# SRO

# Edgework, Uncertainty, and Social Character

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## Abstract

This article proposes a novel conceptual understanding of 'edgework' – a term denoting the voluntary embrace of risk – by drawing on the long-standing sociological tradition of character studies. In doing so, it addresses the paradox that while first-generation research into high-risk leisure suggested that these activities provided identity-affirming *escapes* from bureaucratised capitalism, second-generation writings argued that edgework exists in *harmony* with the norms of 'risk societies', raising questions about its continuing appeal. Developing a new analytical perspective with which to assess these views, we argue that the former studies should be understood in the context of *challenges* to 'other-directed' characterological forms prominent within the post-War era, while the latter signal the embodiment of edgework within emergent 'opportunity-directed' modalities of social character. This interpretation explains the enduring attractions of edgework alongside its changed social role, and also signals its utility as a prism through which to observe broader characterological changes.

## Introduction

Living in an era marked by the development of 'risk societies' (Beck, 1992), the issue of how proliferating hazards, dangers, and uncertainties shape people's identities and capacities for agency has become a major sociological concern (Archer, 2012; Hart, 2017). Within this context, however, the decision by individuals to *voluntarily* embrace *unnecessary* risk remains something of an enigma, as evidenced by the *volte face*

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separating first- and second-generation research into 'edgework'. Concerned with the social significance and personal meanings associated with individuals choosing to pursue hazardous activities, early research looked back to the era of rationalised capitalism. Initiated by Lyng's (1990) ground-breaking account of edgework – a term coined by the journalist Hunter S. Thompson – this writing addressed the growing popularity in the post-War era of high-risk leisure pursuits, including parachuting, rock climbing, and BASE jumping, in which failure to negotiate the 'edge' each involved would result in 'death or debilitating injury' (Lyng, 1990; Lyng and Snow, 1986: 21). From this perspective, the skills and experiences involved in negotiating such risks appealed because of their capacity to provide identity-affirming *breaks* from bureaucratic corporate organisations and interactional conformity.

This account of edgework stimulated a range of additional studies into the subject. These studies went beyond the privileged forms of leisure pursued by certain middle-class males within what Spracklen (2013: 104) refers to as 'safe white spaces', and widened their focus to encompass deviance and more diverse forms of transgression (see Hart, 2017; Lois, 2001, 2005; Meredith et al., 2016). Yet its assumptions were in turn challenged by a second generation of writings that identified the emergence of risk societies as essential to understanding edgework.[1] Against this transformed background, edgework presented analysts with a paradox, appearing to many no longer as an *escape* from normativity, but as *resonating* with and possessing *value* within institutions that eschewed traditional modes of bureaucracy in engaging with accelerated change, danger, and uncertainty. Smith's (2005) account of how the dispositions central to white water kayaking mirrored those of stock market trading, for example, exemplifies how edgework can be seen to converge with the demands of certain key contemporary institutions (Bunn, 2017; Cronin et al., 2014; Zwick, 2006).

This convergence between the macro-contexts of risk societies and the individual embrace of danger was suggestive. Nevertheless, it raised the issue of why edgework continues to be rewarding for many given that this form of activity now *aligns with* rather than offering a *contrast to* societal norms; a circumstance that prompted increased concern with both the ontological nature of this phenomenon, and the problem of how this convergence relates to individual agency (Lyng, 2012, 2014). Focusing on this paradox, this article argues that a comprehensive explanation of edgework should supplement consideration of macro-level social structures and micro-level personal experiences with the meso-dimension of *social character*. Building on Lyng's (2014) introduction of this issue, we argue that the post-War sociological concern with shifting forms of social character can be reinterpreted as providing the basis for a novel, historically informed perspective from which to analyse the changing connotations of edgework by suggesting that its appeal as either an escape from, or as resonating with, broader macro-level contexts depends on the *characterological forms* of those engaged in such activities. In this context, while the earlier embrace of edgework can be seen anew as meaningful in relation to what Riesman (1969 [1950]) called the *other-directed* identities prominent within the post-War era, the continued popularity, meaning, and qualities of such activity needs to be assessed in relation to the rise of *opportunity-directed* forms of social character (Shilling and Mellor, 2020). These two contrasting characterological forms are central to our account, enabling us to explain how the enduring attraction of edgework has

developed from being a valued 'escape attempt' from bureaucratised capitalism and interactional conformity, to also becoming a culturally normative model for engaging creatively with hazards and uncertainty within risk societies.

## The importance of social character to edgework

The first-generation of edgework studies contextualised voluntary risk taking within the macro-level constraints of bureaucratised capitalism and the pressures confronting individuals charged with maintaining socially normative identities. Developing his account within this context, Lyng (1990) drew on the writings of Marx and Mead. In relation to Marx (1975 [1844]), Lyng (1990) observed that the personal significance of edgework – characterised by intense experiences and often conducted amid like-minded others – contrasted radically with routinised waged work in which individuals felt estranged from production, other workers, and themselves. If the alienating conditions of labour enhanced edgework's attractions, so too did stifling experiences of over-socialisation. Drawing this time on Mead (1962 [1934]: 138), Lyng (1990) argued that when the 'generalized other' becomes too pervasive in terms of the social 'Me' through which individuals view themselves, staleness dominates. Here, the 'I' as the spontaneous reaction of the self 'to its socialized selfhood' allows individuals to utilise a creative energy and experience part of their being untouched by socialisation (Mead, 1962 [1934]: 175, 202, 239). For Lyng (1990, 2005a), this 'I' is brought forth in edgework.

It is not simply Marx and Mead who illuminated why edgework can be construed as exciting and authentic amid bureaucratised life. In later writings, Lyng (2005b: 21–26) revisits Weber (1991 [1904–1905]), whose depiction of value-relativism within modernity helps explain the appeal of activities promising 'transcendent possibilities for the disenchanted'. These attractions of edgework can be clarified further if viewed as ameliorating what Simmel (1990 [1907]) identified as the blasé qualities promoted by the metropolis and money economy, and what Elias's (2000 [1939]) account of civilising processes held to be the increasingly safe but relatively boring milieu of modernity. The rise of exciting leisure pursuits here relates to the human need for mimesis and the 'controlled-decontrolling' of emotions excluded from the demands of bureaucracy and impression management (Elias and Dunning, 1986).

It is Weber's concern with emerging *personality structures* and rational capitalism, however, that alerts us to the fact that, rather than focusing exclusively on macro-level contexts or micro experiences of individuals, *social character* constitutes a significant meso-level form through which to assess edgework. Lyng's (2005b: 30) alertness to this is signalled by his use of Campbell's (1987) contrast between capitalism's ascetic character structure and an emergent, emotionally charged 'romantic ethic', and his view of edgework as an expression of the latter and thus a form of resistance to rationalised capitalism. So too is it by his reassessment of Goffman's (1967) dramaturgical approach towards the individual's interactionally constructed character. Goffman's (1967) conception of character-forming 'action' is here placed in 'a general class of risky pursuits in which participants actively embrace and skilfully manage uncertainty', albeit in a manner tied to the 'rules and routines' that constitute society's moral order (Burns, 1992: 129–130; Lyng, 2014: 445, 447).

This introduction to social character provides the starting point for our own account of edgework, but there are serious limitations to both Weber's and Goffman's analyses of how people's socially structured qualities shape their responses to culture and society. Weber (1991 [1919]) recognised the time-limited social role of Puritan asceticism, yet he outlined no more than the general ethical principles required by those who had later to cope with a world bereft of certainties. Goffman's (1967) conception of character-forming action, in contrast, was located within a particular historical context and neglected the theoretical resources necessary for a broad-ranging diachronic account of edgework's changing significance. Seeking a more comprehensive basis for assessing edgework's changing characterological features, we develop our analysis by drawing on and developing the long-standing sociological tradition of 'character studies' ignored by analysts in this area.

Implicit within classical writings on the relationship between personal coherence and social (dis)integration (Levine, 1995), the term 'social character' was developed during the 1920s and 1930s by the Frankfurt School social psychologist Erich Fromm (2002 [1955]: 76–77) to refer to those qualities of personality, shaped by social structure, 'shared by most members of' a society, class or group rather than those elements of identity that 'separated individuals'. Social character does not, therefore, submerge the entirety of an individual's personal identity, but co-exists with other elements that may or may not complement these normative qualities. Change is thus always possible, with Fromm (1960 [1942]: 182–185, 244; 2002 [1955] 79) drawing on Spinoza to argue that life can supersede any characterological form, and also recognising that individuals can develop counter-cultural qualities in response to institutional developments that damage their status. Fromm's writings were significant in shaping sociological investigations into social character within the family (Mead, 1942), organisations (Whyte, 1956), consumerism (Marcuse, 1964), the military (Cunliffe, 1968), and continue to inform more recent writings (Mennel, 2007; Sennett, 1998), but it is the most influential analysis in the tradition – Riesman's (1969 [1950]) evaluation of post-industrial capitalism – that provides an invaluable perspective on edgework.

According to Riesman (1969 [1950]: xxxiii, 21), the large-scale post-War reorganisation of working, social, and educational life in and beyond America stimulated the emergence of 'other-directed' social character. This was suited to an increasingly bureaucratised environment in which increased value-diversification, immigration, and secularisation meant that mutual adjustment and gaining the approval of others became more important to success than the 'inner-directed' instrumentally rational type typical of early 20th-century capitalism (see also Fromm, 1997; Mills, 1951). Riesman (1969 [1950]) did not argue that instrumental outcomes were disregarded in these new circumstances, but he highlighted how group-based processes involving consensus and responding positively to the views and emotions of others were prioritised as means of operating in and outside the post-War corporate workplace (Van Vree, 2011). While other-directed qualities were shared most commonly among the middle-classes, their normative significance permeated society more generally.

This other-directed concern with adjustment was conducive to social success, but it came at a cost. First, anticipating Hochshild's (1983) concern with the alienating effects of 'surface-acting' and 'deep-acting', Riesman (1969 [1950]) suggested individuals

could feel trapped in a cage of emotional conformity. Second, other-directedness included a proneness to debilitating shame if an individual's 'approval rating' declined (shame being *the* other-directed emotion given that it involves judging oneself from the perspective of others; Scheff, 1988: 398). Third, other-directed characters were vulnerable to anomic experiences of not possessing a core to their identity. Fourth, and most immediately relevant to edgework, it was difficult for these individuals to enjoy genuine 'down time' because of their tendency to compare themselves with others (Riesman, 1969 [1950]: 14, 126, 294).

In this context, Riesman (1969 [1950]: 257) argued that those best equipped to cope with these other-directed costs are relatively 'autonomous' types able to retain some creative independence from the stultifying expectations of consensus and adjustment (Svendsen, 2013). What is needed to retain distance from these expectations, Riesman (1969 [1950]) continues, is the capacity to undertake 'adventurous' breaks from normality that Simmel (1971: 193) argues prevents individuals from suffering a weakening 'impulse' towards the social world (Misztal, 2016). Lifting the individual above routines unable to nurture authentic senses of self, edgework here becomes a bulwark against the 'nightmare of repetition' (Cohen and Taylor, 1992 [1976]).

Viewed from Riesman's account, it is neither purely the structures of corporate capital, nor the peculiar motivations of individuals, that enable edgework to facilitate self-actualisation. Instead, voluntary risk-based activities can bracket the reference points of space and time associated with normality precisely because they are experienced *from the perspective of* the other-directed characterological form. In these circumstances, the sensory immediacy associated with edgework deconstructs the disciplined body required for other-directedness, enabling individuals involved in skydiving or rock climbing, for instance, to explore the forces, flows, and singularities associated with what the body can do (Lyng, 1990, 2005b: 66). Thus, while the macro- and micro-levels of society and individual experience highlighted by edgework analyses are important, *a comprehensive account of voluntary risk taking requires a concern with how these factors relate to changing forms of social character.*

## Edgework and other-directedness

Having outlined the broad parameters of our perspective on edgework, it is important to explain in more detail how the development of this research can be illuminated by considering social character. As we suggested, first-generation edgework research focused on the voluntary pursuit and the meanings of risk within activities that provided other-directed characters with a break from a bureaucratised social system. The proliferation of work that followed Lyng's early writings, as well as some of that which came later, existed largely within this paradigm, and a brief overview of these developments enables us to understand how the edges involved and the locations in which this phenomenon occurred related to, but also sometimes *pointed beyond*, prevailing norms of other-directedness. This is evident in Bunn's (2017) threefold classification of edgework research involving: the transcendence of mundane activities/social roles through leisure; the transgression of normative pursuits and behaviour through illegality and deviance; and the occasional merging of these skills and experiences within dangerous paid/voluntary

work. While those classifications concerned with transcendence and transgression are directly relevant to the relationship between edgework and other-direction, the final strand of edgework research identified by Bunn (2017) raises issues relevant to the second-generation studies concerned with risk society and the emergence of a *distinctive form of social character*.

Bunn's (2017) first type of edgework research mirrored closely Lyng's (1990) initial emphasis on voluntary pursuits providing escape from routine. Evident in studies of motorcyclists, kayakers, bungee jumpers, and ultimate fighters (e.g. Albert, 2004; Kidder, 2006; Laurendeau, 2006; Lyng et al., 2009), this strand of investigation highlighted the meanings and 'edges' encountered in these activities. Reflecting on their consequentiality, it suggested that the growing popularity of packaged 'adventure experiences' had to maintain elements of genuine danger if they were to succeed in creating a 'counter-rhythm' to the bureaucratised elements of daily existence (Borden, 2001: 241; Holyfield, Jonas, and Zajicek, 2005: 170). Seen from the framework of social character studies, the integrity of these edges was significant not only because of their intrinsic links with experience, but also because Riesman's other-directeds found it difficult to enjoy leisure as an intrinsic good. Given their propensity to view themselves from the perspective of others, organised edgework could only succeed by maintaining the capacity to take these individuals *beyond* their daily frames of reference (Riesman, 1969 [1950]: 14). This is illustrated by Shilling and Bunsell's (2009) study of the 'edges' involved in female body-building; edges which transgressed other-directed norms of feminine appearance and enabled participants to revitalise their personal identities through a life-world considered deviant (Baghurst et al., 2014).

The second strand of this edgework research takes as its reference point Katz's (1988) phenomenological study of the sensual, transgressive appeal of criminal acts (see also Lofland, 1969). As Lyng's (2004) own analysis of crime and edgework suggested, the transgressive characteristics of illegal activities provide danger and immediacy paralleling the sensual dimensions of high-risk leisure pursuits, while this approach has been supplemented by studies focused on a range of activities considered deviant if not always unlawful (Ferrell, 2002, 2005). Crossing lines of normativity and legality, those immersed in criminal acts and pursuits considered beyond the boundaries of acceptable behaviour often experienced adrenaline, freedom, and a sense of authenticity (Lyng, 2004: 362). Viewing these activities from the perspective of character studies, however, imparts an added dimension to their meaning, highlighting how *radically opposed* they are to other forms of edgework. While edgework leisure activities provide a *temporary* escape from a characterological norm, criminality constitutes a *rejection* of other-directed concerns, standards, and behaviours, reinforcing Riesman's (1969 [1950]) argument that the distribution of other-directed qualities is widespread but not universal.

The third strand of studies identified by Bunn (2017) departs from leisure and crime by focusing on legitimate high-risk occupations and voluntary work. In doing so, it raises issues that point beyond the first-generation of edgework research. Policing, firefighting, health workers (especially during crises including COVID-19), and the military, together with voluntary professional search and rescue groups, are just a sample of those dealing with the edge separating life from death (Hockey, 2009; Kidder, 2006; Lois, 2005). As Lois (2005) suggests, the challenges for individuals whose legitimate work involves

routine yet uncertain forms of edgework are very different from those who *choose* to embrace particular types during leisure or crime. Instead of enjoying 'adrenaline rushes' that provide identity-affirming *breaks* from, or *rejections* of, routinised roles, these individuals must manage and control potentially identity-*undermining* experiences (Lois, 2005: 130). Seeking to contain existentially the edges involved in such activity required not only careful planning, but also cognitively reappraising dangerous experiences to contain them within frameworks conducive to continuing in these roles (Lois 2005: 123–124, 135, 143; see also Allen-Collinson et al., 2018; Ward et al., 2020).

Viewed from the perspective of character studies, this strand of vocational edgework *stands apart from*, rather than existing as a temporary *escape* or wholesale *rejection* of, other-directedness. While the institutions in which it occurs are often bureaucratised, these activities inevitably confront those involved with matters of life and death which extend beyond interpersonal issues of consensus. Relatedly, while mutual adjustment is necessary for adequate preparation, relations with the public, and avoiding recklessness, these jobs are nevertheless distinct from those typified by corporate bureaucracy given their overriding concerns with skill, experience, and risk.[2]

Bunn's (2017) three strands of leisure, crime/deviance, and high-risk vocation edgework overlap (see Sheppard-Marks et al., 2020), are diverse, and highlight the richness of this field. Yet incorporating character studies into their analysis provides us with an additional perspective. Instead of categorising these activities primarily as related experiences, their significance and meaning depends from this perspective upon the actions of people who occupy fundamentally different positions in relation to other-directedness. In this respect, the reason Bunn's (2017) focus on hazardous vocations begins to take us beyond the first-generation of edgework studies is that it identifies vocations that may draw on but which also promote qualities *departing from* other-direction. This departure became evident in those writings focused on changes to the macro-level context associated with the emergence of risk societies. These changes did not render obsolete rational bureaucracies or other-directed qualities, but challenged their dominance. In doing so, they encouraged a second generation of studies into the risks, skills, and experiences associated with edgework, as well as a greater interrogation of the ontological qualities of this phenomenon, and their relationship to the institutional centres of society.

## Edgework and opportunity-directedness

Writing towards the close of the 20th century, social theorists expressed increasing agreement that industrial capitalism now operated within an overarching 'risk society' (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991; Luhmann, 1993). While traditional and early modern societies always faced dangers, risk societies were distinguished by the relationships forged between wealth creation and the *systematic* production of risks, hazards, and insecurities (Beck, 1992: 19, 21, 59). Amid these developments, it was no longer realistic to view society as dominated by rationalised bureaucracies and routinised roles (Castells, 2010). Instead, flexible approaches to accelerated change and insecurity were foregrounded at a time when risk preoccupied technical specialists and policy planners (Caplan, 2000; Giddens, 1991: 3, 4, 123). Adding to this reconceptualisation of the context in which edgework occurs, Archer (2012: 35–36) suggested that this period was also marked by a

broader pattern of *uncertainty* wherein processes of 'morphogenetic change' radicalise risk by removing sureties from institutional and intimate environments.

These diagnoses have personal implications beyond the normative need for individuals to become adept at 'risk management', and those concerned with social character linked them to the emergence of a new, *opportunity-directed* type (Shilling and Mellor, 2020) able to take advantage of those 'situational logics of opportunity' that exist within a fast-changing world (Archer, 2012: 35). Anticipated in part by Riesman (1969 [1950]: 259) recognition that future developments could erode those qualities associated with mutual adjustment, opportunity-direction encourages a *resistance to group pressures* (Archer, 2012: 168–169; Sennett, 2006: 3). This is associated with the tendency for these newly emergent opportunity-directedness to rely on their own *internal deliberations*, in the absence of stable 'generalized others', and to undertake *autonomous* action during occasions in which 'innovation' rather than socially adaptive action constitutes a positive response to capitalism's uncertainties (Archer, 2012; Deutschmann, 2011 4, 9, 42, 64). It is also important to note that these conditions presuppose that individuals cultivate the *confidence* to act creatively, and potentially alone. As Barbalet (2008: 88) argues, confidence provides 'a sense of certainty to what is essentially unknowable', facilitating an active orientation to structuring the future by identifying opportunities that can advance an individual's interests (Tuckett and Nikolic, 2017: 502).

It is possible to argue that there have always been opportunity-directed individuals across different cultures. What identifies them as emerging *character* types, however, is the growing societal demand for this approach within and beyond the financialised economy (Carlson et al., 2017; Davis, 2017; Miyazaki, 2013; Seabrooke, 2014; Tuckett and Nikolic, 2017). Opportunity-directedness also has particular significance for the meanings attached to and importance of edgework, and this can be approached through an appreciation of the costs and opportunities associated with this characterological form. In terms of its costs, the potentially debilitating effects of dealing with radical uncertainty are prominent in studies of contemporary change ranging from the powerlessness of the precariat, to the more general growth of anxiety and obsessive thinking (Hickinbottom-Brawn, 2016; Neilson, 2015; Roberts, 2017; Seabrooke, 2014). For significant numbers of people, however, the societal promotion of opportunity-directedness *enhances* their capacities for agency (Shilling and Mellor, 2020). An expanded sense of autonomy can facilitate ease with utilising the possibilities inherent within change (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 107; Sennett, 2006: 3), while opportunity-directedness has been identified as helping women in particular conceptualise futures outside the traditional gendered restrictions imposed on them by post-war norms (Ganguly-Scrase, 2003; Rodrigues and Guest, 2010; Stone, 2004).

It is against the background of these developments in social character – in which a new opportunity-directedness co-exists with and has challenged the dominance of other-directed qualities – that we now turn to the distinctive strands of research that constitute the second generation of edgework analyses. While these each recognise newly forged affinities between the macro-level institutional parameters of risk societies and the micro-level voluntary embrace of risk, *they arrive at opposed and even mutually exclusive conclusions* which serve to question whether edgework research is continuing to

make cumulative advances. Viewing these analyses from the perspective of this new characterological context, however, allows us to impart theoretical sense to their diversity.

Second-generation edgework studies are defined as such because they address the significance of this activity within the macro-context of risk societies. Like the generation of work that preceded them, however, they can be divided into three distinct strands: those focusing on the costs of morphogenetic change that continue to conceptualise edgework as an *escape* from (risk) society (albeit one that now provides experiences of certitude); those viewing edgework in *instrumental* terms as a strategy for enhancing economic/cultural capital; and those focused on the *intrinsic* motivational benefits that individuals gain from edgework as a set of experiences whose relevance has spread to the institutional centres of society. Maintaining a primary interest in the meanings of edgework, these works also display an increased concern with the shared properties of edgework activities.

The suggestion that edgework remains an *escape* from society (albeit from the uncertainties of morphogenetic change rather than the norms associated with bureaucratic rationalisation) draws upon the sociological concern that late modernity can undermine people's sense of ontological certitude (that pre-cognitive and cognitive sense of surety about oneself and one's world; Giddens, 1991: 39–40). From this perspective, the attractions of edgework now reside in its capacity to offer a counterpoint to contemporary life through experiences of *certainty* in relation to both the environment and social relationships. In terms of the former, Laurendeau's (2006) analysis of death and skydiving highlights participants' sustained focus on the *objective environmental lines* negotiated when undertaking risky manoeuvres. Relatedly, Kidder's (2006) research into bicycle couriers emphasises the grounded identity they build from an urban milieu characterised by severe but *knowable* dangers. The continued relevance of this approach towards edgework is perhaps illustrated even more starkly by Balfe's (2020) account of those who subject themselves to waterboarding as a voluntary encounter with pain and incapacity. As Lyng (2014: 449–450) argues, edgework is in these cases associated within intrinsic qualities which generate 'a sense of an objective reality uncontaminated by subjective cognition' and is experienced as more real than the flux of everyday life.

Some of these studies, as well as related investigations, also emphasise how edgework facilitates experiences of *social certitude* that counteract weakening patterns of collective identification (Lyng, 2005a: 4; Foster, 2012). Thus, the dangers surrounding skydiving or related pursuits stimulate a firm basis for *camaraderie* between those who cooperate in these leisure activities (Laurendeau, 2006). Bicycle couriers also experience a strong *esprit de corps* with their colleagues (Kidder, 2006). Cronin et al.'s (2014: 1125, 1134) explorations of the 'creeping edgework' involved in bouts of 'carnivalesque consumption' similarly highlight a feeling of certainty about collective membership that obliges individuals not to 'lose control' given that it would 'break their shared commitment to the focal activity of the group'. Lois (2005) also highlights the keen sense of objective collectivity that volunteer rescuers experience in preparing for, carrying out, and recovering from hazardous work.

These studies of edgework as escape share a sense that the embrace of risk facilitates a reassertion of shared boundaries and anchorage points for identity, yet such accounts

remain incomplete without an explication of those characterological forms on which they are implicitly predicated. Experiences of environmental and social certitude may well provide identity-affirming escapes from risk society, but *only for those who require such shared reference points*. This is likely to be most important to those whose characters are concerned centrally with stability, mutual adjustment, group approval, and consensus. Such experiences are likely to be less important, however, to opportunity-directed types more relaxed about uncertainty because they equate it with creative potentialities and who are less reliant on the need for a strong sense of stable identity-affirming social relationships. Conceptions of edgework as an escape into ontological security may remain valid, but their relevance is character specific and acknowledging this is important.

The second strand of second-generation studies departs from this concern with certitude in focusing on how the skills and experiences central to edgework now possess *instrumental* value given that they resonate with prevailing institutional norms. Rather than constituting an *escape* from risk society, edgework here becomes an *adaptation* to the normalisation of chronic change and the hazardous nature of life. Simon (2005: 206, 199) exemplifies this position in arguing that the attempt to survive and prosper in a financialised economy bereft of those welfare arrangements, permanent jobs, and routine expectations common during the post-War era increasingly requires individuals to engage in edgework as a form of *general* social action. Contemporary circumstances have thus blurred the boundaries separating edgework from what he refers to as 'centre work' (Simon, 2005: 205). The positive embrace of actions typified by risk and danger is here portrayed as an increasingly important part of effective behaviour in a growing number of social fields including that of political activism and warfare (Cabaniss and Shay, 2020; Singer, 2009).

Relatedly, Bunn (2017) draws on Bourdieu (1978) in depicting edgework as a strategy for distinction in the current era. From this perspective, involvement in high-risk leisure activities, such as climbing and windsurfing, is not only a marker of status, requiring discretionary income, free time, and also potentially the 'appropriate' racial background (Spracklen, 2013), but also a means of cultivating skills and cultural capital valued in elite sectors of risk societies. This argument that leisured edgework benefits career progression is reinforced by Simon's (2005) historical analysis of how risk taking in mountaineering was perceived as a sign of virtuosity within certain professions in Victorian Britain (p. 221). Here, the attractiveness of leisured edgework is analysed as resting on the capacity of its intrinsic properties to nurture 'risk management skills and a positive predisposition towards risk taking' valued instrumentally within core sectors of the 'risk economy' (Lyng, 2012: 409; Wexler, 2010; Zwick, 2006). While of restricted relevance occupationally in Victorian times, these predispositions have far wider relevance in the current era of morphogenetic change.

These instrumental accounts sensitise us to the contemporary value of edgework: its general societal importance has been enhanced by skills and experiences of risk management becoming central within society. Yet in focusing on the macro-contexts of risk societies, and deriving conclusions from these about the means-ends value and intrinsic qualities of edgework, these writings tend to ignore how a focus on social character can inform our understanding of those *able* and *willing* to embrace edgework instrumentally.

*Opportunity*-directed types are, in this respect, far more likely to be motivated to exploit the advantages of those 'transferrable' skills, being predisposed to trace the useful but sometimes obscure links between edgework and specific social openings, while *other*-directed characterological individuals are likely to be more attracted to the possibilities of edgework as an interpersonal status enhancing activity (see Riesman 1969 [1950]: 16, 25, 42, 111).

The third strand of this generation of edgework studies focuses on the supposedly intrinsic motivational benefits of engaging in such activities, and it is here that it is most possible to glimpse the importance of individuals' characterological qualities. Thus, Lyng (2014: 455) links the inherent satisfactions offered by edgework within risk societies to an increasingly far-reaching *hermeneutic* reflexivity involving a radically experiential form of self-determination, while this is further emphasised by Holland-Smith and Olivier's (2013) study of Scottish adventure climbers. Criticising psychological analyses that interpret their edgework as a sensation-seeking *escape* from routine, these climbers emphasised the enjoyment that comes from exercising choice, internal deliberation, personal autonomy, and personal responsibility in situations of objective uncertainty (Holland-Smith and Olivier, 2013: 1097–1099).

The assertions of these adventure climbers resonate with studies of extreme sports, which emphasise the intrinsic satisfactions that opportunity-directed types obtain from testing and developing their capacities of control, resourcefulness, adaptability, self-assertiveness, and independence within situations of uncertainty (Brymer, 2010). These satisfactions also resonate with literature on the ubiquity of 'extreme' practices across contemporary societies exemplified by Hewlett and Luce's (2006) study of the growing phenomenon of 'extreme jobs' (all-consuming, unpredictable, pressured, but highly rewarded). Here, the seductively dangerous, adrenaline-fuelled characteristics of extreme sports now mirror those of the most successful and most sought-after echelons of professional life. Indeed, one of Hewlett and Luce's (2006: 53) respondents explicitly links the opportunities for experiential intensity in investment banking with her love of 'skydiving, snowboarding, [and] bungee jumping'. Earning high salaries, but rating money low as a priority, such individuals profess love for what they do, and acknowledge that the high levels of pressure they endure are *self-imposed*. Indeed, while many companies ostensibly encourage health, safety, and work/life 'balance', others are 'afraid of creating a work atmosphere unattractive to 'A players' which could push them towards 'firms more likely to appreciate their outsize contributions' (Hewlett and Luce, 2006: 59).

This focus on the 'intrinsic' benefits of edgework is, therefore, more accurately viewed as highlighting those who seize opportunities for a creative, experientially rewarding engagement with the challenges, risks, and uncertainties of contemporary life, and for whom extreme uncertainty becomes 'a site where human agency reasserts itself' (Granter et al., 2015: 447; Valentine et al., 2012: 1015). Thus, the attractiveness of edgework to opportunity-directed types does not endure *despite* its harmony with broader institutional norms but *because* of it. In a macro-level context where the assertion of agency and autonomy *in the face of* uncertainty becomes key to human thriving, grasping these opportunities can for this characterological form become more attractive than ever. Far from being the marginal, counter-cultural activity first addressed by Lyng (1990), shifts in dominant forms of social character have aligned with changes in the macro-level societal context to make edgework mainstream.[3] This may be viewed positively,

signalling enhanced human adaptability to the environment, but is not necessarily liberal in its social or political consequences. While Cabaniss and Shay's (2020) study of youth activism as edgework focuses on the radical potential of embracing risk and danger, Moffit's (2016) and Hochschild's (2016, 2018) analyses of political populism highlight how the exploitation of uncertainty amid conditions of insecurity can have explosively divisive social effects.

## Conclusion

In the last few decades, edgework has been associated with a diverse range of meanings and activities, as analysts confronted the paradox that what used to provide episodes of escape and self-realisation now possesses affinity with the skills required in risk societies. Cutting across these first- and second-generation studies, we have suggested that a comprehensive analysis of edgework requires attending to those meso-level characterological forms which mediate the structural context in which these activities occur and the individual experiences with which they are associated. In this context, we argued that earlier analyses of edgework as experiential forms of escape signalled its challenge to the 'other-directed' social character prominent within routinised capitalism. In contrast, second-generation diagnoses of this activity as possessing qualities that manifest 'an especially pure expression of the central institutional and cultural imperatives of the emerging social order' cannot be understood adequately without also taking account of the rise of 'opportunity-directed' individuals (Lyng, 2005a: 5, 10; Shilling and Mellor, 2020).

Utilising this focus on social character, we have been able to account for why edgework not only remains attractive to individuals – albeit for different reasons depending on the range and balance of other-directed or opportunity-directed qualities with which they are associated – but becomes even *more so* for many, despite no longer signalling an escape from burdensome collective expectations and roles. Developing this argument, we have not sought to deny the plural meanings that edgework can have, depending on the specificities of what is involved, and the particular motivations of those who embrace these activities. Numerous empirical studies, as well as Lyng's own contrasting interpretations, have demonstrated conclusively that individual circumstances vary and that people engage in edgework as a result of all sorts of motivations.

Looking to the future, moreover, both the meanings and experiences associated with edgework and social character may well develop further. The constraints placed on people by successive 'lockdowns' during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, and the disorienting effects of what Rosa (2013, 2019) – radicalising Archer's (2012) account of morphogenesis – has identified as an ongoing intensification of 'social acceleration', are both likely to be relevant here. These multi-layered developments shape the macro-contexts in which edgework and social character exist, with the reduction in physically co-presence occasioned by the former (Collins, 2020), and the sense of personal detachment associated with the latter (Rosa, 2019), potentially shaping those qualities shared by people keen to seek out once again the potential for activities that are experienced as providing 'authenticity' and 'resonance' with themselves and the world in which they live (Rosa, 2019: 27–30; see also Hsu and Elliott, 2015).

Yet this acknowledgement of potential change does not make it sound analytically to assess edgework by making assumptions about individuals that derive from the

macro-context in which they engage in these activities. In contrast, what we have proposed in this article is that social character matters as an irreducible meso-level mediator: high-risk activities experienced as escape from routine for other-directed types in heavily routinised social orders come to mean something very different within the transformed characterological environment indicated by the emergence of opportunity-directed qualities. Whatever they may come to mean in the future is dependent upon not only the social and material environment in which they occur, or on the vagaries of diverse individuals, but will also be shaped by the shared qualities of social character that affect their meaning and significance.

## Funding

## Notes

1.  Our grouping of edgework research into first- and second-generation studies is designed to signify an epistemological as much as a temporal distinction. Lyng's early work launched the first generation, which is defined here by its concern with edgework as an escape from an 'over' rationalised and socialised environment. These studies remain significant, and analyses continue to be conducted from within this paradigm, but alongside them is a continuing stream of second-generation studies distinguished by their identification of edgework as significant within risk societies in which hazards and uncertainties have moved to the institutional centres, rather than the voluntaristic and leisured peripheries, of life.
2.  The capacity of certain vocations to encompass but reach beyond other-directedness was made evident in Parsons' (1950) classic account of the 'sick-role'. Normative other-directed social relations were key, but dealing with the 'ultimate' problems caused dying and death imparted a 'personal strain' and a more general existential quality to this work that went transcended concerns of consensus and bureaucracy (Parsons, 1978: 278–285).
3.  Lyng's account recognises that people can be institutionally `pushed' and `pulled' to edgework both as a route to `transcendent reality' in an otherwise disenchanted social milieu (Lyng, 2005b: 24), and as `an especially pure expression of the central institutional and cultural imperatives of the emerging social order' (Lyng, 2005a: 5, 10). While Lyng's explanation of these apparently contradictory ways of thinking about edgework focuses on two structural dimensions of the same social order, however, ours emphasises how the experiences of voluntary risk taking are themselves shaped through their transactions with the contrasting socially shaped qualities of individuals (for more on transactional experience, see Shilling, 2021). Thus, while *other-directed* edgework in the current era may promote the experience of a `stable' external reality, conducive to the consolidation of ontological *security*, opportunity-directed types revel in the experiential excitement that emerges from exercising their own skills amidst circumstances of *uncertainty*.

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