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Action and edgework: Risk taking and reflexivity in late modernity

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Abstract
Although the meaning and usefulness of Erving Goffman's work are still being debated today, few would doubt the importance of his contributions to the sociological study of the self, emotions, deviance, and social interaction. Less well known to most contemporary sociologists is his effort to provide a sociological account of voluntary risk taking—participation in gambling, high-risk sports, dangerous occupations, certain forms of criminal behavior, and the like—activities he classified as 'action'. While Goffman's study of action anticipated the expansion of volitional risk taking in Western societies in recent decades, most contemporary research on this trend has been guided by a different concept—the notion of 'edgework'. Contrasting the action and edgework approaches along three key parameters—fateful action versus corporeal edges, embodied semiotics versus embodied experience, and dramaturgical reflexivity versus hermeneutic reflexivity—reveals how the action and edgework concepts capture conflicting motivations for voluntary risk taking. Finally, this article considers how Goffman's action framework can be reoriented to contemporary social conditions and integrated with the edgework perspective to yield a multidimensional theory of risk agency in late modern society.

Keywords
action, edgework, embodiment, reflexivity, voluntary risk taking

As one of the most prolific and discerning social theorists of the twentieth century, Erving Goffman is a celebrated figure within the social and communication sciences and

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his work has inspired important lines of research in a variety of fields. Although Goffman's status as a keen observer of contemporary social life is widely recognized, some of his most insightful sociological studies have not received the same amount of attention as other parts of his corpus. In addition to his key works on the interaction order (1967a, 1983), self and dramaturgy (1959), deviance (1961, 1963), and frame analysis (1974), Goffman wrote a number of essays on topics outside of these areas focusing on problems of significant personal interest to him. This article addresses one of these topics—the attractions of risk-taking and the management of uncertainty in modern society.

In a lengthy essay entitled 'Where the Action Is' (1967b), Goffman employed the term 'action' to refer to forms of risk taking that seem to possess an appealing character to the individuals who take up these activities. As he often did in his work, Goffman moved beyond the seemingly peculiar nature of these forms of behavior to reveal how they embody some of the most important life challenges confronted by every member of modern society. However, despite the favorable initial reception given to this insightful and beautifully written essay, the action concept was largely ignored by social scientists in the decades following its introduction into the sociological literature. While a few researchers have engaged with Goffman's ideas on risk (Katz, 1988; Wacquant, 2004; Desmond, 2007; Sallaz, 2009), sustained sociological attention to voluntary risk taking did not occur until the 1990s with the introduction of a different concept—the notion of 'edgework' (Lyng, 1990).

Since its initial introduction, the edgework idea has been employed in research that covers a broad range of social scientific disciplines and sub-disciplines. The expanding use of the edgework concept has been fueled by distinctive changes in recent decades, including the rapid growth of new forms of voluntary risk taking behavior, increasing rates of participation in these activities, and the extensive attention of the commercial media to high risk sports and occupations. If Goffman was intrigued by the media fascination with 'action' in the 1960s, he would have been astonished to see how prevalent and influential voluntary risk taking has become in the quarter century since his death.

The concepts of action and edgework possess different theoretical and empirical anchorages (see below), but both theories are devoted to the common analytical goal: explaining why individuals engage in risky behavior when there is no obvious reward for doing so. Thus, the action and edgework concepts are products of a common theoretical agenda, and while they may appear to be competing concepts, I will argue that it is more useful to treat these two ideas as complementary analytical constructs for understanding the attractions of voluntary risk taking. This view is influenced by the current state of research on risk and risk taking, which is moving beyond early tendencies to conceptualize risk in universalistic terms to a growing recognition of the complexities and contextual specificities of risk. A distinctively sociological approach to identifying the motive forces involved in voluntary risk taking—that is, an analysis that conceives of individual motivations in relation to historically-specific structural forces impinging on social actors—will require an engagement with both the action and edgework approaches. The point of departure for this study is the understanding that risk and risk taking are multifaceted phenomena that are perceived, experienced, normatively assessed, and managed in highly variable ways. If we can acknowledge this point, then the need for a multiperspectival analysis of voluntary risk taking becomes evident.

In proposing to use multiple perspectives in analyzing voluntary risk taking, I am aware of the danger that such a strategy poses for producing an analysis plagued by basic logical contradictions. To guard against this possibility, it is important to select perspectives that share some important theoretical themes. While a full-blown synthesis of distinct perspectives may not be possible or desirable, organizing a multiperspectival study around common conceptual themes serves to enhance the logical coherence of the analysis. In the present case, the core theoretical notion linking the action and edgework perspectives and other elements of the analysis is the idea of 'reflexivity'. As I will demonstrate, the action and edgework approaches provide different but potentially complementary conceptions of the relationship between risk and reflexivity, which, taken together, also align well with other sociological perspectives that view reflexivity as a key feature of the late modern social order. This intertwining of ideas about action, edgework, risk, and reflexivity will reveal how risk and risk taking are both sources of and responses to a social universe that has become increasingly dominated by reflexive social practices.[1]

Accordingly, I begin with a brief exegesis of Goffman's theory of action, since this part of his scholarship is not well known to most sociologists. Next, I contrast the action and edgework perspectives. This will not only reveal their theoretical power as distinct explanations of voluntary risk taking, but also the potential that resides in integrating the two perspectives to address important problems relating to institutional agency in contemporary society. Finally, I orient the action and edgework perspectives to contemporary expressions of self and structural reflexivity in order to achieve a better logical integration of the two frameworks and demonstrate the significance of voluntary risk taking to the social conditions of late modernity.

The concept of action

When Goffman began his study of voluntary risk taking in the 1960s, he was fascinated by the prevalence of the term 'action' in the U.S. commercial media and popular literature (1967b: 149). His goal in employing the term for analytical purposes was to locate where action can be found and explain 'why action seems to have a peculiar appeal' (p. 237). It is clear from his initial discussion of chance-taking behavior that action belongs to a general class of risky pursuits in which participants actively embrace and skillfully manage uncertainty. Activities such as gaming and gambling, chance-taking in criminal activities, physically dangerous occupations, 'hustling' enterprises, professional soldiering and police work, and high risk sports involve the management of uncertainty in terms of either calculated probabilities (as in many gambling endeavors) or incalculable outcomes (such as the potential success or failure of street muggings). What is common to all of these risk-taking pursuits is that they are both *problematic* and *consequential*.

They are problematic in the obvious sense that they involve uncertain outcomes, and consequential in that the outcomes of chance taking typically resonate well beyond the bounds of the occasion in which it occurs, affecting the later life of risk taker (pp. 159–60). Conceptualizing risk activities as both problematic and consequential (the term 'fatefulness' refers to the combination of these two qualities) is critical to understanding their significance within the context of modern social life. For instance, Goffman

distinguishes between 'time off' ('killing time' in uncommitted moments) and 'time on' (participation in the formal division of labor) to illustrate the rarity of activities in contemporary society that are both problematic and consequential. Individuals engaged in 'time off' confront problematic choices, but their decisions about how to kill time are inconsequential. Alternatively, 'time on' devoted to work or fulfilling other organizational obligations involves activities that are highly consequential, but not problematic. In contrast to 'time on' and 'time off' activities, Goffman points to some 'extraordinary niches' in social life where human activities are both problematic and consequential—*fateful* in the way that he defines this term. These activities, referred to as 'practical gambles', include dangerous occupations, hustling jobs, criminal activities, police work, and soldiering (pp. 172–4).

'Action' also involves problematic and consequential outcomes, but differs from practical gambles and other risk activities because it is 'undertaken for what is felt to be [its] own sake' (p. 185). Thus, what distinguishes action from other fateful endeavors is the fact that one's risk taking is entirely voluntary—one 'knowingly takes consequential chances perceived as avoidable' (p. 194). Goffman's illustrations of action activities highlight the voluntary nature of these pursuits: most participants in high-risk sports, dangerous drug use, high-stakes casino gambling, risky sexual behavior, or recreational street fighting are not economically compelled to pursue these activities.

In emphasizing the voluntary nature of action, Goffman seems to suggest that action offers intrinsic rewards that explain people's attraction to these pursuits. Later in the analysis, however, Goffman reveals that he has chosen his words carefully in defining this aspect of action: Action is undertaken for *what is felt* to be its own sake—that is, action-seekers may *feel* a deep attraction to the action experience, but this feeling hides the true significance of action to participants and observers alike. Noting that 'statements (including mine) that action is an end in itself must be understood as locutions' (p. 238), he identifies the true motivations for engaging in action, unknown even to risk takers themselves.

So what is *really* behind the pursuit of action? Goffman tells us that action ultimately involves the acquisition and maintenance of 'character'. In Goffman's usage, the term 'character' refers to a range of personal qualities displayed in fateful endeavors, the most obvious of which is the demonstration of courage—the capacity to proceed with a course of action even when one is fully aware of the dangers involved. But the expression of courage is usually specific to the action undertaken, as when gamblers gracefully submit to the rules of a game even when they have much to lose (the quality of 'gamble') or when boxers demonstrate 'gameness' or 'heart' by giving their all to the fight in the face of almost certain defeat. Goffman's nuanced and informed understanding of character allows him to identify more subtle personal traits exhibited in fateful situations, which he captures with terms like 'integrity', 'gallantry', and 'composure'.

What is most important in Goffman's analysis of character is its significance for explaining why individuals engage in dangerous action. Challenging the commonsense view of voluntary risk taking as motivated by individual-level factors—impulsiveness, irrationality, idiosyncratic personality characteristics, etc.—Goffman explains the motives for risk taking in distinctively sociological terms. The pursuit of action is when individuals demonstrate most clearly 'what they are made of' (p. 237): 'It is during moments of action that the individual has the risk and opportunity of displaying to

himself and sometimes to others his style of conduct when the chips are down.' The focus here on (re)creation of the self in character displays is more typical of Goffman's approach as it is known to most sociologists. Following this initial point, however, he moves to another level of analysis to explain the social value of character (and the action activities in which it is displayed):

> Social organization everywhere has the problem of morale and continuity. Individuals must come to all their little situations with some enthusiasm and concern, for it is largely through such moments that social life occurs, and if a fresh effort were not put into each of them, society would surely suffer . . . [I]f society is to persist, the same pattern must be sustained from one actual social occasion to the next. Here the need is for rules and conventionality . . . Possibilities regarding character encourage us to renew our efforts at every moment of society's activity we approach, especially its social ones; and it is precisely through these renewals that the old routines can be sustained. We are allowed to think there is something to be won in the moments we face so that society can face moments and defeat them. (pp. 238–9)

Thus, action offers an opportunity to reward strong character, i.e. personal traits that ensure people's willingness to 'renew [their] efforts at every moment of society's activity'. In short, action-seekers model the qualities that all societal members must exhibit to some degree if the existing social order is to persist.

By claiming that action is ultimately tied to the 'persistence' of society, on the one hand, and the need to maintain 'rules and conventionality', on the other, Goffman appears to employ a functionalist logic to explain the peculiar appeal of action. His efforts to connect micro-level social interaction with macro-level social structure throughout his career and his persistent references to the fore-runners of modern functionalism (especially Spencer and Durkheim) have been well established in Goffmanian scholarship (Winkin, 1988; Burns, 1992; Fine and Manning, 2003). However, one also finds a subtle ambiguity in Goffman's macro-level analysis that invites different readings of his analysis of action.

Among the interpreters of Goffman's scholarship, Tom Burns (1992) has captured most succinctly the contradiction in Goffman's use of functionalist logic. Employing the distinction between 'moral' and 'ethical' qualities, Burns (1992: 129–30) highlights Goffman's focus in some places on action's function in upholding 'rules and routines' (i.e., maintaining the 'moral' order) and in other places encouraging 'excellence' in the pursuit of one's life tasks (i.e., maintaining the 'ethical' order). According to Burns (1992: 129), the ethical order refers to 'behavior which is highly valued in moral terms but which cannot be regarded as governed by rules. For one can never hope to excel at any activity by following rules.' Thus, while moral qualities contribute to the reproduction of specific rules, resources, and institutional routines, ethical qualities ensure the continued existence of an 'ethos' that shapes the emergent social practices of a particular type of society. However, in discussing the social functions of action, Goffman fails to distinguish between the moral and ethical dimensions:

> [I]nterspersed with those [statements] which support this notion of an ethical, as distinct from moral, order, there are others which revert to the notion of a moral universe subject

> to rule by 'society', and relegate ideas of an ethical foundation for right conduct to a 'fundamental illusion' planted in us by society in order to ensure conformity with its rules. (Burns, 1992: 129)

Thus, Goffman mixes the ethical and moral viewpoints in his analysis of action and when he emphasizes the latter, with reifying language such as *society would surely suffer* and *society faces moments [of uncertainty] and defeats them*, '[h]ypostasis . . . is carried to its extreme' (Burns, 1992: 130).

While the ambiguity in Goffman's macro-level analysis is troubling, it does reveal the potential for a new application of his action theory. The unifying factor in most of Goffman's work is his attunement to the situational contingencies that social actors confront in the unexpected twists and turns of face-to-face interaction and immediate challenges of self-performance before various audiences. Therefore, it is not *society* that suffers when actors cannot sustain their morale in dealing with the disruptions and uncertainties of their 'little situations', but rather the *individuals* themselves. What is required of actors who must manage the inherent uncertainties of face-to-face interaction and self-performance are the 'ethical' qualities of courage, gameness, and composure—key dimensions of 'character' as Goffman defines it. Four decades after the publication of Goffman's essay, one could ask if the *structural* uncertainties of contemporary social life pose similar ethical and emotional challenges for social actors, giving new significance to 'strong character' as an individual resource for the maintenance of morale and continued participation in institutional domains. Thus, Goffman's penetrating analysis of action and character may possess particular relevance to the fluidity, plurality, and reflexivity of late modern society. However, before exploring this possibility, I will contrast Goffman's framework with an alternative explanation of volitional risk taking—the theory of edgework.

The concept of edgework

For the sake of brevity, I will introduce the edgework concept and then elaborate this perspective through a series of critical contrasts between the edgework and action approaches. As a preliminary step, it should be noted that edgework conforms to Goffman's action criteria, consisting of fateful (problematic and consequential) activities undertaken for what is felt to be their own sake. However, apart from this basic similarity, the two conceptual frameworks diverge in some important ways, reflecting the different theoretical foundations of each perspective. While Goffman examines risk-taking activities in terms of the self-presentation practices of co-present actors, the edgework perspective arises out of a phenomenologically-based theoretical approach that links the experiential 'foreground' of risk-taking activities to the historically-specific 'background' conditions of these practices (see Katz, 1988: 3–4). With these theoretical differences in mind, let us now consider specific contrasts between action and edgework.

Corporeal edges versus fateful action

In doing edgework, one is most assuredly engaged in fateful behavior, but what this concept highlights is the special significance of critical 'edges' or boundary lines negotiated

in the risk-taking endeavor. At the most abstract level, the 'edge' is best understood as the boundary between order and disorder, form and formlessness (Lyng, 1990: 858), involving more concretely the lines separating life and death, full functionality and permanent disability, consciousness and unconsciousness, or sanity and insanity. Crossing any of these lines clearly represents an 'observable threat to one's physical or mental well-being or one's sense of an ordered existence' (Lyng, 1990: 857).

In its purest expression, edgework represents a form of 'experiential anarchy' where the completely novel circumstances of the situation force one to 'ad hoc' a response to the immediate threat. Although edgeworkers often devote significant time and effort to training and preparing their minds and bodies for edgework encounters, these efforts are focused primarily on dealing with dangers that can be anticipated. What they value most is confronting and managing challenges that are entirely unpredictable—'being able to control the seemingly uncontrollable' (Langer, 1975: 323)—which propels them to get as close as possible to the edge without actually crossing it.[2]

The focus on decisive boundary lines reflects at one level the corporeal nature of the 'edges' negotiated in this form of risk-taking. In the archetype of edgework represented by high-risk ('extreme') leisure activities like free solo climbing or BASE jumping, edgeworkers confront the line separating a sentient living body from an unconscious dead corpse, or some approximation of this distinction such as a fully functional versus disabled body or conscious versus unconscious body. In the death-defying forms of edgework, the boundary line is clear-cut: if one passes over the edge, there is no possibility of return (a return from death) or a full return (a return to a pre-disability state). In this kind of risk-taking, the body's objectivity creates a boundary condition that is unambiguous and unalterable. Hence, risk-takers use their skills to manage *fixed* boundaries in edgework and confrontations with these edges are significant not only as consequential acts but more importantly as forms of ontological exploration.

In empirical terms, the ontological significance of doing edgework is reflected in participants' descriptions of the experience as 'authentic' or 'hyperreal' because they perceive it as being more real than the reality of everyday life (Lyng, 1990: 861). As a fully embodied activity that disrupts the interpretive processes involved in everyday problem-solving, edgework generates a sense of an objective reality uncontaminated by subjective cognition. If the blurring of social and existential boundaries in late modern society undermines the perceived objectivity of most limits, the boundaries that one explores in edgework are experienced as objective and real.

Embodied experience versus embodied semiotics

The focus in edgework theory on the special status of the body in high-risk activities reflects, in part, the influence of the 'embodiment movement' within the social sciences. As Dmitri Shalin (2007: 214) notes, this recent intellectual trend understands human agency 'as a somatically grounded, emotionally laden, discursively framed, historically rooted, self-referentially guided, and structurally constrained capacity for action'. Embracing a socially corporealized view of agency and a hermeneutic perspective that treats the body as a reservoir of historically-rooted meaning, edgework theory emphasizes the body's special significance in late modernity as a site for investigating the limits

of socially constructed subjectivity and exploring the pleasures of this radical form of reflexivity.

In the initial formulation of this perspective (Lyng, 1990), the embodied agency involved in edgework was conceptualized in terms of G. H. Mead's ([1934] 1964) 'I/me' dialectic. The defining sensations of the edgework experience are traced to the way in which the immediate demands of the life-and-death circumstances disrupt the process of 'imaginative rehearsal' and the social self (the 'me') sustained by this process. In situations of extreme danger, actors are forced to deal with the immediacy of the moment by responding 'instinctively' to the evolving circumstances. Thus, under the completely novel conditions of true edgework, imaginative rehearsal ceases and the 'me' is suspended, leaving a residual, 'acting' self that responds without reflective consciousness. The annihilation of the social mind contributes to the emergence of a more fully embodied form of action resembling the *overt* phase of the act that Mead designated as the 'I' (in contrast to the *covert* 'me').

In a more recent effort to conceptualize the embodied experience of extreme risk taking, Lyng (2005) emphasizes the similarities between the edgework concept and Michel Foucault's notion of 'limit-experience'. Foucault's goal in introducing the idea of limit-experience was to counter the phenomenological focus on the 'lived experience' of everyday life by directing attention to 'unlivable' experience—a form of experience that involves 'the maximum of intensity and the maximum of impossibility at the same time' (Foucault, 2000: 241). How the limit-experience connects with edgework practices is perhaps most clearly revealed in Foucault's actual personal use of these experiences. As James Miller states in his intellectual biography of the French theorist, Foucault's goal in pursuing limit-experiences was

> [to] deliberately push his body and mind to the breaking point, hazarding 'a sacrifice, an actual sacrifice of life . . . a voluntary obliteration' . . . Through intoxication, reverie, the Dionysian abandon of the artist, the most punishing ascetic practices, and an uninhibited exploration of sado-masochistic eroticism, it seemed possible to breach, however briefly, the boundaries separating the consciousness and unconsciousness, reason and unreason, pleasure and pain—and, at the ultimate limit, life and death—thus starkly revealing how distinctions central to the play of true and false are pliable, uncertain, contingent. (1993: 30)

We see a striking convergence between limit-experience and edgework in this description, both empirically and theoretically. And while limit-experience and edgework are not synonymous concepts, Foucault's understanding of the role of 'bodies and pleasures' in limit-experience captures the radical form of embodiment that edgework produces. The reflex actions of a body engaged in edgework, which have been separated from the processes of cognitive reflection involved in normal problem-solving, transgress the limit between discursive intelligibility and unintelligibility. This is manifested experientially as a sense of ineffability, authentic reality, altered perceptions of time/space, and feelings of mental control over environmental objects (Lyng, 2005: 39–47). These sensations result from edgework's capacity to dissolve the discursively constructed limits inscribed in the body that undergird the time and space distinctions of lived experience. Edgeworkers are transported to the 'zone of limitlessness' represented by the 'anarchic

body' (Oksala, 2004: 108), where 'objects' and 'events' begin to dissolve as dualistic opposites, producing new perceptions of space/time patterns. Thus, the ontological indeterminacy and unpredictability of the anarchic body mean that it becomes the locus of 'discursively undefined and unintelligible pleasures . . . [and] the permanent contestation of discursive definitions, values, and normative practices' (Oksala, 2004: 112).

While edgework theory conceives of volitional risk-taking as corporeally grounded action and experience, Goffman's theory of action explores the circumstances in which the body is subservient to the reflective social self. Returning again to Goffman's key assertion that action involves the social imputation of strong 'character' to individuals who display the specific abilities indexed by this term, we can now consider the role of the body in such displays. As noted above, Goffman identifies several character traits involved in action, including the qualities of courage, gameness, integrity, gallantry, and composure (1967b: 218–28). Among this list of traits, the one that receives the most attention is composure, which is further dissected into the sub-capacities of poise, emotional self-control, calmness, presence of mind, dignity, and stage confidence.

What is most noteworthy about the elements of composure, as compared to the other character traits Goffman identifies, is that they all refer to somatic-affective qualities or embodied capacities. In describing the general nature of composure, Goffman emphasizes the control of one's body in 'physical tasks (typically involving small muscle control) in a concerted, smooth, self-controlled fashion under fateful circumstances' (pp. 222–3). Similarly, he describes emotional self-control as exercising 'physical control [over] the organs employed in discourse and gesture' (p. 223). 'Dignity' is explicitly defined in corporeal terms as 'sustain[ing] one's bodily decorum in the face of costs, difficulties, and imperative urges' (p. 225). Presence of mind is also considered as an embodied skill, since it depends on the control of neurophysiological processes involved in mental 'blocking'. Mental calmness is an element of stage confidence, which is 'the capacity to withstand the dangers and opportunities of appearing before large audiences without becoming abashed, embarrassed, self-conscious, or panicky' (p. 226). Thus, all forms of composure are acquired through 'the practiced easy use of human faculties—mind, limbs, and, especially, small muscles' (p. 228).

Although one might suppose that properties of composure are simply the kinds of innate embodied capacities that any courageous person possesses, this assumption would violate the logic of Goffman's analysis. The key to understanding the role of composure and the other character traits in action activities is to appreciate the paradoxical nature of character. Goffman challenges common-sense 'folk-beliefs' about the innate quality of character by proposing that it is not 'given' in the individual but instead is 'gambled'. '[A] single good showing can be taken as representative and a bad showing cannot be easily excused or re-attempted. To display or express character, weak or strong, is to generate character. The self, in brief, can be voluntarily subjected to re-creation' (p. 237).

Thus, the paradox of character is found in the fact that it is both unchanging and changeable:

> And now we begin to see character for what it is. On the one hand, it refers to what is essential and unchanging about the individual—what is *characteristic* of him [sic]. On the other, it refers to attributes that can be generated and destroyed during fateful moments. In this

> latter view the individual can act so as to determine the traits that will thereafter be his; he can act so as to create and establish what is to be imputed to him. Every time a moment occurs, its participants will therefore find themselves with another little chance to make something of themselves. (p. 238)

This paragraph is a crucial one in Goffman's essay because his assertions about character and action here are clearly informed by his broader theorization of the self as an emergent product of the interaction between actor and audience. In keeping with his dramaturgical approach, Goffman orients us to 'behavior materials [such as] the glances, gestures, positionings, and verbal statements that people continuously feed into the situation, whether intended or not' (p. 1). Thus, the self and its specific attributes are created through a semiotic process that involves two parts:

> a part that is relatively easy for the individual to manipulate at will, being chiefly his verbal assertions, and a part with regard to which he *seems* to have little control, being chiefly derived from expression he gives off. The [audience] may then use *what are considered to be* ungovernable aspects of his expressive behavior as a check upon the validity of what is conveyed by the governable aspects. (Goffman, 1959: 7, emphasis added)

In other words, an individual who 'signs' a self and its attributes to co-present others employs two basic semiotic resources—verbal/linguistic expressions and somatic/affective indicators. The audience treats signs of the latter variety as definitive because they are *assumed* to be impervious to manipulation by the individual. Of course, Goffman rejects this common-sense belief and his theory of the self rests on the claimed malleability of the body as a signing medium.

We see, then, why composure receives so much attention in Goffman's discussion of character. As the most embodied dimension of character, composure is viewed by common-sense actors as the most reliable signifier of innately-based character. And yet, all the elements of composure—poise, emotional self-control, calmness, presence of mind, dignity, and stage confidence—are seen by Goffman as no less governable by individuals engaged in character displays than the linguistic resources they may devote to this task. The terms Goffman uses to describe how character is revealed in action highlight the pliability of the semiotic resources employed for this purpose. Character is *displayed*, *shown*, *expressed*, *generated*, *created*, and *re-created*. As these terms suggest, the principal role of the body in volitional risk taking is to serve as a signing medium, one that is essentially hyperconductive in nature (Shalin, 2007: 217). Thus, it comes as no surprise that Goffman would assert that 'he [the agent] and his body merely provide a peg on which something of collaborative manufacture will be hung for a time' (1959: 253).

Hermeneutic reflexivity versus dramaturgical reflexivity

Having examined several important ways in which the action and edgework perspectives differ, I now turn to the most important contrast between the two conceptual frameworks. Ironically, this contrast arises in examining one of the principal convergences between the two approaches—the connection each perspective makes between risk taking and

reflexivity. In both interpretations, this connection is the key to understanding the motivations for voluntary risk taking.

As we have seen, Goffman's explanation of the motivations for pursuing action represents an equivocation of his initial assertion that 'action is undertaken for what is felt to be its own sake'. In the case of the edgework perspective, there is no equivocation on this point—edgework *is* undertaken for its own sake. In other words, edgework is not understood as a means to 'higher' ends defined by social system requisites. It is an end in itself.

In order to identify what draws people to edgework, we must take account of the *reflexive* nature of social life in late modernity. Under the conditions of 'structural reflexivity', where institutional rules and resources 'become the object of reflection for agency' (Lash, 1994: 115), agency is set free from institutional anchorages. A second level of reflexivity, termed by Lash (1994: 115) as 'self-reflexivity' involves the reflexive subject making an object of itself—'agency reflect[ing] on itself' in the form of self-monitoring and self-construction. Both forms of reflexivity more clearly distinguish a social universe of action and experience in which manufactured risks, mediated communications, cultural hybridity, and hyper-individualism emerge as the prevalent features of social life.

The primary strength of the edgework perspective is that it allows us to broaden our understanding of late modern reflexivity by moving beyond the concepts of structural and self-reflexivity to a more radical form of reflexivity. As noted above, managing serious risks in highly dangerous circumstances demands that one act automatically and almost instinctively to ensure a successful outcome. Thus, it could be said that the closer one comes to the edge, the more that structure recedes and agency is liberated, which at one level accounts for the intense feelings of self-determination that participants report about the edgework experience.

However, edgework engenders a much deeper form of reflexivity than the 'cognitive' forms of (structural and self-) reflexivity discussed by Lash (1994: 140). The distinctive edgework perceptions and sensations documented in empirical research lend an 'otherworldly' character to the edgework experience, which is indicative of a reflexive orientation toward the nature of reality itself—the culturally constructed categories of time and space normally taken-for-granted in lived experience. The immediacy of the edge is a zone of uncertainty where the limit between discursive intelligibility and unintelligibility is approached, opening up new possibilities of embodiment and experience. Thus, reflexivity experienced in edgework can be conceptualized as a form of 'hermeneutic reflexivity' (1994: 146).[3]

What the concept of hermeneutic reflexivity reveals is edgework's significance as a means of *self-interpretation* that contrasts with the *self-monitoring* practices of late modern individuals (Lash, 1993: 4). This difference can be made clear by returning to Foucault's conceptualization of radical embodiment in the limit-experience. As we have seen, Foucault emphasizes the 'somatization' of social and cultural forces within the bodies of individuals—the creation of 'disciplined' or 'docile' bodies by power/knowledge—but he also finds a potential for resistance to these corporeal inscriptions in the pursuit of limit-experience. In his approach to aesthetics of the self, Foucault posits that the anarchic body is a locus of an agonistic power relationship: 'agonism is the most

productive and liberating practice we can perform . . . and relations of agonism ensure our ability to transgress limits and to resist congealed subjectivities' (Warfield, 1999: 3).

The embodied experience of edgework is best understood in terms of a dramatic tension between the anarchic and docile bodies. As stated above, edgework is similar to, but not the same as, Foucault's limit-experience, the most fundamental difference being that limit-experience involves the *transgression* of boundaries while in edgework one *approaches* boundaries but does not transgress them. Although one approaches the 'limitlessness' of the anarchic body in doing edgework, reflected in the time and space implosions and other distinctive sensations that edgeworkers report about their experiences, the complete annihilation of the socially inscribed body does not occur. Instead, the increasingly mute and unintelligible perceptions and sensations of the emerging anarchic body provide a powerful *contrast* to a sense of reality rooted in durable corporeal dispositions. This contrast functions as a precondition for hermeneutic reflexivity[4] and a level of self-interpretation that incorporates the 'unthought categories' (Bourdieu, 2000) underpinning the collective practices and shared meanings of the cultural body (see Lash, 1994: 153–6). Thus, in doing edgework, it is possible to separate oneself from culturally constructed subjectivities and acquire deep insight into the contingent and pliable nature of embodied experience.

The principal strength of this interpretation is the support it receives from empirical studies of edgeworkers (Lyng, 1990, 2005). The concept of hermeneutic reflexivity reveals the source of the transcendent experience that edgeworkers often describe in explaining their participation in extreme risk taking. The reality-transforming effects of this embodied, ineffable experience and the reflexive possibilities it offers for embodied agency and free access to deep-seated corporeal inscriptions give it a seductive appeal that draws people to it (see also Katz, 1988). For these reasons, we *can* say that edgework is undertaken for its own sake. It is valued because it transports edgeworkers to an alternative reality, a place of new possibilities for existential experience and self-interpretation.

Having previously discussed the motivational basis of action, I will draw the contrast with action theory now by reframing the argument in terms of reflexivity, which yields a more meaningful comparison between the two perspectives. Although theorists of late modernity do not often cite Goffman's work, it is clear that his model of the self represents one expression of self-reflexivity. However, by focusing on *self-presentation* rather than *self-monitoring* as Lash (1994) envisions it, Goffman's version of self-reflexivity reveals the ontological significance of the co-present 'audience' in the expression of the self.

Goffman's notion of self-presentation highlights a key constraint on self-reflexivity unacknowledged by most theorists of late modernity—the potential *resistance* of audiences to self-narratives produced by social actors. Goffman would agree that actors endeavor to be the authors of their own selves and biographies; but he also emphasizes the need to make one's self-narrative believable to others. In this respect, actors do not experience complete freedom of choice in the construction of self—while the constraining effects of institutional ties may be declining in late modernity, individuals still must answer to the performance assessments of audiences who seek to authenticate self-claims in terms of signs 'given' and 'given off'.

Employing the concept of reflexivity in comparing the action and edgework perspectives therefore establishes the most important contrast between the two frameworks. With this concept, we can now envision a continuum of self-reflexive practices, ranging from the structurally-relevant reflexivity of *self-monitoring*, to the audience-relevant reflexivity of *self-presentation*, and ultimately the corporeally-relevant reflexivity of *self-interpretation*. Each point along this continuum corresponds to a distinct form of reflexivity that can be termed (respectively) as *self* reflexivity, *dramaturgical* reflexivity, and *hermeneutic* reflexivity.

Distinguishing between the self-reflexive practices in this way contributes to a better theorization of reflexivity by allowing us to assay differences along several interrelated continua. First, we can locate each form along a continuum marked by increasing degrees of freedom from constraints on the self, although *complete* freedom is never possible. As I have suggested, the increasing separation of agency from structure in late modernity may free actors from institutional constraints on the self but it does not liberate them from the resistance of co-present audiences to their self-performances. By the same token, an actor may have a free range of choices in deciding which self to present to others, but a convincing performance of self through the active control of one's body does not increase one's transcendence of the deeply-rooted corporeal inscriptions. Reflexivity toward these inscriptions is achieved only through experiences that 'bracket . . . subject-object knowledge and situate . . . knowers in their life-world' (Lash, 1994: 156).

The second continuum of self-reflexivity is one based on different degrees of embodiment. While structural and self-reflexivity are strictly cognitive in nature, Goffman's more embodied approach to the reflexive self views the body as a crucial semiotic medium of self-presentation, though the body is still under some degree of cognitive control. Clearly, the *most* embodied form of reflexivity is found in hermeneutic self-interpretative practices that reveal the unthought categories of the socially inscribed body.

Finally, the third continuum of self-reflexivity refers to expressions of self-determination achieved at different levels of the social order, extending from the structural 'background' to the experiential 'foreground' (Katz, 1988: 3–4). In institutional terms, self-reflexivity involves exploring new possibilities of self-definition by individuals who have been liberated from the broad-based structural anchorages of modern industrial society. For Goffman, self-reflexivity and character displays are found in the dramaturgical practices of actors engaged in 'meso-level' interactions with various audiences. And in hermeneutic reflexivity, self-determination is radically experiential in nature as individuals act in conditions of 'absolute presentness' (Simmel, 1919) unmediated by discursive categories. Thus, the assertion that reflexivity is a central imperative of the late modern era is buttressed by this theorization of self-reflexive practices oriented to the macro-structural, meso-interactional, and micro-experiential levels.

We see, then, that this more complex, multidimensional view of reflexivity indicates another way to distinguish between the action and edgework perspectives. More importantly, the distinction between dramaturgical and hermeneutic self-reflexivity may yield new analytical possibilities for understanding the significance of voluntary risk taking in the late modern era. In concluding the article, I offer some suggestions about how the action and edgework perspectives can be integrated to achieve a multidimensional

explanation of voluntary risk taking in an historical era characterized by the increasing uncertainties of a mass-mediated, culturally pluralistic, and institutionally fluid social world.

Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to identify key differences between the action and edgework approaches and, in doing so, demonstrate how both perspectives capture distinct dimensions of risk taking in the late modern context. If late modern society is increasingly dominated by reflexive practices, then an explanation of contemporary forms of voluntary risk taking must incorporate a logic that takes account of this reality. The present analysis employs such a logic.

On the one hand, action theory helps to explain current participation in voluntary risk taking behavior by focusing on emotional and normative demands that are becoming more important in the age of late modern uncertainty and reflexivity. As we have seen, Goffman's sensitivity to the contingencies of face-to-face interaction gave him a deep appreciation for the affective challenges of (re)producing the social order in the individual role performances of everyday life. Although his language for describing the structural consequences of situational contingency reflected the dominance of functionalist sociology of his time, he clearly understood the fragile nature of social reality and the importance of people acquiring the normative resources needed to sustain this reality. With the changes that have occurred in Western societies since the publication of Goffman's essay, it could be said that the demand for these normative resources—all the elements of 'strong character' as he described it—has never been greater. In a modification of Goffman's central thesis, one could assert that possibilities regarding character encourage us to face and defeat the anomic anxieties of living in a social world of increasing uncertainty, reflexivity, and ontological insecurity. Individuals who seek to construct their own narratives of self must not only manage the inherent contingencies of face-to-face interaction, but also general life circumstances that have become increasingly *fateful*—in the workplace, family life, interpersonal relations, and other domains of human experience. What is demanded of individuals living with the new world of expanding risks and uncertainty is courage and composure, qualities displayed so dramatically in the 'action' of voluntary risk takers.

On the other hand, edgework theory reveals how voluntary risk taking acquires special significance to social actors who are already socially predisposed to the liberating power of structural reflexivity, but who remain disconnected from a *substantive* sense of self and reality. While actors engaged in the self-monitoring and self-presentation practices of structural and dramaturgical reflexivity are free to create their own biographies, they are also likely to possess a keen awareness of the artificial character of the selves they construct. This sense of artificiality contrasts dramatically with the 'authentic' experience of the self and reality engendered by hermeneutic reflexivity, as revealed in the reports by a wide range of edgework respondents. In late modern society, a powerful motivation for extreme risk taking is found in the attractions of an emancipatory experience rooted in a reflexive transcendence of the 'unthought categories' of the socially inscribed body. Risk taking at this level offers a singular experience of

authenticity in a social world of unprecedented opportunities for liberation, but one that remains bereft of substance, reality, and objectivity.

One clear strength of the structurally contextualized, multidimensional explanation of voluntary risk taking presented here is that it allows us to acknowledge a simple point often ignored by analysts seeking to explain complex social phenomena—the fact that a particular form of behavior may be motivated by factors operating on many different levels (cognitive, affective, corporeal, etc.) and these motive forces can interact in complex patterns of mutual reinforcement and/or contradiction. In the case of voluntary risk taking behavior, individuals sometimes seek risk taking opportunities with no obvious material payoff because they want to be seen as a person of 'strong character' and other times because they are 'seduced' by the transcendent and transformative experience of crowding the edge. It is possible for both of these motivations to coexist in the same individual and exhibit varying degrees of intensity in different individuals. My attempt to establish conceptual links between action and edgework and the broader structural context of late modern, reflexive society should also alert us to the powerful influence of social location on the motivational disposition of individuals or groups engaged in volitional risk taking pursuits. Whether one's participation in 'unnecessary' risk taking is motivated primarily by a desire to display strength of character or as a way to achieve personal transcendence (or some combination of these goals) will depend in some measure on one's gender, race, class, and other social group affiliations and biographical experiences. Moreover, if the motivations for volitional risk taking are shaped by particular social formations of gender, race, class, etc., then it is likely that these influences will be reflected in almost every other aspect of this behavior as well, including the kinds of risks that are undertaken, how they are perceived and managed, how strong character and existential transcendence are expressed or achieved, and a range of other considerations. Future efforts to advance our understanding of voluntary risk taking must also address these concerns.

I will close with one final reflection on the need to remain attentive to the importance of social location in the study of risk and risk taking. As I noted at the beginning of the article, an examination of recent work in the sociology of risk and uncertainty indicates that this new subdiscipline may have reached a turning point, perhaps best described by Walklate and Mythen (2010) in their critical review of the recent 'turn to risk in sociology'. As these authors note, 'Abstract theorizing about the nature and future effects of risk has led social theory into something of a dead end. There remains a palpable need for greater recognition of the *diversity of subjects* and an empirical fleshing out of *how people construct and negotiate risks under discrete conditions*' (2010: 58, emphasis mine). While I certainly subscribe to this view, I am perhaps less inclined than these two researchers to set 'abstract theorizing' and 'empirical fleshing out' in opposition to one another. One of my goals in this study has been to demonstrate the value of a *theoretical* 'fleshing out' of our understanding of risk and reflexivity that I believe must go hand-in-hand with the expansion of empirical research on these topics. There is work to be done on both ends of the research continuum that can help us to avoid the pitfalls of conceptualizing risk in universalistic terms. The key problem is the tendency to 'universalize' the phenomenon and not the process of abstract theorizing specifically. Theorists can and should be just as attentive as empirical researchers to the diversity of subjects and influence of social context on risk perceptions and behavior.

Notes

1. In choosing to focus on 'reflexivity' as an important distinguishing feature of late modern society, I have been influenced by several distinct strands of social theory devoted to identifying the dominant social and cultural configurations of the contemporary societal order. The most influential and intensely debated of these theories is the risk society perspective of Ulrich Beck (1992) and Anthony Giddens (1991) and their later elaboration of the reflexive modernization thesis (Beck, Giddens, and Lash, 1994). Critical responses to risk society theory and the extended reflexivity thesis have produced some useful theoretical insights on late modern reflexivity, most notably the work of Scott Lash (1993) on aesthetic reflexivity, Tulloch and Lupton (2003) on risk and reflexivity in everyday life, and various efforts to qualify and refine some of Beck and Giddens' most provocative assertions about the nature of reflexivity (Adams, 2006; Sweetman, 2003). Other theorists and commentators on late modernity view reflexivity as a key imperative but do not connect reflexive modernization to the emergence of 'manufactured risks' as Beck and Giddens do. These other scholars see different structural factors operating as generative forces of reflexivity, such as neo-liberal modes of governance (Adkins, 2002; Threadgold and Nilan, 2009), digital/electronic modes of virtualization (Hier, 2008; Han, 2010), or non-modern practices of mediation (Latour, 1993). Thus, a number of perceptive theorists and critics have recognized the increasing importance of reflexive social practices, but there is disagreement about the structural foundations of these practices. For this reason, I believe it is unwarranted at this time to endorse any particular perspective on reflexive modernity, though I share the view that reflexivity is a central imperative of the late modern era.
2. As this description reveals, the concept of edgework may refer to a narrower range of high-risk activities than the forms of risk taking that Goffman conceptualizes as action.
3. Although I have borrowed the term 'hermeneutic reflexivity' from Scott Lash (1994), it should be noted that Lash's empirical application of this concept does not incorporate the forms of voluntary risk taking activities referred to here as edgework.
4. This idea was inspired, in part, by Paul Feyerabend's (1975) reflections on the epistemological strategy of 'counterinduction'. Noting that cosmological 'prejudices are found by contrast, not by analysis', he poses the following question and answer:

> How can we analyze the terms in which we habitually express our most simple and straightforward observations, and reveal their presuppositions? . . . The answer is clear: we cannot discover it from the *inside*. We need an *external* standard of criticism, we need a set of alternative assumptions or, as these assumptions will be quite general, constituting, as it were, an entire alternative world. (1975: 31–2)

Also, Bourdieu's acknowledgement that reflexivity towards habitus can take place in 'situations of crisis which disrupt the immediate adjustment of habitus to field' is suggestive of the counterinductive potential that can be found in the edgework experience (Bourdieu, quoted in Sweetman, 2003: 135–6).

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