# “Up in the air”:

# A feminist account of aerial performance as gendered edgework

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## Abstract

This thesis focuses on the edgework experiences of women aerialists and the additional ontological risks they undertake when edgework is viewed as a gendered phenomenon. Edgework, as a theory of voluntary risk taking, focuses on boundary navigation and remaining in control, whilst getting as close to the 'edge' as possible without crossing it, for example life versus death. Edgework requires skills to navigate these boundaries, such as the 'right stuff' to navigate risks and 'mental toughness' when faced with chaos. However, in applying some of Judith Butler's influential writings to the edgework literature and viewing women's experiences through a Butlerian-informed lens, the theory of edgework becomes problematic, in that women's experiences are stigmatized as deviant and/or are marginalized. To study these experiences, 22 semi-structured interviews were conducted with women aerialists, following a version of the biographical narrative interpretative method and a form of photo elicitation. Using thematic coding and analysis, the empirical findings of the study shed light on what makes aerial performance a form of edgework, with reference to the skills and capacities necessary for risk taking, and reveal aerial performance to be a form of gendered edgework, focusing on motivations and meanings. In connecting the findings with the literature, this thesis introduces three conceptual themes to explain some of the edgework experiences of the women aerialists: their 'body conversations' between one another, the tension between their 'risky aesthetic' and 'aesthetic risk', and how their aerial performing can be seen as a form of 'edgy performativity'.

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# Chapter One. Introduction

This chapter begins by setting up the research problem, which was developed from an initial pilot study conducted for my Master's thesis. It then identifies the gap in the literature addressed by this study, outlines who were chosen for the sample and why, and explains the structure of this thesis.

## Setting up the research

This section identifies the gap in the literature within which this research is situated. This study resulted from a pilot study undertaken for my Master's dissertation, entitled 'Gendered edgework experiences: The differential experiences of men and women in aerial dance and circus performing', which highlighted how the women studied experienced edgework in different ways from the men. Most apparent from the Master's study, and most important to this study, was that certain aspects of edgework appeared to be codified as masculine, and the women had to manage this alongside archaic gender stereotypes of femininity when engaging in aerial performance. Warranting further investigation, the study for this thesis pursued this line of argument further, focusing on the experiences of women aerialists. This led to identification of the gap in the literature on women's experiences in which this research is situated.

### *Why edgework theory?*

The gap in the literature concerns the experiences of women who engage in a form of gendered edgework. Edgework theory provides a social psychological explanation of skilful voluntary risk taking which poses an obvious threat to an individual's physical or mental state, with the potential for life-changing injury or death if not done correctly (Lyng, 1990, 2005). Edgework refers to negotiating boundaries and their 'edges'. The edgeworker seeks to get as close as possible to the 'edge' of a boundary without

crossing it, as it is crossing over the edge that results in injury or death (Lyng, 1990). Some examples of boundaries are life or death, sanity or insanity, and an ordered or disordered sense of the self and the environment (Lyng, 1990). Also included within edgework theory are the activities that constitute edgework, the skills essential for survival, such as having 'mental toughness' to push on and the 'right stuff' (such as the knowledge and skills necessary to undertake risk), and the sensations that edgework produces, including absorption and feeling alive (Lyng, 1990, 2012). In its early conceptualization, edgework theory was used to explore various risk-taking activities, including leisure activities such as skydiving (Lyng, 1990, 2005; Laurendeau, 2006), BASE jumping (Ferrell, Milovanovic and Lyng, 2001) and snowboarding (Laurendeau and Sharara, 2008). Topics have since been extended beyond leisure consumption to include, for example, sex work (Tsang, 2019; Jordenö and Horning, 2022) and excessive food, alcohol, and drug consumption (Cronin, McCarthy and Collins, 2014; Pawson and Kelly, 2022).

Edgework theory was originally selected as a theoretical framework for studying risk taking because it encompasses risk takers' individual psychologies, and how risks are shaped by social factors, providing explanations that account for both micro and macro forces. However, a review of the edgework theory literature revealed some issues. Notably, apart from Lois's (2001) study which compared men and women, the early literature appears to have lacked any focus on women's experiences. The resulting explanations failed to take full stock of women's experiences, for example by labelling their engagement in risk taking simply as 'empowering', as discussed in Chapter 3. Edgework theory can thus be critiqued for its failure to include women's experiences.

Despite attempts to rectify these issues (for example, Lois, 2001), women's experiences of edgework continue to be framed as deviant (Worthen and Baker,

2016), or are marginalized (Newmahr, 2011). Applying a Butlerian lens to the edgework literature brings to light further issues with the theory. For example, it codifies the skills of edgework as masculine, and establishes a baseline norm of experience against which all experiences are compared. These issues presented an avenue of exploration in which to situate the research for this thesis, which aims to provide a feminist account of edgework, focusing on the context of aerial performers.

*Why aerial performers?*

Aerial performing is the combination of circus and dance whilst suspended in the air, and fits the typology described by edgework theory. With regard to the activities that constitute edgework, aerial performers face an obvious physical threat, given the height at which they perform. Sometimes they are raised just above the ground, and at other times they may be 60–80 metres or higher, suspended from theatre beams, crane booms, or bridges, for example. Furthermore, aerialists often wear harnesses, especially when doing 'spectacle work' high in the air, so they must also navigate the resulting physical constraints and limitations. An added physical risk for consideration is the weather. When performing outside, wind, rain, sunshine, and heat may all impinge on performances and performers. A misapplication of a move, a momentary lapse in concentration, or faulty equipment or rigging may result in serious injury or even death. Aerial performance encompasses many of the skills of edgework: it requires 'trained, muscular bodies' to navigate 'suspension' (Tait, 2005: 1–2), using skills developed through rigorous training on the ground and in the air to enable performers to dance with their apparatus. Commonly discussed skills of edgework, such as 'mental toughness' and the 'right stuff', are also displayed, as aerialists must be able to remain in control when faced with chaos, drawing on deeply developed and embodied skills to navigate toward the 'edge' and back in a performance. Lastly, aerial

performance also demonstrates the sensations of edgework. Of particular interest are sensations that contribute to developing self-determination, self-competence, and opportunities for personal growth (Lyng, 1990, 2004). These can be seen in aerial performing, for example when executing new or difficult moves.

As well as fitting the typology of edgework in many ways, aerial performing also exemplifies a gendered form of edgework. According to Tait (2005), it is stereotypically and popularly perceived as feminine, but includes displays of masculinities, such as aerialists' 'trained, muscular bodies' (Tait, 2005: 2): 'all aerialists are muscular, if comparatively small-bodied'. Despite needing muscular strength to ensure a smooth performance and navigate towards the 'edge', 'the social perception of upper-body muscularity is not straightforward', as 'it is conventionally associated with masculine identity; yet muscular female performers are equally central to the development of aerial performance' (Tait, 2005: 2). Aerial performers thus exhibit the gendered 'edge' that must be navigated when undertaking risk.

In addition to the foregoing reasons for choosing to focus on aerial performance in this study, it has also been growing in popularity as a leisure phenomenon in the UK, making the 'impossible' feat of performing up in the air seem tangible (Arnould and Price, 1993). Aerial performing has a long history as a form of entertainment. It experienced a pivotal point of reinvention with the creation of the trapeze in around 1860, before which rope acts 'raised everyday actions of walking, balancing, dancing, carrying and wheeling in the air' (Tait, 2005: 4). Interestingly, women trapeze artists were perceived as 'masculine' early on, requiring them to navigate the gender norms of the time. The song 'The Flying Trapeze', written by George Leybourne and sung by Eddie Cantor in 1867 (referred to by Tait, 2005: 38), depicts a woman becoming a trapeze artist:

A bill in red letters which did my heart gall
That she was appearing with him
He'd taught her gymnastics and dressed her in tights
To help him to live at his ease
He'd made her assume a masculine name
And now she goes on his trapeze!
She floats through the air with the greatest of ease
You'd think her a man on the flying trapeze
Her actions are graceful, all girls she does please
And that's what's become of my love.

This resonates with the context of this study, where women were depicted as 'masculine' because of their physical muscularity and their engagement with risk taking, relating to both their physicality and their gender.

Aerial performance is now carried out in many places, from circus big tops to the sides of national buildings, and is practised in locations ranging from gyms with rigs for fitness classes to aerial-specific studios, making it more accessible to start and to train. Those with previous dance or circus skills training can transition into aerial performing, offering some a way to progress their careers. Its uptake has also increased considerably as a result of the popularity of circus-based shows such as the Cirque du Soleil. With growing audiences in the UK and around the world, such shows thrill and entertain audiences with their extreme routines. Aerial performing is therefore an ideal context in which to explore the experiences of risk taking as a modern-day form of edgework. As well as highlighting highly skilful risk taking, it reveals the gendered aspect of negotiating stereotypical femininities of performing alongside the masculinities of muscular strength and control.

To investigate these experiences, some of Judith Butler's influential texts (2007 [1990], 2011 [1993], 2004, 2016) are outlined and applied to the edgework literature. This elucidates the problematic nature of edgework theory, in that it presents as inherently masculine, with a conceptualization based on hegemonic masculinities and a

masculinized baseline norm of experience against which all experiences are compared, including those of women and other non-hegemonic genders. Furthermore, a Butlerian-informed lens is applied to the women aerialists' experiences, as studying aerial performing as a gendered phenomenon draws attention to the additional risks that they encounter. Having explained the context and rationale for the research, the next section outlines the structure of this thesis.

## Thesis structure

This section explains the structure of this thesis. In summary, Chapter 2 reviews the literature on edgework theory and its conceptualization, and Chapter 3 extends the literature review by outlining some of Butler's influential work and explaining the application of a Butlerian-informed lens to the edgework literature. Chapter 4 describes the qualitative research design, and the data collection and analysis processes, and the findings are presented in Chapters 5 and 6. The discussion in Chapter 7 synthesizes the literature presented in the first two chapters with the empirical findings of Chapters 5 and 6, and Chapter 8 summarizes the findings and draws some conclusions.

In more detail, Chapter 2 reviews the literature on edgework theory, tracing its conceptual development. This includes some early psychological explanations of risk taking, which dominated the literature but tended to reduce the concept to individual psychologies. Stephen Lyng's (1990) introduction of edgework theory supplemented these psychologically reductionist theories with a sociological lens to create a social psychological theory of risk taking. Chapter 2 outlines the core components of edgework theory, including activities with the potential for life-changing injury or death and the skills needed to navigate the boundary edges, such as having the 'right stuff'

to take risks and ‘mental toughness’ to retain control in the face of chaos (Lyng, 1990, 2005). Also important here are the sensations produced from successful edgework, described as being transformational for the edgeworker. This chapter lays the foundation for Chapter 3 by providing examples of edgework theory as inherently masculine.

Chapter 3 discusses some of Judith Butler’s classic texts that are most pertinent to this study. It outlines Butler’s (2007) performative ontology of gender, including conceptualizations of the heterosexual matrix, the gender binary, and hierarchy. Butler’s (2011) *Bodies that Matter* is introduced, explaining intelligibility and abjection in relation to materiality and ‘matter’, and raising questions of how bodies come to matter and whose bodies are deemed to matter. This chapter also outlines Butler’s (2004) *Undoing Gender*, which proves crucial for understanding the experiences of women aerialists discussed in Chapter 7. Butler’s (2016) recent work on vulnerability demonstrates how naturalized perceptions of gender may also be used to denaturalize gender, playing on West and Zimmerman’s (1987) ‘doing’ gender. Drawing on Butler’s key works, this chapter develops a Butlerian-informed lens that is applied both to the edgework literature and other parts of the study. In doing so, it highlights how edgework theory has been conceptualized in terms of masculinities, and has produced codified masculine behaviours and a masculine baseline norm of experience against which to compare all experiences. Lastly, in applying a Butlerian-informed lens to women’s edgework experiences, Chapter 3 shows how the literature continues to stigmatize women’s experiences as deviant (see Worthen and Baker, 2016) and marginalizes their experiences (see Newmahr, 2011).

Chapter 4 outlines the methodology of this thesis. It begins by outlining the rationale for the research and explaining the guiding research questions: (1) what types of risks

do women aerialists experience; (2) how do women aerialists manage the risks involved with aerial performance; and (3) how do social, cultural and structural conditions shape these experiences of risk? Next, the chapter outlines the philosophical underpinnings of the study, including a constructivist and feminist ontology, and an interpretivist epistemology. It aims partly to establish a feminist standpoint from which to elucidate the accounts and experiences of the women aerialists through their narratives. The chapter details the semi-structured interview method and the biographical narrative interpretive method (BNIM; Wengraf, 2001) employed, and the adaptions made owing to constraints placed on face-to-face data collection by COVID-19. It also explains the inclusion of a form of photo elicitation in the interviews to help elicit the aerialists' narratives. Next, the chapter outlines the sample and sampling techniques used, including use of key informant, snowball sampling, as a type of chain referral sampling (Bryman, 2012), and personal social media accounts. The data analysis is then explained, including thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns (Aronson, 1995) from the interview transcripts, and photos discussed by the aerialists to aid visualization of the data (Aiello, 2020). Lastly, ethical considerations relating to the study are considered, with some reflections on the research process.

Two empirical data chapters present the main findings from the aerialists' narrative accounts. Using a typology similar to that adopted in Lyng's edgework theory, Chapter 5 examines the 'what' and 'how', and Chapter 6 examines the 'who' and 'why'. The first part of Chapter 5 focuses on 'what' aerial performance is, including being suspended in the air at various points, and the apparatuses typically used, some of which are commissioned by the aerialists themselves. The importance of riggers, rigging, and safety is also discussed, as well as what makes aerial performance risky,

including aesthetic factors that must be considered when performing and managing safety/risk. The second part focuses on ‘how’ aerial performance is undertaken, including how the women ‘found’ aerial performing, where they trained and performed, and how they funded it. It also outlines how the aerialists navigated the physical, emotional, and embodied risks of their performances. This included practising in the costumes in which they performed, controlling the rush and buzz of adrenaline, and learning various relationships of trust. This chapter aims to demonstrate how aerial performance is edgework, drawing on the narrative accounts of the aerialists interviewed.

Chapter 6, the second empirical chapter, continues to outline the aerialists’ narrative accounts, and applies the same typology, focusing on ‘who’ and ‘why’. First, it examines ‘who’ does aerial performance as gendered edgework, focusing on aerialists’ experiences of their physical strength being underestimated and their skills and capacities negated as a result of the gendered perceptions and assumptions governing aerial performance. This section also reveals how the gendered aesthetics of their performances contribute further to their risk taking, including hyper-feminized costumes and defined muscles. Lastly, this chapter identifies ‘why’ the women embark on and continue to engage in aerial performing. Reasons include the sensations, emotions, embodied experiences and bonds encountered by the aerialists. This chapter aims to highlight how aerial performance is a form of gendered edgework, and to draw attention to the additional risks faced by the aerialists.

In the discussion of Chapter 7, the empirical findings presented in Chapters 5 and 6 are synthesized with the literature reviewed in Chapters 2 and 3. First, ‘body conversations’ are presented to explain how the women connected and communicated between each other’s bodies without talking, based on recognizing the risks and

capacities each took when performing. This highlights a collective aspect to risk taking. Next, the chapter discusses the aerialists' utilization and navigation of tension between their 'risky aesthetic' (making a performance appear more risky than it actually is) and 'aesthetic risk' (how their aesthetic actually adds to their risk taking). This demonstrates the performative side of aerial performance and contributes to a third conceptual theme, 'edgy performativity', focusing on how the women navigated the 'edges' of their recognizability as women and as aerialists to give *credible aerial performances as women.* This connects edgework theory, in that the women were navigating an 'edge', with Butler's performative ontology (Butler, 2007, 2011), relating to how recognition gives credibility and intelligibility, thereby navigating the edges of misrecognition.

Finally, Chapter 8 concludes the thesis by summarizing the findings in relation to the research questions, explaining the contributions and limitations of the thesis, and suggesting some prospects for future research.

In summary, this chapter has situated this study, which arose from a pilot study conducted for my Master's dissertation, and has identified a gap in the literature addressed by this research. It has explained why women aerial performers were chosen as the sample through which to study gendered edgework, and has provided an overview of the structure of this thesis. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on edgework theory.

## Chapter Two. Edgework theory: conceptual development, key components and activities

This chapter reviews the literature on edgework theory and outlines its conceptual development. The review discusses influential theories and concepts that have contributed to the theorization of edgework, including psychological and criminological perspectives, as well as the sociological lens used to supplement these perspectives. Pertinent literature is also reviewed to delineate the key components of edgework, in terms of activities, skills, and sensations. Activities constituting edgework must involve an obvious threat to an individual's physical or mental state, with the possibility of injury or death (Lyng, 1990). For successful edgework, individuals must possess appropriate skills to maintain control in the face of chaos, and thus navigate the boundary 'edge' (Lyng, 1990, 2005). Edgeworkers' survival skills include 'mental toughness' and having the 'right stuff'. Lastly, the sensations of edgework describe the transformative feelings and effects that edgework produces, including intense absorption, adrenaline rushes, and feeling alive (Lyng, 1990, 2012).

Before outlining the core components of edgework theory, a brief consideration of the conceptual development of edgework will help to understand its influences. Early formulations of voluntary risk taking (see Tversky and Kahneman, 1974; Kahneman, Slovic and Tversky, 1982) were psychological in nature, and tended to focus explicitly on individuals' personality types, an approach that critics noted was overly reductive (Lyng, 1990). Studies then focused on criminological influences of 'edge work', including how the 'thrill' and 'excitement' of crime are seductive in (re)attracting individuals (Katz, 1988). Originally formulated by Lyng (1990), edgework theorists adopted a sociological lens to develop a social psychological theory of voluntary risk taking. Lyng's (1990) theory synthesizes Meadian and Marxian theoretical

perspectives to draw attention to both the psychological and sociological factors shaping voluntary risk taking. By tracing this conceptual development and outlining the theory's components, one aim of this chapter is to reveal how edgework theory has implicitly been shaped by masculine biases. Throughout this chapter are hints as to how this impacts on studying women's edgework experiences, a topic explored in greater depth in Chapter 3 through a gender critique of the literature.

This chapter begins by reviewing the development of the literature, tracing the multidisciplinary influences and applications of edgework. It then introduces a range of edgework activities and the notion of boundary navigation and the 'edge', and considers edgework skills, including the 'right stuff' and 'mental toughness'. Finally, attention is turned to the phenomenological experience of edgework, focusing on explicating the intense sensations and feelings that animate the experience. This contributes to the overall aim of highlighting the inherent masculinities of edgework theory, and prepares the ground for Chapter 3, in which a gender lens is applied to the edgework literature.

## Psychological theories of risk taking

Before outlining the components of edgework theory, this section reviews earlier dominant psychological theories of risk taking. This will explain how edgework theory was developed in response to the issue of psychological reductionism.

Early theories of risk explored individual and psychological factors affecting the likelihood of an individual engaging with risk. Theories of risk taking focused increasingly on personality. These proposed a propensity for risky activities based purely on personality type, and described those who seek out risks as narcissistic (Klausner, 1968). Further psychological explanations attempted to incorporate

‘heuristic rules’ into explanations of risk taking and estimations of risk (Heimer, 1988). These included judgements of risk based on various individual factors, such as how common or vivid the risk is to the individual (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974). In this body of research, other factors used to explain voluntary risk taking include how individuals judge risk, including lack of rationality and self-interest (Heimer, 1988).

Critics note that these psychological explanations of risk taking are reductionist in nature, implicitly framing risk taking in terms of negative processes or outcomes. They view risk taking as an adverse effect (Schwing and Albers, 1980) or an evaluated probability of a negative outcome (Zuckerman, 1979), never as a positive or voluntary experience. Portraying risk taking in terms of negative and compulsory behaviour when weighing up whether a risk is worth taking does not encompass the risk-taking behaviours of all individuals. It reduces voluntary risk taking to individualized psychological attributes, suggesting that individuals take risks of their own volition because it is simply who they are. It assumes irrationality and impulsivity, and leaves no space to even begin to consider either the skills needed to take risks, or the allure of the experience.

Psychological explanations of risk taking also neglect how social, cultural, and economic forces may shape an individual’s propensity for risk. For example, those who compete in extreme sports (see Lyng and Snow, 1986; Laurendeau, 2006, 2008), traders on the stock market (Zwick, 2005), and those working in the healthcare sector (see Granter, Wankhade, McCann, Hassard and Hyde, 2019; Avilés, Kean and Tocher, 2021) are not accounted for by these psychological explanations of risk taking, as it is precisely their skills, rationality, and control that make them good at taking risks.

However, as psychological explanations of risk taking developed, researchers began to account for social influences. Factors other than individual psychology started to come to the fore, such as the allure of the experience and desire for control, which are also important for the theory of edgework. The inclusion of social influences can be seen as a response to the reductionism of psychological explanations of risk taking, which emphasized individuals being motivated by the rewards of risk, but paid little, if any, attention to the experience of risk itself. Psychological explanations of risk taking were regarded as problematic because of their bias toward viewing the rewards of risky endeavours as the main motivation for such behaviour (Kahneman et al., 1982), while neglecting volition, and the value placed on experiences of risk taking and losing and regaining control in the face of risk (Lyng, 1990; Lupton and Tulloch, 2002). The gradual inclusion of social influences and motivations in psychological explanations of risk taking paved the way for edgework theory. For example, Heimer's (1988) discussion of 'social structure, psychology, and the estimation of risk' sought to introduce sociological perspectives to established psychological heuristics used by individuals to estimate risk. This approach reveals that social, cultural (and economic) factors also push individuals to seek risks of their own volition. The next section traces this conceptual development.

## Conceptual development of edgework

Tracing edgework theory's criminological and social psychological origins is important for understanding risk taking beyond the psychological, and incorporating the social, structural, and economic factors that affect individuals' propensity to take risks. The theory of edgework thus derives from social psychology (Lyng, 1990) and cultural criminology (see Katz, 1988 on the 'seductions of crime'). The term 'edgework' was first popularized by Hunter S. Thompson, an American 'gonzo' journalist who culturally

criticized the sociopolitical movements of his generation (Torrey and Simonson, 2008). Thompson was most famous for his studies of the illicit behaviour of a Hells Angels motorcycle gang, and of his own self-experiments with drugs and alcohol, and his thirst for adrenaline. His work on the Hells Angels led to an early formulation of 'edge work', in which he described risk taking as having 'to be *good* when you take nasty risks, or you'll lose it, and then you're in serious trouble… it's fun to lose it sometimes' (Vetter, 1974, cited in Torrey and Simonson, 2008: 9). Here, Thompson hinted at the skills needed for edgework and, perhaps more importantly for this study, the 'fun' in experiences of losing and regaining control. Thompson's earlier work highlighted the cultural and sensual attractions of risk taking with regard to reckless driving, alcohol and drug use, and sexual pleasures (Lyng, 2005), paving the way for novel consideration of voluntary risk taking.

Voluntary risk taking has been widely studied through a criminological lens, focusing particularly on illicit behaviours and deviance, such as robbery, shoplifting, and violence (Katz, 1988; Ferrell, 1999). Cultural criminology extended this remit by examining how subcultures and their movements are perceived in the mass media as criminogenic (Ferrell, 1999). Ferrell (1999) highlighted commonalities between criminal behaviour and subcultural behaviour, in that they both use symbols and rituals with shared meaning and mediated interactions and aesthetics. Understanding aspects of subcultural groups, such as their style and group dynamics, in relation to adrenaline seeking and illicit behaviours (Ferrell, 1999) furthered understanding of voluntary risk taking. Cultural criminologists explained the seductive nature of risky, criminal, and illicit behaviours by illuminating the pleasure and satisfactions derived by some people from these experiences (Katz, 1988), as opposed to engaging in crime solely due to structural factors such as poverty. Individuals are said to be attracted and

re-attracted to criminal and illicit behaviour because successfully undertaking such behaviours creates momentary transformative feelings, such as excitement and passion (Katz, 1988).

Edgework theory builds on these notions outlined by cultural criminologists. It emphasizes edgework as voluntary risk taking and a form of skills development to enable individuals to manage risks and feel in control of their lives. Furthermore, the emphasis on voluntary risk taking being 'seductive' (Katz, 1988; Lyng, 1990) lends itself to edgework theory in describing how the emotions and sensations of undertaking successful edgework are addictive and keep individuals going back for more. Rather than describing risk taking as solely coercive, for example owing to institutional or structural conditions, edgework theory also emphasizes volition and the experience. Ferrell (2004) argues that some types of criminal risk taking can be explained as being committed out of boredom. Boredom is a predominant 'structure of feeling' in contemporary society (Williams, 1977; Murphy, Hill, McDonagh and Flaherty, 2023), and edgework provides an opportunity to escape this boredom and 'recapture, if momentarily, the lost immediacy of self-made human experience' (Ferrell, 2004: 293; Lyng, 1990).

Having reinterpreted criminal and illicit behaviours, edgework theory applies the same principles to leisure consumption, including the emphasis on volition and experiential appeal. Such leisure consumption experiences are conducted in individuals' spare time and involve high degrees of risk, with the potential for serious injury or death (Lyng, 1990). Studies have typically focused on extreme sports, such as skydiving (Lyng and Snow, 1986; Lyng, 1990), BASE jumping (Ferrell et al., 2001), and rock climbing (Kiewa, 2002). Such activities emphasize Thompson's original ideas the skill involved in taking risks and the fun produced by navigating the risks (Vetter, 1974).

Fun can thus be likened to losing and subsequently regaining control, and the pumping of adrenaline when all else borders on chaos during edgework. The thrill and excitement that accompany successful regaining of control demonstrate the seductive power of edgework to produce such deep and powerful feelings (Hart, 2017) that individuals are lured back into losing control. Interestingly, the leisure activities examined in early accounts of edgework, including aspects of regaining control because of the constraining effects of late modernity and voluntary risk taking, are closely connected to ideas around masculinity. Moreover, these formative studies typically used mainly or solely male samples from which to conceptualize the theory.

## Edgework: A social psychological perspective on voluntary risk taking

Edgework theory seeks to make connections between individual risk-taking behaviour and broader structural forces to explain voluntary risk taking. By broadening the focus, edgework theory encompasses both individual psychology, including managing fear and the possibility of death, and critical questions about the type of society that creates such an appetite for risk (Lyng, 1990). To further link the social and psychological elements of risk taking, Lyng (1990) developed a framework synthesizing the ideas of Marx (Marx and Engels, 1976 [1932]) and Mead (1950 [1934]).

Lyng (1990) initially took Mead's (1950) concepts of the 'I' and the 'me', which consider selfhood as playing out on a continuum between institution and impulse. For Mead, the notion of the 'me' represents how individuals are constrained by the range of actions that are deemed socially acceptable. The 'me' thus refers to the ways that individuals are constrained, by showing how attitudes and patterns of action in social situations are shaped by the anticipated judgements of others. In simple terms, the 'voice of society' shapes individuals' possibilities for action. On the other hand, the 'I'

represents the part of the self that acts on impulse and is guided by the individual's ego. This is the creative, spontaneous, and impulsive part of an individual that 'exists only in the immediacy of the present moment' (Lyng, 1990: 867). Kidder (2006: 34) notes that 'in edgework, the "me" disappears as survival becomes purely a matter of moment-to-moment responses to the individual – the "I"'.

Building on Mead's (1950) dichotomy, Lyng (1990) also drew on Marx's (Marx and Engels, 1976) notion of the 'spontaneity–constraint' dialectic to help explain the alienation experienced by people in their working lives, and their consequent desire to evade constraint by seeking leisure activities that present opportunities for spontaneous action. For Marx, spontaneous action is creative action that can develop human capabilities (Lyng, 1990), such as concentration, skills, and rational thinking (Ollman, 1971). Individuals who engage in edgework seek risk in activities unconnected with their usually constrained and mundane lives which are controlled by institutional rules and regimes. Alienation and lack of control over daily work routines and everyday life push individuals into risk taking in their leisure activities (Miller, 2005), as people turn to edgework to compensate for feelings of helplessness (Lyng, 1990). Edgework experiences therefore offer temporary escape from society and from increasing economic exploitation, rationalization, and disenchantment, acting as a means to rebel against the constraints and forces of society (Worthen and Baker, 2016; Lyng, 2005). Edgework can thus be regarded as a way for individuals to regain control over their behaviours and choices (Worthen and Baker, 2016), which are lost to institutional routinization and social regulation. It can be viewed as a rational and therapeutic response to feelings of helplessness (Lyng, 1990) in the face of societal risk and threats, and as a cathartic means to continue to press on with the ordinary and mundane everyday occurrences of constrained life (Morrissey, 2008).

By weaving together Marx's (Marx and Engels, 1976) 'spontaneity–constraint' thesis and Mead's (1950) 'I/me' dialectic, Lyng (1990) aimed to show that individuals' propensity for voluntary risk taking may be shaped by broader social, cultural, and economic forces. Edgework can thus be understood as a response to the alienation of working lives in capitalist societies. It represents a way to express spontaneous, free, and creative action within this constraint, and a means to fulfil unmet needs created by capitalism and the consumer imperative (Lyng, 1990). In particular, edgework experiences support feelings of self-actualization and self-determination through successful completion of risky activities. Therefore, edgework can again be seen as a rational and therapeutic response to the helplessness felt by individuals in a constraining society. Only those with appropriate skills and survival capacities developed from such societies will succeed (Lyng, 1990). Extraordinary leisure experiences involving risk offer people an important escape from the mundane nature of their everyday lives (Arnould and Price, 1993). The theory of edgework thus explains voluntary risk taking in terms that encapsulate individuals and their motivations, emotions, and sensations, as well as the influence of the socioeconomic context in which the edgework takes place (Lyng, 1990). Interestingly, and importantly for the critique of edgework in Chapter 3, this synthesis used as a framework to explain the social and psychological aspects of edgework conveys the message that individuals learn such skills whilst struggling within a capitalist system. Ironically, the individuals whose leisure consumption was originally studied for edgework were 'White, middle-class, adult males', as Lyng (2005: 11) has acknowledged.

In more recent writings, Lyng (2005) turns away from his earlier notion of edgework as a response to alienation experienced in working lives and the absence of spontaneity and risk, to instead draw influence from Ulrich Beck's (1992) idea that edgework is a

means to prepare the self for operating within a risk society. On this basis, he argues that 'skills, competencies and symbolic resources deriving from leisure edgework have been increasingly in demand by risk societies evolving in the last two hundred years' (Lyng, 2005: 7). From this standpoint, Lyng (2005) suggests that edgework in leisure presents individuals with opportunities to prepare themselves by gaining experiences and skills to tackle risk, which are highly valued in a risk society. With closer attunement to Beck's (1992) risk society, the key difference from Lyng's earlier writings using the Marx/Mead framework, which constructed edgework as a response to alienation and lack of spontaneity, is that the leisure activities constituting edgework act as ways for individuals to prepare to function in a risk society, with rewards for those who manage to do so (Lyng, 2005).

Core components of edgework theory: Activities, skills, and sensations

This section focuses on Lyng's (1990) theory of edgework, outlining the activities that constitute edgework, the skills needed, and the sensations that edgework can produce. This theory develops earlier conceptualizations of voluntary risk taking (outlined above) about knowing one's limits when taking risks, and discusses this in terms of boundaries being negotiated and conquering the 'edge' when engaging in risk taking. The boundary edge is a thin line, and risk takers seek to get as close as possible to the 'edge' without going over it.

Edgework theory compromises three main components: edgework activities, edgework skills, and edgework sensations. All these are key to eliciting the edgework experience. Activities classed as edgework present clear and observable threats to individuals' physical or mental wellbeing, or their 'sense of an ordered existence', with the potential for life-changing injury or death (Lyng, 1990: 857). Such threats can be

categorized as boundaries that control the edgework experience and outcome. Boundaries include 'life versus death, consciousness versus unconsciousness, sanity versus insanity, an ordered sense of self and the environment versus a disordered self and the environment', chaos versus order (Lyng, 1990: 857), pleasure versus pain (Newmahr, 2011), and emotional boundaries (Lois, 2001).

*The 'edge'*

Key to understanding edgework theory is the concept of the 'edge'. The edge refers to the boundary that edgeworkers must work toward without crossing. Crossing this edge will result in serious injury or death, so successful risk takers use their skills to navigate close to it without crossing it. In navigating the boundaries associated with edgework, the edge is paramount to the experience. Laurendeau and Van Brunschot (2006) argue that the edge is a social construction, describing it as individualistic and unique to each person. How far individuals can go is determined by their skills and knowledge relating to the edge they are seeking to navigate, and their ability to know how far they can go while still returning safely from their edgework endeavour. This opportunity for self-discovery through boundary negotiation demonstrates ontological exploration in edgework (Lyng, 2014). Ontological exploration occurs through the feelings and sensations produced while negotiating the edge of a boundary.

The uniqueness of each boundary is constructed and interpreted by individuals from their own experiences (Ferrell, 2005). These experiences are drawn from the adrenaline rush and the hedonistic escape from the mundanity and rationalization of everyday life, and from not succumbing to the chaos of the moment (Reith, 2005) whilst progressing towards the edge. Knowing how far to test the limits of the edge is what separates the highly skilful (Kong, 2016) and living from those who have been unsuccessful and gone over the edge. Some authors see the edge as a circle, with

ideas of safety, stability, and security inside the circle, and notions of insecurity and instability outside and defined by the edge (Austin, 2010). Similar to Thompson's (1967) notion of working the edge, edgework encompasses the correct knowledge and skills set to successfully navigate the boundary's edge (Ferrell, 2005). Edges exist to remind edgeworkers of the potential for death. The edge cannot be crossed, and successful edgework involves maintaining sufficient control to avoid going over the edge at the height of the experience, when emotions and sensations are amplified and the challenge is at hand. Working towards and around the edge provides 'existential definition' at the edge of chaos (Ferrell, 2005: 76; Lyng, 2005). Being able to push oneself to the edge using a particular set of skills whilst testing the limits of the boundaries facilitates feelings of self-actualization (Kong, 2016). These feelings experienced at the edge also help to explain the seductive appeal of edgework. It provides temporary escape from the institutional routines of work and everyday life (Lyng, 2005) and the overregulation of social life in society (Ferrell, 2005). The edge therefore offers the particular 'magic' of being able to grab hold of the experience, whilst simultaneously allowing the individual to just let go (Ferrell, 2005). To experience the edge, activities deemed to be edgework must encompass voluntary, high risk taking.

*Edgework activities*

As previously mentioned, edgework activities involve a 'clearly observational threat to one's physical or mental well-being or one's sense of an ordered existence' (Lyng, 1990: 857), implying extremely high risk and existential threats with potential physical consequences (Kidder, 2022). Such activities push the boundary of chaos and order deemed most thrilling to master when at the edge (Lyng, 1990). This includes pushing the limits of both mental and physical capacities, and the technical and mechanical

limits of materials used to build skills for and control edgework (Lyng, 2014; Raggiotto and Scarpi, 2022). The more an activity borders on chaotic, with both mind and body being pushed to their full capacity, the more appealing the risk becomes experientially (Lyng, 1990, 2004). To illustrate these ideas in action, this section reviews accounts of edgework activities in the literature.

A plethora of studies demonstrate the extreme edges or limits encapsulated in edgework, and many explore traditional edgework activities associated with leisure consumption. Lyng's (1990) original ethnographic study focuses on the psychosocial experiences of skydivers, encompassing both social and psychological factors that contribute to the edgework experience. In this study, he shows that edgeworkers have essential innate abilities for undertaking and surviving risk, such as 'mental toughness' or cognitive ability to remain in control, and the 'right stuff' (Lyng, 1990; Laurendeau, 2008). The 'right stuff' refers to the risk-taking knowledge and skills necessary to successfully complete the risky activity without harm (Lyng, 1990; Laurendeau, 2006). Lyng (1990) deems both capacities as crucial for survival. Later studies also focus on skydiving. For example, Celsi, Rose and Leigh (1993) investigate the motivations, behaviours, and experiences of those who seek voluntary high-risk activities, and Laurendeau (2006) focuses on skydivers to explore how edgeworkers maintain control when navigating the edge. Other edgework activities include rock, ice, and alpine climbing (Kiewa, 2002; Bunn, 2017, 2022), and BASE jumping, which involves jumping from fixed points with a parachute (Ferrell et al., 2001).

Ferrell et al. (2001) examine BASE jumpers at the annual 'Bridge Day' jump, where thousands of BASE jumpers meet for one day to legally jump from the New River Gorge Bridge in West Virginia. They focus on the jumpers' mediated practices, seeking to capture the ineffability of and edgework, and its consequent transformative effects.

Edgeworkers feel more ‘alive’ after edgework, having gained control and faced their fear (Scott and Austin, 2016; Ferrell et al., 2001; Milovanovic, 2005). In a study of high-speed motorcycling as edgework, Murphy and Patterson (2011) show how feelings of omnipotence and power experienced during edgework activities contribute to edgeworkers’ sense of self. Similarly, mistakes made during edgework prompt significant self-reflection, owing to the potential severity of getting it wrong again. Thus, edgework activities may also contribute to personal growth and feelings of self-actualization (Laurendeau, 2006; Murphy and Patterson, 2011).

Edgework has since been applied to a multiplicity of high-risk activities, spanning many disciplines and utilizing various samples. Edgework research initially focused particularly on activities requiring substantial monetary investments in equipment, insurance, licenses, and so on, as exemplified in the studies cited above. However, edgework is no longer limited to expensive, middle-class extreme sports (Laurendeau, 2008; for examples, see Laurendeau, 2006; Ferrell et al., 2001), as other theorists have sought to explore voluntary risk taking using edgework. More recently, the edgework lens has been applied to activities such as sex work and sex consumption, including Kong’s (2016) qualitative research on Hong Kong men who buy sex. Kong (2016) argues that these men are engaging in a form of edgework that navigates the boundaries of risk and pleasure, chaos and order. He concludes that the men who buy sex are seen as resisting the norms of companionship, arguing that edgework can play a role in how intimacy is negotiated in late-modern society. In a similar vein, Tsang (2019) notes similarities between sex work and other edgework activities, such as excitement, personal pleasure, skills development, and interpersonal networks. Focusing on the ethnographic experiences of female sex workers, she demonstrates that the women must navigate boundaries in terms of potential benefits and

consequences. Jordenö and Horning (2022) also explore sex work. They employ visualization methods to better understand risk-taking activities in the urban landscape, particularly using hand-drawn mental maps of where the participants worked in New York City. With regard to edgework, their study focuses on the sensations of risk-taking activity in the sex marketplace, providing a better understanding of lived experiences, motivations, and social relations. Edgework research also includes work on sexual pleasures and sadomasochism, such as Newmahr's (2011) feminist approach to better understand women's voluntary risk taking and boundaries. By deconstructing edgework theory and drawing on her ethnographic work, Newmahr (2011) aims for edgework to encompass an even wider range of thrill-seeking behaviours, despite perpetuating women's experiences as overly emotional.

Other studies appropriate edgework theory to examine excessive alcohol and food consumption, which Cronin et al. (2014) describe as a 'carnivalesque' style of indulgent consumption. Taking a different approach to edgework, they describe the edges of control with regard to consumption choices in terms of individuals and groups, and their related risks. They highlight a collective form of edgework that offers opportunities for more authentic and intense social experiences. Collective edgework is also researched by Pawson and Kelly (2022), who focus on binge drinking and misuse of prescription drugs by young adults, in terms of peer bonding. They use edgework as a framework to understand the contradiction between impulse and constraint in nightlife, particularly with regard to misuse of psychostimulant medication.

Taking a slightly different turn from sex and food consumption, edgework theory has also been applied to many other activities, such as video gaming and e-sports (Raggiotto and Scarpi, 2022). Raggiotto and Scarpi (2022) focus on the wellbeing of

those engaging in e-sports (as in traditional sports), adopting a virtual edgework lens that enables the development of an insightful theoretical framework to understand consumers' virtual behaviour and wellbeing. Avilés et al. (2021) adopt edgework theory in examining emotional management by organ donation nurses. They suggest that the nurses are on an emotional 'edge' when approaching families about organ donation, and extend this emotional edge to make sense of their experiences (Avilés et al., 2021). In a similar healthcare setting, Granter et al. (2019) draw on edgework theory to explore the complexities of emergency ambulance workers as they negotiate the rewards and risks of their work intensity. In another occupational study, Ward, McMurray and Sutcliffe (2019) use edgework theory to explore the boundary 'edge' of safety and danger in accounts presented by police officers, prison officers, and door(wo)men, as agents of social control. They explore physical and emotional pain, and different gendered conceptualizations of emotional labour (Ward et al., 2019). Channon (2020) also offers an interesting and different lens through which to explore edgework activities. Using mixed martial arts (MMA) as the edgework activity, he provides an account of the paradox of MMA as 'violent', and the motivations of those wanting to engage in something so 'violent' with those they respect. Channon (2020) also contends that as an edgework activity, MMA is appealing because it offers the opportunity to experience identity construction and community formation. A final example of edgework is Walby and Evans-Boudreau's (2021) exploration of the experiences of women tree planters in Canada. They explore the edgework paradox, in that edgework provides an escape from late modernity by controlling the body under conditions of risk, yet involves a laborious monotony preserved by the structural conditions of alienation being escaped from. Interestingly, Walby and Evans-Boudreau (2021) reveal that the women tree planters' performance enables them to challenge

the culture of hegemonic masculinity that enforces a hierarchy of appropriate gender performance and gender identity.

Importantly, early conceptualizations of edgework and related studies produced an abundance of literature focusing on the edgework experiences of men, as the original conceptualization used a male sample. The edgework literature focused excessively on men's experiences (Walby and Evans-Boudreau, 2021), and produced a somewhat androcentric theory. In recent years, studies like those outlined above and in the next chapter have sought to apply edgework theory to women's experiences and incorporate them into the theory. For example, Jennifer Lois's (2001) seminal paper compares the differential behaviours and experiences of men and women mountain rescue volunteers. This switch to incorporating and understanding the experiences of women has led to greater focus in the literature on the emotional, psychological, and interpersonal skills (Newmahr, 2011; Ward et al., 2019; Avilés et al., 2021) employed in edgework. Nevertheless, owing to the initial conceptualization of edgework using men (Lyng and Matthews, 2007; Laurendeau, 2008) and tending to 'disproportionately focus on the experiences of men' (Walby and Evans-Boudreau, 2021: 715), the theory still has inherent masculine biases. Miller (1991) criticizes the theory's essentialization of gender, which establishes a baseline against which all experiences of edgework are evaluated, including those of women, informed by and formulated from early (masculine) samples (see Chapter 3). The next section focuses on the skills needed for edgework.

*Edgework skills*

Edgework skills encompass the technical and mechanical skills needed for successful edgework, and the skills needed to navigate the 'edge' (Lyng, 1990; Lyng and Matthews, 2007). The term 'skills' here refers to specific capabilities and techniques

required to take part in edgework. Skilful completion and survival of high-risk activities (Lyng, 1990) requires the development and honing of unique and specific skills in order to maintain control over situations and activities that seem out of control (Pawson and Kelly, 2022). In an example of the skills needed to get close to the edge without crossing over, Lyng (1990) describes how a skydiver navigated the boundary between life and death when faced with a parachute malfunction. In overcoming this, the skydiver said: 'I wasn't thinking at all – I just did what I had to do. It was the right thing to do.' He used the right skills and knowledge, developed through experience, to navigate the boundary edge. Although such skills are key to successful edgework, some edgeworkers explain successes in terms of their innate survival capacity (Lyng, 1990), essentially in terms of the skills necessary for survival (Lyng and Matthews, 2007). For example, having an appropriate skillset and knowledge of parachuting prior to a jump, including awareness of oneself and others when jumping, the technicalities and timings of parachute opening, landing speeds, and positioning, will gradually enable successful edgework and, in turn, more daring and extreme jumps (Lyng, 1990). Therefore, once developed, these skills ensure edgeworkers' survival, without which they might kill or seriously injure others (Balfe, 2022). These skills are based on control, trust, and intuition, rather than on non-rational strategies such as hope and fate as non-edgeworkers might believe (Balfe, 2022; Peretti-Watel and Moatti, 2006; Zinn, 2008, 2019). Such skills enable individuals to go closer and closer to the 'edge' each time without crossing the boundary.

Edgeworkers are therefore said to possess a very particular set of skills to navigate boundary edges, acquired through significant practice over time, such as 'honing of the body, the mastery of its skills' (Bunn, 2017: 10; Balfe, 2022). Lyng (1990) suggests that edgeworkers deem two particular skills to be important for edgework: having the

‘right stuff’ and ‘mental toughness’. He explains mental toughness as having the mindset to successfully navigate situations or activities and remain in control when all else seems chaotic and uncontrollable (Lyng, 1990, 2014). He describes this as an innate ability for survival in edgework. Mental toughness incorporates both psychological and emotional management strategies that enable individuals to keep pushing towards the edge (Lyng, 1990; Newmahr, 2011). This form of self-regulation (Cronin et al., 2014) is seen as an essential cognitive ability, described in the original study as an innate skill (Lyng 1990). It has been conceptualized elsewhere as ‘calculated hedonism’, which is a type of ‘planned letting go’ (Szmigin et al., 2008: 361). Interestingly, mental toughness is described as a form of emotional regulation that enables people to feel in control while pursuing the edge. This perspective implies that emotional stoicism is required to maintain control when navigating boundaries and chaos, an issue discussed further in Chapter 3.

The second skill that Lyng (1990, 2005) outlines is the ‘right stuff’. This refers to the knowledge and skills required to engage in edgework without being harmed. Like mental toughness, edgeworkers themselves describe the right stuff as being an innate and essential ability for survival (Lyng, 1990; Laurendeau, 2006). Possessing the right stuff when taking high risks encompasses managing the boundary of chaos and order, performing well on the edge, and framing this effectively as control (Laurendeau, 2006). Rather than the right stuff being about skills that are learned, Laurendeau (2006) talks about it as ‘the illusion of control’ that edgeworkers commonly use to explain and justify their decisions to take voluntary risks. He explains that belief in this ability gives edgeworkers comfort by bolstering belief in their ability to control the uncontrollable. He also finds that edgeworkers revert to this idea to explain why some people go over the edge, noting that participants commonly mentioned that they did

not have the ‘right stuff’ (Laurendeau, 2006). Belief that this innate ability will keep them from harm allows edgeworkers to avoid facing the true extent of the dangers of edgework (Murphy and Patterson, 2011). Furthermore, Murphy and Patterson (2011) suggest that lapses in concentration and mistakes that do not result in serious injury or death may contribute to edgeworkers’ belief in their own abilities (Laurendeau, 2006) and bolster belief in their possession of the right stuff. In Lois’s (2001) study, male rescue volunteers were argued to possess more of the right stuff than women because they were better suited to graphic and gruesome rescue missions, owing to a stronger belief in their skills before, during, and after the rescues. Like mental toughness, the right stuff is commonly conceived in the edgework literature as a skill possessed by men. Lyng and Matthews (2007: 89) postulate that such skills for survival are rooted in ‘traditional discourses of masculinity’ in which men seek control of their ‘emotional and mental environment’.

Belief in the right stuff as a survival capacity (Lyng, 1990; Kong, 2016) encompasses a huge skills set, involving detailed knowledge of every risk, employing the correct behaviours at the most appropriate moments (Laurendeau, 2006), and having confidence (Lois, 2001) in oneself to avoid going over the edge. Others propose the notion of ‘creeping the edge’, explaining how some edgeworkers gradually reach the edge over time rather than instantaneously. In particular, Cronin et al. (2014) examine gamers’ excessive ingestion of calorie-dense food and hipsters’ consumption of alcohol to show how control over consumption may be exercised to manage the risks of the immediate edge, whilst simultaneously ‘creeping’ gradually towards a more distant ‘edge’ (future ill-health). It is not a single episode of consumption that takes them over the edge, but collective episodes over time (Cronin et al., 2014). The idea of creeping the edge is also illustrated in Gailey’s (2009) study of anorexia. She

demonstrates that in this case the edge is in the distance and is constructed as a trajectory. Repeated patterns of behaviour, including starvation, build a trajectory towards the edge and gain momentum along the way, leading to other problems and disorders. In these various ways, the idea of the right stuff enables edgeworkers to pursue the edge.

In addition to belief in these innate skills, edgework also includes psychological and social processes necessary for risk taking. Studies highlight that successful edgework necessitates skills such as emotional resilience, confidence, and control (Lois, 2001). Interestingly, the literature highlights apparent gender differences between the experiences of men and women, arguing that men are better suited to the extreme situations of edgework because they possess the 'right' skills set (Lois, 2001; Newmhar, 2011). As edgework produces a vast array of emotions, emotional management is also a crucial skill for survival. The literature perpetuates stereotypical depictions of women as overly emotional and unable to control their emotions (Newmahr, 2011), and as doing more emotional labour, such as suppressing or faking emotions (Birze, Paradis, Regehr, LeBlanc and Einstein, 2022). Other skills identified as crucial for surviving edgework include self-efficacy, self-competency (Celsi et al., 1993; Olivier, 2006), and composure of the body and mind (Lyng, 2014).

An interesting aspect is the implication that the mind is essential for surviving edgework, in pushing away emotions and remaining in control. Again, it is implied that the skills necessary for edgework, particularly those that involve and emphasize the mind, are masculine (Lyng and Matthews, 2007), partly because edgework theory was initially researched specifically in relation to men (Laurendeau, 2008; Lyng and Matthews, 2007). Androcentrism and masculine ideologies (Newmahr, 2011; Naegler and Salman, 2016) are inherent in the edgework literature. Lyng's (2016) later writings

on edgework encompass the changes of modernity and risk in society, but still do not acknowledge women and their experiences of edgework. As discussed further in Chapter 3, the skills viewed as essential for edgework include physical, technical, and mechanical skills, as well as psychological and, to an extent, emotional skills derived from masculinized ideologies and experiences.

In navigating the boundary edges using the skills essential for control and survival, edgework also encompasses sensations and feelings associated with successful completion, creating phenomenological and transformative feelings. These sensations of edgework are discussed next.

*Edgework sensations and emotions*

The concept of 'edgework sensations' offers a more phenomenological perspective on risk taking (Lyng, 2004), focusing on the range of sensations experienced before, during, and after successful completion of edgework. Arguably the most important aspect of edgework, edgework sensations help to explain the attraction and addictive nature of voluntary risk taking. Many edgeworkers report experiencing euphoric feelings from edgework (Lyng, 2004). These are commonly explained as being the product of exercising control over chaos and mastering the skills and apparatus of edgework. Success is not viewed as the product of 'fate', despite the apparently mystical quality associated with edgework (Lyng, 1990, 2005). Researchers note that the feelings commonly experienced during edgework are very similar to those reported from deviant activities. For example, feelings such as excitement, adventure, challenge, and enchantment (Lofland, 1969) are common on successful completion of edgework (Lyng, 2004). Anxiety and fear are converted into excitement, thrill, and omnipotence following safe return from the edge (Lyng, 1990, 2004). This emotional

journey and transformation helps to explain the seductive character of edgework (Katz, 1988; Lyng, 2006).

Edgework produces a range of transformational emotions and sensations, such as self-direction (Kidder, 2022), self-actualization (Beals, Kidman and Funaki, 2020; Austin, 2010), self-realization, self-determination, self-reflexivity, and self-competence (Lyng, 1990). These typically emerge during self-reflection following successful return from the edge, and account for the possibility of personal growth (Lyng, 2004). On completion of the edgework, individuals commonly experience a fleeting sense of omnipotence from surviving the edge and conquering the fear and anxiety experienced in the anticipatory stage of edgework (Lyng, 1990; Rajah, 2007). Others report feeling special (Shay, 2015) and empowered (Hart, 2017), whilst enjoying the opportunity for personal growth, self-efficacy, self-worth, and authenticity from their success (Lyng, 1990; Celsi et al., 1993).

This novel understanding of risk taking tempers common perceptions of individuals who take voluntarily risks as being irrational or impulsive. Intense feelings of power and omnipotence are typically experienced only after the edgework has been successfully completed. For example, Lyng (1990, 2005) finds that some edgeworkers describe a ‘purified sense of self’ after the experience. In attempting to articulate an experience that is in many ways ineffable (Lyng, 1990), others describe feelings of euphoria (Worthen and Baker, 2016). The experience of risking their lives and facing death, using their honed skills and knowledge to maintain control in this seemingly chaotic experience, makes edgeworkers feel ‘acutely alive’ (Schubart, 2019: 163). People find the intensity of sensations and emotions experienced during edgework difficult to describe, and some even say that they actively avoid talking about it in case it ‘contaminates’ their own experience of it (Lyng, 1990: 862).

As edgeworkers gain experience and develop their skills, research shows that the level of risk they are prepared to take tends to increase (Murphy and Patterson, 2011). Coined as ‘crowding the edge’ (Lyng,1990), this involves taking greater risks than previously (Laurendeau, 2008). It can also be applied to the arenas in which edgeworkers take their risks, moving out from where they usually take their risks, and applying their skills to other forms of risk taking. It gives rise to transformational sensations and feelings, and may encourage edgeworkers to try additional forms of edgework (Lyng, 1990). This demonstrates the addictive nature of edgework and its sensations, including omnipotence, ineffability, and control over the environment (Lyng, 2012). At the height of the edgework experience, some edgeworkers lose sense of time, and describe ‘their body and mind seeming to meld with objects around them’ (Kidder, 2022: 188). It is intoxicating, and leaves edgeworkers with a heightened sense of self from reaching inside their selves to find and deploy finely honed skills to control chaos and death (Kidder, 2022; Lyng, 1990), even altering reality for them in the moment.

A kind of hyperreality is experienced in edgework, where ‘the world as it was momentarily gives way to a new order – one where the edgeworker feels counterintuitively in control of the surrounding chaos’ (Kidder, 2022: 188). Hyperreality occurs when the intensity of emotions and sensations felt during edgework make the experience feel more ‘real’ than everyday life (Lyng, 1990). This leaves many feeling that they get closer to their ‘true’ selves in the ‘other world’ of edgework (Lyng, 2005), living beyond the institutional routine and societal reification of who survives and who dies (Courtney, 2005; Lyng, 1990), and escaping the institutional regimes of ‘ordinary’ life (Lyng, 2005). Experiencing hyperreality in edgework tends to blur the boundaries between normative and unconstrained practice, and even illegal behaviour (Lyng,

2005). This hyperreal state involves temporal and spatial blurring, with altered perceptions of time, environment, and consciousness. At the height of the edgework experience, individuals report time getting faster or slowing down, with hours feeling like minutes, and vice versa (Lyng, 1990).

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) reports similar features in the concept of 'flow', a state of consciousness and concentration that involves individuals becoming fully absorbed in the experience. Their sense of time disappears and emotional problems cease within the flow experience. Individuals feel (self-)transcendence and loss of self-awareness when losing control, producing addictive experiences to which they keep returning (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Unlike edgework, flow can be achieved through any activity, from reading to extreme sports, yet the transformational feelings and altered perception of the self are the same. Thus, the phenomenological nature of edgework intersects with highly emotional and psychological processes to create a hyperreal and transformative experience. This brings the psychological together with the social to further elaborate on edgework. Ironically, such phenomenological experiences are not usually discussed by edgeworkers for fear of contaminating their experiences (Courtney, 2005). This is said to create an 'elitist orientation' by those who have experienced such sensations of edgework due to their skills, capacities, and knowledge (Lyng, 1990, 2005).

It is important to remember that the early conceptualization of edgework, which described the individual as having an 'elite status' (Lyng, 1990: 860), was based on the experiences of white, middle-class, heterosexual men (Laurendeau, 2008; Lyng, 2005) and neither encompassed nor reflected the experiences and feelings of all individuals (O'Malley and Mugford, 1994). Early studies perpetuated this sample and dominated the literature. However, Lois's (2001) seminal paper comparing the

experiences of men and women marked a turning point in the edgework literature, as a result of which women's experiences have been incorporated and studied in greater depth. Also of particular note is Laurendeau's (2006, 2008) research seeking to explain the masculinities of edgework and provide a more balanced view. More recently, research specifically on women's experiences has increased, providing more feminist accounts of edgework (for examples of this more feminist thinking, see Olstead, 2011; Newmahr, 2011). This body of literature highlights the need for researchers to consider the ways that understandings of voluntary risk taking are gendered – a call that this research takes up in the next chapter.

## Conclusion

This chapter has focused on outlining edgework theory. It started by reviewing literature offering psychological explanations of risk taking that influenced the conceptualization of edgework. Psychological explanations of risk taking tended to focus on individual factors, such as personality type (Klausner, 1968), estimation of risk (Heimer, 1988), and judgement (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974), and emphasized risk taking as a negative process or outcome of a situation. Psychological explanations of risk taking were therefore reductionist, focusing only on the individual rather than accounting for other factors that affect the propensity for risk taking. Psychological explanations of risk taking then started to include the influence of social factors, emphasizing experience and control.

Building on this foundation, edgework theory, as outlined by Lyng (1990), sought to include a sociological perspective on psychological explanations of risk taking to create a social psychological approach to voluntary risk taking. This included accounting for both micro and psychological factors and macro and social factors in

risk taking, as demonstrated in the Marx/Mead synthesis. Edgework represents a form of escapism that allows people to regain a sense of control by seeking the ‘edge’ and negotiating the boundaries of life and death, chaos and order (Lyng, 1990). Unsuccessful boundary negotiation results in life-changing injury or death. Therefore, the activities that constitute edgework must pose a significant threat to individuals, testing their skills and capacities to navigate the edge. These include skills that edgeworkers commonly believe to be innate to the individual, such as mental toughness to push on when all else borders on chaos, and the right stuff to remain in control. Success results in transformative feelings and a range of intense sensations. The edgework experience usually begins with feelings of fear and anxiety, but at the height of the experience emotions typically disappear as the edgeworker is subsumed by the need to remain in control when faced with chaos. The feelings experienced after the experience may be transformational, with edgeworkers feeling purified with a heightened sense of self (Lyng, 1990; Kidder, 2022), and feeling more alive (Schubart, 2019).

The main aim of this chapter has been to outline edgework theory and its components. It has also begun to highlight the inherent masculinities deeply ingrained in the theory. These resulted from its initial conceptualization focusing on the experiences of white, middle-class, heterosexual men (Laurendeau, 2008; Lyng, 2005), and subsequent studies utilizing the same types of sample. Consequently, edgework behaviours were codified as masculine, such as mental toughness and the right stuff, and a masculinized baseline norm of experience was established against which all experiences of edgework were to be compared, including women and other non-hegemonic masculinities. The next chapter further elucidates these points by adopting

a gender lens to examine the edgework literature, focusing particularly on key works by Judith Butler (2007, 2004, 2011, 2016, 2020; Butler et al., 2000).

## Chapter Three. Gender, performativity, and edgework

This chapter considers the relationship between gender, performativity, and edgework, highlighting the influential work of Judith Butler (1990, 2000, 2004, 2011, 2016, 2020) and its relevance to the empirical and analytical concerns of this thesis. The central argument of the chapter, drawing on insights from Butler and other relevant literature, is that edgework theory is gendered in two distinct but interrelated ways. First, it is gendered because, prior to Lois's (2001) study comparing the differential edgework experiences of men and women, initial studies of edgework (discussed in Chapter 2) utilized male-only samples. Therefore, the concept of edgework, as it was initially developed and continues to be applied in the sociological literature, has a residual hegemonically masculine bias, which has created and perpetuated a baseline, masculine experiential and perceptual 'norm'. Second, as a result of this masculine bias, edgework behaviours have become codified as masculine, as also highlighted in Chapter 2. For example, skills such as mastery, control, and possession of the right stuff have come to be understood as masculine skills essential to successful edgework. In turn, this frames women's experiences as deviant (Worthen and Baker, 2016; Newmahr, 2011), a process that contributes to stigmatization of women's engagement in edgework. The continued presence of this discourse has led to marginalization of the lived experiences of women in the edgework literature. This means that even in empirical edgework research focusing specifically on women, women tend to be represented as possessing negative characteristics that undermine their capacity to engage in edgework, or such engagement is framed as 'gender deviant'. Women are also positioned as being overly emotional (Newmahr, 2011) or unsuited to edgework activities (Lois, 2001), and therefore as lacking the essential survival skills associated with edgework, as also discussed in Chapter 2.

Taking this critique as its starting point and seeking to develop it further by drawing on insights from feminist writing on gender performativity, this chapter focuses on the work of Judith Butler. It develops and applies a Butlerian lens to the edgework literature in order to demonstrate the problems associated with applying edgework theory to women's experiences. It begins by summarizing Butler's most relevant work, including classic texts such as *Gender Trouble* (2007) and *Bodies that Matter* (2011), as well as more recent writing on vulnerability (Butler, 2016). Applying a Butlerian lens to the edgework literature shows how edgework takes on another meaning when studied as a gendered phenomenon, involving an ontological risk that women undertake when engaging in high-risk activities *as women*. The chapter also highlights how the established literature reveals relatively little about the social, psychological, and structural characteristics that influence and shape women's experiences as edgeworkers. In assuming the masculine baseline norm referred to above, the mainstream literature tends to stigmatize women's experiences as deviant, or neglects the significance of gender difference entirely.

As noted in Chapter 1, high-risk leisure activities have become increasingly popular and commercialized, making the 'impossible' seem tangible (Arnould and Price, 1993). Such activities include elements of aerial performance, with many gyms and dance studios now offering aerial fitness classes, partly owing to the popularity of aerial circus performances such as the Cirque du Soleil. In order to understand how this increasing popularity is experienced by women, and how contemporary forms of edgework are gendered, this chapter has three main sections. The first outlines relevant insights from Judith Butler's writing on gender performativity, hegemony, gender binaries and hierarchies, materiality, the heterosexual matrix, undoing gender, and vulnerability. The second applies a Butlerian lens to edgework to further unpack research on

women's experiences of edgework and demonstrate how the meaning of edgework changes when conceived through a gendered lens, particularly on the basis of a performative ontology. This will introduce the significance of studying and understanding the 'extra edgework' that women undertake because of their gender, and because the behaviours, sensations, skills, and emotions of edgework are codified as typically masculine. The third section examines the academic, largely sociological literature on gender and edgework, focusing on the experiences of women and including a critical evaluation of some of the edgework literature outlined in Chapter 2 in light of Butler's work.

This chapter focuses particularly on Butler's earlier writings. *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*, amongst many other classic works, have influenced literature across multiple disciplines, spanning philosophy, sociology, and politics. Although Butler's writing has evolved considerably since these two texts were published, for this thesis I was most drawn to the original theoretical ideas articulated in the earlier writings. This is because it is in these texts that Butler introduces and elaborates on the performative theory of gender, and it is this aspect of Butler's work, in particular, that underpins the feminist, gendered critique of edgework developed in this thesis.

## Butler's performative ontology of gender

Butler's work on gender and how it is enacted and re-enacted provides an important and insightful theoretical lens through which to understand women's experiences of edgework. According to Butler (2007: 191), gender is an identity created over time through 'stylized repetition of acts', materialized through signs and meanings attached to the gender through which individuals bring their subjectivity into being. Gender is understood as a series of accomplishments rather than dispositions (Butler, 1995). For

Butler (2007, 2011), gender hegemony is perpetuated through the compulsion to enact gender according to a binary, hierarchical ontology of sex, gender, and sexuality, or what Butler calls the ‘heterosexual matrix’. Sex is ‘not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is: it will be one of the norms by which the “one” becomes viable at all’ (Butler, 2011: xii). What Butler calls ‘gender performativity’ is not a singular act, but is repetitive and ritualistic; it is the process through which subjectivity emerges as a result of sustaining a credible gender performance (Butler, 1999; Stryker and McCarthy Blackston, 2023). A credible gender performance refers to an individual’s recognizable gender attributes and acts. The desired gender recognition can be achieved through repeated and coherent normative gendered acts (Butler, 2007), which are much more than just the clothes worn on a given day, but are a sustained performance and citation of gender norms in order to be able to achieve a recognizable, liveable, gender-coherent identity. Therefore, gender as recognizable and intelligible runs deeper than a surface appearance. Butler (2007: 23) states:

> Intelligible genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire. In other words, the spectres of discontinuity and incoherence, themselves thinkable only in relation to existing norms of continuity and coherence, are constantly prohibited and produced by the very laws that seek to establish causal or expressive lines of connection among biological sex, culturally constituted genders, and the ‘expression’ or ‘effect’ of both in the manifestation of sexual desire through sexual practice.

For gender to be recognized and counted as credible and intelligible, biological sex, gender, and sexuality must all align coherently with societal expectations of gender norms, for example men displaying hegemonic masculinities and being attracted to women. Failure to align these with such naturalized societal expectations of gender norms will result in misrecognition of gender, and denial or disavowal of subjectivity. Gender is therefore a complex phenomenon.

The most pertinent aspect of Butler's (2007, 2011) theory of gender performativity to this study is that it critiques how normative behaviour is constrained and compelled. Butler (1999: xxi) defines normative gender as being a result of:

> The mundane violence performed by certain kinds of gender ideals … But the term 'normative' also pertains to ethical justification, how it is established, and what concrete consequences proceed therefrom.

Thus, the word 'normative' and its actions become naturalized or justified as expected behaviours associated with each gender, which constrains and compels that gender into particular ways of behaving. This naturalization of what constitutes 'normative' in relation to gender demonstrates that gender is performative. Butler (2009) emphasizes gender as enacting what is usually mistaken for a sign of inherent truth; that is, as natural or 'pre-social'. For example, women are perceived to be more risk-averse than men (Borghans, Golsteyn, Heckman and Meijers, 2009; Karmarkar, 2023), and negotiation of what this means compels and constrains appropriately gendered behaviour. Furthermore, this normalization compels individuals to enact their gender identity in accordance with the normative expectations attached to their biological sex, gender, and sexuality. Non-conformity and resistance lead to ostracism and misrecognition, and those involved are positioned as 'spectres of discontinuity and incoherence', as noted above (Butler, 2007: 23, 2011). To elucidate the roles played by power and recognition in shaping gender performativity in this way, Butler's reading of the concept of 'hegemony' is important, particularly for understanding how power operates and perpetuates the gender status quo.

*Hegemony, hierarchy, and gender binaries*

Butler's (2007) use of hegemony is influenced by Marxist thinker, Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci's (1971) conception of hegemony emphasizes how the bourgeoisie exerts power and dominance, and in doing so maintains social norms. The concept focuses

particularly on maintaining consensus and dominance over oppressed groups through hegemonic ideologies that naturalize the order and interests of those in power, involving constant struggles and contests (Gramsci, 1971; Edley and Wetherell, 1999). In relation to gender, hegemony functions as a way to present the ideologies of the dominant as natural: women must accept their subordination to men because that is just 'how things are' (Paechter, 2018). Individuals must therefore choose whether to conform with this naturalization, including women's subordinate position, or engage in resistance and challenge the reproduction of power (Murgia and Poggia, 2013). Connell's (1995, 2002) work on gender and hegemonic masculinity describes this as the practices of shaping gender through time, in which one particular type becomes idealized. This serves the dominant groups in society by naturalizing their interests, while those who do not conform or recognize themselves as this 'ideal' type are marginalized and become subordinate (Connell, 1995, 2002; Murgia and Poggia, 2013).

Developing the concept of hegemony in feminist organization studies, Joan Acker (1990) notes that dominant conceptualizations of 'ideal' organizations originated using men's reality and standpoint, presenting these gendered perceptions and ideals as if they were gender neutral. Acker's work emphasizes hegemony's deep embeddedness in social and organizational life, perpetuating hegemonic masculinities, behaviours, and attitudes, and a 'hierarchy of masculinities' (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 846).

Butler et al.'s (2000) concept of hegemony echoes that of Gramsci, with a focus on how power functions to shape our everyday understanding of social relations. Importantly, Butler's work is influenced by Louis Althusser and George W. F. Hegel. Hegel's influence is notable in Butler's writings on the desire for recognition. Most

pertinent here is how identity is generated by power and through repeated cultural acts (Butler, 2010), meaning that gender performativity and identity are never fixed or stable. Althusser's (2001 [1970]) influence on many of Butler's writings is based on his notion of misrecognition as the effect of institutional and ideological interpellation, a process through which individuals are addressed and called/hailed into being. Interpellation, in the Butlerian sense, means 'hailing' or addressing an individual within specific social contexts and power relations (Hales and Tyler, 2022). In Althusser's (2001) account, when an individual is interpellated by a police officer and the individual turns in response, it is when they are recognized (addressed, hailed) that they become a subject. Butler draws from Hegel, Gramsci and Althusser to develop a theory of how gender is shaped by power relations (Butler et al., 2000; Laurendeau, 2008), particularly through discourses of naturalization. Thus, Butler (2007) argues that gender hierarchies and binaries are maintained through gendered power struggles for recognition, enacted within social contexts shaped by unequal power relations.

*Gender binaries and hierarchies*

To understand this critique of hegemony and the normative basis of gender performativity, Butler's approach to gender hierarchies and binaries must be considered. Butler's (2007) critique is based on the view that individuals conform or are compelled to enact the gender that is most like their anatomical sex, as this is what is naturalized and normalized through hegemonic discourses and heteronormativity. This complements Butler's (2007) argument that gender precedes sex, in that according to performative theory, inscriptions of culturally defined femininity and masculinity define sex. Butler sees this as a strategy for naturalizing domination/hegemony within and through the gender binary:

> The binary relation between culture and nature promotes a relationship of hierarchy in which culture freely 'imposes' meaning on nature, and, hence, renders it into an 'Other' to be appropriated to its own limitless uses, safeguarding the ideality of the signifier and the structure of signification on the model of domination (Butler, 2007: 50).

This binary normalizes and naturalizes particular societal expectations that organize gender, sex, and desire into both a causal, linear relationship and a hierarchy (Maclaran, 2015). Ideology frames this as natural, upholding established power relations by privileging (straight) males and masculinities through a perpetuation of gender binaries and hierarchies. As straight/cis males and their experiences (their intelligibility and subjectivity) are privileged in order to safeguard, and consequently naturalize, what is seen as the 'natural order', gender hierarchies are (re)produced in ways that privilege normative masculinity, whilst subordinating women and rendering 'non-heteronormative' men Other, as explained in Butler's quote above. Again, this highlights the hegemonic capacity and basis of heteronormativity, demonstrating how heterosexuality becomes naturalized, normalized, and functions as a precondition for gender recognition.

*The heterosexual matrix*

Butler's (2007) earlier writings demonstrate how accepted displays of normative gender, which are afforded recognition, conform with what Butler calls the 'heterosexual matrix':

> I use the term *heterosexual matrix …* to designate that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized … to characterize a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality (Butler, 2007: 208, original emphasis).

Thus, the heterosexual matrix is a model of gender comprehension that perpetuates gender ideology, enabling individuals to make sense of gender expressions, such as femininity (normatively) expressing female and masculinity expressing male. This also includes behaviours that are perceived to be ‘normal’, in the sense that there are clear gender binaries, such as male/female and masculinity/femininity, and these gender binaries are framed as (normatively) attracted to the opposite sex (Butler, 2007; Maclaran, 2017). Butler et al. (2000: 99–100) also describe these behaviours as acting as a ‘self-supporting signifying economy that wields power in the marking off of what can and cannot be thought within the terms of cultural intelligibility’. Through the conditions of the heterosexual matrix, the desire for recognition comes to be organized or ordered in binary and hierarchical terms, in ways that compel or constrain individuals into a very limited performative repertoire in order to secure recognition (Tyler, 2019).

Hence, conforming with the heterosexual matrix also helps to privilege (straight/cis) males and masculinities through the creation of gender binaries and hierarchies (Tyler and Cohen, 2010). The heterosexual matrix demonstrates how heterosexuality, gender ideology, and gender hegemony are naturalized to appear normative by those who are deemed powerful. In turn, this sustains heteronormativity, which is perpetuated through gender socialization, naturalizing and normalizing gender reiterations, and upholding gender binaries and hierarchies. It is important to note that the term ‘normative’ is used not to define normality, but to understand the power effects ‘of what the holders of social power wish to have accepted’ (Connell, 1987: 52). For Butler, our desire for gender recognition and our corresponding fear of being misrecognized or misgendered, and potentially rendered abject (Butler, 2011), lead us

to conform with normative expectations governing gender recognition (Butler, 2011, 2005; Tyler, 2019; Awan and Pianezzi, 2023).

Until recently, Butler had moved away from using the heterosexual matrix as an explanatory concept, seeing it as too rigid, and had shifted towards using the term ‘gender compulsion’, from Adrienne Rich’s (1980) ‘compelled heterosexuality’. However, Butler has recently picked up this concept again, and for the purposes of this research, the heterosexual matrix aids understanding of how gender norms are perpetuated to support hierarchical and binary power relations (Hales and Galbally, 2023). In this sense, Butler’s heterosexual matrix provides a way in which to understand how behaviours are not just gendered, but heteronormatively gendered, compelling individuals to perform their gender in particular (accepted) ways. This point is discussed later in this chapter when applying a Butlerian lens to the edgework literature.

*Gender resignification*

In understanding the heterosexual matrix and the accepted heteronormative gendered behaviours it produces, Butler’s (1994) notion of gender resignification demonstrates this naturalization of gender-appropriate behaviour, and how this can be flipped on its head. Gender resignification can be understood as a contestation of the normative and orthodox conventions of gender norms through subversion, parody, or juxtaposition of the naturalized symbols associated with masculinity and femininity. Gender resignification involves having a reflexive awareness of gender norms, raising questions about what is considered appropriate behaviour for both men and women, and the power relations that govern these behaviours (Butler, 2004; Bell, 2006; Hey, 2006). This includes reclaiming the recognition that has been denied to individuals, in order to signify, or to ‘matter’ (Butler, 2011). This reflexive awareness leads individuals

to question their conformity with heterosexual and hegemonic behaviour, and to seek ways to displace the expected norms and conventions typically associated with gender. An example of this, drawn from Butler's early explorations of the performative theory of gender, is drag, which involves a display of 'anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance' that '*implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself*' (Butler, 2007: 187, original emphasis). For Butler (2007: 188), drag is a form of performativity that 'deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities', opening up an opportunity for resignification. Through the example of drag, gender resignification can be seen to have emancipatory potential by defying, destabilizing, and reshaping cultural and social inscriptions of heteronormative femininity (Thompson and Üstüner, 2015), and eliminating the gender binary between men's and women's experiences. Gender resignification therefore reveals the denaturalization of heteronormative gender behaviours in alternative contexts (Butler, 2007; Boucher, 2006), blurring the gender binary of masculinity–femininity, and increasing opportunities to performatively enact gender in non-normative ways.

Another important consideration in relation to gender resignification and to Chapter 7, and in developing a feminist theoretical framework to study women's edgework experiences, is Butler's (2007) notion of 'gender reiterations. Gender reiterations concern mundane and ordinary expressions of gender that are unquestioned and accepted (Butler, 2007). These are behaviours perceived as traditional and legitimate social facts, naturalized into serving as a pre-social, normative basis for gender socialization. Butler (2007) argues that this pre-social role situates individuals in the heterosexual matrix before they are even born or gender-socialized. For example, a baby is gendered from the minute she is born, as doctors proclaim 'it's a girl!'

Thereafter, the baby grows and passes through stages of gender socialization, and is expected to conform with and perform the normatively gendered behaviours associated with biological sex (Butler, 2007). For example, young girls are expected to play with dolls and kitchen sets. This enables gender socialization to become a 'natural' process, perpetuating the gender hierarchies and binaries in society. These include stereotypical gendered/feminine notions of women being feeble, passive, lacking in confidence, and depending on a male figure (Thompson and Üstüner, 2015; Schubart, 2019), all of which are usually unquestioned and accepted because they appear to be 'natural' and pre-social. Gender reiterations serve the functioning of society insofar as they maintain existing power relations and hierarchical structures (which are usually heterosexual and male-dominated). These are perceived to be a natural social 'fact', and individuals accept their gendered roles and behaviours as normal and natural. Butler argues that these gender reiterations may gradually be re-signified, and to an extent redefined, disrupting the naturalized normative conventions of gender reiterations and socialization, and of heteronormativity. The result is potential relaxation of the coercive hold of social norms over gender and conditioning of what is expected, in terms of gender performativity, in order to lead a livable life (Butler, 2016). With reference to livable lives, Butler (2011) focuses on bodies that are deemed to 'matter' to those with the capacity to offer recognition, for example of gender normativity.

*Bodies that Matter*

Further developing ideas on gender performativity, Butler's (2011) *Bodies that Matter* introduces the ideas of materiality and the abject body. Focusing on the latter first:

> The abject designates here precisely those 'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy

> the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the 'unlivable' is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject (Butler, 2011: xiii).

Much like conformity with the heterosexual matrix and norms governing the desire for recognition, the abject focuses on those who do not or cannot conform with gender reiterations. This denies individuals their subjectivity and materiality, rendering them socially outcast, as bodies that 'do not matter', where matter means having both importance and the capacity to signify or symbolize (embody) something of value. Furthermore, developing Butler's argument that gender comes before sex using 'woman' as an example, mattering works performatively to create the gendered body and behaviour that it names, constituted through continuous performatives and citations/iterations, and becoming naturalized and synonymous with the body that it presents (Butler, 2011; Inda, 2000). Butler illustrates this again with reference to Althusser's (2001) notion of 'interpellation', or the process by which ideology addresses or hails individuals:

> Consider the medical interpellation which (the recent emergence of the sonogram notwithstanding) shifts an infant from an 'it' to a 'she' or a 'he', and in that naming, the girl is 'girled', brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender. But that 'girling' of the girl does not end there; on the contrary, that founding interpellation is reiterated by various authorities and throughout various intervals of time to reinforce or contest this naturalized effect. *The naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm* [emphasis added] (Butler, 2011: xvii).

Here, Butler gives an example of interpellation and how an individual is brought into being and given subjectivity on the basis of gender/sex alignment. The implication is that for materiality – to matter – people's performatively enacted gender must 'match' their anatomical sex. It also implies that gender is a naturalized process that starts as soon as a baby is born, or earlier (antenatal), and happens throughout life and through multiple authorities. Repeated instilling of (hetero)normative behaviours and beliefs

ingrains such processes as natural and normal. This further hints at the potential impact of language on the enactment of gender. The above example suggests that from a young age, a child is 'girled' into believing that women should be subordinate to men; otherwise they face being rendered abject, and cast out into the realms of the 'unlivable' or 'uninhabitable'. But what about those who are interpellated as 'girl' and who do not conform with what this implies, physically, socially, or aesthetically; those who, for instance, do not present in hegemonically feminine ways, but as masculine, strong, and independent, like female edgeworkers? Risking misrecognition as gender-(in)appropriate, do such women embody a basis for a possible re-materialization of femininity/woman?

Butler's (2011) *Bodies that Matter* suggests a multitude of possibilities that mattering may have in relation to the body. How do bodies become matter, physically and socially/culturally? How are they perceived to matter: do people care for these bodies? How is a body materialized through societal and cultural norms to matter? Whose body matters, and why? Through these important questions, Butler's (2011) analysis of 'matter' focuses on ways in which the body is brought into being through gendered performances and is made to 'matter', where, as previously noted, matter means both to materialize and to signify something of value (Tyler and Cohen, 2010). This encompasses both the body's physiological and anatomical being and its performative capacity to embody, and thus represent, appropriate gender norms (Butler, 2011), hence having worth and 'mattering'. For Butler, bodies that matter are those imbued with a capacity to signify or materialize something of value or meaning 'in the service of consolidation of the heterosexual imperative' (Butler, 2011: xii). Butler (2011) argues that this materialization is underpinned by the individual's desire for recognition as a worthwhile, meaningful, and intelligible subject.

In summary, ‘intelligibility’ refers to cultural and social norms and reiterations being performed by the individual in order to become viable (Butler, 2011). In gender terms, this means having or materializing coherence or congruity between individuals’ sex and gender. This is then repeated in order to produce performances that are recognizable and accepted by other individuals, based on their conformity with the gender binary, heteronormativity, and other individuals’ social and cultural intelligibility (Tyler and Cohen, 2010). This desire for recognition, viability, and credibility compels individuals to enact appropriate reiterations that conform with socially and culturally ingrained gender norms.

Connecting insights from *Bodies that Matter* with Butler’s writing on gender performativity and ways in which gender is materialized for individuals to become viable and intelligible subjects provides a valuable ontological basis for understanding the experiences of women who engage in risk taking that might broadly be thought of as ‘edgework’. As briefly outlined earlier in this section, the formation of the subject and the possible rejection faced produces the abject, which does not conform with the heterosexual matrix or heteronormativity, and constitutes an ‘outside’ to the realm of the subject, for example in the sphere of recognition (Butler, 2011). Those living outside of the domain of the subject, in the ‘unlivable’ and ‘unhabitable zones of social life’, are not considered to be viable or intelligible (Butler, 2011: xiii). This is where a link can start to be articulated with women’s experiences of edgework. Women voluntarily engaging in high risk taking do not conform with the gender reiterations of femininity, and in doing and being so, potentially defy their gender socialization as safe and submissive. Taking risks is not stereotypically associated with femininity or with women, as there are ‘normative assumptions about women as risk averse, vulnerable and afraid’ (Olstead, 2011: 93). Beyer (2022) pursues this reasoning in showing how

women are rendered vulnerable, passive, and in need of protection. This demonstrates a careful balance between performing enough of one's gender reiterations to be recognized as an intelligible subject (including, in the context of edgework, to be employable), whilst simultaneously bringing together abject aspects of femininity that are taboo, marginalized, or frowned on by others, in order to (in a sense) re-signify and rematerialize femininity.

Understanding the experiences of women edgeworkers and the process they face in becoming the abject in this way opens up scope for thinking about how alternative modes of subjectivity may be materialized through resignification and solidarity with others, a theme returned to later in this thesis. In summary, Butler's theory of gender performativity, focusing on how gender is enacted as something that we actively 'do' in particular ways in order to be recognized, helps us to think about how women who engage in edgework take risks, including with gender.

*Undoing Gender*

*Undoing Gender* (2004) further explicates Butler's understanding of how individuals subvert gender norms and practices, and at the same time are 'undone' by them. This approach sees gender performativity as both undoing the complexities of lived experiences, and having the capacity to be undone through resignification. This contrasts with West and Zimmerman's (1987) view that individuals 'accomplish' gender through interactions, and therefore 'do' gender relatively unproblematically. West and Zimmerman's (1987) approach focuses on micropolitical and interactional activities, such as body language, gestures, and speech, highlighting in particular how these are influenced by 'social doings', producing a 'doing' of gender. In their framing, doing gender therefore depends on the normative elements associated with gender, and the normative and commonsensical expectations of others, which they refer to as

the ‘audience’ (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Kelan, 2010, 2018). In answer to their question of ‘can we ever not do gender?’, West and Zimmerman’s (1987: 137) response is that ‘doing gender is unavoidable’, as long as society enforces a commonsensical splitting of men and women into essentialist gendered categories (binaries), and individuals are questioned when they fail to do gender according to these binary categories and the norms shaping them.

Butler (2004) complicates this dramaturgical approach, by focusing on the dynamics of gender performativity as a perpetual ‘undoing’, and highlighting both the risks attached to doing gender, and its resistant, disruptive capacity. Put simply, because gender is ‘done’, it can be ‘undone’. This analysis shifts the focus away from interactions in the way that West and Zimmerman (1987) discuss doing gender, and orientates it instead towards wider social discourses and their effects (Pecis, 2016), which produce a normative but contestable ‘doing’ of gender. This approach foregrounds the crystallization and naturalization of gender, highlighting how this feeds back into a process of conformity (Pecis, 2016) and perpetuates the gender binary (Kelan, 2010, 2018).

In *Undoing Gender*, Butler (2004) demonstrates that nothing, especially gender, is ever fixed or stable, but that everything is dynamic and based on norms and expectations and the discourses sustaining them. These societal norms and expectations, which also guide the doing of gender, render the lives of some unintelligible or abject, but may also be transformative. They are transformative in that non-normative gender performativities can challenge and subvert hegemonic norms and expectations, revealing incommensurability between societal norms and expectations and the complexities that constitute lived experiences of gender, and hence ‘undoing’ gender. This again draws insights from *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies*

*that Matter*, in that understanding social inscriptions or gender reiterations of femininity and masculinity enables us to start to question and challenge conformity with heteronormative gender norms. These constraining conditions that force individuals into the gender binary and heteronormativity can also be subverted and reincorporated in a way that constitutes what Butler thinks of as 'undoing gender':

> Gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculinity and femininity are produced and naturalized, but gender might well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized (Butler, 2004: 42).

Therefore by 'doing' gender, gender can also be simultaneously undone, with gender reiterations and socialization being denaturalized, whilst allowing individuals to reshape their understandings, perceptions, and experiences of gender. This again potentially re-signifies gender and supports Butler's (2004: 10) claim that gender is not stable but 'notoriously changeable'.

Applying this understanding of 'undoing gender' to this thesis, the incommensurability outlined by Butler can be noted as experienced in women's edgework, with societal norms and expectations of 'woman' not necessarily or unproblematically aligning with the voluntary high risk-taking practices of edgework in which the women engage. This also supports the idea that there is more to women's edgework experiences than is noted in the literature: additional layers to women's experiences include negotiating the naturalized societal expectations of being a woman, and being women who by their own volition engage with high risk. What can perhaps be further argued here is that revealing this incommensurability offers an opportunity to challenge the processes of conformity and naturalization through the engagement of edgework in reshaping and changing gender, and therefore to question who is intelligible and worthy of a livable life. However, with this potential comes a constant threat of misrecognition, or being rendered non-intelligible or abject, which is, of course, associated with edgework

as a set of activities that involve engaging in constant risk (as discussed in Chapter 2). However, when considered in relation to gender, and in light of the ideas examined above, this risk takes on additional layers of meaning. Women who voluntarily put themselves at risk potentially undo gender, in Butler's terms, in ways that accentuate the risks they take as edgeworkers, adding to the vulnerability to which they are subject.

*Vulnerability and resistance*

Butler's (2016) more recent writing further develops the argument that being vulnerable is a primary, existential condition, which is situated, relational, and interdependent. For Butler (2016), vulnerability is something we experience as soon as we are born and continue to experience throughout our lives, with some individuals and populations being more vulnerable than others:

> We are born vulnerable – that is, dependent on others and on our environment to survive. Our primary vulnerability is simultaneously due to our condition as embodied, social, and emotional beings (Butler, 2016: 26).

This way of thinking about vulnerability is pertinent to this thesis in two ways: first in understanding how vulnerability links with gender, and second in thinking about how resistance to vulnerability is key to re-signifying women as risk takers. In arguing that some individuals are more vulnerable than others, Butler (2016) uses the example of men and their open fear of feminism. Men feel vulnerable, Butler argues, because feminism could take away their power and reallocate it to women. Therefore, men are vulnerable to the possibility of becoming 'like' women, insofar as, in their perception, they would be in a lower gendered hierarchical position, more vulnerable, just like women. In addition, vulnerability can be understood in terms of the body, with bodily vulnerability being the physical risk to which the body may be exposed:

> The body implies morality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instruments of all these as well. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. The body has its invariably public dimension (Butler, 2004: 26).

Here, Butler emphasizes the precarious conditions that a being/body is under. Interesting for this research is the idea that our bodies are never our own and always in the public sphere. This implies that the bodies we use to perform sexual and gender norms, in order to gain recognition and intelligibility and protect us from our vulnerability to misrecognition and abjection, are the very same that put us in these vulnerable situations. For women who perform, who are the focus of this study, their bodies are under additional scrutiny from others (notably the audience), so they must give credible gender performances that make them recognizably feminine. This is arguably achieved through their bodies displaying appropriate social inscriptions of femininity. However, the vulnerability that this engenders potentially offers them an opportunity for resistance, to undo gender in the way Butler (2004) describes, potentially mobilizing as a form of resistance and utilizing their vulnerability to assert their right to equality and to occupy social space (Butler, 2016).

Through edgework, women potentially demonstrate how their gender and bodily vulnerability are intertwined, by engaging in extremely masculine domains, such as bodybuilding, whilst putting their bodies under enormous stress in order to maintain their muscular physique (Worthen and Baker, 2016). Interestingly, it might be argued that female bodybuilders, who are encouraged to amplify their femininity using beauty products and hair pieces, use their bodily vulnerability as resistance in order to still be recognized as women. In this sense, this vulnerability may bring to light desire for the recognition that individuals need in order to become subjects and to ‘matter’. Perhaps

having the ‘right stuff’ for edgework takes on another meaning when applied to the edgework experiences of women, insofar as women have the skills and capacities to navigate the ‘edge’ of recognizability as women and bodily inscriptions of femininity. It appears that as well as experiencing physical and bodily vulnerability and/as resistance, ontological vulnerability and resistance may also occur in a way that has the potential to kick-start Butler’s process of gender resignification.

Butler’s (2016) concept of vulnerability and/as resistance points us towards thinking about how edgework takes on multiple meanings in relation to women’s experiences of gender. In light of the ideas considered in this chapter so far, it might be argued that women edgeworkers experience extra layers and forms of risk when undertaking edgework, given the possibility of gender misrecognition when engaging in their risk taking. Equally, when considered through the lenses of ‘undoing’ and of vulnerability and/as resistance, gender resignification may be thought of as occurring as a by-product of edgework, insofar as engagement with edgework *as a woman* is a way to demonstrate a ‘re/undoing’ of the gender norms that govern hegemonic femininity, including with and through other women rather than simply individually.

A Butlerian lens on edgework

In exploring these issues and questions, this section examines how applying a Butlerian lens might help us to understand the social, psychological, and structural characteristics that influence women’s edgework experiences and their femininity. This will show how women’s edgework experiences reveal performative, ritualistic, and repetitive bodily acts that have become naturalized as normatively gendered behaviour. An example of this in relation to edgework is how women are perceived to be risk-averse (Borghans et al., 2009; Karmarkar, 2023) because they are

characterized as care givers (Olstead, 2011). Over time, as women are socialized into this gendered role, it becomes a normative form of behaviour and a performative expectation associated with what it means to be a woman. If they defy this naturalized and materialized description of feminine behaviour, by engaging in high risk taking of their own volition, women may lose their cultural and social recognizability as women. This goes against women's gender socialization into submissive and 'safe' roles, including as caring and nurturing, and giving and protecting life rather than risking it. This starts to shed light on edgework as a gendered phenomenon. Not least, applying a Butlerian lens to understanding the gendered nature of edgework reveals that women may face an extra layer or additional form of risk when they engage in edgework.

As previously explained, edgework refers to high risk-taking behaviours in which individuals voluntarily engage when seeking to negotiate boundaries to bring them closer to the 'edge' (Lyng, 1990). As also noted earlier, edgework has been conceptualized on the basis of male samples and a normative association with hegemonic masculinities, and the 'dominant' edgework model reflects a male bias favouring the experiences of white, middle-class (Lyng and Matthews, 2007), cis men. This, in turn, has contributed to the codification of edgework behaviours as masculine, involving mastery of skills, control, mind over matter, and having the right stuff and mental toughness. As a consequence of this intellectual or theoretical gendering of edgework, women's participation in and experiences of it have been marginalized (Newmahr, 2011) in relevant research, or have been stigmatized, for instance by being labelled deviant (see Worthen and Baker, 2016) and/or defined with reference to the presumption that women are emotionally and physically unsuited to edgework (Newmahr, 2011; Lois, 2001). Consequently, very little edgework literature actually

focuses on women's experiences, and relatively little is known about the social, psychological, and structural characteristics that influence and shape women's voluntary risk taking. Before examining the masculinities that have been codified for successful edgework, this section first focuses on the edgework literature, re-read here through a feminist lens informed by the ideas in Butler's writing examined above, to establish the gendered nature of perceptions and experiences of edgework.

The edgework literature reviewed in Chapter 2 points to an apparent neglect of the experiences of women who engage in ostensibly risky activities. Although women are not entirely excluded from the literature, the focus is predominantly on men and masculinity, giving the impression that women and non-hegemonically masculine-gendered people are sidelined. To date, research on voluntary risk taking has focused almost exclusively on cis men's experience of risk (Lyng, 1990; Ferrell et al., 2001; Laurendeau, 2008), with a minority of studies focusing solely on the experiences of women. The established literature on edgework also seems to be underpinned by an essentialist notion of women as being 'naturally' more risk-averse than men (Borghans et al., 2009; Karmarkar, 2023), representing the feminine 'ideal' of being safe and responsible (Stanko, 2000). As a result of the persistence of this viewpoint, combined with the fact that edgework theory is based largely on men's experiences, the empirical focus is restricted to men (Laurendeau, 2008) and masculinity. This also limits the theoretical scope of enquiry to highly masculinized notions, including mastery and control (Lyng, 1990; Laurendeau, 2008). These ways of thinking highlight the presumed androcentric nature of edgework. Women's experiences are marginalized, because such activities are continually explained on the basis of masculinized concepts such as mental toughness and the right stuff (Lyng, 1990; Lois, 2001; Lyng and Matthews, 2007). Furthermore, the preoccupation with male experiences of

edgework has led to the emergence and stabilization of a theoretical model that is limited by its own gender ideology (Newmahr, 2011). In other words, women's edgework experiences are perceived through a masculine lens.

Lois's (2001) seminal paper was one of the first to bring women's edgework experiences to the fore, although these were explored in comparison with men's experiences. Lois (2001) noted the differential experiences of men and women, with women (negatively) experiencing more anxiety, less emotional self-control, and physical incompetence, and men being (positively) extremely confident, excited, and displaying some emotional stoicism. Laurendeau and Sharara (2008) draw a similar conclusion from their research on female skydivers and snowboarders, with the women downplaying their gender and trying to 'blend in' so as to avoid differential treatment when engaging in edgework.

Nevertheless, the literature on women's edgework experiences is not entirely negative, as recent studies demonstrate its empowering nature, drawing attention to the edgeworker as the 'empowered feminine self who has confronted and triumphed over normative assumptions about women as risk averse, vulnerable and afraid' (Olstead, 2011: 93). This illustrates that women's edgework may produce sensations other than those assumed in the 'malestream' literature. However, studies have tended to reflect the problem of edgework being conceptualized through largely hegemonically masculine terms, rather than the actual experiences of women. Studies that do focus on women's experiences appear to be limited by the masculinized ideology inherent in edgework theory (Naegler and Salman, 2016); hence women's experiences are analyzed with reference to the presumption of a hegemonically masculine norm. Such studies implicitly position men's experiences as a baseline 'norm' against which all experiences can be compared. Therefore, women's edgework

experiences are, to use Butler's (2011: xiii) terminology, rendered abject because they do not conform with the masculinized norms of edgework theory. As previously noted, this is probably because most earlier studies of edgework utilized white, middle-class, and (cis) male samples (Lyng and Matthews, 2007; Laurendeau and Sharara, 2008) because this was assumed to be the primary risk taker demographic. This has led to a marginalization of the perceptions and experiences of those who do not conform to this norm, and hence to a lack of an empirical and theoretical understanding applicable to all individuals and to the full breadth and complexity of edgework experiences (Miller, 1991).

In attempting to understand the breadth and complexity of women's edgework, few studies have considered women's edgework experiences specifically in relation to negotiating normative gender expectations. In a notable exception, Olstead (2011: 92) notes that the women she studied:

> used guilt to express their negotiation of moral pressures to conform to the gendered expectations of responsibility to others in which feminine performances of care giving, passivity, precaution and risk aversion are socially rewarded.

Olstead (2011) illustrates this further by focusing on the different ways in which the women experienced guilt as a way to negotiate the gender norms and expectations they faced as women engaging in risk taking. Olstead's (2011) research has been vital, not only in highlighting how women's experiences of risk are shaped by normative gender restrictions, but also in illustrating the vulnerability of women risk takers in terms of negotiating normative/social and cultural expectations.

Similarly, Worthen and Baker's (2016) study highlights the motivations of women bodybuilders, in terms of physical and mental challenges. Much like previous accounts of men's edgework, they demonstrate women's desire for discipline and control.

Although Worthen and Baker's (2016) study can be credited for highlighting the empowering nature of edgework through resignification of gender norms, such as the addition of feminine inscriptions (hair, makeup) to their masculinized (muscular) bodies, the authors focus on an edgework activity that is very hegemonically masculine, that of bodybuilding. Yet even their study does not necessarily highlight how women experience risk in different ways to men, nor does it acknowledge that edgework may be experienced differently when gender is considered as an influential factor shaping social perceptions and lived experiences.

As previously outlined, the few studies that do focus on women's experiences tend to convey negative characteristics, such as being overly emotional or unsuited to the edgework activity at hand. Lois's (2001) study comparing the emotional responses of mountain rescue volunteers clearly shows that men and women experience edgework differently, and that men's experiences of edgework are valorized in comparison with women. Lois (2001) describes how the men in her study expressed feeling confident and excited when on rescue missions, and displayed emotional stoicism when faced with the negative outcomes of their rescue missions. These emotions are deemed desirable in edgework theory, and were also valued by the rescuers. They used their mental toughness and emotional regimes to enable them to finish their rescue missions and deal with the aftermath. Different emotions were expressed by the women, who 'tended to feel trepidacious and fearful … and express their upset feelings in the aftermath' (Lois, 2001: 401). These different experiences imply that the confidence and excitement expressed by the men of the group are favourable for successful edgework, highlighting the masculine bias in the participants' perceptions. Lois (2001: 401) outlines the group's beliefs and perceptions of particular emotions:

> They developed beliefs about which emotions were useful or appropriate in each stage and constructed norms to help them achieve these desired emotional states. For example, they believed that emotions such as uncertainty, urgency, fear, upset, vulnerability, and guilt were undesirable because these powerful feelings were potentially disruptive.

Interestingly, although edgework theory foregrounds how 'the individual typically feels a significant degree of fear during the initial, anticipatory phases of the experience' (Lyng, 1990: 860), as displayed by the women, these emotions are perceived as 'disruptive' by the research participants. The research findings of Lois's (2001) study implies their undesirability for edgework as Lois describes the members' evaluations of gendered ways of preparing for a mission, highlighting how both men and women valorized the masculine notion of 'excitement' rather than women's 'anxiety'. Applying some of Butler's terminology here, the perception of the women's emotions as disruptive, and as undesirable, inappropriate, or unproductive for edgework, reflects the terms of the heterosexual matrix in perceptions of edgework and edgeworkers. Lois (2001) highlights not only the differential edgework experiences of men and women, but also how women's emotional experiences are perceived as less desirable for successful edgework, organizing men and women as edgeworkers in a 'rational' versus 'emotional' gendered hierarchy.

Echoing Lois's study, Newmahr's (2011) ethnographic research on sadomasochist communities gives an account of women's risk taking as 'emotional chaos'. Her study highlights the masculine bias in edgework theory, which does not account for the (different) emotional experiences of women. For example, she describes how transgressing normative boundaries creates powerful psychological and emotional spaces of 'play', and how the 'emotional and psychological chaos' that ensues continues beyond the immediate edgework experience (Newmahr, 2011: 700). In this situation, Newmahr (2011: 700) describes a 'sense of emotional and psychological

chaos' that would, for her, run 'the risk of coming somehow "undone"'. Her fear of being 'undone' by her emotional response to the edgework at hand is interesting. The inherent masculinities of edgework imply that her emotional response is undesired and unsuited to navigating the boundaries of edgework: she does not have the 'right stuff' to pursue the edge.

All of the studies mentioned above imply that the differential experiences of women are not accounted for by current edgework theory, and all implicitly position women as unsuited to edgework on the basis of masculinist assumptions that frame women as too emotional for such work. In summary, the dominant theme in the extant literature on edgework is that mental toughness and having the right stuff are deemed essential. The latter refers to the physical, psychological, and emotional capacity to remain in control when all else borders on chaos and threatens individual extinction (Lyng, 1990). Put simply, this raises the question of whether women have the capacity to possess the right stuff, or the essential knowledge and skills to avoid injury or death; or (in Butlerian fashion) whether women possess the 'wrong stuff', in the sense that they do not possess or materialize the masculine behaviours and skills associated with edgework. What might this mean for women who choose to engage in edgework? Have they formulated a new version of 'the right stuff', re-signifying what it means to have the capacity to undertake edgework? Questions such as these highlight the need to broaden the literature on women's experiences of edgework from a feminist perspective, and to consider edgework as a gendered phenomenon. With this in mind, the aim of this thesis, and the research on which it is based, is to re-theorize edgework from a feminist perspective in order to incorporate women's experiences, empirically, conceptually, methodologically, and analytically, and to understand edgework beyond its current, normative codification as hegemonically masculine.

How and why edgework is codified as masculine

As outlined above and discussed in Chapter 2, it is quite apparent that edgework theory, and edgework itself, are gendered. Therefore, it can be argued that several of the skills and sensations associated with edgework, including the physiological and psychological skills deemed necessary, are codified as masculine. These include mastery, control (Lyng, 1990, 2005; Miller and Frey, 1996; Tsang, 2019), fearlessness, toughness, having the right stuff, and mental and physical toughness (Lyng, 1990, 2005). A literal and metaphorical 'manning up' is required to engage in edgework. Men are celebrated as 'action heroes' for demonstrating their hegemonic masculinity by engaging in high risk (Holt and Thompson, 2004). Donnelly (2004) suggests that the ways in which women, and men, engage in edgework are dominated by gender codes and meanings. These masculine-codified behaviours are continuously repeated until they are naturalized as dominant features of edgework. This is strikingly similar to Butler's (2007) notion of gender performativity, in that the codified behaviours are like 'stylized repetitions' of acts. When naturalized, they become not simply the 'norm' (skills, sensations, and behaviours) of edgework, but its defining ideals; not simply what it is, but what it *ought to be*.

These norms and ideals are deeply rooted in hegemonic masculinities and gender ideologies (Holt and Thompson, 2004). Kay and Laberge (2004) similarly note that risk taking is commonly understood to be a signifier of toughness, which is generally a desired practice associated with masculinity, whereas risk aversion and/or management is a skill more 'naturally' attributed to women. Therefore, these masculine-codified behaviours separate and, as noted above, hierarchically organize the edgework experiences of men and women, as a result of which women are marginalized or labelled as deviant. This maintains not simply a binary but a hierarchy

between men and women through repeated citation, in Butler's terms, of naturalized hegemonic masculinities. In this sense, having the right stuff is not only essential to successful edgework, implicitly framed as something that an individual (masculine, male) is born with and (rightly) develops over a period of time, but is also constructed as hyper-masculine by putting the mental and physical limits of this capacity to the test (Lyng, 1990; Lyng and Matthews, 2007).

Butler (2011) discusses having the right stuff in relation to the materiality of the body and having the right type of body, as well as something that is significatory in the sense of being or doing something of significance. In applying a Butlerian lens to these two versions of the right stuff, women do not materialize the right stuff for edgework because their minds and bodies are culturally codified as weaker than men's, nor do they have this innate and developed survival capacity. Hence, women's experiences are marginalized, or rendered deviant or not 'right' in comparison with men's. Indicating the extent to which this is the case, women's edgework is often studied pathologically, with research focusing on selling sex (Tsang, 2019; Kong, 2016), eating disorders (Gailey, 2009), and sharing intimate 'selfies' (Hart, 2017), all of which have heteronormative patriarchal connotations of deviance and non-conformity. Therefore, studying how women use edgework to reconstruct and re-signify their femininity might make a contribution towards retheorizing edgework. Does participating in edgework as a woman open up scope for 'undoing' or 'redoing'/re-signifying femininity?

## Concluding thoughts

In this chapter, it has been argued that edgework is gendered and has been conceptualized in hegemonic, normatively masculine ways. The chapter has also outlined how edgework studies neglect women's experiences, whilst marginalizing and

stigmatizing their participants' edgework experiences. It has shown that edgework behaviours are codified as masculine, championing men's skills and knowledge, while labelling women's experiences as deviant or positioning women edgeworkers as emotionally unstable. In response, applying a Butlerian lens to edgework starts to reveal a different meaning when studied as a gendered phenomenon. When subjected to critique as an ideological phenomenon, and linked with Butler's theory of recognition, we can begin to conceptualize edgework as an activity requiring the performance of a specific type of gender work that involves creating an 'edgy performativity'. This theme is revisited later in Chapter 7.

Bringing a Butlerian lens to thinking about edgework as a gendered phenomenon provides a much-needed theoretical basis for developing a feminist perspective on edgework. Not least, it provides a theoretical foundation for the argument that when women undertake edgework, there is an additional layer to their risk taking, as edgework also becomes a form of 'gender work' which is necessary to maintain a normative gender performance, but which also has the capacity to disrupt and 'undo' that performance. The latter potentially defies gender socialization through engaging in high risk. In defying gender, the naturalized ideologies of femininity are disrupted, making way for women to question and challenge gender reiterations that govern their subjectivity.

Furthermore, the established conceptualization of edgework champions the experiences of men and creates a baseline norm for comparison with 'other' experiences. Merely by engaging in high risk, are women taking the first step toward defying and disrupting gender reiterations and hegemonic masculinities within/through edgework? As a result of understanding women as supposedly more risk-averse (Borghans et al., 2009), abiding by the normative message to be safe and minimize

fear (O'Malley and Mugford, 1994) and risk in society, women are essentially subordinated to men. How can a woman be 'doing' her gender role if she is actively seeking and engaging in life-threatening risks, and is not 'there' for others? As discussed above, established responses to this question rely largely on stigmatizing women's experiences of high risk, labelling them as emotionally unstable or simply as 'bad' women, and rendering them abject.

However, a Butlerian lens also highlights that women who do engage in edgework potentially defy the naturalized gender order, opening up the possibility for gender resignification. An example is female bodybuilders who, through physical discipline and mental control over their masculinized bodies, force their bodies and minds towards a physical edge (Worthen and Baker, 2016). This suggests a gender resignification through edgework, with the women re-signifying their femininity to include hegemonic masculinities, such as extreme muscular definition (Worthen and Baker, 2016) and bodily capacity (Newmahr, 2011), and revealing the masculinity/strength code as performative, something that women can 'enact'.

Understanding edgework as a gendered phenomenon through a Butlerian lens also highlights potentially transformative and empowering effects for women with regard to their edgework and their everyday lives, when they successfully complete their edgework and reach the edge, particularly because they do this as women and hence reach the 'edge' of gender. This again defies masculinized and codified behaviours of edgework, and gender reiterations and norms in society. Might it therefore be argued, in Butlerian style, that women in edgework undergo a sort of 're-materialization' of femininity, redefining what it is to be a risk-taking woman, and perhaps even a woman? Would it be fair to say that women edgeworkers occupy a space between subject and abject, in that they are constantly defying and resignifying gender reiterations, but in a

quest to be recognized as a new, strong, or empowered woman/femininity? This extra edgework/gender work, and potential, reveals an ontologically risky aspect of women's edgework, a theme explored in more detail in later chapters, focusing on the potential conflict between being recognized as female but engaging in typically masculine behaviours. Understanding this additional kind of risk, which is not discussed in the mainstream literature on edgework examined in Chapter 2, requires a performative theory of edgework. Such an approach might bring to the fore the idea that the 'edge' is gendered, showing edgework as situated, and shaped not only by what it is and how it is undertaken, but also *by whom*, a theme neglected in edgework theory to date.

In summary, the insights from Butler considered in this chapter draw together themes such as gender performativity, bodies that matter, undoing gender and vulnerability. These have been applied to a critical reading of studies of women as edgeworkers. First, critical evaluation of the relatively few studies of women's experiences of edgework conducted through a Butlerian lens highlights an inherent and persistent masculine bias, creating and perpetuating a masculine baseline norm against which the experiences of women are compared (largely unfavourably). Second, a Butlerian lens raises questions about the 'extra' edgework that women undertake simply by virtue of being women engaging in high-risk activities. Understanding the ontological underpinnings of Butler's work and applying them to edgework might allow the development of a performative theory of edgework, focusing particularly on the gendered nature and experience of edgework. This chapter has brought a Butlerian lens to the edgework literature, which will also be applied to analyzing the experiences of the women edgeworkers in the study presented in this thesis, in order to develop the performative theory of edgework discussed above, and to respond to the critique of established edgework theory considered thus far.

# Chapter Four. Methodology

Qualitative investigation, as outlined by Denzin and Lincoln (2011), focuses on the complexities of interpretative research practice, and the relationship between researchers and what they are studying, seeking answers to questions about social experience and meaning giving. This chapter outlines the methods for data collection and analysis used in this study to understand these complexities and address the research questions outlined in the previous two chapters regarding the edgework experiences of women aerialists. It begins by situating the research and explaining the rationale for its focus, as well as presenting the research questions that guided the study. It then addresses the qualitative methodologies and philosophical underpinnings of this research, while also highlighting the feminist standpoint adopted. The research methods are then discussed, clarifying how the data collection strategy was adapted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and how an immersive approach and richness of data were achieved during periods of limited social contact. The process of data analysis is explained in detail, and ethical aspects of this study are considered, together with some comments on self-reflection and 'sticky moments' (Riach, 2009) encountered during the research.

## Situating the research

### *Rationale*

Chapter 2 outlined the literature relating to edgework theory, including the components of voluntary risk taking that constitute edgework, such as activities, skills, and sensations. Chapter 3 applied a Butlerian-informed lens to this body of edgework literature to highlight how the theory has been conceptualized in terms of men and masculinities, creating behaviours that are codified as masculine, and establishing a

masculine baseline norm of experience against which to compare all experiences. This revealed an apparent lack of focus on women's edgework experiences, which has led to stigmatized and marginalized accounts of women's experiences. These include the types of risk experienced, how these risks are managed, and the social, cultural, and structural conditions that shape these experiences of risk taking. Despite efforts to rectify these issues and include women in research samples (see Lois, 2001; Newmahr, 2011), the edgework literature still tends to perpetuate hegemonic femininities, such as feebleness and dependency (Thompson and Üstüner, 2015; Schubart, 2019) and women being more risk-averse than men (Borghans et al., 2009). This, and the apparent lack of focus on, and thus understanding of, women's experiences made it important to understand more about their experiences, including their embodied experiences and the (additional) risks that women negotiate when undertaking edgework. Having identified this gap in the literature and situated the research in this area, this study focuses on the experiences of women aerialists to try to understand how they embody and negotiate their edgework. These factors informed the research questions that guided this study.

*Research questions*

Given the rationale for the research outlined above, this study seeks to reflect the differential experiences of women, given the lack of focus in the literature. Therefore, the research questions guiding this study primarily concern notions of gender, and how these impact on women's experiences of and propensity for risk taking. Pursuing research questions focusing on gender and risk taking help to uncover the social, cultural, and structural conditions shaping the experiences of women aerialists, with a particular emphasis on sociocultural aspects of women's experiences of risk. The research questions guiding this research were as follows: (1) what types of risks do

women aerialists experience; (2) how do women aerialists manage the risks involved in aerial performance; and (3) how do social, cultural, and structural conditions shape these experiences of risk?

In addressing these research questions, the aim was to uncover and incorporate women's experiences into a potential theorization of edgework encompassing the gendered differences inherent in the theory. This would highlight the dimensions of (additional) risk faced by women when undertaking high-risk activities. To underpin the research questions and the research process, a philosophical approach was adopted, which seemed most appropriate for researching the experiences of women aerialists. An interpretivist epistemology and a constructivist ontology were applied, and a feminist standpoint developed.

## Research philosophy

This section outlines the research philosophy underpinning this research. It explains the epistemological and ontological assumptions, and the aim of achieving a feminist standpoint.

### *Ontology*

Given the aims outlined above, to understand the experiences of women aerialists from their own perspective, the study was underpinned by an interpretivist epistemology and a constructivist ontology. With regard to the latter, concerning the nature of experience and reality, a constructivist ontology focuses on understanding the cultural and social norms that inform and shape individual experience (Stanley, Wise and Wise, 1993). This would help uncover how the women's unique narratives and realities were constructed by social, cultural, and even structural conditions, and how they were inextricably influenced and shaped by power relations relating to whose

ontologies were deemed to be most accurate, important, or worth listening to (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2012; Rose, 1983). Therefore, a constructivist ontological approach was most appropriate for understanding the subjective, lived realities of the women aerialists when studying their experiences as edgework, including the social, cultural, and structural conditions that influenced, contributed to and shaped their realities of risk taking.

Alongside the constructivist ontology, a feminist ontology was also adopted. According to Stanley et al. (1993), a feminist ontology emphasizes theorization of the reality/realities of women's experiences, their bodies and minds, including their emotions. This would be crucial in responding to the lack of understanding identified in the literature concerning women's experiences of edgework, in terms of perceiving them to be overly emotional and not possessing the 'right stuff' for edgework. In addition to the ontological approaches outlined, an interpretivist epistemology was adopted.

*Epistemology*

Epistemology concerns how we gather and collect knowledge, as well as the 'construction of knowledge' (Mauthner and Doucet, 2008: 417), and who are deemed to be knowledgeable (or in this case, intelligible) subjects, tied in with notions of power (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2012). An interpretivist approach concerns how meanings in the world are constructed and, importantly for data collection, how such meanings are embodied by individuals in society (Schwandt, 1998), in this case the women aerialists. The meanings, interactions, and experiences of individuals thus require interpretation for understanding and analysis (Kvale, 2007). Therefore, conducting research with an interpretivist epistemology takes the view that the world, its meanings, interactions, and experiences are loaded and socially constructed (Rallis

and Rossman, 2012). Advocating and striving to achieve Weber's (1978 [1947]) '*verstehen*', or empathetic understanding, to understand influential factors and the contexts in which social action occurs, an interpretivist epistemological approach to the research would help develop an understanding of the women's experiences of risk taking and their narratives, as well as the social, cultural, and structural conditions shaping them. A (broad) feminist epistemology was also incorporated into the research. For Rose (1983), a feminist epistemology involves understanding how knowledge is gained, the emotions and writings of women's experiences, and how these must contend with those of men and the bourgeoisie. This was crucial to the research philosophy, as the experiences and narratives of the women aerialists would reflect the hegemonic and heteronormative masculinities (and femininities) that shaped the social, cultural, and structural conditions of their risk taking. Combining interpretivist and feminist epistemologies allowed for a multitude of interpretations of the same sensations, feelings, emotions, and physiological responses (Jaggar, 1989) expressed by the women aerialists. The epistemological and ontological approaches both contributed to achieving a feminist standpoint.

*Standpoint*

The feminist ontology and epistemology helped unlock a 'feminist unconscious', tuning into untapped knowledge about what it is to be a woman – and particularly a woman who engages in risk taking. This included the possibility of uncovering different and unique realities (Stanley et al., 1993), and contributed to achieving a feminist standpoint. One aim of this research was to achieve a feminist standpoint through the epistemological and ontological approaches applied, foregrounding the women's claims of truth and the contexts in which their experiences occurred (Harstock, 1983; Hekman, 1997). This study involved focusing on experiences and narratives of the

risks navigated by women aerialists when undertaking edgework, as well as the social, cultural, and structural conditions shaping these experiences and narratives. Therefore, a feminist standpoint would allow for and encompass a multitude of interpretations of the lived realities of the women aerialists developed from a plethora of experiences and interactions. This revealed that despite recalling similar accounts and experiences, each narrative was different, and illuminated the social, cultural, and structural conditions shaping and influencing their accounts and experiences of risk taking.

The epistemological and ontological approaches informing the feminist standpoint, as well as the experiences and narratives of the women interviewed, and thus the research, have important limitations. In adopting interpretivism, constructivism, and a feminist standpoint, the focus is on how knowledge is influenced and shaped by our own cultures, experiences, and cognitions, showing only that our knowledge may be just a part of it (McAnulla, 2006). My own implicit standpoint or viewpoint, formed from my own culture, experiences, and cognitions and influenced by my own pre-existing assumptions, ontologies, and epistemologies, suggests that research is not value-free (Connell, 1995), but rather is value-laden and assumes universal experience, highlighting what may be only a part-of-the-whole experience. It was important to be aware of this and take a reflexive approach to the co-construction of knowledge throughout the research process, as discussed further in the ‘Ethics and self-reflections’ section of this chapter. The philosophical underpinnings influence and guide research, explaining how and why the research is to be undertaken, and influencing the choice of research methods (Creswell, 2009) and design, as explained in the next section.

Research design

The qualitative research design was an important aspect of this study. According to Bell, Bryman and Harley (2022: 47), the research design is a ‘framework for the collection and analysis of data’, and should not be confused with the research method, which refers to the techniques used to collect data. Maxwell’s (2013: 5) research design model allows for flexibility to modify or reconsider the design in response to developments and changes encountered during the research process. It does not treat the research design as a linear or cyclic process, but instead gives it a certain ‘elasticity’. This was an imperative consideration for the design of this study, enabling continual adaptation, for example of the research methods and questions, as the data collection and analysis progressed.

The research design for this study followed a form of narrative inquiry as a strategy to better understand the risk-taking experiences of the women aerialists. Narrative inquiry would help to elucidate the aerialists’ ‘lived and told stories and talk about those stories’, how they created meaning in their own lives, and how others also contributed to this (Clandinin, 2006: 44). Furthermore, this strategy would help me to remain reflexive, especially during the data collection, in that I too would contribute to and shape the participants’ narratives (Clandinin, 2006). Therefore, it was also important for the research design to operate with reflexivity at each stage of the project (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). The research design involved a qualitative multi-methods approach to participant observation, and two-phase, semi-structured interviews, as explained in the next section. Using a multi-methods approach to data collection enabled triangulation between the participant observation and the two phases of interviews, helping to overcome possible biases or weaknesses arising from using a single method (Denzin, 2007). The data collection and analysis were designed

to be carried out concurrently, analyzing small batches of one to three interviews as they were undertaken. The aim was to uncover emergent findings and refine the thematic coding used in the analysis. It allowed me to remain immersed in the research, using data already collected and analyzed to inform and shape subsequent interviews. As outlined at the start of this section, the research design needed to be flexible at various stages of the study, enabling the necessary adaptations to be made. This was most notable with regard to adaptations made to the data collection methods when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, as explained in the next section.

Data collection

This section explains both the intended data collection methods and the adaptations made as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which halted all face-to-face data collection. It is important to explain the immersive and embodied methods originally planned for this research, because these provided the foundation from which I had to make necessary adaptations to my research design in order to immerse myself in the aerial culture within the confines of lockdown and institutional research restrictions. This was a challenging process, not least because I sought to avoid compromising data quality, yet still produce and collect immersive and embodied data reflecting the experiences of the women aerialists, without endangering their or my own safety. The solution was to adapt the research and make it virtual, taking an ethnographic approach online ‘to develop an enriched sense of the meanings of the technology and the cultures which enable it and are enabled by it’ (Hine, 2000: 8). In the next subsections, the research design is outlined, including the necessary adaptations.

*Interview method*

In following the epistemological and ontological approaches outlined earlier, the aim was to enable the aerialists to create their own meaningful narratives of their risk taking. Qualitative research methods were used, in the form of semi-structured interviews that facilitated philosophical conversations and dialogues (Qu and Dumay, 2011) to encourage the women interviewed to create narratives of their experiences of edgework. These conversations focused on understanding how they had started aerial performing, their favourite performances, those that had not gone quite to plan, costumes and stage designs, and rigging, as well as other unrelated aspects of their lives, such as pets, partners, and other passions. To elicit narrative accounts of their experiences, a form of narrative-based interviewing was used. This method provides 'an opportunity to prioritise the story teller's perspective' based on 'stories about events in their lives' (Anderson and Kirkpatrick, 2016: 2).

The style of narrative interview employed was the 'biographical narrative interpretive method' (BNIM; Wengraf, 2001; Wengraf and Chamberlayne, 2006). The BNIM, as proposed by Wengraf (2001), is a form of semi-structured interview that allows participants to carve and shape their own narratives from just a few set questions. It draws on participants' lived experiences to understand psycho-societal structures that shape their lived accounts, experiences, and attitudes (Wengraf and Chamberlayne, 2006) using a conversational manner (Qu and Dumay, 2011). Split into two rounds of interviewing, round one of the BNIM aims to establish a narrative, and round two consists of a follow-up interview to clarify any 'particular incident narratives' (PINs). PINs are additional questions seeking to understand particular parts of the narrative that characterize the participant's life story (Peta, Wengraf and McKenzie, 2019). These enable participants, in a sense, to relive the 'incident' they are narrating

(Wengraf, 2018). Interview one started with a ‘single question aimed at inducing narrative’ (SQUIN), so that participants could start to express their own narratives (Wengraf, 2001) of their experiences of edgework without the interviewer’s influence or input. An example of a SQUIN was, ‘could you please tell me, in detail, about your experience as an aerial performer?’

As the researcher, my role here was to pose the SQUINs in a respectfully encouraging and caring way, and to really hear and understand the narratives that the women were relating to me (Rubin and Rubin, 1995; Weiss, 1994). It was important to me that the aerialists expressed their own narratives, with few or no prompts from me, so that the interview and the subsequent research were participant-led. This was done by asking a broad SQUIN, as in the example above, so that the aerialists could choose what they wanted to share with me. I remained quiet but engaged during the interviews, showing that I was listening to their narratives. I also paused after the participants had finished talking, allowing them time to reflect briefly on what they had said. Participants sometimes used this brief silence to elaborate further. This reduced the influence of my own positionality as a researcher on the choices and research process (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998), including my own preconceptions and opinions of women’s edgework and aerial performing. Wengraf (2001) suggests that a second interview should be conducted a few months later to clarify any PINs raised from the first interview. This is a lengthy and sometimes difficult method of interviewing. However, it was crucial in allowing me to develop a deep understanding of the women’s narratives.

Some adaptations were made to the BNIM so that the data collection was better suited to an online format. This was because the impact of COVID-19 meant that face-to-face and in-person data collection could not be undertaken. First, adaptations were made to the locations of the interviews for this research. It was originally planned that

these would be conducted wherever the participants felt most comfortable (Nespor, 2000; Walby and Stuart, 2021), such as an aerial studio, a coffee shop, or the university. However, they were instead taken online using Zoom. Participants' answers are a very important part of data collection, but how they say them are equally important (Bryman, 2012), such as changes in the tone of their voices, or how they use their hands when creating narratives around a certain experience. Potential drawbacks of online interviews are that they lack the personal touch that in-person, face-to-face interviews offer, and may be disrupted by internet connection issues. The latter were experienced by both the participants and myself, including lags or delays in hearing or seeing what the other was saying or doing. Online BNIM-style interviews still enabled me to collect narrative accounts from the aerialists, and interpret the participants' facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice, meaning they were still embodied to some extent. Another important change to the BNIM was that, rather than conducting two separate interviews per aerialist months apart, I decided to do one much longer interview, and made it clear to participants that I would be in touch with follow-up questions for them to type their responses to, rather than speaking to me again over Zoom. Again, this was due partly to the constraints of COVID-19, and partly to time constraints and the participants' inability to commit to two separate interviews. Although many were not performing in person for tangible audiences, they were still working on other activities, such as teaching aerial-related classes online, taking up other 'side hustles', or working on funding. Therefore, this research used a condensed version of the BNIM by conducting one round of interviews, which lasted between 30 minutes and 2 hours 45 minutes, and using SQUINs to induce narratives. An additional method used to aid narrative creation was photo elicitation, as explained later in this chapter.

All interviews were conducted and recorded on the Zoom platform. In addition, fieldnotes were taken during the interviews, detailing important PINs discussed, and any follow-up SQUINs I wanted to ask, as well as my own thoughts and feelings about what was being discussed, and links made to other participants' PINs and narratives. The fieldnotes were typed up and used for the analysis phase of the research, to help contextualize what the aerialists discussed. The interview recordings were also transcribed. I transcribed one interview entirely manually, but this was very time-consuming. Therefore, I used the automatic transcription that Zoom produces from a recording. This entailed listening to the audio and reading the transcript through, making necessary edits, and re-immersing myself in the data. Although still a time-consuming process, this process saved me time in the long run, and helped with the data analysis. In addition to the interviews, data were collected through participant observation, as explained in the next subsection.

*Participant observation*

Plans to conduct observational work were included in the research design, drawing inspiration from the principles of ethnography. Participant observation would have provided valuable information about interactions between the aerialists and their contexts, which would have been detailed in the fieldnotes (Mulhall, 2003; Frechette, Bitzas, Aubry, Kilpatrick and Lavoie-Tremblay, 2020). In particular, the plan was to observe interactions and behaviours between the participants (Kozinets, 2002) and with their apparatus to see how they moved and interacted with objects compared with other humans. Observing such patterns of behaviour and interactions, including how the participants navigated and negotiated their apparatus and routines, would have provided another layer of interpretation and analysis contributing to answering the research questions.

I would also like to have tried aerial performing myself. As a novice, it was important for me to feel something of what it is like to do aerial performing, and experience the sensations of conquering the edge and the feelings of communitas with others. I am the first to admit my slight fear of heights (as reflected in my fieldnotes), and participant observation would have given me the opportunity to be part of the edgework experience, to push through the fear and remain in control, using the skills and capacities developed. This would also have enabled further immersion in the community, feeling the support of other aerialists and even, if only to a small degree, feelings of 'communitas' (Turner, 1974) with them. Fieldnotes would have supported this process, as in the interview process, and would have contributed to the analysis phase and the findings, for example by documenting changes in body language or the hand gestures used when discussing particular experiences. This would have enabled immersive and embodied research, and first-hand experience of the emotions and sensations that the women aerialists felt.

However, as with the interview phase of the research, the impact of COVID-19 meant that I could no longer undertake participant observation. National and institutional constraints were placed on face-to-face data collection, and some were imposed by aerial studios even when the restrictions were temporarily lifted. In order to still be immersed, but virtually, in the research, I invited each participant to share three photos of their aerial performing that meant something to them. This was a form of photo elicitation.

*Photo elicitation*

Photo elicitation was included in the interview method to enrich the interviews (Kyololo, Stevens and Songok, 2023) and the aerialists' narrative accounts, and to encourage immersion in the narrative. Each participant shared three photos (and in some cases, more) chosen based on their aerial performing that meant something to them. I left this particularly broad and open to the participants' interpretation, reiterating that the photos could relate to either positive or negative experiences of performing, perhaps taken during their favourite performance, or a performance that did not go to plan. I also told them that the photos need not be of an actual performance, but might have been taken at a training session on the ground, or in a costume just before a show. Interestingly, one participant sent a photo of a team huddle after a particularly challenging day of rigging into a cliff face and rehearsing in challenging weather conditions (see Figure 1).

*Figure 1. Jayne's team huddle*

This form of photo elicitation aided further discussion about the women's experiences of edgework that might otherwise have been too difficult to articulate. The photos also sometimes acted as or informed SQUINs, as I was sent the photos in advance of the interviews. An example of using a photo as a SQUIN included, 'Could you please, in detail, tell me why you have picked this photo?' This helped to visualize the research

questions relating to the types of risks experienced by the aerial performers, and how social, cultural, and structural conditions shaped these experiences of risk.

An interesting caveat here was the resistance raised by Charlotte (pseudonym) to the interview discussions being facilitated by photos. Charlotte reflected on the interview process before agreeing to take part. She stated that she was 'resisting', and wondered, 'can we not just talk… why do I have to have a picture?' For her, it was frustrating and fed into the perception of 'how we Instagram our lifestyles and we have to have everything, has to be Instagram-able'. However, Charlotte did discuss the photos she had chosen for the interview. Therefore, photo elicitation replaced what would have been participant observation, and enabled me to remain immersed in the embodied research approach. This meant that I was still able to collect rich contextual data, which might not have been feasible with interviews alone (Kyololo et al., 2023).

*Reflections on data collection*

Although I was unable to collect data in person, collecting data virtually had several advantages. First, following the adaptations, the number of interviews increased from 15, as originally planned, to 22 narrative accounts of women's experiences of aerial performing. This opportunity to interview more women was a result of being less restricted by time, place, or expense, for example in terms of the travel costs of the participants and myself. Therefore, I was able to access more women across a larger geographical area, and with varying levels of professionalism with regard to their competencies, skills, and full-time engagement in aerial performing. I also felt much more confident in conducting the interviews online than I would have in person, which helped with some of the 'sticky moments' (Riach, 2009) experienced with some participants. This issue is explored in greater depth in my self-reflections later in this chapter.

Second, the adaptations also presented an opportunity to collect data much earlier than anticipated. Adapting the research design to be undertaken online, including adapting the BNIM and using photo elicitation in the interviews, meant that the process of organizing and conducting interviews was far easier and less time-consuming than it would have been in person, and conducting them via my laptop in my bedroom was far more comfortable, as discussed later in this chapter.

The next section focuses on the sample and the sampling methods used to select the participants for the research.

## Sample and sampling methods

### *Why aerial performers?*

Aerial performers were selected for the sample firstly because their performances are suspended in the air, using silks, ropes, trapezes or hoops, amongst other innovative apparatuses, and if they make any mistakes, such as misapplying a move or not concentrating when in the air, they may be injured or die. Therefore, they embody the tenets of edgework, in that they are highly skilled voluntary risk takers. As well as exemplifying the physical side of edgework, such as the skills and capacities for risk taking, aerial performing also showcases stereotypical gendered depictions of what an aerialist is, such as being popularly perceived as feminine, despite their displays of masculinities. Therefore, aerial performance was a suitable site in which to study edgework because it encompasses many aspects of Lyng's (1990) original conceptualization of edgework (being voluntary, skilful, high risk-taking, navigating boundaries in pursuit of the 'edge' whilst remaining in control, and producing transformative effects), whilst also demonstrating gendering and the additional risks of women's edgework experiences.

*Participant information*

The sample consisted of 22 aerial performers. All identified as female, and were from the UK, Ireland, or America. One was originally from Mexico, but at the time of the research was residing in America. Of the 22 participants, 20 identified as white, one as Filipino, and one as Mexican. At the time of the data collection in 2020, the women were aged between 25 and 42 years old, with a mean age of 31. Regarding aerial performing as a profession, 12 stated that they did aerial on a full-time, paid basis, either solely performing, or performing and teaching aerial and/or aerial-based fitness. The part-time aerial performers did so alongside other occupations, such as other performing arts or creative jobs, or did aerial in their spare time. Note that the anonymity of all participants is protected, and they are referred to only by pseudonyms in this thesis. The next subsection explains the sampling techniques used.

*Sampling techniques*

As mentioned in Chapter 1, this research resulted from a pilot study conducted during my Master's degree, which compared the experiences of men and women aerial and circus performers. The same key informant was used to recruit the sample for this research. The decision to use a key informant, rather than a gatekeeper, was taken because of the key informant's ability to gain access to the wider community and help to recruit additional participants (Bogner, Littig and Menz, 2009; Lokot, 2021). Selection of the key informant was based on their expert knowledge of the subject (Taylor and Blake, 2015; Lokot, 2021) and connection with the topic of research (Tremblay, 1982).

Key informants are said to differ from others in a community 'by the nature of their position in a culture, their information-rich connection to the research topic, and by their relationship to the researcher' (Tremblay, 1982: 73). The key informant was used

to start ‘snowball’ sampling, a form of chain referral sampling (Bryman, 2012), leading to recruitment of the rest of the sample. Snowball sampling is typically used for populations of interest that are hard to reach or are the subject of research involving sensitive issues or illegal practices (Etikan, Alkassim and Abubakar, 2015). The aerialists were considered to be a hard-to-reach population, as aerial performance is a particularly niche performance art that has only recently started to become more popular in the UK, especially with aerial-based fitness classes. By combining the key informant and snowball sampling techniques, the sample size should theoretically increase through continuous referral, gaining more and more participants (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981).

To start the snowball sampling, the key informant was asked to pass on details of my study to other potential participants, either by word of mouth or by circulating my participant information sheet (see Appendix A). However, this sampling technique yielded a rather homogeneous sample, with little variety in the aerialists’ demographics and characteristics (Etikan et al., 2015). For example, most of the women were white, in their late 20s or early 30s, and from Westernized cultures. However, this research was relatively exploratory in a community to which I would otherwise have had little access, so I still felt that this was the most appropriate sampling method to begin my study.

Another issue raised by this sampling technique was that although I was able to rely on the key informant to pass on information about the study to the aerial performance company she worked for, which emailed my information to other aerialists on my behalf, it did not guarantee that other women would come forward and contact me to be interviewed. This was a frustrating part of the data collection process as I received

very little interest in the interviews, which prompted me to adopt another recruitment technique.

I began to contact women aerialists using my own personal social media account (Instagram). I adopted this strategy because I felt that this was a more direct but personal approach. I started by looking at aerialists' accounts on Instagram through my key informant's page. From there, I clicked through to individual profiles and read through their posts, noting the types of content they had posted, such as videos of them performing, and whether they had posted much about their past and forthcoming performances, and about their aerial life, including training, injuries, travelling to gigs, and costuming. This enabled me to gauge their level of experience, and whether or not they were currently training or performing. To select participants with suitable levels of experience for the sample, I included those who had posted regularly about their aerial performing (at least once a week for a minimum of three months), and who had over 1,000 followers (some had over 190,000), particularly follows from other aerialists. I took the latter criterion as an indication of their level of involvement in the aerial community, in the hope that this would enhance the efficiency of the snowball effect following the interviews.

The recruitment and interview processes took place during the UK's COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, when all performance work was halted. This rather serendipitously gave me a small window of opportunity to recruit and interview women aerialists while their training and performance schedules were free. I sent them a private message telling them who I was, what my research was about, and how I was conducting the research. I gave my university email as a point of contact, and left it up to them to contact me (see Appendix C for the text of the message). I knew this process would be limited, given the generally low response rates for such research and the

expectation that some women would not want to be interviewed. I was met with some resistance to my research methods, including my use of photos in the interviews, as explained above, and the wording of my working title (see the section below). I had to keep going through accounts and messaging more and more women, but overall I found this technique to be very effective, with 14 participants recruited in this way.

Although this method of recruiting participants was largely successful, I felt I had to present myself in a certain way on my personal Instagram page, including having a suitable picture of me and an appropriately written bio (see Appendix D). I was utilizing a method that Ignatow and Robinson (2017) describe as having 'digital capital', a Bourdieusian approach focusing on social capital with a social media presence and online behaviour. Therefore, it was important for my account/page to look professional but also lived, in the sense that it was not an account used solely for research practices, but my own personal account through which the participants could get to know me, and get a sense of who I am and what I do, as I did for them when scrolling through their accounts. This also meant that I had to leave my personal Instagram account on the 'public' setting, allowing anyone who clicked on my profile to see all that I had posted, rather than being 'private' to those whom I had accepted as followers. This felt uncomfortable to me, as I do not want to share all aspects of my life with everyone, and usually use Instagram as a way to document photos of things that are important to me. However, I felt I had to show who I was to the participants in order to gain some initial trust.

Once the women had agreed to take part, they were sent a 'Participant information sheet' (Appendix A) that detailed the research, and a consent form (Appendix B) to sign virtually and return to me. Consent was gained prior to all interviews, apart from one where I had to gain retrospective consent after the interview (see 'Ethical

considerations' section below). Dates were set for online interviews via Zoom, and the interviews started with an introduction to myself and the study, and ended with participants selecting their pseudonyms for the study.

Data analysis

The data produced from the qualitative semi-structured interview process were coded and analyzed, weaving together the SQUINs, PINs, photos, fieldnotes, and interview data to uncover overarching themes (King, 2004; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The aim of the thematic coding and analysis was to identify recurring themes in the interviews and photos. Thematic analysis concerns identifying recurring themes or patterns (Aronson, 1995) emerging from the data that are considered important to the studied phenomena (Daly, Kellehear and Gliksman, 1997). In this study, this included using pre-defined first-order codes deduced from the literature, as well as emergent codes drawn from the first five interviews. This helped to guide the subsequent interviews and the analysis of the interviews and photos, as well as informing the second-order coding. The pre-defined first-order codes included 'physical risk', 'social risk', and 'emotional risk', which were extracted from the existing body of literature, as well as 'edgework example', which focused more on descriptions of the activities, skills, and sensations of edgework described by Lyng (1990).

In addition to using pre-defined codes, emergent codes were drawn from analysis of the interviews and photos. These included 'emotion', 'adrenaline', 'skill', 'capacity', 'safety', 'costume', 'place', 'apparatus', 'risk' 'COVID-19', 'desire', 'recognition', 'vulnerability', 'gender expectation', 'femininity', 'masculinity', 'rigging', 'undoing', and 'aesthetics'. The themes identified were carefully chosen to avoid being overly

descriptive or too simplistic, in order to retain the participants' points of view (King, 2004).

In thematic analysis, codes such as the pre-defined and emergent codes are defined as either first- or second-order codes. First-order coding looks for aspects of interest that might differ from recurring patterns. The resulting codes describe what the analyzed passage of text from the transcript is about (Linneberg and Korsgaard, 2019). For example, one first-order code was 'inappropriate costume'. This described costumes discussed or shown in the photos that restricted the aerialists' movement in some way or might hinder their performance. Rather than being a basic code or label, this is more detailed than just 'costume', and more descriptive of the account given by the aerialist. The codes should be easily understandable by others, especially the participants, as they should be able to identify their own experiences in these first-order codes.

The photos discussed by the participants in their interviews were coded in the same way as the interview data. This included first order codes that were produced from whatever I could see in the photo, as well as my own knowledge, understanding and interpretation of the photos. Using Figure 4 as an example, the first order codes included 'costume', 'rigging', and 'safety' as well as 'long hair', 'silk' and 'sky'. These were simplistic, yet descriptive. Second order codes were also produced to analyse the photos similarly to how second order codes were produced for the interview data, as outlined in the below sections. Second order codes connected the first order codes together, as well as with the literature presented in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3. Using the same figure as an example, the first order codes of 'sky', 'safety', 'performance', 'risky', 'aesthetic', 'femininity', 'long hair', and 'rigging' was combined together with Lyng's (1990) 'mental toughness' and Butler's (2004) 'undoing gender' to provide an

example of the ways the women demonstrated how they make their performances appear more risky than they actually were, drawing on and navigating gendered preconceptions and expectations. There was some overlap between the interview and photo codes. There was some overlap between the interview and photo codes. This helped to confirm the codes that had been developed, and to visualize the narratives discussed in the interviews.

Further, the thematic analysis of the photos using first and second order codes firstly aided in consolidating my understanding of the aerialists' narratives. Through their descriptions of their performances and the analysis of their photos, I was able to visualize the aerialists' narratives and draw further analytical points that contributed to Chapters 5, 6 and 7. To exemplify this, Figures 6b, 9, 13 and 15 demonstrate the aerialists performing in particular (elaborate) costumes. Using thematic analysis on these photos, the codes that were occurring here was 'elaborate costume', 'performance', 'aesthetic' and 'additional risk'. With support from the interview data, this contributed toward 'what makes aerial performance risky?' and 'getting a feel for their costumes' in chapters 5 and 6 (respectively), and to the conceptual ideas of 'risky aesthetic' and 'aesthetic risk' in Chapter 7. Secondly, the photos acted as a way to help further elicit narratives from the aerialists, which in turn, helped me to formulate additional questions – SQUINs – to ask the aerialists during the interviews. An example of a SQUIN formulated from the photos included 'could you please tell me, in detail, how it made you feel to perform in this costume?'. The more photos there were to analyse, and the more codes produced, the more informed I became, which sparked more questions than I had initially anticipated.

In addition to this, the photos provide potential for further analysis in the future. The photos not only provide support for the analysis of the interviews, but can also be a

source of data themselves (Brown and Collins, 2021). To do this, I would undertake a semiotic analysis of the photos deconstruct them as visual texts to understand their social and culture structure, as well as the relationships and differences that characterize the photos (Aiello, 2006) to focus on their denotations and the wider connotations of the imagery the photos contain. Doing this would enable a focus on the ethnographic landscape that shapes perceptions and expectations of aerial performance, the lived experiences of aerialists, and other gendered forms of risk and/as edgework. The photos, paired with interview data, therefore can provide potential for further analysis using an interconnected analytical process that combines together visual and textual materials (Browns and Collins, 2021) to further elucidate the lived experiences of women.

The next stage of the thematic analysis was to combine first-order codes into second-order codes, making connections between the first-order coding and the literature based on recurrence and similarity (Gioia, Corely and Hamilton, 2013). This involved ‘classifying, prioritizing, integrating, synthesizing, abstracting and conceptualizing, and theory building’ (Saldaña, 2015: 58), as well as starting to make interpretations, making this a more analytical process. For example, the emergent and first-order codes of ‘physical risk’, ‘emotional risk’, ‘embodiment’, and ‘performance injury’ were brought together with ‘mental toughness’ from Lyng’s (1990) edgework theory to describe Natalia’s experience of pushing herself to perform higher than ever before for an audience, and the effects this had on her body, both physically in terms of migraines and nightmares, and emotionally with increased levels of anxiety.

The coding was initially carried out in small batches. The first batch comprised the first five interviews, which helped to produce emergent codes, and subsequent batches consisted of just two or three interviews. The coding was repeated until a point of

saturation was reached, when no new codes were being created, and the transcripts contained ample quotes and examples to support the codes.

Having completed the data collection and coded the interviews, I listened to the audio stream of each interview as I read back through the transcript, and conducted another round of coding. This enabled me to become re-immersed in the interviews and pick up any potential codes (and PINs) that had been missed. This was a positive experience, in that it opened up interpretation of the data to potentially unforeseen or new phenomena, as described by the participants in their narratives (Qu and Dumay, 2011), and shaped the overarching themes of the findings.

Interpretation of qualitative data is based on mutual construction of knowledge. Thus, my interpretations were based on the ontologies and epistemologies of the aerialists and myself. The implication for this research is that, like other qualitative studies, the codes created and the meanings embedded in the photos were subject to my own understandings of the narratives and the underpinning literature, as well as my own ontology of being a researcher. My interpretations of the data might differ from those of individuals with different epistemologies and ontologies from my own. This also means that this research, like most qualitative research, is not completely value-free, as underlying assumptions, personal beliefs (Hopper and Powell, 1985), and epistemological and ontological assumptions influenced each phase of the research. When undertaking the data analysis, it was important to be aware of this issue, and to ensure that the analysis valued and reflected the women's narratives and experiences in the co-construction of knowledge. Therefore it was crucial for reflexivity to be woven into the process.

An aspect of data analysis that I found quite challenging was having to exclude data during the coding process, because I wanted the data to reflect the women's narratives. It was very difficult to decide which data to retain and which to 'break up' with, such as data that were interesting but did not contribute to the overarching themes of the research. To do this, I simply used A3 sheets of paper and coloured pens, and simply went through batches of the transcripts again, noting down quotes from the participants under appropriate subheadings produced from the thematic coding, as illustrated in Figures 2a and 2b.

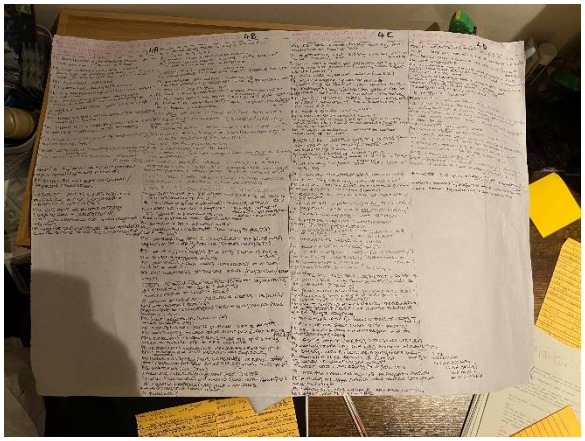

*Figure 2a. Chapter 5 data analysis notes*

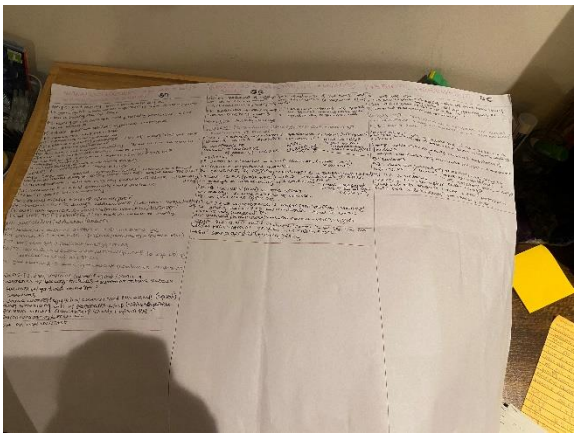

*Figure 2b. Chapter 6 data analysis notes*

Here I was able to then compare the quotes across the sheets and look for any crossovers between themes or repetitions. I was then able to pull together codes and quotes to formulate the findings chapters. The data analysis process was an iterative rather than a simple linear process, continuously developing with each iteration and new interpretation.

The next section discusses some ethical considerations, before giving a reflective account of the research process.

## Ethics and self-reflections

### *Ethical considerations*

Ethical considerations must be taken into account in any piece of research, and necessary institutional approvals must be secured before the data collection commences. Central to ethical research is avoidance of harm to the participants or the community. All research involving living beings raises a range of complex ethical issues, and it is the researcher's duty to safeguard participants, their interests, and others who may be affected by the research (BSA, 2017). This research adhered to the guidelines of the British Sociological Association (BSA).

The following steps were taken. Anonymity and confidentiality was a priority, and was ensured so that participants felt at ease in giving open accounts or narratives of their experiences of aerial performing. I ensured their anonymity as far as possible, given that many participants knew each other or had been recommended to me by someone else through the snowball sampling. This was reiterated in the participants' information sheet and the consent form. In addition, pseudonyms are used for each participant. I asked participants to pick a pseudonym, and in some cases used one chosen by myself, either because the pseudonym picked was another participant's real name or stage name, making them identifiable as participants, or simply because none had been chosen. Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' narratives, identity, and any identifying data. Any data regarding the participants, such as consent forms, transcripts, and contact details, were stored electronically under their pseudonyms on a password-protected personal laptop to which only I had access.

Meaningful informed consent was obtained from the participants. Written informed consent was gained after contact had been made via email (see Appendix B), and was

accompanied by a participant information sheet (see Appendix A). Consent was gained retrospectively via email for one participant, as she had been unsure whether she would proceed with the interview, and before participating she wanted to express her concerns about the research, such as the working title and perpetuation of aerial performing being stigmatized as high-risk. The participant information sheet contained further details of the study to aid participants' decisions on whether or not to take part. This included a statement of their right to withdraw at any stage of the research without giving reasons, when their data would be destroyed immediately and withdrawn from the research.

Although the participants recruited were unlikely to be classified as 'vulnerable', I had anticipated that sensitive subjects would be discussed, including COVID-19 and its impact on their careers, income, and physical and mental wellbeing. The online interviews provided an opportunity to start the research earlier than planned, but I had to be mindful of the impact that COVID-19 was having, and continues to have, on the performing arts sector. Given that the funding cuts arising from the pandemic placed the performing arts in an even more precarious position than previously, the aerialists may have been more vulnerable or upset when discussing their experiences prior to and during COVID-19. To reduce any harm or distress from these discussions, I explained to participants at the start of and throughout the interviews that they did not have to continue to talk about particularly distressing and sensitive subjects. I provided the participants with appropriate links (see Appendix A) for help with any issues raised.

*Self-reflections*

This last section of the chapter provides some self-reflections on the data collection and analysis process. These include aspects of reflexivity that I tried to weave throughout the research process, requiring constant awareness and readiness to

assess, re-assess, and adapt the research (Patnaik, 2013). For example, the approach to data analysis was constantly assessed and re-assessed to ensure that the themes did justice to the narratives of the women I interviewed, despite the necessity to make difficult decisions about which data should be included or excluded. Although I found this process challenging, I felt that I developed as a researcher throughout the data collection and analysis phases of the research.

With regard to the adapted research design and eliciting narrative accounts virtually, I had to be aware of the amount of control given to participants to carve and construct their own narratives of their edgework experiences. I also had to maintain awareness that the interviewees might be giving socially desirable answers or exaggerating the truth (Bryman, 2012) in their answers or PINs. To pre-empt this issue, I took care not to ask leading SQUINs or encourage particular answers that would guide my research in the way I felt it should go. For example, the SQUINs were broad and open to the aerialists' own interpretations. Some SQUINs evolved to avoid presumption or guiding, including when discussing the photos. However, this was not always feasible or desirable, given that the research was value-laden based on the narrative accounts of the aerialists, and knowledge produced from the data collection was a co-construction between the aerialists and myself. For example, checking my own understanding of what the aerialists were saying may have spurred them to produce more detailed narratives. With the inclusion of photo elicitation, this approach seemed the most effective in view of the possible limitations of online interviews. It enabled a 'construction site of knowledge' (Kvale, 1996: 42) that provided insights into the online communities and their symbolic and meaningful interactions (Kozinets, 2002; Arnould and Price, 1993), with discussion focusing on the narratives being carved out by the aerialists.

Nevertheless, with regard to the data collection, I had to be aware of my position as a researcher in the (co-)construction of the aerialists' narratives. Recruiting participants and conducting interviews was a very intense period of my research. As I tried to balance aspects of my own personality with characteristics of a good qualitative researcher, with each interview I became more attuned to being a qualitative researcher. Further to this, data collection also included some highs and lows, which contributed toward my development as a qualitative researcher. The highs included meeting amazing women and hearing their fascinating narratives, which I am privileged to tell as part of my research. Other highs included bouncing back from the lows, when I had been 'stood up' for interviews or had had to navigate 'sticky moments' (Riach, 2009) with participants.

'Sticky moments' entail '*participant-induced* reflexivity, to represent the temporary suspension of conventional dialogues that affect the structure and subsequent production of data' (Riach, 2009: 361, original emphasis). For me, the sticky moments contributed to my determination to collect data. An example experienced during the interview phase of data collection originally made me feel like giving up. The participant's attitude and preconceptions of my research led her to seek me out for an interview to tell me that she did not want to participate because she thought that my title was insulting, and that I was erroneously perpetuating a perception of aerial performing as high-risk. This participant would not initially sign the consent form for fear that her name would somehow be divulged and damage her business, although she did give consent after the interview. She also reluctantly sent me photos to discuss, although we did not discuss them. Without her comments and thoughts on my research, I would not have stopped to reflect on aspects of myself as a researcher – my 'own positionality or biographically created knowledge' (Riach, 2009: 366) – that

might be improved. Following this interview, I adjusted my approach by making a conscious effort to say even less in the interviews, and not to assume that the participants were happy with all aspects of my research simply because they had agreed to participate. Instead, I checked in at appropriate points in the interviews to give the participants ample opportunity to voice any concerns, as well as reassuring them that if they had any thoughts after the interview, they should email me or message me on Instagram.

Another important aspect is the extent to which rapport should be established with participants. In drawing on Weber's (1978) 'verstehen' to achieve an empathetic understanding of the women aerialists' experiences, as well as becoming immersed in their worlds by following their Instagram accounts, it was important to strike a balance between my positions as a researcher and as a friend to the participants. Some of the women discussed deeply personal and sensitive experiences, and it was my job to listen and offer support where I could, but also to ensure that I balanced this with being a researcher. For example, when discussing health issues that had previously impeded a participant's capacity to perform, I ensured that she was given sufficient time and space to carve out her narrative and portray her experience of getting back to performing as she wished, taking the time she needed while discussing this and afterwards. Interestingly, Duncombe and Jessop (2012) describe this balance as fostering 'fake friendships', when the balance of rapport may start to become unethical or immoral and the participants start to feel used. To reduce the danger of this occurring, I clearly set out my aims and the underlying goals of the research, and took measures to pre-empt any negative feelings towards myself or the research wherever I could, including during the initial contact with participants, in the participant

information sheet, and at the start of the interview, to avoid the participants feeling I was using them for my own personal gain.

In relation to this, some reflections on the data analysis process are warranted. I found this process very long, and sometimes struggled to see the end of it. During all phases of data collection and analysis I tried to embed reflexivity, by using PINs in the interviews and in follow-up questions, and working iteratively in small batches through the data analysis. Having reflected on this and my struggle with the data collection and analysis phase of the research, I feel that this was partly due to having such rich and detailed data, and also wanting to share the narratives of all the participants. I felt that I owed the participants something for giving up their time to be interviewed, and that I should allow their voices to be heard on the various issues discussed. My earlier drafts of the findings chapters were initially thousands of words longer, and shortening them made me feel like I was ‘breaking up’ with the data. For example, it was sometimes necessary to exclude data that were important to the participants and myself but neither contributed to answering the research questions nor related to experiences of edgework. Although I felt conflicted, and sometimes felt I was doing a disservice to the women’s individual narratives, I was able to find comfort in organizing the ‘dumped’ data for use in future work. This taught me that data analysis is not a process that can be rushed, and may not go right the first time. It is not an even, smooth, or linear progression, but must be taken in small batches and analyzed iteratively. It was important to trust in the process to produce findings chapters that would reflect the embodied and immersive nature of conducting research during a pandemic.

To conclude this section on self-reflection and reflexivity, I should describe what my research space looked like. When starting my PhD, I had envisioned travelling to different places across the UK to conduct interviews in a variety of spaces, perhaps in a coffee shop, or in a participant's place of work or office, or even in a theatre. I had thought of sitting in an audience watching my participants wow me with their performances, and afterwards speaking about how they had felt before, during, and after their show, quickly jotting down notes of anything I found of importance. However, this dream was far from the reality of conducting online interviews. This gave me some insight into the women aerialists' feelings about having their work paused or severely limited.

*Figure 3a. Bedroom/interview room*

*Figure 3b. Photos on bedroom wall*

My research spaces, as for many other people, were the dining-room table for writing and my bedroom for conducting interviews (see Figures 3a and 3b). These spaces took on many meanings beyond the usual conceived and perceived spaces, in terms of Lefebvre's (1991) 'trialects of space', as well as personal connotations of the 'bedroom' as it gradually became a workspace too. Somewhere that should have made me feel relaxed quickly became somewhere in which I found it difficult to unwind, as I was constantly thinking of how the interviews were going and what could be improved. However, it did provide me with a sense of safety and protection, as a space in which I was comfortable and that gave me confidence to conduct the interviews. It

encouraged a dogged approach to conducting interviews, especially those that posed issues from the initial point of contact and throughout the interview process. As outlined above in relation to the participants' potential social desirability bias, I may have acted more confidently than I would have in person, as I drew protection from the screen and my bedroom.

## Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological approach adopted for this research. It started by outlining the research philosophies guiding this research, including a constructivist and feminist ontology and an interpretivist and feminist epistemology, which contributed to developing a feminist standpoint for understanding the participants' own epistemologies and ontologies. The research design and data collection and analysis methods have also been described. Qualitative data collection techniques were used, including a condensed version of the BNIM interview method and a form of photo elicitation to facilitate discussion. These research methods go beyond superficial layers of interpretation of the participants' experiences, and contribute to answering the three research questions: what types of risks do aerial performers experience; how do aerial performers manage the risks involved in aerial performance; and how do social, cultural, and structural conditions shape these experiences of risk?

In addition to justifying my research on the experiences of women aerial performers, this chapter has described the sampling techniques used, and the advantages and disadvantages of these techniques. It has also explained the process of data analysis, including first- and second-order thematic coding to identify emergent and subsequent themes and connect them with the literature. The last section has outlined the ethical

considerations that were taken into account so as not to cause any harm or distress to the participants, and to ensure their anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses. I have also included some self-reflections on the research process, highlighting my own struggles to ‘break up’ with some of the data.

The next two chapters present the findings from this qualitative investigation of the experiences of women aerial performers. Chapter 5 highlights ‘what’ aerial performance is and ‘how’ it is done, focusing particularly on first-order thematic codes that reflect the aerialists’ accounts of their experiences of what aerial performance is and what it means to them. Chapter 6 presents the second order coding, and starts to connect with the literatures on edgework and gender to show how studying aerial performing as edgework reveals it be gendered and a gendered phenomenon.

# Chapter Five. Aerial performance as edgework: Skills and capacities

This chapter starts to present the thematic findings of the empirical data discussed in Chapter 4, focusing on analysis of the 22 interviews with women aerialists. It integrates the data with the visual materials and the fieldnotes collated in the course of the study. Analysis of these data provides thematic insights into the physical, emotional, and embodied risks of aerial performance as edgework, and how these risks are lived, experienced, and navigated. This chapter and Chapter 6 present themes that connect with and extend Lyng's (1990) discussion of the activities, skills, subjectivities, and sensations that constitute edgework. Each of these components speaks respectively to the 'what', 'how', 'who', and 'why' of edgework, addressing what it involves (activities), how it is done (skills), what kinds of subjectivities are brought into being and are at stake in its performance (the 'who'), and why edgeworkers voluntarily undertake the physical and emotional, and embodied risks involved (sensations).

This chapter focuses on the 'what' and 'how'. The first section starts with a descriptive account of what aerial actually is, and what makes a performance 'aerial', and the second section considers aerial as a *risky* performance. The third section examines the data to produce an embodied, feminist understanding of the skills and capacities involved in aerial performance, and the following three sections investigate how the physical, emotional, and embodied risks of aerial performance are navigated. The final section of this chapter draws some conclusions.

## What is aerial performance?

Before considering the lived experiences of aerial performance as edgework, it is important to ask what aerial performance is, what it entails, what makes it 'aerial', and what makes it 'performance'.

Aerial performance can be understood as a unique combination of circus performance and dance, undertaken in an elevated (off-ground) scenario. Performances usually last between six and ten minutes (Tait, 2005). In common with traditional dance, aerial performance involves movements and routines whilst navigating circus elements, such as ‘dancing’ with apparatus (Sydney) up in the air. This latter feature is crucial to what constitutes this distinctive sphere of physical activity and performance. What makes it ‘aerial’ is that it is performed without any point of contact with the floor. Not even the performers’ feet touch the floor; rather, they are most commonly suspended from a rigged point that enables them to be hoisted into the air, even if only ‘half a metre off the floor’ (Natalia). Being suspended in the air allows exploration of different movements and shapes, creating novel orientations and experiences for the audience (Tait, 2005). Thus, what makes the performance ‘aerial’ is simply that the performers are suspended in the air (see Figure 4).

*Figure 4. Hannah performing silks in the sky*

The findings of this study suggest that the height of suspension ranges from one metre to between 60 and 80 metres with cranes, and perhaps higher from buildings and bridges. The sky is quite literally the limit, as an aerialist once performed a trapeze act from a hot air balloon at 3,159.25m.[1] Performing at extreme heights ‘is a very big

[1] https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/news/australasia-news/2016/3/daring-performer-completes-highest-trapeze-act-ever-suspended-from-hot-air-balloo-421126

spectacle'. Aerialists often either require a crane from which to hang a truss or themselves, or abseil down or perform from 'the side of big buildings', typically using 'national or important buildings in the city' (Rebecca). Such performances tend to be known as 'spectacle work'. When performing this high and undertaking this kind of work, aerialists often have added layers of safety and follow strict safety protocols. For example, Anne suggested that anything above 10 metres, for example for crane spectacle work (see Figures 5a and 5b), would need a harness: falling from below 10 metres without a harness 'would be a serious accident', whereas if one were to do so from above 10 metres, she said, 'you will die'.

*Figure 5a. Anne's performance from a crane*

*Figure 5b. Elena's performance from a crane*

For less high and ostensibly risky performances, perhaps suspended a few metres in the air in a theatre or studio, harnesses may be optional. An important consideration in spectacle work is the weather and its effects, and whether the performance can be adapted or is deemed too unsafe to proceed in inclement weather, such as high winds, rain, or excessive heat. If it is too windy, a crane performance will not go ahead

because of safety concerns. Natalia recalled a performance where, following a safety assessment, the aerialists had to get off the crane because ‘the wind was so strong that it would be dangerous’. Elena explained similar experiences, including performing when it was ‘raining so heavily … it ran up your sleeve’, and feeling that she was ‘going to get heat stroke’ because it was so hot.

In addition to height, the spaces in which aerial is performed are extensive. Examples include indoor and outdoor spaces with truss and rig-like structures from which the aerialist is suspended, such as showcases in theatres and aerial studios, Halloween and Christmas immersive experiences (see Figures 6a and 6b), forests, arts festivals, music festivals, conventions, corporate dinners and events, churches, and adverts.

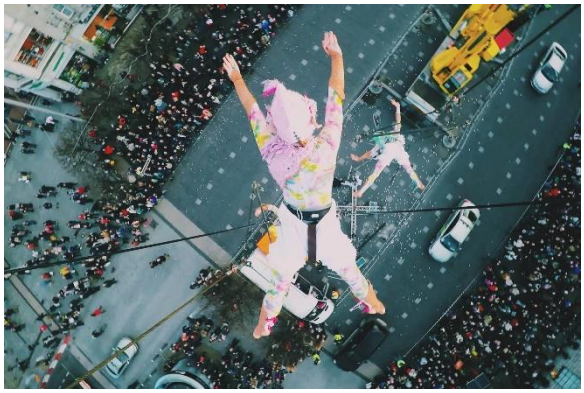

*Figure 6a. Jayne performing as an elf above the street*

*Figure 6b. Janet performing as Dolly Parton*

Aerial is not limited to being performed from truss structures, but can be done safely from a variety of things, including beams, ceilings, the tops or sides of buildings (see Figure 7), roof spaces, bridges, cranes, cliffs, theatres, and open spaces like circus big tops. Whilst its safety is debatable, some aerialists even perform in trees (see

Figure 8), as long as the trees have been thoroughly and professionally checked and have been rigged extremely carefully. Debate about the safety of rigging is interesting, particularly about rigging in trees. Despite acknowledging that performing in the trees is ‘fun’, Rebecca also noted they are ‘really unpredictable’, mainly ‘because of the shape of the trees … they sort of bend as they grew taller’. For her, ‘You could never guarantee that when you jumped away, you would land back where you intended … it was so hard to guarantee what would happen next.’ As both an aerialist and a qualified rigger, Megan’s attitude to rigging in trees was that she was ‘happy to do it for [her]self’ but for ‘other people, that’s a different story’. She said, ‘I will do myself, knowing the risk’, even rigging herself from a ‘high-voltage power tower’, but she refused to rig other aerialists from unconventional spaces, as the ‘onus’ would be on her as a rigger if the aerialist were injured or killed.

*Figure 7. Elena’s performance on a national building*

*Figure 8. Rebecca performing in the trees*

From spaces to apparatuses and partners, the aerialists move much like gymnasts, using their apparatus to enhance their routine by moving in, on, and around it, ‘like dancing with a partner’ (Alice). Apparatuses include trapezes, including the traditional, circus-type apparatus that looks like a swing, silks consisting of two pieces of hanging silk running parallel to each other from the rigging point to the floor, ropes or straps, which may be single or double, and hoops. A single hoop is usually attached to a rope from a rigged point, but multiple hoops can be used (see Figure 9).

*Figure 9. Janet's performance with multiple hoops*

*Figure 10. Megan's own-design apparatus*

Some performers design and use their own aerial apparatus (see Figure 10). Each apparatus moves in its own way and can be pushed, pulled, spun, flipped, sat in, sat on, or danced with in a multitude of ways and at varying heights, adding to the illusion that the apparatus is just floating in the air. This is discussed in more depth in the 'Managing embodied risks' section of this chapter.

As well as performing with their apparatus, aerialists can also perform solo or with other people. Some perform with partners or as a triple act (see Figure 11), and some remain solo unless working with others on a project. The aerialists interviewed for this research quite commonly worked 'solo', but many also worked with others on projects, either directly in a routine involving another performer, or indirectly in the sense that they performed at the same time (see Figure 12), with many working in pairs or groups in this latter way. Interestingly, the double and triple acts did not remain together for extended periods owing to conflicting agendas, as well as not 'finding a partner' to

‘travel with where ambitions were the same and our training schedules were the same’ (Alice).

*Figure 11. Minerva and others as ‘see no evil, hear no evil and speak no evil’*

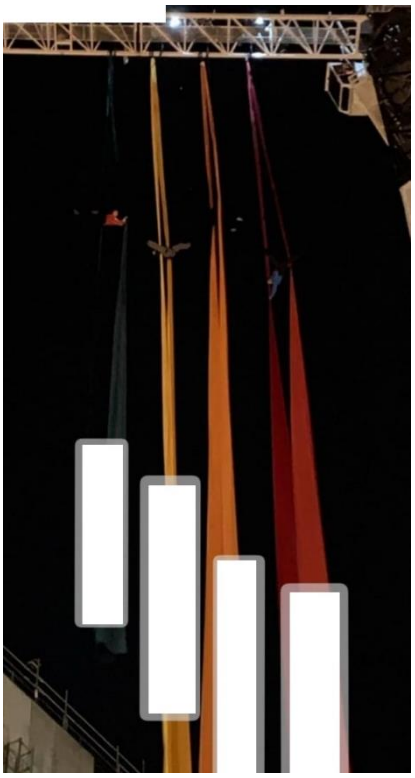

*Figure 12. Natalia and others performing at the same time*

Usually there are riggers, whose role is to ensure that the surroundings, equipment, and aerialist are safe. Riggers are the people who can do anything, from setting up equipment, such as the rig or truss structures from which the aerialist hangs, to checking carabiner clips that connect to the rigging system, and implementing the rigging systems comprising winches, ropes, and counterweight measures. Sometimes they are the counterweight measures themselves, being ‘on a ladder … wearing a harness and then they move up and down and they lift and lower you’ (Sydney). They can also set up the apparatus for the aerialists, such as calculating dynamic loads, in terms of the amount of force the aerialist can exert when moving on an apparatus, including the ‘different types of aerial movement’ (Sydney) for swing, drop, and roll

moves, and setting up performance space for the aerialists. Drops and rolls are moves in which the aerialist starts at the top of the apparatus, and either suddenly ‘drops’ or carefully unravels down it. Lastly, riggers carry out the important task of working out whether the space in which aerialists are being asked to perform and be rigged from, and the equipment with which they are performing are feasible and safe, using calculations like dynamic loading. With regard to space, this includes assessing whether there is sufficient space for all the moves and tricks the aerialists can do, and providing instruction on the extent or limitations of the space. For example, in a small space, two silks running parallel to each other from the rigged point towards the floor, or a hoop suspended from the rigging point may have to be cut or adjusted to fit safely in that space. The rigging point is the main point from which the weight will be coming, where the aerialist and the apparatus will be hanging and performing from. This may be a structural beam in a theatre, a fixed rigging point in a studio, or the top of a crane boom. For aerialists looking at potential performing spaces to be rigged, as Anne said, ‘there’s certain types of beams that are just fecking perfect – anything … structural high beams, anything like that’.

Riggers therefore play an important role in moulding what constitutes aerial performance, the ontology of which can be understood as being shaped by the performer, the equipment, and the work of the riggers, as well as the audience, whose expectations shape the nature and experience of the performance itself, and all that it involves in terms of training, preparation, safety design, and protocols. The riggers are in charge of the aerialists’ safety when they perform. They ensure that every aspect of the rigging is perfect, including setting up the truss structure, and ensuring that the ropes and pulleys are in the right places, the weight and exertion calculations are correct, and the carabiners are clicked into place.

The riggers have extensive knowledge of the skills and competencies needed for the aerialists to perform safely and smoothly. This is knowledge that they usually pass on to the aerialists, which helps them to rig themselves or check what has already been done. Key aspects are how riggers interact with aerialists, and how they understand the types of performer in front of them before they perform. This is discussed further in the 'Managing embodied risks' section later in this chapter. However, it is important to note that trust plays a vital role in shaping this crucial relationship between rigger and performer, and between the safety protocols and the performance itself. Performers need to be able to trust riggers literally with their lives before being hoisted into the air to perform. Therefore, developing trusting relations with riggers is paramount to the safety of the aerialist and the performance itself. Interestingly, these relations of trust between aerialist and rigger are highly gendered, and are shaped by gendered expectations governing who comes to be perceived as credible and 'trustworthy', and on what basis. Rigging is explored in greater detail in later sections of this chapter, and the intersect with gender is explored further in Chapter 6.

What makes aerial performance risky?

Having established what *aerial* performance is, it is important also to consider the *performance* side of aerial performance. For the purposes of this discussion, this involves clarifying what it is about aerial performance that makes it risky and constitutes it as a form of edgework. As noted above, aerial performance is predominantly physically risky because of the height at which it is undertaken. The higher the aerialist performs, the greater the physical risk. Being suspended, often very high in the air, enhances the performative side of the aerialists' routines, 'because a higher trick is usually more impactful or spectacular' (Sydney), and the height alone is impressive. Similarly, Jayne likened aerial performance to having long hair in dance

and comparing the effects. She said, ‘that’s exactly what aerial dance or vertical dance is like … you’d be like, “that was quite pleasant”, but you stick me up on a wall and suddenly it becomes this phenomenal thing’. Taking this sentiment further, Sydney emphasized that aerial performance must be spectacular, in that ‘the whole goal isn’t [simply] to make it as dangerous as possible’, but to appear that way:

> So, you’re constantly negotiating your safety, but also with the outcome that you want from the performance … you’re constantly negotiating ‘okay, well if I take my hands off and I hang just from the skin behind my heel’ or ‘if I just hang from my neck’, there is a big likelihood that I could fall … and potentially get very injured or die. But … you’re making that choice to do that very dangerous thing because it makes the performance more exciting, impactful.

Managing audience perceptions of danger and the whole ‘spectacle’ of aerial is also possible because the aerialists know the safety protocols and precautions that have been undertaken to ensure their safety when they perform, meaning that whatever they decide to perform in their routines will automatically look much harder and, they hope, far more impressive to an audience than if it were done on the ground or at a lower height. Karen expressed a strong view that people tend to have a ‘misconception towards it [aerial performance] being high-risk’. She said: ‘what we do is actually quite low risk because we have gone through so many safety protocols, and we have trained for so long … We have factored in all of these things to make sure that it is low risk.’ As recorded in my fieldnotes made during Karen’s interview, I found this view difficult to understand. To my untrained eyes, and even having conducted other interviews, read articles, and watched countless videos, ‘reels’, and ‘lives’ on social media and in real life, it seemed to me, whilst conducting the interviews, that:

> There is still a lot of risk and danger simply because it is done in the air… OK, I have a slight, maybe irrational fear of some heights, but that doesn’t change the fact that this is well risky. Or does she just want me to feel like that, as part of the ‘act’ of an aerialist? ... I just can’t shake the idea that she is telling me it’s not risky and is low risk, but has to fill in all these risk assessments, safety protocols,

> workshops, precautions … if it was so low risk, then it wouldn't need quite so much mitigating and negotiating.

Karen's account indicates an understanding of the potential risks and dangers of performing at height, but she did not see height as dangerous because of the safety protocols and precautions in place. The latter simultaneously confirm aerial to be risky and reduce the risk to the performers, whereas through their performance and art, the performers make it look risky when it is actually relatively safe for them. Therefore, the risks and dangers of height are compensated for by the safety measures, and the performers understand that performing is far more impressive when suspended in the air, and is therefore worth the risk in the performance.

In addition to the risks associated with performing at height, aerialists must manage other factors that 'heighten' their risk taking when performing. Additional aesthetic factors shape these risks, including their costumes and hair. Navigating these additional factors for the 'look' of the performance, such as its spectacular aesthetic, contributes to what makes aerial a *performance*, while simultaneously adding to and enhancing the risk taking. In relation to costumes, the aerialists discussed what their costumes typically looked like, such as the stereotypical performer's 'full body catsuit' that is 'shiny, pretty' and quite often associated with 'feminine qualities … of lightness and weightlessness' (Jemma). Others described elaborate costumes, including 'a headpiece [that] might get in the way' or 'things around your hands [that] can get in the way of you gripping if you have flowy pants that look really pretty when you're flying, but then they can get really tangled in the fabric and that can be dangerous' (Natalia). Some costumes were 'crazy uncomfortable', 'very elasticated', and 'unflattering … [highlighting] the bits you wouldn't emphasize if you had the choice' (Rebecca). Rebecca added that the costume she wore 'usually looks really ugly up

close but … when you see it far away its incredible and makes total sense', thereby adding to the audience's amazement at the performance when in mid-air. Furthermore, the costumes the women were expected to wear sometimes compromised their safety. Alice outlined another example of wearing a floaty costume with a big headpiece, and how she had had to adapt her performance to accommodate to the costume (see Figure 13):

> I wouldn't obviously ever wear anything with a giant headdress and a giant tail on a hoop because … the kind of act I prefer to do is highly technical … which is not compatible with really intricate costumes. But for this particular photo, all I was doing was being picked up and swept in a circle … I would say this is definitely the least convenient costume I've ever worn.

*Figure 13. Alice's performance with another aerialist, in a headpiece and long tail*

Alice outlined another example of a costume that had a 'flared leg', made of fabric that was 'really fluttery', making 'spinning apparatuses look so much better'. However, she said that 'it is hard to incorporate loose fabric into aerial costumes because *inevitably it will get caught*' (emphasis added). Although the extra material creates shape, movement, and drama when performing in the air, much like the costumes Natalia and Alice outlined, these costumes would not necessarily be appropriate for silks, nor perhaps even for rope performances, because of the possibility of either being literally

tangled together, or of performers mistaking the floaty fabric for their apparatus and clutching on to it, which might lead to them dropping or even falling during their routines if they had not previously done the moves and knots with the fabric. Furthermore, costumes may also get caught, either in the rigging or on the apparatus; they can rip and even burn the aerialist's skin. These issues may further complicate their performances and accentuate the embodied risks to which aerialists are subject. Such risks, as the examples discussed so far suggest, are both physical, relating to performing while suspended at height, and aesthetic, with costumes that potentially compromise performers' safety. Therefore, costumes are an important gendered aesthetic factor that can add to their performances, and therefore risk taking. This is discussed in greater depth in Chapters 6 and 7.

As well as the costumes, some of the women outlined how their hair may also be an added risk in their performances. The use of hair may enhance the look of a performance, but it can also get caught. Hair being caught in rigging devices poses an obvious risk when the aerialist is suspended in the air. Rebecca recalled how her hair 'got caught in the device' and how 'as I was descending … we [were] doing a really dramatic performance … as I abseiled, I turned around and my hair was like, went into the device which is all teeth'. Rebecca's only option to get free was to rip it out, so she has 'cut it short now'. Thus, costumes and hair play an important role in experiencing and understanding aerial as a performance, and increase the physical risk to which performers are subject and which they must navigate as a common component of their roles as performers.

It is also important to consider what impact injuries may have on aerial performance. Injuries range from common types, such as burns and bruises, to broken bones, dislocations of joints, head injuries, and torn muscles. Participants discussed injuries

such as protruding spinal discs (Natalia), breaking their back (Sirena), and 'popping' leg muscles (Sirena), as well as suffering 'second degree burn[s]' (Louise). In addition to these more commonplace injuries, aerial performance has the potential for death as soon as the performer is suspended in the air. Negotiating the performance side of dancing, whilst navigating apparatus, safety equipment and protocols, and height, all bring their own risks and consequences, and often accentuate the physical risks associated with elevation. Even performances undertaken lower in the air come with risks, such as falling awkwardly or getting tangled and 'stuck in the apparatus' (Alice). Training alone is dangerous and 'really frowned upon' for these reasons. However, performances done at great heights appear to pose the biggest risks, as one false move or a slip of the hands or feet may lead to death. For example, national and international news outlets have reported the deaths of performers in the Cirque du Soleil when performers have lost their grip or the safety equipment has failed them.[2] One participant, Jayne, recalled the safety equipment failing. She described how a carabiner attaching an aerialist to a crane, which was 'weighted for tonnes of weight', had 'malfunctioned' and unfortunately led the aerialist to fall to her death.

For Lyng (1990), pursuit of and safe return from the 'edge' is one of the ultimate goals of edgework. Having the 'right stuff', in terms of the physical and mental skills and capacities to be able to engage in and undertake skilful risk taking, deploying these skills and capacities in the approach to and safe return from the 'edge', experiencing chaos and navigating its boundaries, and regaining control with its transformative feelings and sensations are what, according to Lyng, risk takers seek to experience. Such experiences and their associated skills and capacities are explored in greater

[2] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-43450805; https://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/cirque-du-soleil-long-running-fears-about-safety-resurface-after-aerialists-horrifying-death

detail later. The focus here is on what it is about the ‘edge’, about boundary negotiation, chaos, and control, combined with performance, that makes aerial both risky and attractive for performers and audiences alike. For aerialists, the ‘edge’ presents itself in many different ways, with a variety of additional boundaries to negotiate. As illustrated earlier, multiple boundaries associated with safety are continually navigated when planning and undertaking an aerial performance high in the air in an extravagant costume. Reaching the ‘edge’ of this boundary but not crossing it into unnecessarily risky or dangerous territory, by remaining in control to successfully perform the routine and navigate additional risks such as costumes, is a key part of the experience of performing at height. Failure to do so will end in injury or even death.

The findings of this study highlight the various boundaries and edges that aerialists must navigate for a performance to work, both aesthetically and safely, bringing together elements of aesthetics, performance, and risk. The data foreground two sides to an aerial performance that contribute to making it ‘spectacular’: factors that make a performance look more risky than it is, and occasions when the expected ‘look’ that constitutes aerial performance compromises the safety protocols. Both sides are returned to in greater depth in Chapters 6 and 7.

<u>How is aerial ‘done’? Understanding the skills and capacities involved in aerial performance</u>

Having provided an account of what constitutes aerial performance, the discussion now turns to ‘how’ aerial performers undertake their work. How do they start out in the industry; how do they develop through their training; and how do they finance and fund it? How are they able to continue with aerial when their life circumstances change?

The women who took part in the study had ‘found’ aerial in many different ways. For example, some women had been taken to beginners’ classes, or had started because there was an offer for ‘$100 for an unlimited class package for a couple of months’ (Sirena). Others had simply wanted a way to keep fit and become stronger, and aerial was an ideal way to do so, as for Louise. Some of the women, like Blake, Sophia, and Jemma, had had previous pole dance experience and had found themselves transitioning over to aerial. Similarly, other women had found aerial through skills they already had, such as dance, gymnastics, or circus, and perceived aerial as being a natural progression to elevate their skills or give them more performance time, or just to try something new. The tangibility of aerial and its opportunities appeared less limited than for dance, and some of the women felt they had stagnated and were ‘getting to a point with dance where I was … at a plateau, like I was really pushing myself but I wasn’t … I felt I wasn’t getting anywhere’ (Elena). Therefore, ‘aerial was a real tangible way to like feel a sense of progress… Skill is much more tangible in aerial, so you can find value in your abilities.’ For these women, aerial offered the continuous progression and development they were seeking. Interestingly, a few of the women stated that they had ‘just loved it [aerial]’ (Sophia) from the start and had become ‘so hooked’ and ‘obsessed’ (Alice) straightaway, whilst others explained ‘hating every second of it’ at first, and not actually liking it until weeks, months, or even years later when they tried it again, when they ‘fell absolutely madly in love with this’ (Sydney). Thus, in exploring how the women had found their way into aerial, their multitude of experiences illustrates that many different paths may lead to aerial performance.

The women had to find training spaces that were suitable specifically for aerial, so that they did not have to lug all their equipment about. This was as difficult as it was important. These spaces ranged from fitness gyms with harnesses ‘attached to a bungee cord’ (Talia), to performers’ own indie aerial-specific studios that had rigging points (Minerva), circus big tops (Charlotte), and even homes with rigs in the garden (Janet), including some impromptu rigging from trees (Hannah and Talia; see Figure 14).

*Figure 14. Talia on a rope on the beach*

As well as finding the space, the women also had to balance their aerial performance careers with other jobs and commitments, such as teaching dance or gym classes, or even completing university degrees. To support their performing, many of the professional aerialists had second jobs, mainly related to the industry. These included teaching aerial (Alice, Talia), gymnastics and contortion (Jemma), or dance and general fitness (Rebecca, Louise), as well as teaching at workshops (Alice), and

funding their stays on retreats (Rebecca). Some women discussed their own businesses and the non-aerial 'normal… muggle job[s]' they did, such as childcare (Janet) and caring (Sophia), and making jewelry (Rosie) and aerial kitbags as 'side-hustles' (Elena).[3] These gave them the financial resources necessary to continue to do their aerial performing. Interestingly, in relation to aerial performance and earning money from it, the women continued to earn money during periods of COVID-19 lockdowns in the UK.[4] Like many people, the women had to shift to online teaching, with some even performing via online platforms like Zoom. For example, Elena ran a 'Zoom cabaret'. Despite claiming to 'hate teaching online' (Alice) and finding it 'really more draining' (Jemma), it was a way to ensure that they were paid and continued to do something at least slightly related to aerial performance. Thus, finding the spaces and time to do aerial was possibly not the hardest task for the women. Continuing to finance it at various professional levels was more difficult.

The participants who were full-time professional aerial performers emphasized the need to constantly apply for funding from arts councils to enable them to research, create, and perform their own pieces. Travelling around the world to specific locations enabled them to train or shoot and work creatively with other performers, but more importantly meant they would get paid for their work and participation. Grant funding provided a crucial income for the aerialists and those they worked with, allowing them to do aerial without having to compromise as much on money or time. For example, Rebecca explained that funding was 'something you have to think about when you upskill'. She also explained her process for securing funding for her own shows. For

[3] In J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books, the term 'muggle' is used to describe someone without any magical ability.

[4] During periods of COVID-19 'lockdown' in the UK in 2020 and 2021, legislative orders forced people to stay at home to stop the spread of the virus.

example, a proposal would ‘rattle about inside my head’, or ‘an idea … that sits with you quietly for months and months and months’. Rebecca’s case illustrates the performers’ need to work continuously on funding opportunities owing to the precarity of their work, whilst still working on their current performances. Interestingly, some of the women worked in exchange for other services that enabled them to cross-fund their aerial work. For example, Jemma explained how she negotiated her rate for an event by striking a deal, where she would ‘lower my rate a little bit if I could get photos and footage from the event’. Others simply funded their aerial from their full-time jobs, and engaged in it when they could either afford to or had the time to do so. Balancing finances with time pressures, as many of the women discussed, highlights an interesting intersection with risk, as time spent training and rehearsing is invaluable in minimizing risk and developing skills. Thus, resources, including aerial space, equipment, clothing and costumes, time (factoring in commuting and its costs), and instructor(s), are needed to create, develop, and nurture the skills needed for their moves and performances, and for the embodiment of their aerial. Therefore, the aerialists had to carefully balance their ‘spending’ of money, time, effort, and skill to ensure that they could reach the ‘edge’ without compromising their safety and within their financial limits. Some, like Sophia, sought additional (‘expensive’) private aerial lessons, whereas others with finance and time constraints practised anywhere, like Hannah in the garden on a tree. However, the aerialists interviewed said that over time they had developed more awareness of safety and would avoid practising just anywhere, like the tree.

In addition to understanding practical and financial aspects of how aerial performers come to undertake this kind of work and find the time, space, and resources to do so, it is also crucial to understand how they negotiate the risks noted above that

characterize what aerial performance is. It is therefore important to consider questions such as how aerial performers develop the skills and capacities needed to navigate risks and boundaries in their approach to the 'edge'; how they progress in their journey from beginner towards professional, developing their physical, emotional, and embodied skills and capacities along the way; and how they navigate and experience risk according to Lyng's typology, but also in relation to the additional gendered and aesthetic risks noted above. To begin to address these questions, the next section focuses on how the aerialists navigated the physical risks involved in aerial performance.

## Managing physical risks

Finely-tuned bodily skills enable aerial performers to remain in control of situations that might appear chaotic to casual observers. However, novice aerialists do not begin with this capacity; it is developed over time. To understand the process of becoming a skilled aerialist, this section examines some of the ways in which the women interviewed had developed their skills and capacities to perform. It focuses on three techniques and practices that aerialists learn in order to manage risk and remain in control: floor work as practice, getting a feel for the costumes, and learning to cope with pain.

### *Floorwork as practice*

The women discussed how they prepared to negotiate the physical risks involved in aerial. By starting on the floor, or even a few inches off the floor, the aerialists developed and strengthened their physical skills, whilst getting to 'imagine what it [the move] feels like' (Hannah). Removing the height enabled the aerialists to spend time getting to grips with how the various moves should feel, iron out any kinks in the

routine, and make safer mistakes before starting out on elevated performances. Talia explained:

> There's a lot of moves that you do in the air and you need to have an awareness of where your body is in space … for example, we do some things where we just lie on the floor and we create spaces, those shapes on the floor, erm… it really does help, again, [to] create that visualization in your head of where your body needs to be.

Visualization and getting a 'feel' for how their body should be was key. This was later translated and practised in the air, as the performers gradually got higher. For Hannah, it meant rehearsing for 'hours and hours, just getting used to like this exact moment', whilst 'practically touching the floor with my fingers … when I was doing it in the studio'. This had helped her to hone this very embodied capacity. Hannah continued: 'the more I did it at that height, then it became kind of second nature'. Getting to this stage through meticulous practice meant having the capacity to manage mistakes. By managing the mistakes during floor-based practice, the aerialists were able to reduce the chance of physical risk when later performing in the air, thus creating the conditions necessary for learning to take place. This added a layer of safety to aerial performance by allowing them to reduce the physical risks and learn the control needed for their performances, without the high-risk element that comes with height until it had become part of their very 'nature', as explained by Hannah. By practising at floor level to the point where the 'feel' for aerial performance became second nature, the women learned to trust themselves, their skills, and their capacity to do the moves by initially making mistakes and refining their techniques at low heights. They gradually sedimented their routines and techniques into bodily memory through repetition. For Talia, this 'solidifies the technique, and it can give you confidence and trust in yourself as well'. Thus, understanding how aerialists use floorwork as practice, enabling them to 'incorporate' a feel for aerial performance to the point that they feel it is 'second

nature', is key to understanding how they experience, understand, and navigate the physical risks involved.

*Getting a feel for their costumes*

Beyond developing skills at lower heights, the aerialists discussed how they would practise in their costumes in order to get a feel for the potential risks that these accentuated, and develop skills to navigate those risks. Given the significance of costumes to their performances, the aerialists explained the importance of wearing their costumes during practice, to enable them to fully appreciate how everything would feel and move, before they undertook live performances at height in front of live audiences. This might be the feel of the fabric moving or constricting against their skin, or with or against their apparatus. Sydney's experience highlighted the importance of this process:

> One time I had to perform in a beautiful dress … I had performed this particular move; it is called a 'wolf roll'. So, you're in an aerial hoop and you're wrapped around it and you roll around it, and thankfully this wasn't in the performance but this was the rehearsal – which is why you rehearse in your costume – that it got so wrapped around it that I could not move… it took two people to untangle me, so needless to say, in the actual performance I didn't do that.

Sydney's example illustrates the role played by costumes in potentially making a performance even more risky than it might otherwise be. In other words, aerialists' costumes may significantly magnify the physical risks involved, and an important aspect of developing the skills necessary to navigate these additional risks is learning to get a 'feel' for their costumes through practice. This enables them to anticipate these risks, and know how to navigate them, for example, in Sydney's case, by adjusting her performance techniques. Aerialists not only trust their bodies to perform moves, but also develop trust that their costumes will move with their bodies and the rigging in ways that enhance rather than constrain the performance. Rehearsals are when

aerialists can come to understand the possible risks involved, and plan and practise their moves accordingly. During this time, they start to feel whether a move is going to work, and also learn, by coming to ‘know’ in a very embodied way, that they are not going to make mistakes mid-performance, such as getting stuck or falling.

As noted earlier, costumes play a pivotal role in how aerialists navigate and experience risk when performing. Knowing how a costume will feel is one strategy that experienced aerialists use to feel in control and navigate risk. Another is learning to understand the actual material. The participants explained that over time they had come to recognize the significance of costume design, and how it would impact on their ability to perform. Aerial-specific costumes benefitted the women and their performances because the designers understood the aerialists’ needs, facilitating rather than hindering them and their performances, as Rebecca explained (see page 117). The aerialists explained that the material needs to be able to withstand the performance, and must be thick enough to protect the skin. It is imperative that the costume does not rip, split, or tangle, because each of these apparently simple wardrobe malfunctions may have dire consequences when performing at height. An ideal aerial costume would be thick and tight-fitting, like the catsuits mentioned earlier (page 117), benefitting the aerialist as there would be one less thing to navigate and they could then focus solely on the performance.

However, the aerialists also stressed the importance of costumes being aesthetically pleasing, as mentioned by Rebecca (page 117), and eye-catching from various distances, to enable audience members at the back of a venue or crowd to get a similar effect from the costume to those at the front. If a costume is detailed or patterned, it must be done in a way that is visible to all. Yet experienced aerialists highlighted that the aesthetic appeal of the costume must not compromise the aerialist’s safety. In

addition to being strong and thick, the material must also be made in line with the requirements of that specific performance, which may mean that the context and staging of the broader show must be taken into consideration (see Figure 15).

*Figure 15. Hannah's Halloween performance with fireworks*

For example, if an aerialist's performance includes a fireworks display, then the costume (and hair) must be fire retardant, otherwise they might catch alight, with potentially dire consequences for the performer. For example, Jayne used fireworks in her crane performances. She said, 'I flip with the fireworks, [so] then obviously I can't have any hairspray or anything in my hair'. She continued: 'my whole costume I go up in will be flame retardant … even down to everything in the rigging, nothing would be material, nothing would be rope. You'd be all wire.' Experienced aerialists have an in-depth understanding of the importance of the material composition of their costumes, and are aware of the risks associated with getting this wrong. Costumes must be made from materials suited to the performance surface, and also to the potential weather conditions for outdoor performances: too hot and they risk their costumes melting, too cold and wet and they risk slipping. Elena described performing from roughly 50 metres off a 'crazy roof'. During rehearsals, Elena said it was 'completely lashing down with rain' and 'water was running down the rope … it ran down your sleeve and

everything', and on other rehearsal days 'it was so hot that people's shoes were melting to the roof'. Thus, not only do the aerialists need to get a feel for their costume, the material, and how it moves; they also need to test the different conditions in which they have to perform in these costumes. Whether extreme heat or wet and windy conditions, getting a feel for their costumes means getting to know, again in a very tacit, embodied way, the extremities or 'risk parameters' of the conditions in which they can perform, and when to cancel because it is too dangerous.

These same issues and skills apply to aerialists' hair. Although hair may enhance the aesthetics, it must be carefully thought about and navigated for a performance; otherwise, like costuming, and even something as simple as using hairspray (see page 130), it may compromise the aerialist's safety. Similarly to floaty costumes, long hair may get stuck around the apparatus or in the rigging, meaning that the aerialist is literally stuck in the air, as Rebecca mentioned (see page 119). Just like getting a feel for the costumes, practising wearing their hair (including headpieces) is vital to the safety of live performances because it also enables aerialists to anticipate potential mishaps or mistakes ahead of time and mitigate them. Therefore, performance, risk, and safety must be carefully balanced, as with costumes, to ensure that the focus is on the performance. Rather than having added risk to negotiate, like hair and costumes, the aerialists learn how to incorporate their hair into a performance to add to the spectacle, and how to flick and swish their hair so that it does not get caught.

In summary, getting a feel for costumes, by coming to appreciate their design and material, is important in enabling aerialists to navigate and experience the risks involved in aerial performance. Although hardly recognized by audiences with an 'untrained eye', costumes bring additional layers of risk that aerialists must negotiate and control when performing.

*Learning to cope with pain*

This section turns to how aerialists learn to cope with pain, as a third example of how they learn to anticipate and navigate the physical risks associated with aerial performance. When explaining how they trained and conditioned their bodies for performances, the women described experiencing various kinds of pain, such as muscle fatigue, blisters, calluses, bruising, and discomfort. The types of pain recounted ranged from the apparatus physically hitting or burning their bodies, to the bodily discomfort and fatigue experienced from continuously drilling a new move or routine. Over time, through practice, the participants had developed the capacities needed to negotiate, manage, and endure pain during their performances, to an extent desensitizing their bodies to enable them to deliver flawless performances.

The aerialists discussed the physical pain and discomfort they experienced during aerial performance, such as the sharp pain of torn muscles, the brutal sting of burns, the throbbing of broken bones, and the dull aching pain experienced when trying to push their bodies past persistent niggling injuries. Much like training on the floor to sediment muscle memory, the participants also practised in order to condition their bodies for the pain they knew they were likely to experience when performing. For Talia, aerial could be ‘quite uncomfortable, but you can get over that quite, quite easily’ with practice. Conditioning themselves to cope with expected physical pain, and understanding the pain of others involved, as Talia put it, partly coming to understand that the pain and discomfort was worth the ‘fun’ and ‘freedom’, as it ‘outweighs the cost of uncomfortableness’. Thus, by ‘conditioning’ to pain, both physically and emotionally, prior to and between performances, experienced aerialists are able to reduce their fear of anticipated pain and the impact of pain when they experience it, and to appreciate and understand the risks arising from being impeded by pain, and

even reframe this as fun or as an embodied sign of freedom. In this way, pain becomes one less physical risk that the aerialists must negotiate when up in the air. Getting used to the pain and the 'dead zones' ('bits that stop having so much feeling in', as Janet phrased it) early on in their aerial careers meant that, as the performers explained, the pain would not be such a shock to them when they experienced, for example, a burn from the silks, or their muscles hurting when holding on tightly. Ultimately, the pain would therefore not distract them in front of the audience, jeopardizing the performance aesthetic or compromising their own safety.

Interestingly, some of the aerialists described feeling an adrenaline rush, and explained how this helped to push any pain experienced into the background while they performed. During performances, aerialists are usually completely focused on the moment, so there is no time to notice aching bodies or exhausted muscles. Performing and being in the 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), with control over the adrenaline coursing through them, enabled the women to navigate the risks of aerial performing by being entirely focused on what they were doing (their moves), and allowed them not to feel the pain, hits, or burns. Of course, the women recognized that this feeling was temporary, and that once the adrenaline had worn off, the pain returned post-performance. For example, Rebecca recalled being 'quite reluctant to get into the rigging' due to an old back injury. She said that 'once I was up there, you'd feel quite like soothed'; but she explained, 'I don't know why it felt like it would heal the pain … then as I'd come back down, I'd be like "fuck sakes!"' Some women even discussed how they could push through the pain, and their mentality of dosing up on painkillers to enable them to continue to perform. For Karen, 'taking loads and loads of painkillers' was the only way to 'push through' and continue with her aerial. Even when performing was excruciatingly painful, the women continued to push on with the show, harnessing

their adrenaline in an almost medicinal way to press on for themselves and the audience.

Furthermore, aerialists negotiate an important boundary, or ‘edge’, with pain. This is the fine balance between a level of pain that is acceptable or desirable because it represents hard work and preparedness for performance, perhaps involving calluses, bruises, or burns, and the more serious pain caused by an injury. Jemma explained that ‘there is an element that you do perform through some pains and things’; however, this is not to be conflated with being injured. Longstanding injuries, such as torn muscles and broken bones, and those that might affect aerialists’ safety by reducing their mobility or strength do not add to the ‘edge’ but compromise it, meaning that they might cross the ‘edge’ because they are unable to control the pain. Therefore, knowing what constitutes desirable, and perhaps even ‘wearable’, pain, such as calluses and bruises, must be distinguished from injury, otherwise boundary negotiation in pursuit of the ‘edge’ is compromised, as is the performance. Performing whilst injured is perceived to be dangerous and is frowned on within the community, because it is considered to be an additional risk that brings an unacceptable level of uncertainty to performances. Injuries are not something to be negotiated in mid-air, as Sydney explained, because ‘you might have a niggling injury that you’re kind of not sure if something bigger is going to happen if you push it’. The participants considered cancelling a performance or stopping mid-way to be far more acceptable than continuing with an injury, because it was important to avoid uncontrollable risk and the potential to go over the ‘edge’. Sydney continued:

> I have seen people who stopped performances and it’s always advisable. And it’s really, within the aerial community, it’s quite accepted that it’s better for you to not do the performance and be safe than to push it. Nobody really values people

> in the aerial community who [are] just reckless… you just risked your life there and did stupid things – people kind of look down on it.

Sydney's explanation demonstrates the fine line between performing through pain, which is expected by aerialists and understood, in a very embodied way, to be a 'normal' part of aerial performance, and performing injured. As aerialists already engage in physical risk simply by going up to do a performance, performing while injured would add additional risk, which might not be 'negotiable', depending on the seriousness of the injury.

The need to anticipate, recognize, and negotiate physical risk is thus central to learning how to perform as an aerialist. This section has considered three examples of techniques that aerialists learn to develop to cope with the ubiquitous presence of physical risk: practising at floor level, learning to navigate the risks accentuated by costumes and hair styling, and working with/through pain, including knowing the difference between pain that can be safely 'pushed through' and a genuine injury. The next section considers the emotional risks attached to aerial performance.

Managing emotional risks

Alongside the physical risks involved in holding poses, gripping tightly to an apparatus, and maintaining control when transitioning between moves, the women discussed emotional aspects of their risk taking. For Lyng (1990, 2005), emotions management, in the form of mental toughness, refers to the capacity to be able to push on and control the emotions experienced in approaching the 'edge'. This capacity is deemed crucial to surviving edgework, as it requires edgeworkers to be able to master their emotions to maintain control at the 'edge' and make a safe return. The notion of mental toughness is a masculine way of understanding emotions, implying that the only way to do edgework successfully is simply to push through the emotions and concentrate

purely on boundary negotiation and the ‘edge’. Three examples of the techniques and practices that my interviewees developed and deployed illustrate how they worked *with* rather than *through* their emotions: reframing and balancing their nerves as excitement; mobilizing emotionally ‘neutralizing’ discourses around mortality; and learning to control the adrenaline rush they experienced.

*Reframing nerves as excitement*

The women exhibited mental toughness in a way that did not ignore or push emotions to the side, but rather balanced and channelled their emotional responses to aid their performances. An example of this was the aerialists’ understanding of nerves and excitement, and of how to balance these responses to seek and experience the ‘edge’ in a safe way. For Anne, balancing nerves as excitement was what got her on stage, having been told that ‘nervousness and excitement are the same physiological response … so when I feel nervous I just … recap it in my mind, I’m like “oh God, I’m so excited”’. She managed her pre-performance emotions using techniques she had developed over time. Rather than letting her sweating palms and intense breathing fill her with nerves, she greeted them as a ‘positive feeling’ that aided her performance. Her mental toughness was about recognizing and embracing these emotional and physiological responses, rather than pushing them aside.

Emotions are not ignored or cast aside as a hindrance, but rather are used in a way that helps aerialists’ performance. Finding the right balance between the two enables them to ‘push on’ in their own way, as too much of either may lead to greater risk. Being too nervous would hamper their performance, meaning mistakes might be made, putting themselves at even more risk, whilst too much excitement might lead to an overly enthusiastic performance, perhaps missing a beat or causing injury by putting too much into the performance. Rebecca’s first professional job exemplified

this, when she failed to clip herself into the rigging in time. Rather than missing her music cue, she continued with the performance and clipped in when she could, noting that she had made it 'twice as bad as I wasn't thinking like an aerialist yet'. For the aerialists interviewed, gaining an embodied understanding of their emotions and learning how to work *with* these feelings were crucial in enabling them to negotiate the risks involved in their performance and recognize that their nerves and excitement could enhance, rather than hinder, their work.

*Mobilizing emotion-'neutralizing' discourses around mortality*

Another related strategy used by the women to manage emotional risk was how they talked about the risks involved in aerial. For example, their narratives tended to centre around their fears and acceptance of death as a possible consequence of their risk taking. For Sydney, it was important to talk about being 'okay with the fact [that] it might go wrong', recognizing that it:

> sounds really crazy … but I am accepting responsibility that if I make a mistake and I suffer as a consequence, that it is something that I have done, not that I just haven't been paying attention or anything.

Elena explained this further:

> It's sort of that whole idea of like toying with your mortality, like standing on the edge of the cliff kind of thing … if you were someone who tends to catastrophize, you could totally go 'oh, all these bad things could happen to me' and be paralyzed by it … so it was like always toying with that line between feeling like you're going to see all the bad things happen in your head, or else enjoy the fact you're there.

In mobilizing emotional discourses, they would use words like 'death', 'dying', 'risk', and 'dangerous', and phrases ranging from comparing the risks of doing aerial to the risks faced in everyday life, such as 'you can die of a head injury falling from your feet' (Anne), to blunt acceptance of 'being okay that you might die in that situation'

(Sydney). This helped to neutralize their fears and the possible effect of something going wrong for them when performing, and justified their engagement in risk taking, making it possible for them to continue. It also helped them to reframe the negative risks as positives, for example by noting that opportunities to do work like this were rare and were actually safe.

This reasoning, using emotionally charged language centring on narratives of fear or death as a result of their risk taking, to manage their emotional risk was accompanied by highly affective perceptions of what was physically risky, mobilizing a discourse of being 'death defying'. Anne articulated this through her reference to having a 'quasi-suicidal idea of "well if it's my time to go" … there's no other way to convince myself not to be scared'. This helped them when faced with the fear and potentially paralyzing nerves commonly experienced before, during, and after a performance. The women dealt with this by reasoning and saying to themselves and other performers, 'well then, fine, if it happens, it happens', and by asking themselves the rhetorical question: 'are you willing to take that risk?' The answer was 'usually yes' (Anne).

Thus, the women used emotionally charged language that centred on their fears and the potential risk of death as a way to cope with the possibility of not making it back from the 'edge'. It was their way of coping, using their own version of the 'right stuff' (Lyng, 1990), which included mobilizing emotionally charged rhetorical forms of language as a way to neutralize their emotions about what they were doing, showing how they negotiated risk taking through emotion management.

*Controlling the adrenaline rush*

As noted above, the women discussed balancing their sense of an adrenaline rush and the 'buzz' that performing created for them, with the importance of navigating the

risks involved. Most felt that the adrenaline buzz produced through their risk taking usually enhanced their performance. The women commonly used this feeling to help them to navigate the physical risks associated with aerial performance, such as masking any pain, injuries, or even mistakes made during the performances, as discussed above. In this sense, adrenaline acted almost as a coping mechanism for physical risk taking. For example, Megan discussed how she had injured her hand during a trapeze trick, but 'there was adrenaline, so there was a lot of, any feelings I did have were masked'. It was not until after her performance that she had realized there was pain in her hand. As a coping mechanism, the adrenaline buzz appeared to literally numb any physical discomfort that would have hindered or made the performance riskier. The adrenaline buzz allowed her to push it out of her mind and remain focused and in control of what she was doing.

Another illustration is Rebecca's earlier example of her hair getting caught in the rigging device during a performance (page 119). She said, 'it was actually really scary 'cause I was like, am I gonna be able to get out of this? ... my hair's just gonna keep feeding in, and I was like "fuck", but I ripped it with such adrenaline, it came straight out'. Rebecca, like the others, would not have stopped, felt the pain, or realized this until after the performance when the adrenaline had started to wear off and her absolute focus and control whilst performing was no longer needed. In these ways, the adrenaline buzz produced protected the aerialists during their performances, enabling them to keep pushing on, not only through the physical risks they encountered, but also through the emotional risks. Hannah spoke to these issues when discussing her fear of fireworks and having to do pyro-crane work:

> I'm going to say like … really high up, with the fireworks, with a huge crowd … I've never been that scared, like I was petrified … but at the same time … I've never felt that relief like when I got down … I was buzzing … I was just full of

> energy because … I was petrified up there … just the relief that I was like still alive after that … I just feel so full kind of energy and adrenaline … I was just so glad I'm still alive.

However, the women noted that their adrenaline buzz had to be kept in check and balanced, for both themselves and the audience. For the audience, too much of an adrenaline buzz would somewhat mask and protect against any mistakes happening onstage. Likewise for the aerialist, too much adrenaline might mean that a major injury would go unnoticed until it was too late. Participants noted that adrenaline might mask the pain of a broken bone or a tear in a muscle, much like Megan's hand injury or Sirena's broken back. An uncontrolled and unchecked adrenaline surge might also increase the risk for other aerialists performing alongside them, such as missing a step that impacted on another aerialist's next move, potentially injuring them or even letting them fall. Conversely, with too little adrenaline the pain would be felt, the routine would become stiff or disjointed, and the performance would be underwhelming for both the aerialist and the audience. The key was to balance their adrenaline, for their own safety when performing and to meet the audience's expectations of their performance.

In achieving balance, both in adrenaline or between nerves and excitement, the aerialists demonstrated that emotions are experienced as bodily sensations that safeguard them from further risks, ensure that their nerves, fear, pain, and excitement do not become debilitating and/or compromise their performance, and protect their own safety.

## Managing embodied risks

### *Learning to trust themselves*

This last section of the chapter focuses on how the participants developed embodied skills and capacities that enabled them to 'feel' when things were not right, and to

communicate with other aerialists while performing. They developed trust in themselves, and in other performers and their apparatus. In terms of self-belief, with time and practice the participants had come to believe in their abilities, skills, and capacities to anticipate, recognize, negotiate, and safely undertake risk. For example, Natalia said, ‘I trust my hand holds me and that my arm does the work’. This kind of belief in their own embodied abilities and tacit knowledge allowed the aerialists to push themselves when trying new moves, apparatus, or heights, and during their return to live performing after the COVID-19 lockdowns.

By developing these embodied abilities for aerial performance, the women knew how far they could push themselves to continue in their pursuit of the ‘edge’. Physically, they knew how far they could push their bodies, like Natalia learning to trust her grip strength when holding on to the apparatus with one arm while suspended 20 metres in the air. Emotionally, the aerialists learned to trust in their ability to remain focused and in control when approaching the ‘edge’. These abilities became deeply embodied, involving skills and capacities developed over time through practice, conditioning, and repetition. Crucially, this enabled the aerialists to learn to know when something did not feel right, such as a move or the rigging. Trusting themselves, through their bodies, enabled them to do their risk taking, and equipped them with the embodied skills needed to go about it. Jemma suggested that this was about ‘being connected with the body’ and focus: ‘your head’s kind of emptied ... of other things’. For her, this involved using visualization techniques until it became ‘more of a kind of natural tactile experience, where you’re kind of moving with the equipment and the equipment’s almost part of you’.

*Learning to trust and work with riggers*

In addition to trusting themselves and their equipment, the women had to develop trust in others, most notably the riggers. The latter are crucial to connecting aerialists with the apparatus they use, in both a physical and affective sense, in order to navigate their embodied sense of risk. The aerialists interviewed emphasized that the trust built with the riggers was key to enabling them to perform, as 'they're keeping you alive there' (Jayne). Sydney summed up trust and the relationship with the riggers:

> You know when someone says, like friends or people in relationships, they go 'oh, I trust you with my life'? Like you actually have to trust someone with your life … it's a different thing, you know, I put my life in your hands. So, for example, some of my closest friends are people who I have done those performances with or who would have rigged me (see Figure 1, page 85).

Aerialists must trust the riggers' extensive knowledge, and the riggers must put the aerialists at ease in order to ensure their safe return from the 'edge'. For aerialists, the trust developed in the rigger is vital in building their embodied ability to push towards the 'edge'. Sydney explained that aerialists and riggers have a 'shared experience with that much risk … you're almost kind of on a very thin line between life and death'. This 'very thin line' and the joint experience of negotiating it together helped the aerialist to 'develop really deep important connections with people', because 'you have actually trusted them with your life'. Thus, trusting relationships developed with riggers are fundamental to aerialists' pursuit of the 'edge'.

Having an expert rigger who used specific and appropriate equipment, and listened to their concerns, questions, and pre-performance routines enabled the women to go up and do their performances. Developing an embodied capacity and trust in a rigger, as Jayne explained, is 'what makes a really good rigger', such as 'they can read different people and … be like "okay, right now I need to shut up because that person needs to

just be in their zone"'. Thus, riggers must assess not only the aerialists' rigging and safety, but also their need to feel at ease before performing.

Riggers are hugely influential because they are usually the last person the aerialist sees or speaks to before performing. Not trusting the rigger might lead aerialists to overthink aspects of their safety when performing. Worrying about the rigger's capacities and being distracted by distrust might hamper aspects that keep aerialists safe before and during a performance, causing them to overlook other important safety aspects. Therefore, paramount to the aerialists interviewed was having 'to trust them [the riggers] 100% but … it's also having someone that you feel really cares about you to like chat to you … and suddenly you've got a relationship with them that isn't just about safety' (Jayne). Developing these types of trusting relationships means that aerialists have one less risk to deal with, and they come to understand that their relationships with, and trust in, their riggers are both a physical, safety-based bond, and an affective one.

As part of the process of learning to trust and work with the riggers, aerialists develop a 'feel' for the safety of their own rigging, articulated with reference to the importance of developing a deeply embodied capacity to know when the rigging is not right and they feel unsafe. Getting a 'feel' for rigging safety is an embodied skill acquired over time through experience and learning, which serves to protect the aerialists when they engage in their risk taking. For example, their harness might not be sitting quite right, or they might feel that there is too much slack in the rope to which they are connected. Such issues need to be checked and adjusted by aerialists and riggers before going up in the air. This embodied skill of 'feeling' the safety is designed to mitigate the risks involved in edgework, and keeps aerialists on track to reach the 'edge' and return safely.

*Learning to trust the apparatus*

The final illustration of how aerialists learn to navigate the embodied risks associated with their performance is learning to trust the apparatus they use. Describing the equipment as 'like a dance partner', Natalia referred to how aerialists must be able to attune to and move with the swings and moves of the apparatus. They are essentially performing *with* the apparatus, not on it, as how each apparatus moves determines what sort of moves can be performed. For Alice, 'the spin and the hoop will tell me where to go, or [to] … pare down options, like … the spin [created by the hoop] is just going to say "no"'. Alice's apparatus determined how she performed her spins, and therefore her moves, helping her when she was 'paralyzed with choice and I don't know where to go'. Natalia and Alice both evoked a sense of the equipment having agency, if not subjectivity ('it tells me where to go', 'like a dance partner'), imbuing the apparatus with meaning and purpose.

In this sense, the apparatus becomes a part of the embodied performance, whereby the movements of apparatus and body are each shaped by the other. Sydney also explained this with reference to an unusual spiral-shaped apparatus (see Figure 16), which she described as 'very big, they're very heavy, they're hard to move around'. Sydney said that figuring out which way to spin, to 'move in these crazy ways that you never thought were possible' would have the audience 'mesmerized by it when you're dancing'. In likening their apparatus and moves to dancing with a partner, trying to figure out the moves that best suited the relationship between themes, the aerialists trusted their apparatus to give them the best, most mesmerizing sequence of moves for their performances. To some extent they humanized their apparatus and embodied its moves and guidance. Sydney described how it felt when the moves did not work out as planned or the spin in the spiral wasn't 'completely centred':

> It just cracks you in the head, it just wallops you from all sides, you get totally beaten up by it. We call it being bitten. It's like it's biting me, and you just get it.

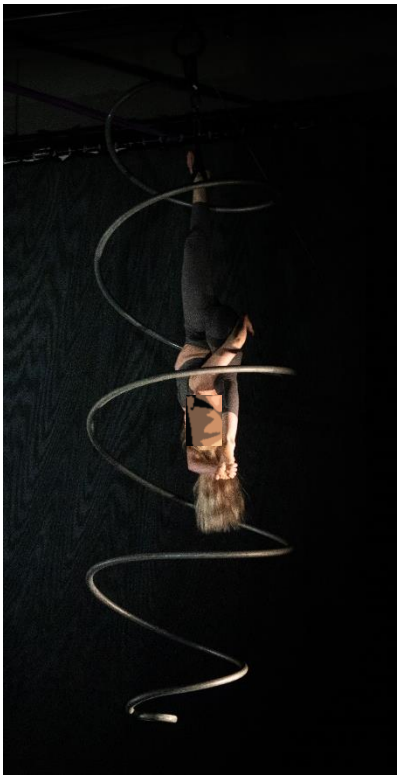

*Figure 16. Sydney performing on an unusual apparatus*

The relationship between the aerialist and her equipment, and her need to learn and trust and work with it despite knowing that it might 'bite' her, indicate a process of embodiment of the apparatus, much like the trust one might develop in a dance partner.

## Conclusion

This chapter has presented thematic findings and empirical data that connect with and extend Lyng's (1990) activities ('what') and skills ('how') in relation to women's aerial performing as edgework. It has provided an account of what aerial performance is, and what makes it 'aerial', including aerial performance as a combination of circus and dance, suspended in the air whilst navigating an apparatus under the careful watch of a rigger. It has also examined what makes aerial a 'performance', such as negotiating

the safety aspects associated with performing at such extreme heights in costumes. This chapter has also looked at how the women do their aerial performing, including how they first got into aerial, the spaces they train and perform from, and how they finance their performing. In addition, it has examined how aerialists manage the physical, emotional, and embodied risks they face.

This chapter has foregrounded women's aerial performance as *edgework*, whereas the next chapter foregrounds it as *gendered edgework*. By applying the typology further, Chapter 6 demonstrates the 'who' (subjectivities) and 'why' (sensations) of women's aerial performance as gendered edgework, and the need to navigate additional ontological risks. In extending Lyng's typical characteristics of edgeworkers and motivations for edgework, which is seen as an individualistic pursuit of the 'edge', this study reveals that women's experiences do not quite conform with Lyng's edgework because, for them, it is a collective and collaborative experience. It connects bodies through shared experiences of mutual recognition of the physical, emotional, and embodied risks they face and conquer. In addition, they take ontological risks on account of their gender, by engaging in something as ostensibly masculine as risk taking.

# Chapter Six. Aerial performance and/as gendered edgework: Motivations and meanings

Chapter 5 examined ‘what’ aerial performance is, what makes it ‘aerial’, what makes it a ‘performance’ – and what makes it risky. It also highlighted ‘how’ aerial is ‘done’, including the skills and capacities that the women developed to manage some of the physical, emotional, and embodied risks they experienced when doing aerial performance. This chapter continues to apply this typology to the data, focusing now on the ‘who’ and ‘why’ of aerial performance as edgework to highlight how aerial performance as edgework is experienced as embodied and gendered. In doing so, this chapter brings to the fore the additional ontological risks that the women in the study took on when engaging in risk taking.

The line of argument developed here is that the ontological risk taking undertaken by the women is more about taking risks with their gender. That is, in engaging in aerial performance, the women take on additional edgework, in the sense that in addition to dealing with the physical, emotional, and embodied risks discussed in the previous chapter and highlighted by Lyng, they must also negotiate social, cultural, and structural risks relating to the (heteronormative) constitution and experience of their gender. In this aspect of the analysis presented here, a Butlerian-informed lens is applied to the findings to show how women’s risk taking is a gendered endeavour, emphasizing the vulnerabilities of (mis)recognition associated with being a woman risk taker. Shifting the focus to the ontological side of risk taking, this chapter highlights the ‘who’ and ‘why’ of aerial performance as edgework.

The ’who’ is split into three subsections focusing on the women who engage in aerial performance. These examine how their physical strength is underestimated, their

(embodied) skills and capacities are negated, and their gendered aesthetic adds to both the performance and risk taking. The ‘why’ focuses on what motivates the women to do their aerial performing, including the risks accentuated by gender expectations, and how it adds to their sense of ontological risk, as well as the collective experience of aerial performing. This chapter thus extends Lyng’s notion of edgework, highlighting edgework as an embodied, gendered, and collective experience for the women aerialists. Starting with ‘who’, the first half of this chapter focuses on the women’s experiences of gendering in aerial performance.

## Who does aerial performance?

Building on the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of aerial performance as edgework discussed in Chapter 5, the ‘who’ in this chapter starts to foreground aerial performance as gendered edgework. Because the aerialists are women, the edgework they undertake, including the physical, emotional, and embodied risks they have to manage (discussed in Chapter 5), must be understood as gendered. To understand this, as well as how the women experience gendering in aerial performance and therefore in their risk taking, three recurring themes in the data are used to illustrate such experiences: ‘physical strength underestimated’, ‘skills and capacities negated’, and ‘gendered aesthetic adds to the risk taking’. Exploring each of these highlights ‘who’ the women are, and their experiences of gendering that not only add to their physical, emotional, and embodied risk taking, but also contribute to their ontological risk taking as they are women undertaking risk. As explained in the next section, the women discussed how their physical strength was usually underestimated because of a perception that their petite size meant they were weak, fragile, or incapable, which also compromised their safety.

*Physical strength underestimated*

The women in the study outlined various experiences of having their physical strength underestimated when it came to performing and being rigged for a performance. In particular, their petite frames were mistaken for, or conflated with, stereotypical perceptions of women being 'feeble' and 'passive' (Thompson and Üstüner, 2015; Schubart, 2019), and they were sometimes given rigging plans that did not account for their routines or the force exerted when performing. Some of the women highlighted that the gendering experienced was based on a perception of women aerialists being 'graceful', with their perceived 'weightlessness' (Jemma) undermining their physical strength, and sometimes even compromising their safety when it came to rigging, and thus performing. Although the women did acknowledge that they might be small, the force they could exert when performing was much greater, and not all riggers considered this. Anne explained an experience of this:

> Nine times out of ten, you get this, the same sentence: 'Anne, you're only tiny, you'll be fine hanging off.' I'm like, like... just if I was a big man, they would think twice about it and they don't listen either… I'll be telling them when I'm doing movement up there, I'm exerting far more force than my actual weight, so I can exert ten times my weight and that beam takes... like, this truss you've just shown me takes 100 kilos. I understand I'm only 50 kilos, but that doesn't mean I can't exert over 100 kilos of force… I get defensive before I've even started because I'm like, 'oh, they're not gonna believe anything I say', because I'm this 5' 2'' small woman who turns up and is like 'no I don't want to hang off that'.

Anne's experience, which was shared by other aerialists, is important for understanding how gendering can affect the relationship and trust developed between aerialist and rigger. As highlighted in Chapter 5, the trusting relationships built with riggers are paramount to the women's edgework, ensuring their safe return from the 'edge', alongside the aerialists' extensive knowledge of rigging and embodied knowledge of what 'feels' right when it comes to their safety. If riggers fail to respond

to aerialists' requests for more stringent rigging because they are unhappy or uncomfortable with what has been planned or already executed for them, the relationship between aerialist and rigger comes under fire, as the aerialists' physical and embodied knowledge, skills, and capacities are underestimated or ignored, and their safety compromised. One example is the dynamic load calculations outlined by Anne on the previous page. The women's gender and stereotypes of woman aerialists are used against them, even implying that if they were male, they could make such demands for safety because they would know what they were talking about, or their physical stature would be sufficient to ensure more stringent rigging. Anne mentioned that 'I find most of the time I feel like it's because I'm a woman, that the rigger is always a man'. If she were a male aerialist, then concerns about the rigging and safety would be heard. Sometimes the women even used other men to voice their concerns or plans for them.

In playing on such gender stereotypes and using men, whether other aerialists or men in the rigging industry, the women had to negotiate their physical safety using a male's voice to express their concerns in order simply to be heard, rather than being undermined or ignored because they were perceived to be 'light', 'delicate', and incapable of rigging, somehow conflating size, gender, capacity, and knowledge. For example, Karen said that when she was seeking safety permission for rigging, she would essentially have to 'hire a less qualified or less knowledgeable older man' to relay her rigging plans as his own. This was because she found that usually the 'safety officers are also older men' who 'don't like a young little dancer … that is more knowledgeable … than they are', and therefore did not listen to her.

The gendering experienced here reinforces archaic body-based gender stereotypes and the gender binary between men and women, as well as the vulnerabilities the

women experience because they are women. They are seen as ‘vulnerable’, like a ‘young little dancer’ (Karen). Their embodied and developed knowledge, skills, and capacities mean nothing when they are women in a man’s domain, being undermined because of their gender, size, and associated stereotypes. Furthermore, because their physical strength is undermined, such as the force they exert when performing or their capabilities to rig, they must negotiate and manage another layer of risk in their risk taking. In doing so, they balance gender stereotypes, skills, capacities, and safety in order to rig and perform. This highlights aerialists’ physical vulnerability in terms of their bodies and safety, but also their ontological vulnerability in terms of having stereotypes applied to and enforced on their bodies when it comes to rigging, safety, and performing. Karen discussed how these experiences were ‘belittling’ for her and felt to her as though ‘you have to work so hard… Sometimes it feels like we have to work twice as hard to make it the same distance.’

Women aerialists’ vulnerability to stereotypical perceptions of their gender and aerial performers, which shape their safety and therefore their performances, exemplifies how they are not afforded the embodied or experiential capacity to negotiate their own safety. This adds to their physical and emotional risk taking, as well as their embodied and ontological risk taking. Ontological risk taking therefore connects with other modes of risk: it potentially compromises the women’s safety, both physically and emotionally, by undermining their own ability to know what they need and how to meet these needs, both for themselves and each other. Similarly to their physical strength being undermined, the aerialists also experienced having their skills and capacities negated owing to the gender stereotypes that govern aerial performing.

*Skills and capacities negated*

As explored in Chapter 5, the women's narratives demonstrate how, as aerialists, they developed skills and capacities that helped them to manage the physical, emotional, and embodied risks of their aerial performance, and therefore their risk taking. Proving integral to their risk taking by keeping them safe, the women's skills and capacities were developed over time and experience by learning from and building trusting relationships with other performers, riggers, and themselves. The deeply physical, emotional, and embodied skills and capacities developed and managed by the women are seen to be negated by the same relationships that they rely on and trust to keep them safe, namely their relationships with the riggers. Stereotypical perceptions of femininity that govern aerial performance, such as being 'tiny' and 'little' (Karen) contribute to gendered perceptions of women being physically vulnerable (as noted in the previous section) and therefore unsuited to or incapable of using their own developed skills and capacities to keep them safe. Skills and capacities that were negated included rigging, as when the women were rigging for themselves for a show. Some negative perceptions of women aerialists doing rigging persisted, as they were referred to as 'girl' (Megan) or 'twirlies' who were 'just there to look pretty and hang' (Sydney). Adding to the 'who' here, the women had to manage the ontological risks associated with their gender and gendered perceptions of aerialists and of rigging, whilst also managing the risks that these posed to their safety because these gendered perceptions invalidated their knowledge, skills, and capacities, hence encapsulating gendered edgework.

Of the women interviewed, those who did engage in rigging practices were often perceived to be engaging in something ostensibly masculine, including heavy lifting and making the apparatus secure. This even extended to dynamic load calculations,

implying that the women aerialists were incapable of or did not have the knowledge necessary to work these out for their own performances; they needed men to do the calculations for them, and they should just accept what they were told. The 'who' here, as indicated in Anne's comment earlier (page 150), centres on the aerialists being women and the riggers being men, governed by gender stereotypes and the gender binary. Rigging is therefore seen to be a masculine endeavour owing to the physicality and risk associated with rigging, while the aerialists are seen to be too feminine to rig successfully because they are 'graceful' and 'lightweight' (Jemma).

Alternatively, the women were seen as just 'having a go' at the rigging, rather than being legitimately qualified to do so (Megan), trivializing the aerialists' skills and capacities. This seemed to trigger others to panic about the aerialists' safety or over-scrutinize them when they did have an opportunity to rig. Sydney explained that when she was rigging for a performance, the production team were 'slightly uneasy' and 'hanging around, watching, almost in a way that they wouldn't'. She said that after her male oil-rigger friend had told the production team that she, as a rigger, was 'one of the best' and that 'she's so knowledgeable', the production team relaxed around her when she was doing her rigging. Sydney experienced these types of situation all too often, where 'validation from someone they respected' and who had credibility as a rigger – a man – ensured her safety as a rigger/aerialist, thereby (re)enforcing stereotypical gender expectations whilst negating her own skills and capacities. Anne described a similar experience. She said that the best way to ensure her safety when her skills and capacities were negated was to use another male to convey her knowledge, skills, and capacities on her behalf:

> I still haven't really figured out the best way [to deal with having her rigging ability negated by male riggers] … but I also have a friend... and the last two or three years we spent most of our time working together. He is a broad, sports-playing,

> tall man, and so the easiest thing to do was to have him walk into the room, command attention from the person that we need to speak to, and then I would slip in and be like ‘so this is what we need’. Because I actually knew a lot more than he did about the rigging, and that would work quite well. And they would often look to him for confirmation, but at least the information was getting transferred.

Like Karen, Anne took to using a man who was less knowledgeable than her to convey her rigging plans. She relied on gender stereotypes governing masculinity and knowledge in order to keep herself safe, despite having more appropriate, deeply developed skills and capacities to ensure her own safety.

An interesting intersect is with age. Ageing aerialists’ skills and capacities are to some extent negated owing to the aesthetics that govern growing older, which may push them to greater heights to continue performing. As Karen quipped, ‘you can’t see the details, you can’t see the wrinkles at that height’. As aerialists age, gender stereotypes governing femininity and performing, such as looking young to be more ‘hireable’ for corporate gigs, continue to be applied, even though they have the skills and capacities necessary to continue with the strenuous routines. For example, Karen outlined that ‘there is probably not really going to be a place for me to be doing silks at a banquet’, despite arguably having developed better skills and capacities to continue doing so over time and with experience. Nevertheless, she said that ‘the only girl that can keep up with me is 17, and we perform together’. Karen’s understanding that her time in the corporate world was limited demonstrates how stereotypes of looking young and feminine are employed in corporate aerial performances, even though she is just as capable as those younger than her.

An interesting comparison can be made with non-corporate gigs, with acceptance within the aerial community to continue performing. Alice outlined that actually, in the aerial world, ‘people get more interesting as they get older’ compared with a ‘shit hot

16-year-old who can do all the big tricks but doesn't have anything to say'. So although the women's skills and capacities are ultimately undermined and negated owing to their physical appearance as ageing women, opportunities arise to continue performing in non-corporate gigs. Rather than ending their careers, the aerialists can be somewhat more selective with the work they take on, or adapt their performances to enable them to continue to perform, such as having 'to do more of the Cirque du Soleil thing where I like cover up with the make-up' (Karen).

Further illustrating the 'who' of aerial performance and linking this with gendered edgework, the women navigate their non-conformist behaviour in relation to age and gender norms by continuing to perform throughout their lives. They show that their careers are not limited by their age, and that their skills and capacities should not be negated because of perceptions of gender and age. They are not too old or too weak to perform; rather, they have more deeply developed and finely tuned skills and capacities to do aerial performing. Thus, there is space for the women to continue to perform at high levels of height and skill.

*Gendered aesthetic adds to the risk taking*

The first two sections of 'who' have focused on aerial performance as gendered edgework arising from who engages in it, such as women. This includes having their physical strength undermined and their skills and capacities negated based on gendered stereotypes that govern women and aerial performers. This final section of 'who' further demonstrates aerial performance as gendered edgework by focusing on the hyper-feminized aesthetic expected of the women aerialists whilst navigating the masculinities that enable them to undertake their performances, such as defined muscles and muscular control for apparently flawless movements. The additional layer of risk here is an ontological one, which requires them to navigate their recognizability

as women, and which is accentuated by the aesthetic expectations attached to their (gendered) performances and to performers.

Starting with the hyper-feminized aesthetic expected of aerialists, the women described some of their typical highly-gendered costumes, especially in corporate gigs. This aesthetic combines what is stereotypically expected of women and of femininity, and gendered expectations attached to aerial performance. For example, some of the women described what a corporate gig would typically require of the aerialist, focusing particularly on costumes and movements that would accentuate their womanliness, femininity, and body shape. Jemma explained that this would be the 'general stereotype of performing… they want you to be that slinky, shiny, pretty'. This included wearing tight, sparkly, catsuit-like costumes, or ethereal and floaty costumes, and performing and moving in ways very stereotypically associated with aerial performance, such as 'lightness' (Jemma) and 'being as delicate as possible' (Sydney), with many splits and soft moves. The women were gendered into a very hyper-feminine, embodied version of their risk taking. Anne said that for corporate gigs, 'usually what they want is splits into a big drop. Like we have like the corporate act, which is always upbeat, happy: you do the splits halfway through, or like several times in different orientations, and then you do a big drop at the end.'

Being light, soft, shiny, and pretty in costuming and moves is the feminine aesthetic expected of the aerialists. Accentuating their womanliness and femininity also accentuates their risk taking, sometimes increasing their physical risk through what they wear or how they move in the already risky situation of performing at height, and also heightening their ontological risk taking. Adding to their performance in an ontological way, and therefore their ontological risk taking, the women must navigate the 'edge' of their recognizable femininity when performing. They must amplify and

signify the femininities in their aesthetic, especially for those who are not in the aerial performing world and do not appreciate the artistry and skills of their performances.

With such signifiers of their feminized aesthetic, the women were ‘seen’ as ‘graceful and feminine’ (Jemma), and even fragile, and were idealized as young, and perhaps small and petite, because these qualities were expected of such performances owing to gendered expectations associated with women aerial performers. In reality, the women were only able to achieve such graceful, flawless, and smooth movements and performances because of their carefully honed and fully developed bodily abilities, such as their defined muscularity and extreme knowledge of how their bodies can move, and knowledge of how they are expected to look and perform at such gigs. The women’s bodies thus do not conform with stereotypical expectations of aerial performers based on gendering of their hyper-feminine bodies, meaning that they take on an ontological risk when performing, sometimes even trying to hide aspects of their bodies that are not associated with femininity, such as their muscles. The ‘who’ here are women performing in gender-expected ways, despite the need for muscular bodies to (literally) carry them through their performances.

An interesting aspect is the intersect with culture and the gendered aesthetic of the aerialists, which is highlighted by different (hyper-)feminized expectations when performing in other countries. For example, Sydney explained that for a performance in the Middle East, the aerialists were ‘covered down’ from their wrist to their ankles, whereas ‘usually aerial costuming, in order to be safe, is skin tight’. For this performance, the women were expected to still be identifiable as women, but were not permitted to accentuate their femininity in terms of their body and shape. As a compromise, Sydney described the ‘unitard’ they wore, with ‘feathers… all across our chest, feathers all across our bum’, as well as ‘face paint’ and their ‘hair covered inside

these different caps so you don't even look like a person, you look like a bird'. They were being presented as 'other worldly', and therefore 'it stops becoming such an issue then'. This can be understood as a boundary to navigate, in that the women had to negotiate the 'edge' of their femininity, for example by not being hyper-feminine in presenting the overly sexualized bodies expected of corporate gigs, but also being feminine enough to be easily identifiable as a woman, thus adding to their (ontological) risk taking. Natalia outlined a similar experience when performing for southern US mega-churches during the Christmas holidays:

> One of the clients for the company that I work for – big mega-churches, southern mega-churches – that for holidays put on these big Christmas shows and then they include aerialists as angels. But because sometimes they're very conservative churches, they want to make sure that you're... you don't look sexy, you know, or provocative in any way. I mean, they want you to look like an angel, right? So you have to look angelic and innocent… and feminine, but not too womanly… the costumes are, erm, not super fitted, so they're a little bit loose and the flowy pants.

Looking 'innocent', 'feminine', and not overly 'womanly' are just some of the gendered aesthetics expected of the women, which compel their performances to meet stereotypical perceptions of aerialists. Having to negotiate their feminized aesthetic and finely balanced muscles, as well as the physical, emotional, and embodied risks associated with aerial performance, further demonstrates the ontological aspect of the women's risk taking. Thus, their aerial performance as edgework is gendered edgework. The 'who' are the women who undertake physical, emotional, embodied, and ontological risks on account of, and accentuated by, their gender.

Having foregrounded the 'who' in this first section of the chapter, the second section focuses on reasons 'why' the women are attracted to aerial performing.

Why engage in aerial performing?

This section examines the ‘why’ of aerial performance: why do the women undertake and continue to engage in aerial performing? It focuses on the aerialists’ motivations for doing aerial performance/gendered edgework, and connects the ‘who’ with the ‘why’. Gendered experiences of the ‘who’ motivate the women to develop trust in themselves, other performers, riggers, and even the equipment, as seen in Chapter 5, and to reassert their deeply embodied capacities. The aerialists’ physical, emotional, and embodied risks are accentuated by gendered expectations, contributing to the ontological risk they experience, and further illustrating gendered risk taking and gendered edgework.

This section also focuses on ‘why’ the aerialists are drawn to aerial performance by the sensations, feelings, and embodied experiences and bonds they can get from it. For example, the ‘magical’ and ‘addictive’ (Jayne) qualities of their risk taking and feeling alive having returned from the ‘edge’, as well as collective feelings of togetherness when performing or watching a performance, are arguably missing from Lyng’s (1990) edgework theory. The collective aspect of risk taking and the mutual recognition experienced contribute to motivating the women to keep doing their aerial performing, to be recognized for what they do. Here, the connection between the ‘who’ and the ‘why’ is deepened, showing that ‘why’ the women do aerial also partly explains ‘who’ does aerial performing and gendered edgework. Why the women are continually attracted to aerial performing is partly to do with who does it and the shared collective experience of performance, whether performing with other aerialists, or connecting through deeply embodied and empathetic bonds when watching performances based on shared experiences of risk taking.

*Risks accentuated by gendered expectations and ontological risk taking*

As highlighted in the last part of the 'who' section, the women had to navigate additional ontological risks based on hyper-feminized/gendered expectations of women aerialists. This also included navigating, to some extent, the masculinities that enabled them to move softly or be 'graceful' in the air, as their extreme muscular control ensured apparently smooth and graceful performances. This part of the 'why' section develops this further, showing how masculinities were sometimes consciously included and blurred into the aerialists' feminized aesthetic. Being seen as 'doing something different' motivates ontological risk taking, highlighting how risks are accentuated by gendered expectations, such as performing with a feminized aesthetic. However, gendered expectations that are perhaps more ostensibly masculine, such as displaying their muscles, are also played on and included in the aerialists' aesthetic, illustrating their navigation of recognizable (gendered) perceptions of aerialists and of being a woman. Thus, this subsection highlights the aerialists' conscious inclusion of their muscles in their aesthetics and performances, as they exhibit interest in and addiction to the embodied, subversive potential of 'doing something different' with and through gender. Done consciously, the women demonstrate how the (additional) risks of their edgework are accentuated by and through gender expectations and stereotypes, contributing to their ontological risk taking.

As highlighted in Chapters 5 and 6, amongst the skills and capacities necessary for aerial performing, the women's muscular bodies enable them to get through their performance gracefully, yet are hidden or masked by costumes. However, some of the women discussed ways in which they consciously showed off their muscular bodies. In blending the imagery of stereotyped hyper-femininities expected of their aerial performance with the masculinities needed to be able to give such gendered

performances, some the women discussed how their muscles were beneficial for achieving their smooth and delicate performances. Jemma highlighted the masculinities needed to give such gendered (feminine) performances:

> I think it's [aerial performance] perceived to be quite graceful, often quite glitzy and glamorous, quite feminine … it's all about the performance and kind of moving through the air… of lightness and weightlessness … at the same time, there is that muscularity, and that's part of why I like this one, because often you hide your muscles… and people don't always register how much strength it takes.

Some of the women discussed displaying their muscles by purposely and consciously showcasing not only their embodied skills, but also the masculinities they needed to be able to move so gracefully or to push through a performance even when they felt unsafe or were in pain. Jemma explained how both masculinities and femininities are included in costuming and performances when discussing one of her photos (see Figure 17):

*Figure 17. Jemma performing skills*

> it's really striking, and I think it kind of encapsulates, for me, what a lot of aerial is often considered to represent, in terms of the kind of sequin, shiny costume, but then also… really shows off the muscles in my back and that side of things.

> So for me, it kind of encapsulates a lot of what aerial is often perceived to be but then still showing that muscularity.

In showing off their muscles in shiny costumes, Jemma and others discussed how they would sometimes purposely blend their feminized costumes with their muscular physiques. They told how they liked to perform in stereotypically feminine costumes, for example dresses, to add to the graceful effect of their movements in order to appear feminine, graceful, and floaty, moving seamlessly and effortlessly. However, crucially, in order to do this the women must deploy their masculinities, such as muscle control. Karen illustrated this, and other skills and capacities of edgework potentially perceived as ostensibly masculine, by explaining that with 'training or enduring some of the pain that comes along with training… I love then that we can make it, from my aesthetic anyway, is to make it look very feminine'. For Karen, enduring pain is seen to be masculine, like Lyng's 'mental toughness', yet for her aesthetic she liked to be feminine and said that she did 'most of my stuff in dresses'. Thus, the women demonstrated ontological risk taking, accentuated by gendered expectations of women and of aerialists, by showcasing, and even championing, stereotypical masculinities such as their muscles and their capacity to endure pain.

However, as noted above, their strength and muscularity, which are necessary to safely navigate the physical risks discussed in the previous chapter, must often be played down in favour of the feminized aesthetic. They must negotiate this tension involved in additional work, without which they risk being 'misrecognized' as overly masculine, because 'muscularity is often... typically… perceived as a masculine aesthetic' (Jemma), as not looking 'right', or as not strong enough to safely undertake the level of performance expected. Hence, this challenge is understood as ontological risk, relating largely to recognition of the women, during and through their

performance, as credibly feminine. They must embody both masculine and feminine ‘traits’, associations, characteristics, and stereotypes in order to meet people’s expectations of aerialists. Mixing the imagery of aspects stereotypically associated with femininity and masculinity contributes further to their recognizability as people who are different or are doing something different, as they neither conform with nor feel compelled to perform gender norms. Instead, they negotiate the edges of femininity and masculinity, and take aspects of both to enable them to do their own edgework successfully. This can also be understood as a collective endeavour, knowing and understanding that other aerialists are navigating the same edges with their own performances.

Importantly, alongside fear of being misrecognized when undertaking edgework as a woman, the women also exhibited interest in and addiction to its embodied, subversive potential for ‘doing something different’ with and through gender. In relation to the women aerialists and how they engaged in risk *as women*, they purposely trained to be stronger and visibly muscular, incorporating this into their routines and movements. This starts to defy naturalized representations of femininity by ‘playing with’ sedimented perceptions of masculinities. For example, Sydney was ‘a particular fan of looking super muscly, like trying to look as big as possible’ ,and actually found it ‘more useful for my aerial to be strong’. This required her to ‘train a lot with aerial straps’, ‘which is usually associated with male gymnasts’, so for her it was ‘an amazing thing to train for strength and coordination and… dynamic abilities’. This ontological risk taking navigates the ‘edge’ of the women’s recognizability as women, by purposely incorporating such masculinities. Their femininity and aspects of masculinity are explored in relation to an ‘edge’ of still being recognized as a woman, and not fearing being cast as abject for their gendered performativity, but rather fully embracing it.

As both Karen and Sydney showed, the risks the women took were accentuated by gendered expectations of femininity, by including stereotypical perceptions of masculinity that affected the look of the performance. This included ‘dude moves’ or ‘beast moves’ stereotypically associated with men’s gymnastics, and abilities arising from physicality, such as ‘the really hard ones [moves] that require more strength and more power’ (Sirena).

Drawing insights from recognition theory, feeling a sense of accomplishment for their embodied skills and capacities was recognized not only by others, but also within the performers themselves. This meant that they were able to recognize this in other performers who pushed themselves to the ‘edge’ in their performances, much like the embodied bonds described in Chapter 5. As a factor motivating them to keep doing their risk taking, accomplishment as recognition also seemed to contribute to their ‘desire’ to be seen to be doing something different, not usually associated with being a woman. Receiving recognition from others, as well as their own embodied skills and capacities, contributed to their sense of accomplishment. This foregrounds how it was important to them that their risk taking was deemed worth watching, and that they were able to recognize themselves, and be recognized, as embodying this. In other words, the women gained a sense that who they are and what they do ’matters’ in some way, which differs from normative expectations shaping feminine embodiment, especially in the highly aestheticized sphere of performance. This experience/ontology of performing becomes deeply shared, collective, communicative, and embodied.

*Collective experiences of aerial performing*

This part of the ‘why’ section focuses on collective responses to the gendered experiences faced by the women in aerial performance. In further developing and connecting the ‘who’ of aerial performance as ontological/gendered edgework with

'why' the women continued to engage in their risk taking, their motivations for doing aerial are revealed as deriving from shared collective and collaborative experiences, based on the skills, capacities, and abilities developed and mobilized by the women when negotiating and responding to ontological risk. Thus, this section highlights ways in which the women were motivated to develop trust in themselves, other performers, and riggers, and even their apparatus (as seen in Chapter 5), in order to reassert their undermined and negated skills and capacities by connecting and communicating at an embodied level. The women exhibited an embodied capacity to connect and communicate with other performers by developing embodied bonds with each other, highlighting their mutual recognition of the physical, emotional, and embodied risks they took, as well as the ontological risks on account of their gender, as risk-taking women.

*Embodied bonds and capacities*

The women aerialists exhibited deeply embodied bonds and capacity to empathize through their extensive knowledge of how performances felt, enabling them to almost communicate with each other, and providing motivation for, as well as explaining 'why', the women engaged in aerial performance: for recognition and connections with other performers. These embodied bonds and capacities included the deeply embodied ability that the women developed when watching other performers, as their bodies reacted physically and emotionally to the performances they were watching. Karen said that she was 'very affected by other people's moods or other people's energy', and that actually 'a lot of performers are like that'. Rebecca explained her version of this, describing that when she watched a performance, 'if I can see in their body that they aren't strong enough for what they're doing [or] because they're nervous they just look weaker, then I'll actually be quite anxious watching it'. Talia expressed a high level

of attunement to others, describing how she could ‘pick up on details and their body language and sometimes their aura that they’re giving off; how they’re feeling, erm, and just their presence as well’. The ‘aura’ refers to the energy of the aerialist performing, and how other aerialists can pick up on this, such as feeling their anxiety or excitement. For example, Talia explained that this:

> could be through how quickly or slowly they do a move … someone who’s really competent might be doing things quite quickly, but then there might be that one move where they’re really hesitant and you can see that in how slowly [they do it].

The embodied bonds that the aerialists developed as performers, empathizing with the risks being taken and the skills being showcased in doing so, connected them on a deeply embodied level, acknowledging and understanding what the other was experiencing without uttering a word. The aerialists therefore exhibited attunement to each other’s bodies and their bodily capacities, such as their body language and the energy they gave off when performing. Motivating their engagement with aerial performance as risk-taking/ontological gendered edgework, the women developed trust between themselves and others, exhibiting a collective response to the gendered risks they navigated and experienced when doing their edgework.

The aerialists also explained the bodily reactions that they experienced even while just watching others’ performances. For example, their hands started to sweat, their bodies tensed up, or they felt nervous when watching, as if they were the ones performing. Karen even explained that ‘if I am watching another aerialist … if I know they are about to drop, I have like tensed up my core to protect my body from the drop, to protect their body from the drop’. The aerialists explained how empathy was experienced as a deeply embodied reaction. Rebecca described this as an ‘empathy of the body’, explaining how she could ‘feel what they’re feeling in [her] body, even when [she’s] not

moving'. In discussing issues pertaining to embodiment, Talia drew a distinction between 'inner' and 'outer' work when performing. 'Inner' work refers to the 'certain feelings of how it's meant to be in your body … you kind of learn how it feels'. She went on to explain how, for example, once this inner sense was developed, she could automatically tell whether her silks were wrapped in the right way during a performance by how they felt against her skin. She contrasted this with 'outer' work, referring to the performance that everyone sees, and 'learning how to engage with the audience, bringing the emotions or the thing outwards'. The women thus outlined slightly different versions of the embodied capacities they developed over time with practice, knowledge, and expertise. These embodied capacities not only protected the aerialists who were watching, but also communicated to the aerialists performing that others recognized and understood the multitude of skills, strength, trust, and adrenaline powering their performance.

When describing their photos of their own performances in the interviews, the participants reflected on how they could physically feel the nerves and excitement from that experience all over again. The sense of excitement was often palpable, with some participants even moving their bodies in ways that mimicked the original performance. For example, they threw their arms wide, used their hands to show the drop, clenching and opening their fists, and swayed their bodies as they described certain moves and spins, even reenacting their facial expressions. Over time, I began to recognize how these bodily movements helped them to describe and verbalize their photos to me, showing the extent to which their aerial performance was deeply embodied.

This subsection, focusing on the deeply embodied bonds and connections between the aerialists, has highlighted mutual understanding and recognition between the

aerialists, and how they communicate with each other without speaking, by watching routines and drawing on their own experience. This is discussed further in Chapter 7.

*Embodied feelings of safety*

As illustrated in the previous subsection, the women exhibited an embodied capacity to communicate between each other's bodies when performing. This enabled the aerialists to feel what the other was feeling, whether that be the strength and awe of the routine, or some anxiety or tension in the lead-up to a complex move or high drop. Therefore, even to enable the performance to take place, the women negotiated aspects of the aesthetics of the performance, such as how complex their routines looked to the audience and other performers, alongside their embodied capacities to keep themselves safe. Negotiating this line between the aesthetics of their performance and their safety is an embodied communicative skill used by performers to keep themselves and others safe, and must be carefully honed for ontological risk taking. In engaging in this way, the women were able to 'feel' the safety when they were being rigged. They developed this capacity by watching and learning about the rigging process from the riggers, through feedback and support from other performers, and from having extensive embodied knowledge of when something felt 'off'. For example, Jayne recalled her first ever gig, which involved a crane flight, and which, unbeknown to Jayne, was the first crane gig performed after a previous aerialist from the same company had died as a result of a faulty carabiner clip. Jayne illustrated how the aerialists 'share the load' to enable them to hear and feel they are safe:

> So we're doing silks on the crane, but we had them in a cocoon as well… so I'm sat in there… and then I remember my boss – who's still the artistic director of the company – saying 'can you click your carabiner for me?' She wanted to hear the carabiner – this was when we were in the air, so we've done all the safety checks – and she said, 'can you click the carabiner for me?' So I went, 'click, click' and she said 'thank you'. And then the other performer who was up with

> me, who also, she said, ‘can you click it again for me too?’ So I clicked it again for her.

In building this collective embodied skill and capacity, the women protected themselves and other performers from the vulnerabilities of risk taking. This recognition of when something did not feel safe, whether by the look or feel or by hearing that something was wrong, was mutually understood by the women, and further protected them when taking risk.

In a sense, these embodied skills and capacities for ontological risk taking that specifically ensure safety can be linked with their embodied empathetic understanding of risk, and therefore their mutual recognition of each other’s risk taking. This, alongside the embodied bonds discussed previously, differs from Lyng’s original theory of edgework, in which edgework and working the ‘edge’ are a somewhat individualistic experience based on edgeworkers’ own skills, capacities, and knowledge. Here, the women demonstrated how their risk taking is also a shared and collective experience, which is unique and based on mutual recognition of each other’s embodied skills, capacities, knowledge, safety, risk taking, and vulnerability, and is also shared and shaped by the audience.

*Audience*

As well as highlighting recognition of themselves and other performers’ embodied skills and capacities for risk taking, the interviews also revealed the significant role played by the audience in this collective response to gendered edgework experiences. Enhancing the aerialists’ capacity to do aerial performance, the audience’s engagement and ‘energy we get from an audience is amazing’ (Karen), and motivates performers to take risks. An excited and engaged audience lifts the aerialist and in turn, lifts the performance. For example, the audience may give an aerialist a much-

needed energy boost to end a performance on a real high. Jemma described ‘feeling the general atmosphere, mood in the room, erm yeah, the audience for me, are absolutely integral’, as ‘the more they give back, the more it makes you kind of want to put more of yourself out there’. Anne’s description of an ‘energy exchange’ between herself and the audience was strikingly similar to the communicative capacities of the embodied bonds between aerialists:

> Their own personality and there’s always a back and forth that happens. Erm, if the audience isn’t with you or you’re not with the audience and you don’t give a shit about them, the energy exchange doesn’t happen … the real high is not the adrenaline of being watched, it’s the adrenaline of sharing something and being shared back with.

The energy exchange between aerialist and audience, and the visibility, vulnerability, and recognition of their risk taking keep them going, motivating their aerial activities. Recognition of their risk taking, because they are skilfully doing something different, in turn pushes the women further and arguably closer to the ‘edge’ when performing. This is one reason ‘why’ the women continually seek the ‘edge’ when performing. Anne described the relationship between herself and the audience, and what recognition from the audience feels like when performing, likening it to being:

> Drunk at two in the morning. You have this massively deep conversation with somebody else; it feels like that, that you... that you’re being seen and you’re seeing them, as who, as your whole self. There is not, erm – even though as a performer you’re oftentimes a character – it feels like there’s no mask.

Thus, the visibility of the aerialists and their performance, exposed to the audience and their reactions, deepens the relationship between the two. The aerialists feel like they can be their true and authentic selves with an engaged audience, being recognized for their risk taking. This recognition is akin to a relationship between the aerialists and the audience, in that the women need to negotiate their audiences’ engagement and energy for their performances, and highly energetic and engaged

audiences are able to amplify and push the aerialists during their performances. This adds to their engagement in what might be understood as an aesthetic that looks risky, such as performances that, to the audience, look more risky than they are for the performers. The aesthetic depends heavily on the performer's embodied skill to manage the audience's experience and perceptions. The audience's role in motivating the women's aerial performance, energy, and recognition is considered to be integral to their performances, as it provides a form of mutual recognition between the aerialists and the audience of the risk being undertaken, with the performers being recognized and therefore 'seen' by the audience as they engage in risk taking for the audience's benefit. This moment of recognition pushes them harder and closer to the 'edge' of risk, and even shapes the performance itself and adds a performative element to their performances.

The audience's role also shows that aerial performance is a collective and collaborative experience of edgework between aerialists and audience, with the audience affecting the performance and the energy, and the aerialists negotiating the audience's expectations of the performance, in a physical and emotional sense, through their embodied abilities and bonds developed with the audience. This insight contributes to edgework theory by revealing additional boundaries to aerial performance, and performance in general, in that performers must carefully balance physical aspects of their performance with the emotional boundaries of the audience.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has discussed the 'who' and 'why' of aerial performance as gendered edgework, revealing the additional ontological risks that the women aerialists in this study took on when they engaged in their risk taking. The three

subsections relating to the ‘who’ have highlighted that because the aerialists are women, the edgework they undertake, including the physical, emotional, embodied, and ontological risks they navigate, must be understood as gendered. Thus, the ‘why’ has focused on collective responses to the gendering the women experience, which motivate their aerial performing. Both the risks accentuated by gendered and ontological risk taking, and collective experiences of aerial performing demonstrate that the additional risks faced by the women when doing aerial performing/edgework are more about navigating the ontological risks of their risk taking as women, highlighting collective and collaborative experiences of recognition in aerial performance.

Applying this typology to the data and to edgework allows distinctions to be made between Lyng’s original conceptualization of edgework, and the gendered/ontological edgework that the women undertake, such as their collective response to the additional ontological risks faced. These experiences connect aerialists/edgeworkers with each other, and with riggers and the audience. Thus, this chapter has highlighted that women’s edgework can be viewed as a collective process based on mutual recognition. What Lyng neglects is that although edgework can perhaps be conducted individualistically, recognition of each other’s edgework and shared experiences of gendering shape the aerialists’ edgework.

# Chapter Seven. Discussion: Doing aerial performance as gendered edgework/edgy performativity

This chapter returns to insights and issues raised in the literature on edgework and gender performativity, discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, respectively. It considers these in light of the findings presented in Chapters 5 and 6 to present an empirically and theoretically informed account of women's edgework experiences. The main contributions of the analysis to the development of edgework theory will be highlighted, particularly in relation to foregrounding what a gendered lens can bring to the analysis of lived, embodied experiences of edgework. Three themes are examined: the 'body conversations' in which edgeworkers engage; how their performances involve both a 'risky aesthetic' and an 'aesthetic risk'; and 'edgy performativity', a concept that helps to make sense of how edgework is experienced in gendered ways not grasped by established theory.

To recap on the literature explored in Chapter 2, Lyng's (1990) social psychological theory of voluntary risk taking explores social and psychological factors that explain the risk-taking experiences of male skydivers. According to Lyng, as the skydivers work towards the 'edge', their risk taking can be understood as a form of boundary work, and seeking the 'edge' of the boundary between life and death, conscious and unconscious, chaos and order is what attracts people to undertake it. Lyng describes edgeworkers navigating this boundary using both innate and acquired skills, such as 'mental toughness' to push on and reach the 'edge' of the boundary, and the 'right stuff' to ensure successful completion of edgework, for example to avoid being seriously injured or dying when taking risks. Lyng (1990, 2005) and Kong (2016) suggest that successful edgework has transformative potential owing to its association with feelings of self-actualization and self-determination. However, as noted in Chapter 2, this tends

to be understood in highly individualistic, overly-cognitive ways, framing the ‘right stuff’ primarily in terms of mental capacity, resourcefulness, and self-reliance. Related research highlights feelings of ineffability and the transformative effects of feelings of power and superiority (Ferrell et al., 2001). It shows how these may connect with alternative modes of identity creation (Murphy and Patterson, 2011; Lyng and Matthews, 2007), and an individually empowering sense of self-efficacy and self-competency, through control over mind and body (Lyng, 2014).

Lois’s (2001) seminal paper prompted a turn to researching edgework in relation to women as well as men, in Lois’s case through an account of search-and-rescue volunteers. However, her paper reflects rather than challenges the normative, masculine bias in established edgework theory, highlighting the differential experiences of men and women, but attributing the latter to women being emotionally unsuited to edgework (Lois, 2001). Subsequent studies involving either partly or entirely women samples further reflect this masculine bias. For example, Newmahr’s (2011) study also posits that women are too emotional for edgework and are thus unsuited to risk taking.

Therefore, as discussed in Chapter 3, established edgework theory is problematic insofar as it is inherently masculine, not only methodologically because its concepts are based on all-male samples, but also analytically because it is premised on a masculine ideal that frames being ‘overly emotional’ as a feminine weakness. As a result, experiences of edgework are codified as masculine. For example, mental toughness and the right stuff are seen as ideal traits of edgeworkers, inferring that emotions should be worked through or cast aside. This creates a masculine baseline norm against which to evaluate the experiences of all edgeworkers, including women, labelling their experiences as deviant, or ostracizing them from edgework because

their experiences do not conform with men's. Reading the edgework literature through a gender lens drawing on ideas derived from Butler's writing (1988, 2007, 2011), and particularly the performative ontology of gender and recognition theory, further highlights that women's edgework is experienced differently to men's. When undertaking edgework, the women aerialists in this study were also taking additional ontological risks. In established edgework theory, this is not understood; whereas in a feminist-based approach that understands edgework through a gender lens, it is foregrounded.

As a reminder, three main questions guided this research: (1) what types of risks do women aerialists experience; (2) how do women aerialists manage the risks involved in aerial performance; and (3) how do social, cultural, and structural conditions shape these experiences of risk? In response to the first question, this chapter examines the women's ontological risk taking when they undertake aerial performance as edgework. The discussion focuses on related themes that provide an understanding of how ontological aspects of risk taking in aerial performance are experienced and managed, connecting the theoretical discussion with the empirical findings presented in the previous two chapters, and with the second research question.

In response to this second question of how women aerialists manage the risks involved in aerial performance, the analysis focuses on the 'body conversations' in which the women engage, a term used here to refer to embodied ways of interacting through which the aerialists connect and communicate with each other. These body conversations help the performers to cope, both individually and collectively, with the risks described in previous chapters, and the ontological risks discussed here.

Finally, in response to the third research question of how social, cultural, and structural conditions shape these experiences of risk, the analysis focuses on the intertwined conditions that shape how aerial performers navigate the boundaries between a 'risky aesthetic' (carefully balancing and negotiating what looks risky in an aerial performance) and an 'aesthetic risk' (risk accentuated by the expected 'look' of the performance). The analysis presented shows how risk is experienced in ways that reflect the expectations and wider context within which aerial performance takes place, and which make it more risky than it might otherwise be.

Lastly, the chapter develops the argument that aerial performance can be understood, following a Butlerian reading of Lyng, as a form of 'edgy performativity', which opens up scope for un/doing gender in the way that Butler advocates. The risk of gender misrecognition is a common thread throughout all three responses to the research questions, and in the link between ontological risk, body conversations, the additional risks engendered by a risk aesthetic/aesthetic risk, and the theoretical framing of aerial performance as edgy performativity. In exploring this issue, the chapter connects norms governing femininity with the lived experiences of aerial performance. It shows how the aerialists' recognition of the skills and capacities involved in ontological risk enable the performers to become connected or 'bond' in very embodied ways that are neither explained nor acknowledged by Lyng's analysis of edgework.

In examining 'body conversations', 'risky aesthetic/aesthetic risk', and 'edgy performativity', this chapter draws on key components of edgework theory recalling the masculine biases underpinning the theory. It discusses findings from this research that demonstrate the differential experiences of the women studied. These have wider implications and contribute to the literature on edgework theory. The next section examines the first of these three themes, body conversations.

‘Body conversations’

Through their own bodies and those of other aerialists, the women exhibited a deeply embodied connectedness with one another. This was a form of communication that enabled them to recognize their own and each other’s skills, capacities, and experiences of being negated, particularly in relation to their embodied skills and capacities. These embodied forms of connectedness and communication is referred to here as ‘body conversations’. Developing Butler’s (2007, 2011) ideas of ‘embodied bonds and capacities’, the term ‘body conversations’ helps us to understand the deeply embodied ways in which the aerialists learned to connect with one another, communicating between their bodies and recognizing that others ‘matter’, in the Butlerian sense of being both of substance (matter) and of significance (mattering).

In this sense, understanding the aerialists’ experiences of ‘mattering’ through the concept of body conversations helps to grasp the recognition that they experienced when watching other aerialists move. Drawing on their extensive knowledge of aerial performing, including their physical, emotional, and embodied skills and capacities, their experiences of body conversations created a collective sense of risk taking, even when they were not necessarily performing together. They understood one another’s risks and how these risks were experienced, whether executing a high drop or performing in an outrageous costume, or perhaps even watching someone relatively new to aerial performing. In these scenarios, the aerialists demonstrated an empathetic understanding of what others were going through, and an embodied capacity to connect, trust, and bond through movement, experience, and risk taking. Thinking of these ways of recognizing and relating to one another as body conversations foregrounds edgework as an embodied and collective experience that unifies the aerialists in ways that enable them to challenge the gendered perceptions

governing gender and risk taking, including by highlighting their shared, embodied capacity.

The discussion in this section presents a more detailed account of the significance of the concept of body conversations to edgework theory. It focuses in more detail on core aspects of body conversations, explaining how the notion might be incorporated into edgework theory, particularly by understanding edgework as gendered. It also discusses links between body conversations and empowerment, teasing out some of the possibilities whereby edgework empowers female aerialists, and indicating how it can be understood as a form of un/doing gender in Butler's (2004) sense. The next subsection examines connection and communication in body conversations, focusing on connections established between the aerialists through their moving bodies, and how these enable them to communicate with each other, and develop 'communitas' (Turner, 1974) between them.

*Connection and communication*

The aerialists in this study exhibited a noteworthy capacity to connect and communicate with others through their bodies. Developed through practice and performing themselves, as well as watching others, the body conversations in which they engaged were a vital way to connect their bodies together, based on mutual understanding and recognition of the skills and capacities required for aerial performing. The aerialists were then able to 'speak' to one another through their bodies, 'conversing' over the risks associated with performing, and particularly the ontological risks that they confronted in an ostensibly masculine, voluntary risk-taking context. In doing so, they contributed to satisfying each other's desire to be recognized, and in a sense undertook their performances and risk taking together.

In relation to the first research question on the types of risks that women aerialists experience, connection and communication shed light on the multiple risks of aerial performing, and how these risks are shared. The women connected together to share their experiences of risk by communicating with each other; they spoke through their bodies and empathized with those performing, understanding the emotional responses and management to navigate and cope with the (additional) risks associated with their performance, such as the tension between 'risky aesthetic/aesthetic risk' outlined in the next section. The aerialists' responses to the additional ontological risks faced as a result of gendered perceptions of aerial and edgework were largely collective, focusing on their shared experiences of risk, and underestimation and negation of their skills and capacities. They developed empathetic connections with each other through shared experiences of navigating the gendered perceptions that they commonly faced as aerial performers.

Such responses suggest that aerial performing constitutes a site for undoing gender, as it is shaped by hegemonic femininities and gender reiterations, for example in the shiny, sequined costumes the women are expected to wear, and is simultaneously carried out in a more critical, reflexive way by showcasing their muscular physiques, and recognizing each other's bodily capacities and knowledge.

*Recognition*

As discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, recognition is important for understanding the edgework experiences of aerial performers, not only in terms of recognizing their own skills and capacities for risk taking, but also in recognizing them in others, through connection and communication. As discussed in Chapter 6 in particular, the women recognized both the importance of these skills and capacities, and the extent to which they were underestimated or negated by non-performers, owing largely to the

gendered expectations shaping aerial performance. The aerialists found connection in this and in their shared desire to be recognized for their risk taking *as women*, including by other performers. Therefore, the mutual recognition – the connection, bond, or conversation that occurs between bodies – which helps them to connect with each other's skills and capacities, and even with their equipment and how it moves and can be worked with, enables them to signify to each other that their bodies, and each other's bodies, 'matter', and what they are doing through their performance has worth (Butler, 2011).

Drawing on Butler (2011), it is possible to understand that what enables the women to connect and communicate together through understanding and recognizing each other also involves a shared sense of the ontological risks with which they have to engage. These include the risk of gender misrecognition, since they undertake an ostensibly masculine activity (voluntary risk taking), yet because they are women, they tend to be seen, even in the edgework literature, as overly emotional or physically too weak to undertake risks. Hence, being recognized by other aerialists, as well as riggers and audiences, *for* their risk taking 'matters' to them. As a means of recognizing 'matter' in each other (both value and substance), the women's body conversations demonstrate mutual recognition, and arguably represent an affirmative, collective, and collaborative response to some of the more negating, gendered aspects of aerial performance as edgework discussed in Chapters 5 and 6. These include the ontological risks to which the women are subject, potentially providing the basis for an undoing of gender as the aerialists engage in edgework.

Understood in this way, sites of edgework, such as aerial performance, can be approached as potential sites for undoing and resignifying gender in Butler's (2004)

sense. In other words, aerial performance becomes an ‘undoing’ of the normative perceptions and expectations that shape gender and risk taking.

*‘Body conversations’ and edgework theory*

Applying Butler’s theory to body conversations, particularly to highlight the aerialists’ mutual recognition as a method to communicate that the risks they take ‘matter’, has implications for edgework theory and subsequent research, which has codified the skills and capacities necessary for edgework as masculine. For example, Lyng (1990: 859) explicitly spoke of ‘mental toughness’ as being ‘cognitive in nature’. For him, it meant having the ‘unique skill’ to be able to ‘maintain control over a situation that verges on complete chaos’, including ‘the ability to avoid being paralyzed by fear and the capacity to focus one’s attention and actions on what is most crucial for survival’. In his account, the right stuff is the psychological and emotional capacity to keep pursuing and pushing closer to the edge (Lyng, 1990; Newmahr, 2011), which is an essential skill for edgework and is crucial to survival (Lyng, 1990; Laurendeau, 2006). It means having the correct skillset and knowledge for risk taking, and being able to make what seems uncontrollable more controllable (Lyng, 1990; Laurendeau, 2006). For Laurendeau (2006), drawing directly on Lyng, those who are injured or die during edgework do not possess the ‘right stuff’.

As highlighted in Chapter 3, a Butlerian-informed critique of the basic premises of these accounts of edgework highlights the hyper-hegemonic ways in which skills and capacities such as mental toughness and having the right stuff are conceptualized that, in turn, codify edgework skills as masculine and create a baseline norm for edgework and the skills needed to navigate the ‘edge’. Consequently, these hegemonically defined traits are hailed as being the only ones that ‘matter’ for edgework and to edgeworkers, which results in women and non-hegemonically

masculine edgeworkers being cast as deviant, and at risk of being misrecognized and negated.

In response, body conversations can be seen as an embodied capacity to undertake risk taking collectively, sharing the risks between bodies. Applying a Butlerian-informed critique to the edgework theory highlights that Lyng's (1990: 881) original conceptualization was based on a (gendered) assumption that voluntary risk taking is an individualistic endeavour. In his terms, 'the responses of the individual engaged in edgework that are self-interested, spontaneous, and fully intelligible' are key to understanding the capacity to perform edgework. Even when outlining edgework skills, Lyng describes them as 'the specific *individual* characteristics and capacities that are relevant to the edgework experience' (1990: 857, emphasis added). However, the application of a gender lens to edgework theory and the findings of this study foreground that the sense of connection and communication achieved through engaging in body conversations with others is key to successfully undertaking edgework. Lyng neglects this aspect, and in doing so problematically underplays the relational and collective dimensions of edgework that connect bodies together by recognizing and understanding the skills, capacities, and risks the other is taking.

The women aerialists' capacity to connect and communicate between their bodies through bonds and empathetic understanding developed over time enabled them to share their understanding of what the other was going through because of their own understanding and experiences of performing. Aerialists on the ground, watching but also feeling and connecting, could empathize fully; their bodies could empathize with and understand the physical, emotional, and embodied risks that the aerialist was undertaking because they too had been in that position. For example, they shared an understanding and knowledge of the physical and emotional risks involved in taking a

move from the floor and gradually translating it into the air, as well as a shared grasp of the aesthetics of a performance, including the impact of height and costuming. This applied to the embodied risks that the aerialists took and could watch during a performance, such as learning to trust others (performers, riggers) and the apparatus (the 'additional' dance partner), and to ensuring that all moves and flows combined to create impact and 'magic' whilst suspended in the air. Their bodies therefore bonded and connected together because they both understood what truly goes into an aerial performance, what makes it aerial, and what makes it risky. They engaged in an embodied connection or 'conversation', which involved recognizing the different and related kinds of risk that aerialists undertake, including additional ontological and gender-based risks such as those discussed in Chapter 6. Through this communication, the aerialists engaged in body conversations on the risks they were taking and their experiences of having their skills, capacities, and knowledge of aerial performing and rigging underestimated and negated because of gendered expectations and additional ontological risk taking.

Communicating through body conversations helped the women to develop and deploy the skills and capacities needed to cope with the gendered nature of aerial performance as edgework and with their additional, ontological risk taking. The highly collaborative, embodied nature of this approach contrasts with the individual, cognitive traits referred to by Lyng (1990) as the basis for his theory of edgework, including mental toughness and the right stuff. Lyng (1990) describes how mistakes that result in injury or death are often rationalized by other edgeworkers with reference to a risk taker not having the right stuff and the required mental toughness to return safely from the 'edge'. In contrast, through body conversations, aerial performers' more collective experiences based on mutual recognition led them to develop what might be thought

of as a form of ‘communitas’ (Turner, 1974) between their performing bodies and as a means to collectively ‘un/do’ gender.

The concept of body conversations highlights the relational and collective aspect of edgework, problematizing Lyng’s theory that focuses almost exclusively on individual self-reliance, and on separation from, rather than connection with, others. This has important implications for edgework theory, as Lyng proceeds from the assumption that edgework is an experience that is highly, ideally individualistic, yet the connections experienced by the women discussed here show that when understood through a gender lens, edgework can be thought of as a collective pursuit relying on recognition of the other, a ‘communitas’ between bodies rather than separation. Communitas is distinct from the more individualized notion of having the right stuff, as it connects aerialists together, enabling them to share their skills and capacities based on mutual recognition and embodied conversation. Communitas also facilitates the aerialists’ ongoing recognition, for example by offering approval and reassurance to other aerialists when they are performing because they know what they are going through, and connecting with them in ways that, as described in Chapters 5 and 6, are often very visceral. Feelings and experiences of communitas are important in conversations between the aerialists’ bodies, connecting them on physical and emotional levels which are distinct from Lyng’s purely cognitive notion of having the right stuff. The significance of communitas for understanding aerial performance as gendered edgework therefore supports a more embodied perspective on the latter than Lyng’s analysis enables. The women in this study were not trying to ‘overcome’ their emotions or bodies as Lyng describes; on the contrary, they developed and deployed skills as edgeworkers precisely by becoming attuned to their own bodies and to those of others, whether up in the air performing or on the ground watching.

*Empowerment*

As outlined in Chapter 2, feminist accounts of edgework have tended to conceptualize women's voluntary risk taking unproblematically as empowering, yet scholarship to date offers no convincing explanation of why this should be the case, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. To address this, it is important to explore what insights this study might contribute to a feminist understanding of why edgework might be empowering for women, using the idea of body conversations, the sense of communitas engendered by these, and the skills and capacities that the women recognized.

As discussed in Chapter 2, mainstream (or 'malestream') accounts of edgework work with the idea that it constitutes an experience with the capacity to produce feelings that have transformative potential for the individual. This is understood to involve feeling a heightened sense of omnipotence from conquering the edge and overcoming fear and anxiety (Lyng, 1990; Rajah, 2007). It produces feelings of 'specialness' (Shay, 2015), a strong, affirmative sense of self-determination, self-actualization, and a 'purified' sense of self (Lyng, 1990; Beals et al., 2020; Austin, 2010), as well as championing values such as self-efficacy, self-worth, and authenticity (Lyng, 1990; Celsi et al., 1993). Edgework is understood to provide opportunities for personal growth as a result of succeeding against danger and 'surviving' in the face of potential death (Lyng, 1990; Celsi et al., 1993). As noted earlier, these assumptions are based on a largely hegemonically masculine theory that makes sense of experiences understood to be (normatively and ideally) undertaken predominantly by men. Put simply, edgework is understood primarily as an activity engaged in by men, or is understood normatively as something that only men should do or should want to do.

Following these assumptions, edgework has largely been conceptualized and studied as a 'men only' space. Therefore, applying edgework theory as currently configured,

with its masculine, cognitive, individualistic, and rationalist bias, to women's experiences is problematic, because edgework theory in its current stage of development does not adequately explain or understand women's and non-hegemonically masculine experiences. This may inadvertently lead to labels of 'empowerment' being applied unproblematically and uncritically to empirical studies of women (and men) who engage in risk taking, in an effort to incorporate a more gendered perspective on edgework. In the literature discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 (see Lois, 2001; Newmahr, 2011; Olstead, 2011; Worthen and Baker, 2016, for example), women edgeworkers are championed as imitating masculine norms, and therefore as undertaking something of worth and 'matter' in an empowering sense. The gendered perspectives discussed in Chapter 2 mean that when men take risks they are celebrated as heroes and recognized for their capacity to court, and endure, risk (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), whereas women's risk taking is confined and constrained by gendered expectations and the gender binary that frames them as risk-averse compared with men. Therefore, edgework theory developed on the basis of these gendered assumptions, including research positioned as adopting a more feminist orientation, does not fully understand the experiences of women's edgework and risk taking. It fails to provide a critical, reflexive understanding of exactly what it is about doing edgework, or doing edgework *as a woman*, that has transformative potential.

Edgework theory, as it is currently developed, arguably thwarts efforts to understand women's experiences of edgework and the multiple forms of risks it involves when understood as a gendered activity. This applies to both mainstream (malestream) research and more feminist-orientated studies, which fail to grasp the full complexity of what it means to undertake risk from a position that is normatively gendered as risk-

averse – in the case considered here, as a woman. In this study, the women's ability to navigate the physical, emotional, embodied, and ontological risks they undertook enabled them to push through and navigate the gendered aspects of their lives outside aerial performing. As discussed in Chapter 6, their sense was that if they could get through being suspended high up in the air from a crane connected only by their harness, wearing a costume accentuating their feminine aesthetic and simultaneously adding to their physical risks, all whilst 'dancing' with their apparatus in front of an audience and other performers, then they could get through the ontological and gendered risks of underestimation, negation, and gendered aesthetics to which they were subject when 'on the ground', in their lives outside aerial performance.

Like Thompson and Üstüner's (2015) 'derby grrrls', for whom elements of their roller derby personas were incorporated into their everyday identities and attitudes, the women aerialists explained that their aerial (performance) personas had qualities, like confidence, that they would like to see in themselves outside their performing lives. They explained how they made efforts to transfer the confidence they derived from their edgework into their everyday lives. They derived a 'big sense of empowerment through aerial', based on a feeling that if they could 'push through this' then they 'have the strength to push through other things in life', producing 'greater satisfaction out of it than the pain', as Karen put it.

Furthermore, sharing these experiences of empowerment collectively, and the aerialists' communitas and body conversations when performing aided them in their everyday lives, enabling them to speak up when they needed their rigging plans to be heard, or to say when the safety measures did not feel right to them, checking repeatedly that the rigging was done as stringently as possible for themselves and others. In such instances, they foregrounded their embodied knowledge and expertise,

challenging its negation and disavowal of their skills arising from being women. Empowerment therefore shaped their edgework and their lives outside aerial as well as within it. Their work was not pretty, painless, light, graceful, or 'shiny and sequined', as perceptions of women aerialists suggest, but rather painful, gritty, and determined. It involved connecting with others' bodies, minds, and emotions, and sharing on-stage experiences with those off-stage.

Undertaking a 'risky aesthetic' and an 'aesthetic risk'

In applying a Butlerian lens to the findings presented in Chapters 5 and 6, this section focuses on the aesthetics of performing in two ways. First, it considers how aerialists can make performances *appear* more risky and therefore impressive than they actually are, described here as a 'risky aesthetic'. Second, it examines how the look of the performance, such as costuming and hairstyling, can *actually* make the performance more risky than it might otherwise be, described here as 'aesthetic risk'. Having already discussed the physical, emotional, embodied, and ontological types of risk experienced by the women, these twin ideas are developed to address the research question relating to the types of risks that aerial performers experience, and to show how these multiple layers of risk are connected and gendered, thereby addressing the third research question of how social, cultural, and structural conditions shape these experiences of risk. Therefore, both the 'risky aesthetic' and 'aesthetic risk' reveal how the women have to negotiate additional risks when performing, by virtue of the ways in which they are gendered. This involves negotiating the obvious physical risks, whilst also navigating additional ontological and aesthetic risks, such as conforming with the expected hyper-feminine 'look' of a woman aerialist. This section synthesizes insights drawn from the findings discussed thus far to explain the extra risks that the aerialists must negotiate as women.

*'Risky aesthetic'*

The term 'risky aesthetic' is used here to refer to aspects of aerial performance that give it the appearance of looking more risky than it actually is. In other words, it describes how performers make the audience perceive their performances as more risky, dramatic, and daring than they actually experience themselves; hence their aesthetic is 'risky'. This risky aesthetic draws on audiences' preconceptions and expectations of what an aerialist and aerial performance look like. Using their accumulated skills, capacities, and experiences, the performers are able to heighten the 'look' of risk in a performance without necessarily adding any more risk to themselves or other performers. As presented in Chapter 5, which focused on what makes aerial performance a *performance*, the aerialists discussed various types of moves they would include in their routines in order to heighten audience perceptions of risk. These included moves involving drops, rolls, and swings. The routines they devised to heighten perceptions of risk also included, they explained, positions that they could hold for long periods, such as holding the splits, which are 'routine' for aerial performers but which look impressive and 'risky' to an audience, in situ or online.

Such moves and techniques can give the audience an impression of danger and, as the performers explained, can be impressive without necessarily adding any physical risk. This is because although the moves or routines may look risky to the audience, they involve techniques that the aerialists are able to execute well and easily, owing to skills, capacities, and experiences acquired in part, as discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, through the body conversations in which they engage and the trusting relationships they develop in themselves, and with other performers, riggers, and their equipment. Such moves have become 'second nature' to them because they have practiced and performed them countless times, so that they form a canon of moves and positions on

which they are able to draw in ‘routine’ performances that look risky to the audience. More importantly, these kinds of moves and positions are comfortable to hold and can be executed well to give the look of a performance being more dangerous than it actually is, without adding to the performer’s risk taking. By choosing moves and positions that they can execute competently, the audience experiences a performance that is risky and dangerous; yet this happens precisely because the aerialists mobilize a risky aesthetic in order to manage the perceived risks associated with aerial performance.

Such moves and positions are often those that the audience has come to expect as a result of the social, cultural, and structural conditions that shape gender, and thus audience preconceptions of aerial performing. They may be relatively simple for the aerialists, but when performed in the air, they are more ‘impactful’ and ‘spectacular’ for an audience. To an untrained eye, such moves may look difficult to master in the air, giving the impression that what the performer is doing is tricky, risky, and impressive. The risky aesthetic maintains a level of perceived or expected risk, without adding unnecessary risk or vulnerability to the performance.

Other aspects of the risky aesthetic mobilized by aerialists include the places from which they perform and the height at which they do so. Performance places include traditional or expected places, such as circus big tops, local theatres, and aerial studios. More unexpected places, which add considerably to the risky aesthetic, include national buildings, cranes hanging over the streets and the audience, bridges, and electricity pylons, as well as more natural settings where performers may be rigged to trees or even cliffs. In addition, motifs such as music, graphics, lights projected onto a building or into the sky, and even fireworks, may all be used to accentuate the drama, tension, and perceived risk involved, producing something that

the audience experiences as spectacular, but which, for the performer, may be quite routine. In addition to skills, experiences, and capacities that minimize the actual level of risk for the aerialists, they are also knowledgeable, as discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, about the rigging required for any performance, and the safety measures and protocols put in place to protect themselves and other aerialists. Thus, the aerialists are comfortable and confident in their safety and the protocols that go into ensuring a smooth performance that might look death-defying to the audience, but from their point of view is not.

Similarly, the height at which the aerialists perform, and its effect on their mobilization of a risky aesthetic, may obviously make a performance look more risky than it actually is from the aerialists' point of view. This is because simply increasing the height gives the impression that the risk is also increased, whereas, as outlined in Chapter 5, it does not necessarily increase physical or emotional risk, nor compromise the aerialists' safety. When they have confidence in their skills and capacities, the rigging, and the other safety measures and protocols, increasing the height adds to the aerialists' risky aesthetic but not necessarily their actual risk. Added height gives the impression of a performance being particularly risky and dangerous, as does flying or floating in the air; yet for the aerialist, it may be quite routine.

The last factor that contributes to a risky aesthetic, in addition to location and height, is the costumes in which the aerialists perform. These include the often-elaborate costumes that add to the 'graceful' 'weightlessness' and 'lightness' of the performances, giving the impression of the aerialist floating or flying in the air. To achieve this look for a performance, the aerialists described a multitude of costumes they might be expected to wear (see Chapters 5 and 6). Some costumes had long, loose pieces of fabric that moved in the breeze when performing, or they might be

rolled up and then released in the air to add to the performance. Other costumes included long, flowy dresses and skirts, adding movement and shape to the spinning moves being performed. Others added to the theatrics of the performance, for example when giving a themed performance at Halloween dressed as Beetlejuice, or as an elf at Christmas. Costumes also included hairstyling and headdresses, which added to the aerialists' embodiment and mobilization of a risky aesthetic by making performances appear more impressive and daring than they actually were. Combined with their simple but competent moves, the aerialists added layers of risk *aesthetically* to their performances, without having to add more physical risk by attempting moves beyond their capabilities. This risky aesthetic therefore contributed to their management of risk, enabling them to control the level of risk in the performance. For example, they might perform simple moves while descending from a bridge in a dress with a long train, which would have the effect of appearing extremely risky and dangerous to the audience, but would not increase the risk to the aerialists, as they would be utilizing moves that they knew looked good and worked well with their costume to achieve maximum impression.

The risky aesthetic also reveals the types of risks that aerialists experience, and how they manage these so that aesthetic aspects of their performance look risky, dangerous and impressive, but are not necessarily so. However, maintaining this risky aesthetic as part of their performance requires considerable bodily skills, capacities, and experience. Hence, aerial performing demonstrates that the aerialists must account for and manage aesthetic and performance-based risks to ensure their safety and the audience's enjoyment and appreciation, while making the performance look as risky as possible. This is particularly the case in the context of a review culture in which audiences watch aerial performances live (in situ) as well as online. Making the

moves and routines appear as risky as possible is therefore imperative to secure positive reviews and recommendations. Hence, although aerial performing involves risk taking, it is also a *performance*; and in order to secure recognition of their performance as 'risky', aerialists must manage this risk, in part aesthetically.

*'Aesthetic risk'*

'Aesthetic risk' is an empirically related but conceptually distinct term used here to make sense of the relationship between aesthetics and risk in aerial performance. In contrast to the risky aesthetic, aesthetic risk encapsulates how aspects of an aerial performance can *actually* make the performance more risky than it might otherwise be, largely, as this study suggests, because of the gendered nature of aerial performance as a form of edgework. In other words, the aesthetic risks that the aerialists experience derive largely from gendered preconceptions and expectations of aerial performing and performers.

To illustrate what this means, the interviewees highlighted how the hyper-feminized costumes that they were expected to wear, in order to look appropriately feminine and to embody normative bodily ideals, actually, rather than simply aesthetically, add another layer of risk. This additional layer may be physical, such as when a costume is too restrictive to move safely in, but it may also be ontological in nature, insofar as the aerialist must navigate the edges of recognizability as a woman when performing. In addition to developing muscular strength and bodily capacity, as discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, the aerialists must also appear appropriately feminine in order to avoid being 'misrecognized' in gender terms.

The data discussed In Chapter 6 reveal how this aesthetic risk constrains and compels the women's aerial performances in recognizably gendered/feminine ways, creating

additional boundaries and ‘edges’ to navigate relating to gender recognizability. In practice, performing in ways that conform with a normative, gendered aesthetic may heighten the risks taken by the aerialists. Applying a Butlerian lens sheds light on how, in order to give a credibly gendered performance, the women must performatively enact and embody signifiers of hyper-femininity through a ‘stylized repetition of acts’ (Butler, 2007, 2011: 140). As well as evoking certain motifs, such as their long hair and costumes, these stylized repetitions also involve covering up or playing down their muscularity and strength, as well as the embodied knowledge, for example of rigging, that the women acquire and need to enable them to perform safely. The data discussed in the previous two chapters foreground how the women often have to perform in costumes that make them look small and petite and accentuate their feminine body shape, and perform moves associated with women gymnasts/aerialists. For example, they do the splits on apparatus associated more with women’s movements, like hoops or silks, whereas in gymnastics, ropes and straps are typically male. These motifs connote flying or floating, framing the women and their bodies as having ‘weightlessness’ and ‘lightness’. All of these gendered elements contribute to a recognizable and credible (aerial) gender performance that the women feel compelled to embody and enact. In Butler’s (2004) terms, this means that the complexity of the women’s embodied lives and experiences, with their skills, capacities, muscularity, and knowledge, is conflated into a relatively one-dimensional feminine aesthetic, thereby ‘undoing’ them and their performance.

Understanding aesthetic risk in this way therefore contributes to answering the research question on the types of risks that aerial performers experience. It responds by highlighting the hyper-feminized aesthetics that add to the aerialists’ physical risk taking. Having to navigate a costume that is so tight that it restricts movement because

otherwise it will rip, or becoming entwined in the long train of a dress so that they are stuck on the hoop, or even having long hair that might get stuck in the teeth of the rigging device, or misapplying a move as a result of mistaking the additional fabric of a costume for the silk, are all additional aesthetic risks that add considerably to the physical risks taken by the aerialists. Yet the risk experienced here is not simply physical; it is also ontological. In stylizing themselves to conform with and embody hyper-feminine associations and expectations and hegemonic gender norms (Butler, 2007, 2011), the women must also navigate the edges of gender recognizability, continually risking being perceived as insufficiently or inappropriately feminine.

As discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, these women have the skills and capacities (the moves, positions) to be able to perform at a technically high level. However, they are constrained by their desire to be recognized as women, yet at the same time to be recognized as women risk takers, compelling them to take risks in hyper-feminized ways so that they are still recognizable when doing something as ostensibly masculine as voluntary risk taking. For Butler (2007, 2011), the desire for recognition that underpins social relations makes all social relations risky, in the sense of the potential for denial of recognition/subjectivity and being cast as abject for not conforming with the expectations shaping a societally credible gender performance. Women who voluntarily put themselves and others at risk are arguably undertaking this ontological risk; that is, they take the risk of being unrecognized as appropriately feminine, since women are gendered as ‘naturally’ or socially risk-averse.

Thinking about aerial performance as gendered edgework in this way, as a form of activity that pushes the boundaries or ‘edges’ of gender performativity, helps us understand how the experiences of women aerial performers are shaped by the social, cultural, and structural conditions governing gender recognition. For example, having

short hair is much more practical for performing, because long hair may get caught in rigging devices; yet many aerialists have long hair for their performances because, for them, short hair does not signify femininity as obviously as long hair. Thus, they endure the physical risks of performing with long hair (the aesthetic risk discussed above) in order to navigate the ontological risks they perceive and experience, such as the risk of being misrecognized as insufficiently feminine. Their performances are performative of an aesthetic risk that increases their 'recognizability' as women and as women risk takers, with additional boundaries and edges to navigate. Worthen and Baker (2016) make a similar point about women bodybuilders, who wear jewelry, fake tan, and make-up in order to be identifiably female when competing. Thompson and Üstüner's (2015) 'derby grrrls' also illustrate how this aesthetic risk must be managed and navigated. Framing this through a Butlerian lens enables us to highlight the additional ontological risks these women, and the women in my own study, face when undertaking edgework *as women*.

*Connecting the 'risky aesthetic' and 'aesthetic risk': Towards 'edgy performativity'*

The 'risky aesthetic' and 'aesthetic risk' are useful concepts for making sense of the additional and aesthetic risks that women aerialists take when engaging in risk-taking activities. In connecting the concepts together and demonstrating the additional edgework undertaken by the aerialists, Butler's (2007, 2011) performative ontology of gender is crucial for understanding the additional boundary 'edges' of recognition that the aerialists navigate in order to give credible performances. Demonstrating how the women aerialists un/do gender in aerial performance, credibility is twofold: it refers to how the women navigate the edges of their recognizability both as a credible *aerialist* (performing with a risky aesthetic and 'undoing' normative gender expectations of

women) and as a credible *woman* (performing with an aesthetic risk and 'doing' gender in hyper-feminized ways).

There is therefore a tension, or an incommensurability, in striving to balance the two aspects sufficiently to be recognized as a credible woman aerialist. Too much of a risky aesthetic in striving for a credible aerial performance will present them as insufficient or inappropriate women, because they are taking risks; whereas performing with a 'heightened' aesthetic risk will enable them to give a more credible gender performance as a woman, but their credibility as an aerialist (their skills and capacities for risk taking) may be misrecognized as not risky or enough. By taking risks as women in performatively feminine ways, the aerialists demonstrate the additional ontological and aesthetic risks that must be navigated in their aerial performing. This opens up aerial performing as edgework as a site for Butler's (2004) 'undoing' of gender, which re-purposes the constraining gender norms and expectations of women/femininity in a way that pushes the edges or limits of recognizability. Aerial performance can therefore be understood as a form of 'edgy performativity', the final concept introduced in this chapter to develop the theory of edgework.

'Edgy performativity'

This section focuses on how the analysis developed in the previous sections connects with and contributes to the literature discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, and particularly to the concepts of edgework (Lyng, 1990, 2005), gender performativity, and 'undoing' (Butler, 2007, 2011, 2004). The aim is to answer the last of the three research questions, on the social, cultural, and structural factors that affect women aerialists' experiences, and to tie this to the other two research questions about the risks of women's aerial performing and how they are managed. The concept of edgy

performativity is discussed as a way to make sense of how the additional aesthetic and ontological risk taking that women undertake when engaging in aerial performance links with gender performativity and the gendered nature, meaning, and experience of edgework. In doing edgy performativity, the women exhibit a capacity to 'undo' their gender, in the Butlerian sense, that destabilizes the heteronormativity governing their aerial performances. Applying a Butlerian lens to Lyng's (1990) edgework reveals that risk taking has many layers and meanings, in that the women are taking risks physically with their edgework, but also ontologically with misrecognition as credible women aerialists.

'Edgy performativity' helps to foreground how the women in this study had to navigate ontological and aesthetic risks in order both to conform with normative expectations shaping what it means to give a credibly gendered performance (aesthetic risk), and give a suitably entertaining, daring, and 'risky' aerial performance (risky aesthetic). The analysis presented in the previous sections, which have synthesized the findings of Chapters 5 and 6 and the literature discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, has shown how both endeavours, in combination, involve pushing the boundaries of gender and performance-related recognition, as the women risk being 'misrecognized' as appropriately feminine, and as 'edgy', for example as risk-taking performers. The aerialists illustrate Lyng's (1990, 2005) edgework theory, in that their performances include skilful risk taking, working toward multiple boundary 'edges', experiencing euphoria (Worthen and Baker, 2016), and maintaining control (Schubart, 2019). However, the boundary edges for them are ontological and aesthetic.

A Butlerian lens is applied to the findings to reveal a boundary line of recognition that the women navigate. Understanding this as a form of 'edgy performativity' helps to emphasize how the women un/do their gender in ways advocated by Butler (2004).

For example, they engage in a ‘doing’ of gender through the ‘aesthetic risks’ in which they engage, in order to perform in ways that present their bodies as suitably (and often hyper-) feminine and conform with gendered expectations of what it means to be, and look like, an aerial performer. In doing gender in this way, through aesthetic risk in their performances, the women feed into the process of conformity with naturalized gender reiterations of femininity and adherence to the gender binary and hierarchies that compel them (Butler, 2004; Pecis, 2016; Kelan, 2010, 2018). At the same time, as Butler (2004) notes, the very things that compel us to ‘do’ gender may also be those that ‘undo’ us. For example, aerial performers engage voluntarily in risk taking in ways that challenge gender norms, as articulated and reflected in the edgework literature discussed in Chapter 2, and female bodybuilders use beauty products and hair pieces in their competitions (Worthen and Baker, 2016). For the aerialists, this relates to how they engage in a ‘risky aesthetic’ and make their performance appear to be more risky than it is. This includes skills, knowledge, and expertise, as well as trusting relationships with and through themselves, other performers, and their equipment, which motivate and empower them in other aspects of their lives beyond aerial, extending beyond accounts of ‘empowerment’ described in the literature in Chapter 2.

To elaborate on what this means, both for the women themselves and for understanding edgework as a gendered phenomenon, this section begins by outlining what edgy performativity means and how it connects with recognition. This is followed by a discussion of how edgy performativity relates to edgework, in ways that potentially open up opportunities for an individual and collective sense of ‘undoing gender’ (Butler, 2004).

*What is 'edgy performativity'?*

Edgy performativity helps us to understand the additional ontological and aesthetic risks experienced by women aerialists. These are risks resulting from giving a credible gender performance *and* a credible aerial performance in order to make them recognizably feminine as aerial performers. Edgy performativity therefore highlights how the women in this study were 'doing' their gender (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Butler, 2004) when they performed in the air, while simultaneously being 'undone' by the gender norms constraining their performances and identities as aerialists in a more Butlerian (2004) sense. However, as Butler also highlights, embedded in this undoing is scope for 'undoing' these normative constraints. This dynamic is captured by the concept of edgy performativity, which highlights how the women, as they engaged in potentially life-threatening, voluntary risk taking in an activity requiring high levels of skills, strength, bravery, and mutual trust, were able to defy and re-purpose the essentialized norms to which they were subject. Similarly to how the 'derby grrrls' resignified their gender by 'skating' the ideological boundaries of gender (Thompson and Üstüner, 2015), incorporating aspects of femininity crystalized and naturalized as taboo into their personas and their lives outside of the rink, edgy performativity can be seen as a way to allow gender norms to be resignified by re-purposing the very norms constraining them. Edgy performativity thus helps understand how and why the women engaged in aerial performance, in ways that enabled them to 'undo' their gendering as aesthetically and naturally risk-averse.

The aerialists undertook edgy performativity through the connection and communication of the 'body conversations' in which they engaged, and the 'risky aesthetic' and 'aesthetic risks' they navigated shaped their lived experiences of edgy performativity in ways that involved pushing the norms of gender recognition to the

‘edge’. In doing so, every time they go up in the air to perform, they are challenging the conditions of the heterosexual matrix that compel their performances; they work the edges of the matrix and perceptions upholding the gender binaries and hierarchies (Butler, 2007). This helps us to understand women’s aerial performing as a form of gendered (edge)work based on a desire to be recognized as credibly feminine women who are also aerialists, and therefore risk takers and edgeworkers. They play with the ‘edges’ of recognition, individually, and crucially also with other performers, as they each recognize the risks involved.

Crucial to understanding the concept of edgy performativity is Butler’s (2007, 2011) performative ontology of gender, on which it is based. For Butler, gender performativity is the process through which gender is performed in ways that conform with the normative expectations by which it is shaped, in order for it to be intelligible or recognizable as socially credible. A credible and intelligible gender performance can be sustained by repeating normative gendered acts (Butler, 2007) that conform with the terms of the heterosexual matrix. Therefore, to be recognized as credible and intelligible, there must be coherence between biological sex, gender, sexuality, and societal expectations of normative gender acts (Butler, 2007).

The aerialists in this study demonstrated this by performing in hyper-feminized costumes and using typically ‘feminine’ moves, such as the splits, accentuating their gender/femininity whilst in the air. These performances repeatedly and coherently matched, or met the conditions of, established gender norms framing women in very particular and recognizable aesthetic terms. Costuming, hair, and moves, such as those outlined in the previous section, all enabled the aerialists to give a credible gender performance that was recognizably feminine. They were aware of this, and presented and performed their bodies accordingly, for instance with stylized and

repeated feminine motifs, even when these were known to add to the physical risks they undertook. For example, the aerialists would perform with long hair or in particularly feminized costumes, much like the women aerialists in Walby and Stuart's (2021) study, and similar to women bodybuilders (Worthen and Baker, 2016), and the 'derby grrrls' who purposely incorporated such inscriptions of femininity into their performances. Nevertheless, the women still had to give credible *aerial* performances, as outlined in the previous discussion, because otherwise they would not be recognized as 'worthy' aerialists by non-performers, including live audiences, promoters, and online viewers. Therefore, their performances had to appear risky, complex, and impressive in order to receive recognition for what they were doing as performers, risk takers, and edgeworkers. What made this 'edgy' is that the women had to work the edges of recognition, both as women and as aerialists, and risked misrecognition and abjection in doing so. Viewed through a Butlerian lens, they took on extra gender (edge)work to balance their 'aesthetic risk' and 'risky aesthetic', conforming sufficiently with gendered norms of femininity and aerial, while displaying enough risk for their performance to be deemed credible. They worked the edge of zones deemed 'unhabitable' or 'unlivable' (Butler, 2011: xiii) in order to be recognized as credible women aerialists.

To illustrate what this meant for the women's experiences of aerial, as discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, they were expected to perform using stereotypically feminine moves while wearing hyper-feminized costumes; yet to achieve this and thereby conform with this feminized aesthetic, they had to use considerable physical strength and fine muscular control. Sources of recognition were important, coming mainly from non-performers (such as the audience), which strengthened the aerialists' feeling of being compelled to enact their gender in stereotypically feminine ways, and also connected

the aerialists together through mutual recognition of their experiences of navigating the relationship between recognition and risk. The women even spoke of how they risked misrecognition, and in doing so challenged the 'socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility' (Butler, 2007: 24) shaping their performances. In doing so, they pushed the edges of the boundaries or limits of gender recognizability, in Butler's (2004) terms, whilst denaturalizing how they were positioned as naturally risk-averse (see Borghans et al., 2009; Karmarkar, 2023). Thinking about what they did as a form of 'edgy performativity' therefore helps to foreground how these women pushed the boundary limits of gender recognizability as an example of Butler's (2004) 'un/doing', which Lyng's (1990, 2005) theory of edgework fails to grasp, given its lack of focus on edgeworker subjectivity, as developed here.

*Edgy performativity as 'undoing' gendered edgework*

As outlined above, the women in this research pushed the boundary limits of recognition as credible women aerialists, providing a site for undoing gendered edgework and the naturalized and essentialized gender norms that constrain aerial performing. As documented in feminist literature, women are naturalized and essentialized by:

> a set of guidelines that are focused on a woman's role as a nurturer … tasked with carrying, nurturing, and ingraining cultural beliefs into children as well as incorporating cultural considerations as regular elements of daily life (Sharma, 2022: 25).

Gender norms constrain and 'gender' women into risk-averse roles, so being a woman according to the terms of the heterosexual matrix means being caring and nurturing, not voluntarily taking risks to their own or others' lives. This means that engaging voluntarily in risk is seen as 'unnatural' or deviant for women (Newmahr, 2011; Worthen and Baker, 2016), who risk misrecognition as a result. Women are understood to

nurture life (see Olstead, 2011), whereas men are valorized when risking it, and even championed as ‘action heroes’ (Holt and Thompson, 2004), owing to the gendered assumption that men have the right stuff to take risks, amongst other masculine-codified skills deemed best for edgework (see Chapter 2). However, the women in this study showed how performing as an aerialist offers opportunities to challenge these norms, and to undo the gendered positioning of women, not simply in aesthetic terms, but also as naturally risk-averse nurturers.

Opportunities to challenge and denaturalize essentialized notions of femininity/woman contribute to an undoing of gender. Undoing gender, for Butler (2004), refers to how notions of gender can be ‘done’ by conforming with naturalized, societal, (hetero)normative expectations, yet can be denaturalized or ‘undone’ by subverting those very same expectations, revealing an incommensurability between societal expectations and the gender lived and performed. Butler (2004) thus outlines that undoing may be defiant, disruptive, resistant, and transformative, challenging the confines of unintelligibility and abjection, whilst allowing individuals to (re)shape/resignify their understanding and performances of gender. For the aerialists in this study, this incommensurability existed in negotiating societal expectations between being a woman, meaning that they had to continually navigate aesthetic risk, and being a credible aerialist, meaning that they had to work with the performance of a ‘risky aesthetic’. Through edgy performativity, the women defied the naturalized essentialist assumption, replicated in the literature on edgework discussed in Chapter 2, that they were ‘naturally’, normatively risk-averse.

Through their engagement with and navigation of additional ontological risks, the women worked towards and pushed the ‘edges’ of recognition by pushing the limits of the normative expectations of gender and edgework. They did this in a similar way to

the ‘derby grrrls’, by challenging the boundaries of gender without losing social and cultural legitimacy (Thompson and Üstüner, 2015). In doing so, they opened up opportunities, however fleeting, to reinstate some of the complexities of gender. Their risk taking enabled them to experience connection and communication through body conversations, recognition of their skills and capacities by others, and the buzz of adrenaline. They were able to do things that they loved, and were willing to risk misrecognition as a result. As a way to undo gendered edgework, edgy performativity thus contributes to understanding *why* women do aerial performing. They are willing to risk vulnerability in potentially being denied their recognizability and subjectivity. Edgy performativity does not fear being cast as abject, but embraces it. Where there is vulnerability, there is opportunity for resistance (Butler, 2016), and the aerialists did so in navigating their edgy performativity and the edges of recognizability that might easily render them abject.

Interestingly, as discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, the edgy performativity in which the aerialists engaged to undo the gender constraints of aerial performing could be undertaken individually or as a collective endeavour. As a collective endeavour, edgy performativity demonstrates how, through the body conversations they experienced, the aerialists were able to connect with each other in order to communicate that they recognized this in each other. This connects norms of femininity governing aerial performance with the aerialists’ lived experiences, demonstrating how recognizing the skills and capacities involved in their ontological risk taking and their shared desire and capacity to push the edges of gender recognizability involves recognition between their bodies, signalling that what they were doing in taking ontological risks was worthy and of ‘matter’ to the other. They developed a collective and collaborative agency that enabled them to be strong and muscular, as well as a (shared) reflexive awareness of

the simultaneous need to be ‘shiny’ and ‘sparkly’. They were able to un/do gender together in ways that repurposed the gender norms compelling their aerial and gender performativity, and which Lyng’s analysis of edgework neither explains, nor even acknowledges.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has highlighted the importance of edgeworker subjectivities in understanding what edgework is, grasping how and why it is undertaken, and appreciating how it is lived and experienced. These are unaccounted for in mainstream edgework theory (Lyng, 1990, 2005). The research was guided by three main research questions: (1) what types of risks do women aerialists experience; (2) how do women aerialists manage the risks involved in aerial performance; and (3) how do social, cultural, and structural conditions shape these experiences of risk? In this chapter, these have been answered by developing the concepts of ‘body conversations’, ‘risky aesthetic and aesthetic risk’ and ‘edgy performativity’. The chapter has also brought together a conceptual focus on ‘body conversations’, an analysis comparing the ‘risky aesthetic’ and ‘aesthetic risk’, and a discussion of ‘edgy performativity’ as a response to the issues raised and unaccounted for in the edgework literature. It has applied a Butlerian-informed lens, and has connected this with the findings presented in Chapters 5 and 6, in order to develop a more sophisticated conceptual framing of what aerial performance involves as a form of gendered edgework. For example, it can be viewed as a phenomenon through which the women involved can be understood to be ‘undone’. They are subject to the stereotypically feminine gender norms that constrain them, which accentuate the risks to which they are exposed, while simultaneously finding scope to ‘undo’ these constraints, and to do and be something that challenges gendered assumptions of women as naturally,

normatively risk-averse. Rather than providing insights into such experiences, the mainstream literature on edgework discussed in Chapter 2 replicates such assumptions. The findings presented in Chapters 5 and 6, and discussed with reference to the analytical concepts introduced in this chapter, challenge these assumptions, and provide an alternative way to understand edgework as a gendered phenomenon, drawing on Butler's (2007, 2011, 2004) theory of gender performativity and concept of 'un/doing' gender to understand how and why aerial performance can be understood as a form of 'edgy performativity'.

# Chapter Eight. Conclusion

This final chapter provides an overview of the study, including a reminder of the research questions that guided the research. The main contributions of the study are summarized, and its limitations evaluated, and some potential avenues for future research emerging from this study are mapped out.

## Thesis summary

Having explained the context and rationale for the study in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 introduced the theory of edgework, starting with its conceptual development. It outlined psychological explanations of risk taking that dominated the early literature on risk taking, and critiqued the reductionist orientation of Lyng's (1990) seminal paper. Lyng's (1990, 2005) theory of risk taking as edgework focuses on activities with the potential for life-changing injury or death if not undertaken with appropriate skills and capacities. These include edgeworkers having the right stuff to navigate risks and mental toughness to remain in control when faced with the 'edge'. Lyng (1990, 2005) describes edgeworkers as pursuing the 'edge' and getting as close as possible without crossing it. Examples of this boundary include 'life versus death, consciousness versus unconsciousness, sanity versus insanity, an ordered sense of self and the environment versus a disordered self and the environment', and chaos versus order (Lyng, 1990: 857).

Chapter 3 extended the exploration of gender critiques highlighted at the end of the previous chapter. First, it outlined some of Judith Butler's influential work of relevance to this study, including *Gender Trouble* (2007), *Bodies that Matter* (2011), *Undoing Gender* (2004) and writings on vulnerability (2016). Drawing on this work, a Butlerian-informed lens was applied to the edgework literature, and to the study as a whole. This

highlighted that the edgework literature can be seen as problematic in presenting edgework as inherently masculine. As a result, the edgework experiences of women are stigmatized as deviant and/or marginalized (see Worthen and Baker, 2016; Newmahr, 2011). Using a Butlerian-informed lens to examine previous research on women's experiences reveals that women undertake additional edgework, which is foregrounded when edgework is studied as a gendered phenomenon.

Chapter 4 explained how the research was undertaken. Having outlined the rationale for the research and the research questions that guided it, attention turned to the philosophical underpinnings of the research, focusing on aerialists as risk takers. The research design was then outlined, including the research methods used and the sample and sampling techniques adopted, with an explanation of how thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview and visual data. Finally, the chapter outlined the ethical considerations raised by the study, and provided some self-reflections on the data collection and analysis processes, including navigating 'sticky moments' (Riach, 2009) during interviews and 'breaking up' with the data.

As the first of the two findings chapters, Chapter 5 provided insights into aerial performance as edgework. It considered the typologies of 'what' and 'how', including *what* an aerial performance is and *what* makes it risky, such as aerial performance as a combination of dance and circus performing suspended in the air. It gave examples of locations, such as studios, theatres, the sides of buildings, cranes, and bridges, and discussed apparatus, such as hoops, trapezes, silks, and apparatus created by the aerialists themselves. It also considered the importance of riggers and rigging to the aerialists' safety. The discussion of what makes aerial risky therefore focused on the performance side of aerial, such as the height at which it is performed, aesthetic factors that can shape the performance, including hair and costumes, and safety/risk

management. The chapter also focused on ‘how’ aerial is undertaken, including how the women got into aerial performing, used spaces to train, and obtained funding. It considered how the aerialists navigated the physical, emotional, and embodied risks associated with their performances, such as training on the floor or close to the ground, in the costumes in which they perform, learning to cope with the pain and the rush and buzz of adrenaline, and learning to trust themselves, the riggers, and their apparatus. Thus, this chapter showed how aerial performance and its skills and capacities are a form of edgework, meeting the parameters of this concept discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

Chapter 6, the second of the two findings chapters, continued to apply this typology and focused on the ‘who’ and ‘why’ of aerial performance as edgework, highlighting how aerial performance as edgework is experienced as embodied and gendered. It highlighted the additional ontological risks that the aerialists in the study encountered, showing how they engaged in risk taking with and through their gender. The discussion of ‘who’ does aerial performance focused on the women’s experiences of their physical strength being underestimated and their skills and capacities negated owing to stereotypical perceptions of women/femininity and aerial performing. This impacted on the rigging and their levels of safety by adding more risk to their performance. The ‘who’ section also focused on gendered aesthetics that add risk to their aerial performances. These include navigating their hyper-feminized costumes alongside masculinities, such as the defined muscles and muscular control required for performances to be so flawless, ‘graceful’, and ‘lightweight’. This highlighted an additional layer of risk, which is understood as ontological insofar as it involves having to navigate their recognizability *as women* whilst performing as aerialists. The chapter also considered ‘why’ the women do aerial and continue to do so. Sensations,

emotions, and embodied experiences and bonds were discussed, highlighting a collective side to edgework that is missing from the original conceptualization of edgework theory discussed in Chapter 2.

Chapter 7 drew together the insights and issues raised in the literature and connected these with the findings discussed in the previous two chapters to present an empirical and theoretical account of the aerialists' experiences of women's edgework. First, it presented the concept of 'body conversations' as a way to make sense of how the women connected to each other's bodies, communicating about the risks they were taking and the skills that went into their performances. This highlighted the aerialists' mutual recognition, signifying to each other that their bodies 'matter' and their performances/risk taking have worth. The discussion also explained that this experience is collective and empowering through development of a shared sense of communitas. Next, the chapter discussed how the women in the study engage in both a 'risky aesthetic' and 'aesthetic risk'. These additional ontological and aesthetic-based risks demonstrate the gender-performative risks associated with aerial performance. Finally, the chapter introduced the concept of 'edgy performativity', discussion of which focused on how the women navigate the 'edges' of recognition to give credible aerial performances as women. This discussion drew on Butler's performative ontology and theory of gender 'undoing' (2007, 2011, 2004) to show how the women's aerial performances are constrained by hegemonic/heteronormative femininities, and how these could be used to 'undo' such constraints. This section presented an analytical account of aerial performance as gendered edgework.

Research questions

The first research question that this study aimed to address was what types of risks do women aerialists experience? This question was considered in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. The types of risks that the women aerialists in this study encountered included the physical risks associated with performing, such as the height at which they performed, pain from burns, bruises, and 'bites' from their apparatus, and the constraints of their costumes. The women also experienced emotional risks, including nerves and the rush and buzz of adrenaline. Also experienced were embodied risks, such as being able to trust their skills and their bodies' capacities when performing, as well as trusting their apparatus to move 'like a dance partner'. In addition, they faced embodied risks in relation to their safety, most notably in being able to trust and feel safe when performing, even when their physical strength, knowledge, skills, and capacities were underestimated and negated. Perhaps most pertinent to answering this research question are the additional ontological risks that the women undertook on account of their gender. These included navigating the tension between their 'risky aesthetic' and 'aesthetic risk' in order to perform credibly as *feminine risk takers*.

The second research question was how do women aerialists manage the risks involved in aerial performance? This was answered in Chapters 5 and 6, in examining how the women managed their physical, emotional, and embodied risk taking. For example, it investigated how they would get a feel for the costumes, safety, and performance through practice, learn to cope with pain, nerves, and adrenaline through careful control and balancing, and rely on (some) gender stereotypes to keep them safe, such as using a man to convey their rigging needs or support their rigging decisions, thus validating their skills and capacities. This research question was also addressed in Chapter 7, particularly in focusing on how the women managed their

‘risky aesthetic’, such as performing moves that had the most impact on an audience but were so well trained and rehearsed that they came ‘automatically’ to them. In addition, discussion of the concept of ‘body conversations’ contributed to answering this question by foregrounding how the women recognized the risk that others were taking because they, too, were used to taking the same risks. They connected and communicated over this, and shared an understanding of what was involved and expected of their performances. Body conversations were a way not only to signify that the risks they take ‘matter’, but also to share the load between aerialists to enable them to cope with the risks involved, and to motivate their continued involvement in these risks, owing to the enjoyment they derived from these points of camaraderie and connection.

The last question was how do social, cultural, and structural conditions shape these experiences of risk? This was discussed particularly in Chapter 6, focusing on how the aerialists’ experiences of risk taking were treated differently because they were women. For example, their physical strength, knowledge, skills, and capacities were underestimated, and they had to navigate additional ontological and aesthetic-based risks when doing their aerial performing, owing to the hegemonic femininities that shape being a woman and an aerialist, including being ‘graceful’, ‘lightweight’, vulnerable, and risk-averse. Such naturalized perceptions had to be negotiated in undertaking ostensibly masculine risk taking. Therefore, through connection and communication in body conversations over the tension between navigating their risky aesthetic and aesthetic risk in order to be recognized as credible women aerialists, they engaged in an ‘edgy performativity’ that enabled them to take risks with gender recognition, opening up possibilities for them to denaturalize hegemonic perceptions of femininity. Through their body conversations, the aerialists were able to tell each

other that the risks of misrecognition were worth it. Therefore, the social, cultural, and structural conditions that shaped and compelled their risk taking in very hegemonically feminine ways also contributed to an edgy performativity, enabling them to collectively 'undo' the constraints shaping both their performances and their gender performativity.

Contributions

This thesis presents a performative theory of edgework and highlights the importance of studying women's edgework experiences. In applying a Butlerian-informed lens to both the literature and the research findings, it contributes to understanding the gender work in which women engage when undertaking edgework, including the additional ontological and aesthetic-based risks, and the physical, emotional, and embodied risks associated with aerial performance. The concepts outlined in Chapter 7 – 'body conversations', 'risky aesthetic and aesthetic risk' and 'edgy performativity' – contribute to the literature on edgework by revealing important ways in which edgework experiences are gendered.

Specifically, the conceptual idea of 'ontological risk' from this thesis has the capacity to be developed beyond edgework theory and aerial performing, and to inform analyses of other organisational contexts. Referring to the ways the women aerialists risked misrecognition as credible women, ontological risk encapsulates the ways the women worked (at) the 'edges' of recognizability in their performances to give credible (aerial) performances as women. Developing this further, as a concept, ontological risk has the potential to be able to understand the ways women and other individuals may take aesthetic and performance-based risks in the workplace. It demonstrates the extra risks women and other individuals have to negotiate on account of their gender at work. This includes the social, cultural and structural conditions of heteronormativity

within hegemonically masculine workplaces that present as gender neutral, and how this can confine and compel particularly gendered behaviour, risking (mis)recognition as appropriately gendered when not conforming to these expectations.

Ontological risk as a concept therefore has the potential to elucidate the experiences of women and other marginalized groups, with future research potentially demonstrating how (ontological) risk is more acutely experienced by some groups rather than others. For example, those who work in a job or a sector that is considered as not appropriate for their gender because they do not conform to the heteronormative preconceptions of that role, such as women in hypermasculine jobs like construction or stockbroking. In a similar vein, ontological risk could be extended to those jobs that women do and are perceived to be inadequate or as unsuitable for. Lois's (2001) study of mountain rescue volunteers serves as an illustration. In this study, the women's skills and experiences were implicitly deemed undesirable and were perceived as not suitable to the physically demanding nature of the job. Applying ontological risk here, like many other examples where individuals are perceived to be working in inappropriately gendered (work) roles, they are having to work the edges of gender recognizability whilst simultaneously working on this 'job' itself. This demonstrates the extra (gender) work some individuals have to engage in to be recognized, otherwise run the risk of misrecognition at work. Future research could highlight the lived experiences of these scenarios, and the consequences of misrecognition for those involved.

Additionally, in contrast to 'malestream' edgework theory, this thesis exposes a collective and collaborative side to risk taking not accounted for in the original conceptualization. Applying a Butlerian-informed lens helps to highlight the collective ways in which recognition enables collaboration between performers. Recognition *of*

their own risk-taking skills and capacities enables the aerialists also to recognize these abilities in others, offering support and encouragement to the bodies up in the air to keep on going. The thesis also highlights the collective ways in which recognition *by* aerialists, the riggers, the audience, and others contributes to a collaborative experience of risk taking, in that recognition by others, in a sense, collaborates with the performing aerialist to shape their performance. This recognition may arise, for example, through the body conversations that the aerialists share of the risks being taken, or how the aerialists must adapt to a risky aesthetic to suit audience perceptions. This reveals a collective and collaborative approach to women's edgework that is otherwise overlooked in the (malestream) literature.

Limitations and reflections

This thesis, and the study on which it is based, have some important limitations. Social interactions and observations were precluded by the pandemic, as the lockdown coincided with the period set aside for data collection. Lags and delays caused by poor internet connections made it difficult to maintain rapport and focus, and to interact in an embodied way, for example by using body-language cues during the interviews. Nevertheless, conducting research online gave me confidence and enabled me to grow as a researcher. For instance, in the example outlined in Chapter 4 of an awkward interview (page 101), I felt somewhat protected by the computer screen, whereas had it taken place in person, I might have been unable to complete the interview, which turned out to be an interesting and important one.

I also feel that my discussion of some of the experiences outlined by the participants is limited by not having been able to feel them for myself. For example, I cannot fully understand or empathize with some of the sensations of aerial performing that were

described because I have not been able to experience these sensations in the context of aerial performing, although I can empathize with some sensations that I have experienced through other means. Had it not been for the constraints of COVID-19 and the restrictions imposed by some local aerial studios, for example allowing in only aerial students who already knew the safety protocols for performing and were familiar with the sanitary precautions for COVID-19 safety, as well the time limitations once the restrictions had been lifted, I might perhaps have tried some classes and gained a deeper understanding of what it feels like to be an aerial performer. This might have enabled me to empathize emotionally or in an embodied sense with doing an aerial routine, and to overcome my fear of heights. Seen in a more positive light, my lack of experience perhaps placed me in an ideal position as a researcher, as I could not apply my own experiences to understanding what the aerialists were relating to me in interviews, and therefore allowed myself to be entirely guided by them.

In being reflexive about the study and the limitations of studying the experiences of women, I am aware that my study is itself gendered. In studying only women's experiences, I may imply that they are marginalized, whilst also marginalizing the views of men and other non-hegemonic genders, thereby reinforcing a hierarchical and binary view of gender. I initially thought, and still do think, that focusing only on the experiences of women aerialists would be the best way to explore gendered edgework. With more time, money, and resources, including a transcriber, and without the restrictions imposed by the pandemic, I might have been able to study a broader range of aerialists who do not identify as women. This would make for an interesting piece of research in the future.

I would like to reflect here on an important aim of this thesis, namely to elucidate the potential for change to the ways in which women's risk taking is perceived. Rather

than continuously being compelled or constrained by gendered perceptions that govern their risk raking, such as being tiny or petite, the women I studied demonstrated the ways in which they could change these perceptions; they reclaimed and repurposed aspects of their femininity and of masculinity to be able to undertake the risks that they did. Highlighting this has enabled me to show how gendered perceptions of women and risk can, and need to, change.

The conceptual ideas developed in Chapter 7, for example ‘risky aesthetic’, ‘aesthetic risk’ and ‘edgy performativity’ demonstrate the ways in which perceptions are malleable and can be denaturalized, having the potential to disrupt the gender binary and gender reiterations, and ultimately, create opportunities for change, including changing perceptions and expectations. Women have the capacity to be able to work the ‘edges’ of recognition to undertake and enjoy voluntary risk taking, as well as being able to simultaneously ‘undo’ the gender constraints that have compelled women/the gender binary. This change has the potential to be extended beyond aerial performing and to other organisational contexts, such as the workplace.

Additionally, conducting a feminist piece of research into the experiences of women has impacted me as a feminist researcher and on my future plans. Much like how I analyzed the experiences of the women aerialists, I have, in a sense, reflected on the ways in which I also ‘do’ and ‘undo’ gender, including by undertaking research that challenges the confines of gender and contributes toward changing gendered perceptions of women (and men) in relatively risky situations.

Future research

There is potential for further research to be conducted on the experiences of gendered edgework. As outlined in the limitations above, conducting further research with men

and non-hegemonic genders would advance the theory by expanding on this study to test the conceptual ideas deduced from the experiences of women aerialists.

Using some of the data I struggled to 'break up', an interesting avenue for further investigation would be the role of the audience and their influence in facilitating or hindering the aerialists' performances. This would enable further exploration of embodied connections between aerialists and audience, which might extend the concept of 'body conversations', for example to establish whether such conversations can be experienced between aerialists and others, such as riggers. The riggers also have extensive knowledge, skills, and capacities for risk taking, but their perspective differs slightly from that of the aerialists. Personally, I would like to engage in a project on embodied and collective ways to connect with others, based on shared experiences and mutual recognition of skills and capacities for risk taking.

Lastly, there is potential for future research on the conceptual theme of 'edgy performativity'. This might establish whether edgy performativity can be applied to other forms of risk taking, and particularly to less gendered forms of risk taking, and might connect with other aspects of social identity, such as social class, race and ethnicity, migrant status, age, and disability.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Participant information sheet

**Participant Information Sheet for Research Project: A Feminist Account of High-Risk Leisure Consumption**

Dear Participant

I, Georgie May Rider, am currently carrying out a piece of research entitled 'A Feminist Account of High-Risk Leisure Consumption' under the supervision of Dr Stephen Murphy, Professor Melissa Tyler and Dr Sophie Hales. I am a PhD student at the Essex Business School at the University of Essex.

We are investigating the factors involved in women's attraction to high-risk leisure. This includes looking at the social, cultural and structural factors, such as job security, familial ties and emotions, and so on, that would influence a woman's decision to participate within a high-risk activity. The theory of 'edgework' has been chosen to study high-risk leisure as it encompasses the social and emotional aspects of high risk that many other theories neglect or ignore. However, the theory of edgework does not include the perspective of women or their experiences. Therefore, this research seeks to retheorise edgework and incorporate women into the theory.

The research will be conducted through one interview via Zoom/Facetime/Skype etc, and follow-up questions will be sent via email to be completed in a Word document. This is so the research can be conducted remotely and to comply with COVID-19 social distancing. The interview will last approximately 1–2 hours and the aim will be to make it like having a conversation about your experiences involving aerial dance and performances. Our interviews will be audio recorded on my phone, and later transcribed by myself. Handwritten notes will be taken whilst we are talking and typed up straight after. The handwritten notes will then be shredded. I will be asking you to include three photos of your choice for us to discuss in the interviews. For example, these could be of you performing at your favourite place or a performance that didn't go to plan. If you consent to your photos being used, I shall blur out any identifying features if they are to be used in the thesis. Otherwise, a description of the photos will be included. Questions that will be asked and topics that will be covered will centre upon aerial dance and the risks associated with it. This will include physical risks to your body, the social risks of performing and being a woman, and economic risks of work. Some of the topics will involve discussing COVID-19 and the impact this has had on your work. If you are not comfortable discussing this, or any other questions posed, please just say and we will move on and not discuss this any further.

All data, including personal information, interviews and photographs will be anonymised and remain completely confidential. Only I, the researcher, will know your real name, and your transcripts and references in my thesis will be as a pseudonym so you remain completely anonymous throughout. Storage of the data and photographs will be on my personal laptop that only I know the password and pin code for, including the password-protected files I have on my laptop where your data will be saved. I will have a list of real names and the corresponding pseudonyms I am using for the thesis. This will be stored in a password-protected file on my laptop that no one shall ever see, ensuring your anonymity and confidentiality. The data collected will be used within my thesis, which will be viewed by other members of the University as it comes under scrutiny to determine the outcome of my PhD. All PhD research projects are deposited and stored in a data repository used by the University

of Essex for others to view their work and be used by others for future research and learning activities. This will still be fully anonymised. There is also the possibility of the PhD being published or the findings being included in any other papers or articles that are published. In any such publications, your identity will be fully anonymous. I would be happy to provide you with a copy of the findings, the thesis and/or any published papers on completion of the PhD, or at any later stage.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary; it is entirely up to you whether you wish to participate or not. This information sheet is designed to decide if you would like to participate. If you do decide to take part, I will email you a consent form for you to electronically sign and send back to me, making sure you keep a copy for yourself. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time during the research, even once the data has been collected, and you do not need to provide me with a reason at all. If this happens, I will destroy all of your personal details and data, and remove your data from the thesis. If the data has been published and you decide to withdraw, your data will still be included; however, it is anonymised and your personal details will still be destroyed. All data collected, including transcripts, photographs and other personal data, will be stored for 10 years after the completion of the research. After this 10-year period, all your stored data will be destroyed. This includes personal details, interview audio recordings and transcripts, and any notes taken during the interviews. These will be completely deleted from my laptop; however, the thesis deposited in the repository will still contain some your pseudonymous data that has been used in the thesis.

There will be minimum costs involved in this research, except for your time. If the chance arises that we can conduct these interviews in person, then you are to pay your own travel costs. Potential of psychological harm is kept to an absolute minimum; however, if any is experienced, I shall provide you with website links for the relevant support pages for you. Some have been included at the bottom of this information sheet. I have to say that if participation in the study harms you, there are no compensation arrangements in place. Regardless of this, if you wish to complain or have any concerns about any aspect of the way you have been treated during this research then you should immediately inform the supervisors and/or me. If you are not satisfied with the response, please contact the Essex Business School Research Ethics Officer, Dr Maria Hudson (mhudson@essex.ac.uk) or the University of Essex Research Governance and Planning Manager, Sarah Manning-Press (sarahm@essex.ac.uk), who will advise you further. Additionally, although I cannot promise you any specific or major benefits of participating, you will be contributing to our understanding of risk and women's experiences of risk.

The legal basis for processing the data collected for this project is informed consent. The data controller for this project is the University of Essex and the contact is Sara Stock (University Information Assurance Manager, contactable at dpo@essex.ac.uk). I have applied for ethical approval to undertake this study. This application was reviewed and approved by the Social Sciences Ethics Sub-Committee at the University of Essex. This research is currently funded by SeNSS (the South East Network for Social Sciences) via the ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council).

If you would like to take part, simply email me! I will email you first anyway with an invitation to take part in the study, including this information sheet. If you could reply saying that you would like to participate, I can get the consent form sent to you and we can start organising when is best for the interview to take place. Interviews will be taking place between June and October 2020, with more from February 2021 to the end of October 2021.

We would be very grateful for your participation in this research. If you need to contact us in the future, please contact me (gmride@essex.ac.uk), Dr Stephen Murphy (sjmurphy@essex.ac.uk) or Professor Melissa Tyler (mjtyler@essex.ac.uk) or Dr Sophie Hales (shales@essex.ac.uk). You can also contact us in writing at: EBS, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester, CO4 3SQ.

You are welcome to ask questions at any point.

Yours

Georgie May Rider

**NHS Mental Health Helplines:** www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/mental-health-helplines

**MIND charity:** www.mind.org.uk

**Government Guidance:** www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-public-on-mental-health-and-wellbeing/guidance-for-the-public-on-the-mental-health-and-wellbeing-aspects-of-coronavirus-covid-19

**NHS Mental Health at Home:** www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/coronavirus-covid-19-staying-at-home-tips

## Appendix B: Consent form

**Participant Interview Consent Form for Research Project: 'A Feminist Account of High-Risk Leisure Consumption'**

Dear Participant

This research is being carried out by Georgie May Rider under the supervision of Dr Stephen Murphy, Professor Melissa Tyler and Dr Sophie Hales at the Essex Business School (University of Essex).

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be interviewed by the researcher. The answers you provide will be recorded through audio recording on a personal phone and notes taken by the researcher. Photos will be used as either a description of the photo, or an anonymised version of the actual photos. Any photos included or referred to in the thesis or other publications will be fully anonymised.

Please see the attached 'Participant Information Sheet' for more details about the study and your rights as a participant.

Yours

Georgie May Rider

| **Statement of Consent** | **Please initial each box** |
|---|---|
| • I confirm that I have read and understood the information provided in the Participant Information Sheet dated XX for the above study. I have had an opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had any questions satisfactorily answered. | ☐ |
| • I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without giving any reason and without penalty. I understand that any data collected up to the point of my withdrawal will be destroyed and not used. | ☐ |
| • I understand that the identifiable data provided will be securely stored and accessible only to the members of the research team directly involved in the project, and that confidentiality will be maintained. | ☐ |
| • I understand that my fully anonymised data will be used for the postgraduate PhD thesis. | ☐ |
| • I understand that the data collected about me will be used to support other research in the future, and may be shared anonymously with other researchers. | ☐ |
| • I give permission for the data to be stored in the form of audio recordings and anonymised transcripts that I provide to be deposited in a research data repository so that they will be available for future research and learning activities by other individuals.<br>• I understand any data securely stored by the researcher, including photographs, transcripts and personal data, will be destroyed after 10 years.<br>• I give permission for my photos to be included within the thesis analysis and understand the photos will not include any identifiable factors, with my face and other identifiable factors blurred out and anonymised. | ☐ |
| • I agree for this interview to be audio recorded and recorded via notes taken by the researcher. | ☐ |
| • I agree to participate in the research project, "A Feminist Account of High-Risk Leisure Consumption", being carried out by Georgie May Rider. | ☐ |

**Signed (participant):** **Date:**

**Signed (researcher):** **Date:**

## Appendix C: Instagram message for recruitment

Hello!

My name is Georgie and I'm currently collecting data for my doctoral research. I am currently studying for my PhD at the University of Essex (UK). I am researching the experiences of female aerial performers and I was wondering whether you might be interested in participating in my research?

My research is entitled 'A Feminist Account of High-Risk leisure Consumption' and focuses on the experiences of female aerial performers. My aim is to include the experiences of women into 'edgework theory' (a theory that focuses on voluntary skilful risk taking). The interview will be conducted online and be based on 3 photos of your aerial that mean something to you. All data are completely confidential and anonymous.

Please let me know if you are interested in participating or would like some more info – I'd be extremely grateful for your time. Please feel free to ask me any questions on here or my email is gmride@essex.ac.uk

Many thanks.

Georgie

Appendix D: Personal Instagram bio