontana 1984). The positive social

relationships encourage continued participation, ratify their identity as a skydiver and provide a strong sense of communitas. As I have suggested, even though the tragedy of Stephen Hilder initially caused a great deal of suspicion, the trust and general sense of communitas that previously existed between skydivers ensured that the strong bonds formed at the drop zone could only be temporarily questioned and continue to transcend everyday life.

Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

This thesis has provided an in-depth study of the social world of skydiving. By adopting a qualitative approach and assuming the role of the actors being researched, I have investigated the norms, values and categories that typify the skydiving community as it is known and experienced by its members. The purpose of this final chapter is to provide an overview of the arguments made in each of the findings chapters and to discuss the implications the research has for understanding this particular high-risk sport. The chapter will also consider the limitations of the thesis and make constructive recommendations for future research on this topic. Although sociological investigations of a range of high-risk activities have shed considerable light on social worlds that have too often been neglected, there remains much work to be done. Indeed, to understand whether the skills and abilities required for participating in a high-risk sport such as skydiving are increasingly valued in late modern societies, future research may need to look beyond the current areas of inquiry and focus attention on aspects of social life that have previously been ignored by sociologists of risk. Future research will need to determine whether the sustained attractions of voluntary risk taking affect far more areas of social life than previously realised.

8.2 The Research

The overall aim of this thesis has been to explore the neglected world of the voluntary risk taker, a social world where individuals actively and knowingly take 'consequential chances perceived as avoidable' (Goffman 1969: 145). For those

outside the skydiving community the consequences of skydiving may seem obvious: jumping out of an aeroplane at roughly thirteen thousand feet and being overwhelmed by the experience of freefalling towards the earth at a speed of 120 miles an hour clearly involves the possibility serious injury and even death. Although skydivers recognise the possibility of both eventualities, they also know that such occurrences are extremely unlikely. Skydivers are aware of the statistics and would know the intricate details of the latest fatality. Each serious injury or fatality provided the skydivers with an important lesson of what they should or should not do during each skydive. Skydivers would individually and collectively take active measures to protect themselves from 'becoming another statistic'. All skydivers at the centre jumped with a reserve canopy, and the majority also jumped with an automatic activating device. Even in the unlikely event of a skydiver being knocked unconscious during freefall or misjudging the correct height for opening their parachute, the automatic activating device was set to deploy their canopy at a predetermined height. In addition to the reserve canopy and the AAD, there are also numerous safety checks carried out prior to each jump: skydivers double checked their own equipment in the minutes before leaving the aircraft; they were only allowed 'on a lift' in appropriate weather conditions and both alcohol and drugs were strictly monitored by the staff and rigidly self-policed by other skydivers at the centre. None of these points should be seen as detracting from the 'serious ride' that skydiving provides individuals who are committed to the sport. Learning to skydive provides individuals with a chance to extend personal boundaries and continuously offers new challenges to conquer and master. Despite the individual's level of ability and experience, the world of skydiving offers a wide range of unusual challenges. For the complete neophyte the first challenge is to voluntarily expose oneself to uncertainty and to experience the

previously unknown sensations of jumping out of a plane. Aside from constantly improving their aerial positions and techniques, experienced skydivers may decide to accept the challenge of learning a completely new skydiving discipline, to become an instructor or even to enter national and international competitions. Such a diverse range of challenges suggests a trajectory: from complete novice to competent skydiver. The 'serious ride' of skydiving is therefore preceded by a 'serious journey'. Rather than attempting to locate and discover what motivates the 'high-risk personality', this research has provided an alternative consideration of the gradual series of transitions that take the individual from being a complete neophyte to a competent skydiver.

8.3 Skydiving as a Moral Career

For the majority of my informants their journey began by enrolment on the Ram Air Progression System static line course. The word progression is important here. The RAPS course is specifically designed to take students through the various stages until they achieve their 'category eight'. Rather than signing up for a tandem jump in order to have a once in a lifetime experience of 'jumping out of a perfectly good aeroplane', the RAPS course is intended to take the complete neophyte through all the necessary stages in order to become a qualified skydiver: a journey that will eventually take what some interviewees referred to as a 'dope on a rope' to a committed and competent skydiver. In chapter five I suggested that this trajectory is not simply a technical one: it can be viewed as a moral career, and Goffman's analytical concept was specifically employed to examine the students changing attitudes and abilities in relation to their chosen recreational pursuit. As the term moral career can be used to 'refer to any social strand of any persons course through life' (1961: 119), the concept was particularly useful for co-examining both the progressive stages and the social

processes participants go through in order to successfully become a skydiver. Whereas the moral career of the 'mental patient' begins with the experience of abandonment and disloyalty and is marked by 'humbling moral experiences' (1961: 137), the moral career of the skydiver begins with excitement, curiosity, fear, fascination and a sense of adventure. The neophyte enters a new social world full of new opportunities and unfamiliar challenges. Rather than restricting or degrading the individual, the various rites of passage that await the neophyte celebrate personal success and encourage individuals to become competent skydivers.

Drawing on data from my fieldwork I described the complex processes and procedures that an individual goes through before becoming a licensed skydiver. From the first day of the Ram Air Progression System training course the enthusiastic students learn to take parachuting seriously. In chapter five I documented how the intense training covers both the necessary and routine skills of the sport and as well as learning how to survive in emergency situations. The RAPS training aimed to instil a sense of responsibility to each 'hedonistic consumer' (Arnold and Price 1993). As this term suggests, static line students typically expect an 'extraordinary experience' which will provide a sharp contrast from their usual everyday activities (Lipscombe 1999). Hedonistic consumers searching for a new and exciting experience, who 'just want to get up there and jump', often become impatient with the hours of training involved. Instructors therefore use particular techniques to impart information and challenged inappropriate behaviour in order to ensure that all students took the training seriously. A barrage of constant questioning from the instructors ensured that the students understood the importance of safety and that any breach of the instructor's rules, no matter how trivial, would not be tolerated. In return, students

were keen to answer questions correctly to show they had acquired the appropriate and potentially life saving information. Students soon learned that they must not touch any specialised equipment without being instructed, and that they must take the training seriously. Instructors repeatedly stated the importance of the training and emphasised how students needed to pay close attention throughout the RAPS training course. Failing to pay enough attention during the training could result in students endangering themselves together with the other students, instructors and pilots at the centre. A video was used to demonstrate the consequences of inattention throughout the course. In addition to the strategic use of the video, the instructors also vividly described what can happen when a student is 'hung up' underneath the aircraft or spinning uncontrollably towards the earth after making a 'bad exit'. Such techniques neutralised inappropriate behaviour and maintained the appropriate emotional tone for 'serious leisure' (Stebbins 1982).

During the training, students also began to learn the correct embodied techniques and practices required for skydiving. Throughout the training the body is constantly worked upon by both the instructor and student. The student learns the importance of a particular bodily position for free fall, landing under canopy and for making an emergency landing in the aircraft. Students watched the instructor's demonstrations and constantly monitored each others movements. Such bodily positions were repeatedly acted out and rehearsed. Students also commented on how they practiced the bodily positions away from the drop zone. As skydivers need to react automatically, pre-reflexive awareness is clearly of central importance. By charting the corporeal transformations that evolve during the skydivers career I demonstrated how emergency procedures should 'sediment into fixed habits' (Leder 1990:32) and

how new items eventually became incorporated into the skydivers body. The handles and pads that the skydiver needs to pull and punch in order to activate the reserve parachute can therefore be located without even having to see or touch them. The equipment therefore comes to be viewed as 'part of the body'.

Aside from the RAPS course, the compulsory revision training also ensured that students remembered the correct emergency drills together with the various safety procedures, bodily positions, landing procedures, canopy safety checks and so on. Using similar techniques and scenarios from the RAPS course, students were repeatedly checked and rigorously tested before being allowed to jump at the centre. The students were given numerous opportunities to demonstrate they had habitually developed the correct embodied techniques for each scenario given by the instructor. Students were required to display a practical bodily know-how (to react if the plane was forced to make an emergency landing, to go into the arched position etc) together with the conceptual background necessary to know that they have to flare the parachute at fifteen feet, check their altimeter at regular intervals or operate their reserve parachute and so on. During the revision training students were keen to discover how many jumps the other students had made and what progressive stage they had achieved. Jumping without the assistance of the radio, doing their first dummy pull, free fall, five, ten, fifteen second delays, and the unstable exit were all extremely important stages. As I noted, those students who were held back from progressing at the rate of other students often showed frustration. Committed students who received negative feedback from their instructors were eager to 'go up again' the same day in order to 'get it right'. The different stages were seen as personal challenges, barriers to be overcome, and so served to encourage students to progress.

The gradual transition that occurs to students as they progress through these different stages was explored by considering the different vocabularies of motive (Mills 1940) used by novice parachutists and experienced skydivers. Both the constructive rationales of 'self-fulfilment' and 'putting things into perspective' were completely absent from the accounts of novice parachutists. The shifting vocabularies of motive revealed how experienced interviewees justificatory accounts are subculturally acquired. Differences in the content of these vocabularies of motive revealed how the neophyte's attitudes towards skydiving change as they become immersed within the skydiving community. The changing accounts that claim to mediate action should therefore be seen as incorporated into the process of becoming a skydiver. Rather than existing prior to participation, this research has suggested that desirable motives are socially constructed within and through the processes and procedures of becoming a skydiver. As the novice increasingly associates with other skydivers their aspirations are reflected, reinforced and substantiated by other members of the skydiving community. The individual student is therefore transformed from an inquisitive outsider to a committed and enthusiastic insider. Rather than attempting to identify individual 'traits' that 'cause' certain types of behaviour, the disposition to engage with skydiving is learned as the novice progresses through the particular stages of their skydiving career. As individuals acquire reciprocal perspectives they gradually adjust to their new roles in the skydiving community. By considering the different vocabularies of motive it became clear that individuals develop motivations that could not have been recognised prior to their continued participation.

8.4 Perceptions of Risk

In chapter six I explored how changing perceptions of fear and risk can be seen as specific examples of 'turning points' in the skydiver's moral career. All of my novice interviewees felt overwhelmed by the potentially life saving procedures they were required to remember. They also understood that failing to remember such information could have dramatic consequences. As Le Breton has noted, 'The symbolic game with Death is what gives power to the experience' (2000: 8). For some that power was too overwhelming. During my fieldwork I directly observed some students who refused to jump and others who found the whole event so traumatic that they never wanted to repeat the experience. All of my novice informants made successful jumps, but some openly admitted that they were seriously concerned about the possibility of fainting whilst in the plane, or of not being able to move, what Fenz (1974) described as fear paralysis (and therefore being forced to come back down in the plane). As my own fieldnotes demonstrated, jumping out of a plane is certainly a terrifying and intense experience. All novice and experienced interviewees admitted to feeling extremely nervous and experienced high levels of fear on their first few jumps. Due to the training techniques employed during the RAPS course, students are acutely aware of the various factors that can and occasionally do go wrong. Such contingencies include having a malfunction, being 'hung up' underneath the plane, colliding with obstacles whilst under canopy such as houses, factories, electricity pylons, other parachutists and even planes and microlights. The prospect of serious injury and death had not been 'stripped away' from this activity and as I explained, accidents do occur. So the student's first challenge is to see how they will personally react to the 'emotional intensity' produced by the 'dialectic of fear and pleasure' (Le

Breton 2000: 4). Nevertheless, experienced interviewees explained how fear was something they had to overcome. The process of overcoming fear was a gradual transition that occurred during the early stages of the skydiver's moral career. This transition involved transforming fear into a positive rather than negative aspect of the sport. Experienced respondents claimed that although fear was an important safeguard against complacency, it was also vitally important to embrace and live with the fear. Transforming fear into pleasure was one of the first turning points in a series of personal adjustments. Skydivers gradually learned how to successfully manage the high-risk context. Rather than being viewed as something to be dreaded, skydivers become almost indifferent to the once terrifying prospect of jumping out of a plane. Jumping becomes normalised and the act of jumping becomes something to be enjoyed rather than a 'horrendous' challenge to overcome.

Skydiving is an activity where the 'stakes are high' (Lipscombe 1999), and individual decisions and actions can, and occasionally do, have disastrous consequences. Every time a skydiver jumps they have to deal with extreme heights and extreme conditions and occasionally it can 'bite hard'. Although those outside the skydiving community may believe a fatality to demonstrate that skydiving is an uncontrollable and unacceptable risk, respondents believed that such incidents can frequently be avoided. Serious injuries and even fatalities were usually believed to be the fault of the skydiver rather than the equipment and all of my experienced informants marginalised the risks of skydiving by emphasising the possibility of control. Although informants did not attempt to deny that there are serious dangers that everyone needs to be aware of, skydivers believed they were taking a calculated risk. According to my informants, individuals who climb without ropes or participate in B.A.S.E or extreme forms of bungee jumping are dicing with death. Unlike skydiving, all of the above examples

have no safety net. If the participant does make a mistake, in all probability they would be killed. All skydivers jump with a reserve parachute in case of a malfunction, and the overwhelming majority jumped with an AAD in case they were knocked unconscious during freefall. Obviously there is a chance that the reserve canopy will also be a malfunctioned canopy and, as like any mechanical device, the AAD may not work and that is precisely why it is seen as a calculated risk. Skydivers continually emphasised the importance of control. For example, some informants literally hated being in the plane below one thousand feet because if anything went wrong with the plane they were simply too low to jump out. This was a risk that was beyond their control. Skydivers also made comparisons with bungee jumping, horse riding and theme park attractions to emphasise the appeal of skydiving. With skydiving the individual skydiver is in control, and if anything happens during the descent it is their responsibility alone to successfully deal with the problem. Whereas rollercoaster enthusiasts constantly place their lives in the hopefully competent hands of others, one of the main attractions of skydiving is that the skydiver is literally the pilot as opposed to a trusting passenger who has no control over life threatening situations. Skydivers are not interested in putting their lives in other peoples' hands. Even at an early stage of their skydiving career, novice students are keen to learn how to pack their own parachutes, instead of relying on the ability of others. Skydivers did not like the idea of taking random chances. Instead skydivers sought controllable risk contexts where their individual capabilities could be challenged and tested. Indeed, experienced informants often maintained that the use of their skills in relation to skydiving was one of the most valuable aspects of the overall experience.

This research raises interesting questions in relation to the concept of edgework. Lyng's (1990) claim that edgeworkers tend to seek out more purified kinds of edgework by artificially incapacitating themselves clearly clashes with the findings of this research. As Mitchell (1983) and Celsi et al. (1993) have also noted, individuals tend to limit high-risk contexts to what they consider to be a manageable and controllable level. My informants did not deliberately choose to jump in threatening weather conditions or attempt to unnecessarily increase the risks of skydiving. All informants emphasised the importance of safety rather than demonstrating a 'willingness to take unnecessary risks' (Lyng 1998: 227). Neither did the informants gradually progress 'toward more extreme and varied risks' (Lyng 1998: 230). In fact informants indicated that there is actually a progressive movement towards safety and that skydivers spent a considerable amount of time discussing the details of previous fatalities and generally learning how to reduce rather than increase the risks. According to Lyng and Snow (1986) skydiving offers the opportunity to get as close as possible to the edge without falling. Nevertheless, informants maintained that the majority of skydivers would not intentionally deploy their canopy at a low altitude or take drugs to increase the risks. Taking drugs was certainly viewed as reckless and irresponsible behaviour. Jumping under the influence of legal, let alone illegal, drugs was not tolerated. Not only would skydivers place themselves in danger, but they would also create unnecessary risks for everyone else on the lift. Even jumping without an AAD was viewed as irresponsible by the majority of my informants. The minority who did take unnecessary risks were described as 'irresponsible' or 'bloody stupid' for not recognising that things can go wrong. The majority of skydivers acknowledged that some aspects of skydiving were simply beyond their ability to

manage and control. Informants claimed that they wanted to live so they could 'go up and do it again' and would take the necessary precautions to ensure a safe descent.

Although skydivers do give high priority to developing and using their skills, the fact that the majority of skydivers jump with an AAD does question the belief that skydivers have an innate survival capacity, and that their 'personal survival skills will ultimately determine the outcome' (Lyng 1990: 872). Far from what I had expected before entering the field, the majority of skydivers were extremely safety conscious. Despite their level of skills and ability, experienced skydivers still recognised that there were some circumstances beyond their control. Only those described as 'cowboys' took what informants believed to be 'unnecessary risks' and both formal and informal sanctions served to discourage 'irresponsible' and 'extremely stupid' acts. Individuals considered 'extremely dangerous', 'arrogant' and 'irresponsible' received negative sanctions from those within the skydiving community. The fact that this minority became subject to ridicule and gossip demonstrates how boundaries of 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' constructions of risk are learned and negotiated throughout the skydiver's moral career. Skydivers normalise acceptable and controllable risks and redefine them as pleasurable. Rather than the notion of any risk being a problem (Furedi 1999) acceptable risks were understood as a positive feature of the activity. Informants claimed that without taking risks, life would be intolerably restricted and could not offer enough challenges or allow the individual the chance to realise what they are capable of achieving. Indeed, a life without taking risks would be seen as having no life at all. Experienced informants maintained that skydiving had become a desirable and pleasurable technique for enhancing the experience of life itself. An important turning point in the skydiver's moral career therefore involves recognising the difference between responsible and irresponsible risks. In this respect,

skydivers shared perceptions of risk can be understood as bound to a specific social context and also as serving to maintain symbolic boundaries within the skydiving community. These findings highlight how risk epistemologies are bound to the specific social cultural contexts in which they are generated (Lupton 1999a), and the research has demonstrated how the risk positions of skydivers are both grounded in the social relationships formed at the drop zone and also reflect their identity claims. Chapter seven specifically investigated how symbolic boundaries are both constructed and maintained by focusing on issues surrounding 'identity' and the sense of 'communitas' that emanates from shared experiences.

8.5 Desirable Identities and Communitas

Learning to skydive also provides individuals with the opportunity to forge a new identity, and chapter seven documented the various ways in which skydivers purposely enacted and negotiated this new identity. By considering a variety of examples from my fieldwork, this chapter focused on issues surrounding the social construction of a 'desirable' identity and how a strong sense of 'communitas' (Turner 1969) emerged between the regular skydivers at the centre. At the start of the skydiver's moral career the complete neophyte enters a new social world and undergoes a process of socialisation. The process of identity construction begins with the neophyte experimenting with what they assume is to be expected of them and by adopting particular styles of clothing to visually represent their increasing commitment. However, students' initial attempts at identity construction are often problematic. As I demonstrated, students often exaggerated the dangerous nature of skydiving and enjoyed 'telling stories' to other students about how dangerous or reckless their actions were. For many students, being labelled as 'mad' and 'crazy' by

those outside the sport confirmed that they had started to successfully construct a new and distinct identity as a skydiver. Nevertheless, as a neophyte's assumptions are provisional, students must learn to continuously refine their initial self-presentations in order to gain credibility from the most valued audience: other skydivers at the drop zone. Students who successfully learned to model their behaviour on other skydivers at the centre soon realised that skydivers were extremely critical of those who gave advice to other students without having the necessary experience, or those who deliberately exaggerated the risks involved. Such students had failed to adopt the 'right' or 'correct' attitude and could potentially be stigmatized by the other skydivers at the centre. In order to be accepted by the regular skydivers, students needed to adopt the 'right attitude' by asking appropriate questions rather than giving students inaccurate advice, and by demonstrating their enthusiasm and commitment to the sport. Students who had started to have their new identity validated by those outside and inside the skydiving community still had the challenge of keeping up appearances. Students who started to have their identity claims validated by other skydivers were required to constantly perform in front of a witnessing audience. Refusing to jump ensured that their new identity claims would come under attack, and the student would need to make the necessary repairs by returning to the centre in order to face and overcome their fear. The social construction of identity can therefore be seen as an active and on-going process, and one in which claims and actions are continually subject to evaluation and consideration.

For the individual who decides to do a one-off tandem jump, skydiving is not an activity that will significantly affect their social identity. It is a one-off challenge of jumping out of a plane at thirteen thousand feet, and usually a chance to raise money

for their favourite charity. Unlike the tandem students and some static line students who only decide to do one jump, committed students are not interested in achieving such a one-off experience. Although a 'once in a life time' experience may differentiate them from their everyday peers, it fails to provide the opportunity to construct a new identity. It is continued participation in this 'high-risk' sport that provides individuals with such an opportunity. Learning to skydive offers clear stages of progression that the student needs to meet in order to proceed to the next stage. For the complete neophyte the first static line jump is a considerable achievement. Once this has been achieved, additional 'side bets' (Becker 1960) are placed and the student becomes committed to achieving each goal set by their instructor. This provides the individual a clearly defined context for personal change and is marked by defined stages and specific rites of passage. Becoming a skydiver creates a sense of belonging and as students become more experienced they begin the process of differentiating themselves from those outside the skydiving community. Students internalise the skydiving ethos and demonstrate their increasing commitment to the sport. They adopt particular styles of clothing, learn about specialised equipment and familiarise themselves with technical vocabulary relevant to the pursuit of skydiving. Rather than being a strange and unfamiliar environment, the drop zone becomes what many described as a comfortable and familiar 'second home'. Even in poor weather conditions, the drop zone is a place to meet up and socialise with other skydivers. For such individuals skydiving can be described as a 'way of life' (Stebbins 1982). The desire to achieve a new social identity makes an important contribution for understanding the sheer determination of students to master each stage and become a licensed skydiver.

These findings demonstrate how individuals master skydiving in order to reflect, reinforce and sustain each others identity as a skydiver. The rewards of 'sticking with it' can therefore be seen as offering far more than simply becoming a competent skydiver. Chapter seven also explored how the neophyte's experience of a 'strange kind of togetherness' is gradually transformed into a 'strange kind of bond' that exists between skydivers. By sharing and understanding an extraordinary experience, skydivers claimed to experience a powerful sense of camaraderie that had the potential to take over their lives. External roles soon became insignificant when compared to their specialised roles within the skydiving community.

The main aspect of 'communitas' involves everyday statuses losing their significance (Turner 1977). As Belk et al. recognised, communitas 'is a social antistructure that frees participants from their social roles and statuses and instead engages them in a transcending camaraderie of status equality' (1989: 7). The shared 'extraordinary experience' (Shoham et al. 2000) that skydiving provides suspends the everyday social order (Celsi 1992) and transcends everyday life. Skydivers claimed to have an instant bond that only other skydivers could possibly understand. The sense of 'communitas' was considered by my experienced respondents to be an additional benefit of becoming a skydiver. The positive social relationships formed at the drop zone ratified each others identity as a skydiver and provided a strong sense of communitas that informants claimed transcended the mundane demands and dreary constraints of everyday life.

The same sense of 'comunitas' also ensured that skydivers implicitly trusted one another by leaving their 'kit' unattended at the drop zone, and having other skydivers

checking their equipment before each jump. Even the suspicious death of Stephen Hilder only had a temporary negative effect within the skydiving community. Skydivers started to lock their equipment in the boot of their car rather than leaving it unattended in the hangar, and their pre-jump checks become far more rigorous. Skydivers were no longer simply inspecting their equipment, they were now also checking for signs of sabotage. Understandably, skydivers become especially - even overly - cautious, often keeping an eye out for any 'strange' people walking around at the drop zone. Nevertheless, this was only an initial reaction and the informants explained how such overly cautious behaviour was only short lived. Even this skydiving tragedy failed to break the strong sense of 'communitas'; once over the initial shock, the strong bonds and sense of trust remained intact.

8.6 Discussion

This research has focused on the social and moral experiences involved in becoming and being a skydiver. By documenting the progressive stages and social processes that the complete neophyte necessarily goes through I have described the regular sequence of transitions that typically occur 'in the person's self and his framework of imagery for judging himself and others' (Goffman 1961: 119). The various 'turning points' in the skydiver's moral career not only change the individuals' original conception and experience of skydiving, but also change 'the way in which the person views the world' (Goffman 1961: 154). The investigation has also revealed interesting insights into how 'late moderns' (Lupton and Tulloch 2002b) respond to risk. Rather than being detected and avoided, skydivers recognise and embrace what they understand to be 'acceptable' risks as a method for achieving self-determination and authenticity. In this context, voluntary risk taking provides an opportunity to construct a 'desirable' identity, display courage, control fear and live their lives with an

enhanced sense of personal agency. Skydiving provides the context for a 'radical one-to-one contest' through which participants can continuously 'test their strength of character, their courage and their personal resources' (Le Breton 2000: 1). Rather than viewing voluntary risk-taking as the 'height of irresponsibility' (Reith 2005: 230), some risks are positively and actively embraced in 'late modernity' as a method for taking responsibility of their own life trajectory. Challenging the expectations of others and testing one's own personal boundaries can carry symbolic weight in our over-routinised lives (Holyfield 1999). So perhaps the imagined obsession with risks does not penetrate so deeply after all (Boyne 2003). As Lupton (1999a) has recognised, parallel to the ideal of the highly controlled and regulated self there exists a discourse that represents risk taking as a positive technique for enhancing the experience of life itself. Indeed, without 'the feeling of risk-taking' skydiving would be unable to provide either 'the enjoyment' or 'have such an effect on personal life' (Le Breton: 2000: 8). Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise that the majority of skydivers in this research did not intentionally increase the risks of jumping. Skydivers believed that risks of skydiving allowed individuals the chance to challenge themselves and to explore and negotiate their own personal boundaries, but they did not attempt to increase the risks that were already there. Rather than seeking out chaos, skydivers actively sought to reduce, manage and control the risks associated with their sport.

Smith's (2005) recent research on financial traders has emphasised how traders also feel a sense of agency by controlling and managing the risks associated with their profession. Smith provides a different take on edgework. The following quotation is particularly interesting in this respect:

Given that most financial trading involves a high degree of risk – admittedly more financial than physical, though extreme financial risk can entail physical risks, such as stress-related illness – it would seem to be an appropriate candidate for edgework analysis. It differs from most sports related high-risk endeavors, however, in that most participants generally strive to reduce the risk entailed rather than maximise it. Most skydivers – the edgeworkers whom Lyng initially studied – and other leisure risk takers fervently embrace the risk factors of their sport. In contrast, most financial traders attempt to minimise risk, looking upon it as a necessary but hopefully controllable element of what they do. Most financial traders, in short, are not gamblers seeking the psychological rush that the risk of gambling can generate. This is not to deny that traders enjoy, and even seek, an emotional high associated with their activity. It is not, I will argue, a high derived from the inherent risk of their activity (2005: 188-189).

Smith's comment that financial trading differs from most high-risk sports needs to be reconsidered. In a similar way to Smith's financial traders, this research has also suggested that the majority of skydivers do not intentionally increase the risks of skydiving. Risks described as being within the individual's ability to control were seen as pleasurable. Acceptable risks were positively celebrated and embraced, but as I have noted, there exists a fundamental difference between 'acceptable' and 'irresponsible' risks. Clearly, skydivers could have made their sport more extreme. For example, skydivers could jump without as AAD, bomb other formations, fly in

front of other skydivers, take legal and/or illegal drugs whilst jumping, refuse to carry out safety checks, jump with canopies that were too small, insist on jumping in bad weather conditions, deliberately open their canopy at a low altitude or jump without a reserve parachute. Skydivers were not interested in increasing the risks. All of my experienced informants emphasised the importance of control. It was precisely issues of control that explained why skydivers disliked the idea of a tandem jump, and why skydivers encouraged students to pack their own parachutes. Individuals attracted to the tandem jump as opposed to becoming a skydiver are those Goffman (1969) would call 'pseudo-adventurers': they are able to satisfy their curiosity by experiencing the emotional thrill and excitement of skydiving without possessing the necessary competencies. Unlike the tandem jump, the appeal of learning to skydive is that the individual is personally responsible for any contingencies that may occur. From packing their equipment to making a successful landing, everything rests on the ability of the individual. As a growing amount of people now feel physically and mentally threatened by forces beyond their personal control (Lasch 1978), one of the central attractions of skydiving is that the individual skydiver is directly responsible for managing their actions and controlling any life threatening situations that may occur.

Bane (1998) argues that 'the trend in society is to eliminate risk. It's gotten to the point where there are no more swings in playgrounds. At the same time, people are saying, "Where's Indiana Jones?" People need adventure in their lives' (1998: 64). The need for adventure was also recognised in the work of Simmel. For Simmel, modern life has denied individuals the chance to be fully responsible agents. Individuals can now live a passive life without any physical or mental exertion:

The Individual has become a mere cog in an enormous organisation of things and powers which tear from his hands all progress, spirituality, and value in order to transform them from their subjective form into the form of a purely objective life...life is made easy for the personality in that stimulations, interests, uses of time and consciousness are offered to it from all sides. They carry the person as if in a stream, and one needs hardly to swim for oneself (1997a: 184).

Simmel argued that the adventure was as an 'island in life' as it allowed the individual to break the continuity of everyday life and escape the constraining processes of modern living. Indeed, the experiences that have been pushed to the fringes in modern times are the very experiences that skydivers value. As a 'form of experiencing', learning to skydive offers the chance to overcome the blasé attitude to sensations, to rejuvenate our faculties and take control of our lives by purposely pulling 'the world into ourselves' (Simmel 1997b: 225). This research has suggested that skydiving provides an opportunity for individuals to display courage, to control their fear, and to live their life with a sense of personal agency. To a certain extent, skydivers have re-learned how to swim for themselves. Becoming a skydiver offers the individual far more than the passive, fabricated and pre-packaged sameness of the amusement park (Ferrell 2001; Holyfield, Jonas and Zajicek 2005). As Goffman (1969) recognised 'serious action' can be seen as compensating individuals for the lack of direct personal control they experience in their everyday lives. In a social world where large numbers of individuals perform their everyday routines with mental detachment (Lyng 1990), are distanced from the products of their labour (Mills 1959) and

increasingly protected and insulated by large bureaucratic organisations (Mitchell 1983) the focused attention necessary for skydiving is a unique and rewarding experience. The absence of control and loss of autonomy in our institutional lives is the complete opposite to the heightened sense of control and personal satisfaction experienced by skydivers. As participants gradually become competent skydivers, they learn and develop the skills required for remaining calm in extremely trying circumstances that are simply absent in the over rationalised routines of everyday life (Hayward 2002; O'Malley and Mugford 1994). The stability of our 'monolithic corporations and government bureaucracies' may be comforting (Mitchell 1983: 223) but such reassurance comes at a serious cost. The price we pay is the severe reduction of challenging experiences and thus the dehumanisation that accompanies an overly rationalised and standardised existence. The result is what Hayward pessimistically calls the 'hyper-banalization' of everyday life (2002: 84). To conclude it is appropriate to consider the words of Cohen and Taylor: 'We do not want a world in which the guarantee of no longer dying of hunger is exchanged for the risk of dying of boredom' (1993: 160). As this thesis has demonstrated, dying of boredom is certainly not a risk that can be associated with skydiving.

8.7 Limitations and Future Research

The primary methods of data collection for this research consisted of semi-structured interviews and participant observation. The decision to employ these methods reflected the need to explore and understand the world of skydiving from the inside and to reveal the interpretations and meanings that can often be concealed from those outside the skydiving community. Although no other method would have allowed such access to the interior (Suttles 1967), there are interesting questions that have

been generated by this study that inevitably remain unanswered. For example, critics will note that this research has not investigated gender differences in relation to the overall experience of skydiving. Although an increasing amount of women are now engaging in high-risk pursuits (Celsi et al. 1993) much voluntary risk-taking is still viewed as a masculine domain (Harrell 1986). Lyng (1990) has also noted how men are more likely to engage in edgework activities and my own sample reflected the high proportion of male skydivers at the drop zone. Lois's (2005) recent research has added a new dimension to the existing literature on voluntary risk taking by systematically analysing the role of gender. By studying a volunteer search and rescue group in the Rocky Mountains she examined the differences between male and female members in relation to how they managed their emotions 'before, during and after their most dangerous, stressful or gruesome missions' (ibid: 118). According to Lois:

Women and men experienced edgework differently, interpreting and managing feelings in gender-specific ways while they prepared for missions, performed high risk activities, reflected on their participation, and made sense of their actions (2005: 122).

Whilst this research has not focused on the issue of gender, future research investigating the world of skydiving would undoubtedly benefit from taking Lois's findings into account by purposely investigating whether there are significant gendered differences in relation to skydiving.

This thesis could also be criticised for solely focusing on one particular parachute centre in the United Kingdom, indeed, of limiting my study to the world of skydiving.

Questions inevitably remain unanswered due to the limitations in terms of both the size and scope of the research. Nevertheless, I make no claims to the generalisability of my findings in relation to other 'high-risk' sports, and as I stated in chapter three, no other methods could have generated such rich data in relation to the social world of skydiving or have provided such a thorough understanding of the meanings that skydivers construct to make sense of their activity.

One of the most interesting unanswered questions to have emerged from this research relates to what we are to understand by the word 'extreme'. Although I would agree with my informants that skydiving should be understood as an 'extreme sport' there are clearly other pursuits that deal with more extreme conditions. B.A.S.E. jumping, climbing without ropes or deep sea diving without oxygen are all appropriate examples. Unlike skydiving, such activities appear not to offer the various safety nets that I have discussed throughout this thesis. As Ferrell notes:

BASE jumping ups the ante appreciably on the already risky sport of skydiving; in comparison to skydivers exiting a moving plane at altitude, BASE jumpers have no forward velocity to help pull open their chutes, no time to correct for mistakes or deploy backup chutes, and little control over exit points or landing areas, which BASE jumpers are forced to access surreptitiously and illegally. In BASE jumping, the edge between chaos and order, creativity and destruction, is a thin one indeed (2001: 82).

Future research projects could explore this issue further by collecting data on 'extreme' activities where the safety procedures adhered to by skydivers are simply

not valued. Aside from examining the perceptions of risk held by both novice and experienced participants and examining to what extent their risk perceptions change and evolve, useful research could also explore such pursuits to investigate whether participants also experience a strong sense of 'communitas' and identity based on their activities. A study of B.A.S.E jumping could add a further dimension by exploring the boundaries between legal and illegal behaviour and study the meanings that such boundaries have for both novice and experienced participants. Adopting a developmental approach to researching such activities would provide interesting comparative data in relation to this research and enhance our understanding of a diversity of fascinating, yet neglected, social worlds.

Comparative data taken from a number of different and apparently 'low-risk' pursuits are also required to increase our overall understanding of voluntary risk-taking. If, as Smith has stated, a defining feature of the risk society may imply that voluntary risk taking is 'happening around us in our everyday lives to a much greater extent than we realise' (2005: 199), then future sociological research should also cast a critical eye on activities not previously associated with being on the edge. Smith's (2005) own research on financial traders and Sjoberg's (2005) work on intellectual risk-taking are particularly relevant examples, but more research is needed on such actions. If the 'skills, competencies and symbolic resources' required for activities such as skydiving 'have been increasingly in demand by the risk societies evolving in the last two hundred years' (Lyng 2005a: 7), then research needs to move beyond the domain of leisure and explore other mundane areas of social life such as politics, work, consumption, sexuality and health. Such studies could have interesting and unforeseen implications. Although voluntary risk taking has been 'largely off limits', sociologists

can no longer ignore the flourishing opportunities to engage with an increasingly wide variety of high-risk activities that saturate our everyday lives. Indeed, the increasing popularity of such behaviours in a diversity of social contexts may 'mirror the climate of late-modernity itself' (Reith 2005: 241). Future research will need to determine whether the sensations and emotional experiences produced by voluntarily taking risks are more in demand than one could have previously imagined.

Appendix 1: R.A.P.S. and A.F.F. Progression Levels

Table 1: Ram Air Progression System

Category	Requirements
1	Completed ground training for first jump
2	First jump – 1 further static line descent
3	3 dummy ripcord pull descents
4	First free fall (3 seconds) – 5 second delay
5	2 x 10 second delays
6	2 x 15 second delays
7	2 x 360 degree turns with precision
8	Dive exit Unstable exit Backloop(s) Tracking and track turns Qualifying jump for Category 8 (including turns, a backloop, track, wave off and pull)

Source - British Parachute Association

Table 2: Accelerated Free Fall

Level	Requirements
1	<p>Has completed ground school and achieved the following:</p> <p>Heading awareness</p> <p>Awareness of altimeter and instructors</p> <p>Reasonably co-ordinated practice pulls</p> <p>Pull on instructors signal</p> <p>Additional exercises may be introduced at the instructors discretion at any subsequent level</p>
2	<p>Free arm time</p> <p>Practice Pulls</p> <p>Reasonable body position</p> <p>Solo pull on own altitude awareness</p>
3	<p>Leg and arm awareness</p> <p>Heading maintenance (whilst totally relaxed)</p>
4	<p>Start and stop turn(s)</p>
5	<p>Turns left and right</p>
6	<p>Solo exit</p> <p>Sub-terminal control</p> <p>Attempt backloop(s)</p> <p>Tracking</p>

	Wave off
7	Dive exit Alternate 360 degree turns Backloop(s) Track and track turns Wave off
8	Solo exit and pull stable within 10 seconds

Source - British Parachute Association

Appendix 2: Interview Questions

- 1) How long have you been skydiving?
- 2) How many jumps have you made?
- 3) Would you describe skydiving as an extreme sport? Why?
- 4) What is it about skydiving that initially attracted you?
- 5) Did anyone you know disapprove of you taking up the sport?
- 6) How did you deal with this?
- 7) Do you think skydiving is particularly dangerous?
- 8) Have you ever had to pull your reserve parachute?
- 9) Have you ever been involved in what could be described as a dangerous situation whilst skydiving?
- 10) Do skydivers take safety seriously?
- 11) Do you think some skydivers take unnecessary risks?
- 12) How does the centre deal with this?
- 13) Have you ever come across anyone who takes drugs to enhance their experience of jumping?
- 14) Have there been any serious injuries at the centre?
- 15) Any fatalities?
- 16) Do you know how many deaths there are from skydiving each year in the UK?
- 17) Do you know anyone who has given up the sport?
- 18) Why do accidents happen?
- 19) Why do you think some individuals complete the training and make their first jump but never want to repeat the experience?
- 20) Do you still get scared before jumping?

- 21) How do/did you overcome this fear?
- 22) How would you describe the overall experience of skydiving to someone who'd never done it before?
- 23) Is skydiving a sport for adrenalin junkies?
- 24) What are some of the stereotypical views that people have about skydivers?
How accurate do you think such views are?
- 25) Do you think skydivers are largely misunderstood by those outside the skydiving community?
- 26) Do you feel that your views and expectations about skydiving have changed in any way since you took up the sport?
- 27) Did you find it hard to talk to skydivers when you first started?
- 28) Do you socialise with other skydivers? On a regular basis?
- 29) Has skydiving increased your overall confidence?
- 30) Do you think skydiving has changed your life?
- 31) Why do you think that an increasing amount of people are attracted to extreme sports like skydiving?

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