

# Being in control by taking voluntary risk in contemporary society

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**Abstract :** *The paper analysis a paradox of contemporary society : on the one hand the society stresses out on actions that protect citizens' life and welfare and offers security, and on the other hand we are witnesses to an increased number of people who choose to take voluntary risks in spare time activities, willing to escape of the normative frame of organizations and institutions they are forced to be part of. The number of individuals who accept the challenges of the extreme sports or of the activities who put their life in danger has been increasing during past years, especially when society values people who take controlled risks and those who can challenge their limits willing to achieve more. In this context, we conduct 10 in-depth interviews with people involved in physical risk activities : motor-cycle riding, parachutism, and mountaineering.*

*The results proved that subjects have experienced a profound need to take control of their lives and to develop their potential as a reaction to an excessive birocratic and consumerist society that alienates individuals to the products of their work. Finding themselves in a society they believe they are not able to control anymore, individuals make an escape in practicing those sports or those activities that value their potential and re-establish the feeling of control.*

**Keywords :** risk, voluntary risk behavior, control

**Cuvinte-cheie :** risc, asumarea voluntară a riscului, control

## Introduction

We are witnesses of a society who is more and more preoccupied of individual welfare, especially if we look to the individualistic Western way of life that stresses a lot on individual security within the community no matter if we talk about neighbourhoods, working places, schools, hospitals or travel agencies. People demand safety conditions to work and travel, to grow up their children or just to live their lives in a specific neighbourhood and the governments have to prove

their capacity to fulfill people's needs of security, otherwise citizens will not trust them anymore. It has been longer debated that recent events in Italy, when several crime incidents caused by Romanian citizens at the periphery of some of the largest Italian cities have caused an unprecedented wave of racism, happened because people felt unsecured and they did not trust the local authorities anymore in their actions to protect them. However, such willingness to be protected coexists almost paradoxically with a higher demand for risked involved spare time

activities. The number of sports that involve higher physical risk is increasing and also the number of people who are willing to take voluntary risks when practicing them. And we are not talking only on adolescents, but on mature corporate individuals who are trying bungee-jumping or enduring motorcycling for the first time when they are in a teambuilding, for example, and then they are talking for days about “the sensations”, “the adrenaline” accompanied with the event, so that such a voluntary risk taking situation is probably to replicate. It looks like public agenda does not necessary fit the private agenda, as Stephen Lyng noticed already in the 90’s :

High risk sports such hang gliding, skydiving, scuba diving, rock climbing and the like have enjoyed unprecedented growth in the past several decades even as political institutions in Western societies have sought to reduce the risks of injury in the workplace and elsewhere. The contradictions in American society between the public agenda to reduce the risk of injury and death and the private agenda to increase such risks deserve the attention of sociologists (Lyng, 1990, 852).

The literature on risk taking is divided between approaching risk taking from a strategic management perspective (Bowman, 1981 ; Hitt, Freeman and Harrison, 2006, Malenfant, 2009), researching on natural disasters (Slovic, 2000 ; Pidgeon *et al.*, 2003, Zhang *et al.*, 2009), or using a psychological approach (Lupfer *et al.*, 1971 ; Horswill and McKenna, 1999, Wall and Olofsson, 2008), when risks are related to personality features. From the later perspective, authors (e.g. Klausner, 1968) divided individuals in *risk-seekers* and *risk-averse*, a typology that makes difficult to predict the influence of social factors in the equation. However, later psychology models on risk (Lyng and Snow, 1986 ; Anderson and Galinsky 2006) describe *risk-seekers* as individuals who are trying to reestablish an in-

ternal equilibrium and to regain the control over the external environment. Following such an approach, voluntary risk taking could be associated with individuals’ need to redefine them in a highly normative environment that practically lets them little space of being unique or actualizing their selves. It is also what the present article states, following Marx and Mead distinction between spontaneity and constraint.

Voluntary risk taking is mainly ignored by sociological literature because traditionally, from a game theory perspective (Myerson, 1997 ; Camerer, 2003), risk has been associated with gains and losses. From the rational choice perspective, individuals will tend to maximize their utility and reduce the incertitude. Therefore, voluntary risk behavior not associated with rewards but living as a rewarding experience by itself has not been taking much into account. When we look back to classical sociology, we found support for the idea that social factors could be responsible for the individuals’ preferences for risks behavior, besides personality orientation or neurophysiologic differences (as the need of adrenaline). On the one side Marx (1867/1992) defines creative activities as emergent from the constrictive environment that alienates individuals from their work. Therefore, spontaneous and creative actions are those which develop a sense of power and control on the individual level and we suggest the fact that this is also true in case of voluntary risk behavior. Finding themselves in highly corporate or simply constrictive environment, where they have little access to the final product of they work, individuals will tend to define their own rules in spare time activities and to distinguish themselves from others by pushing their limits. They will finally have the opportunity to control the “uncontrollable”.

On the other side, Mead (1934) made a remarkable distinction between *I* (personal self) and *Me* (social self), with the later being the constrictive dimension of self, dictated by society and accepted by the individual while letting enough room for conflict. On

contrary, personal self is responsible for spontaneous actions, is not socially regulated and also “acts” without thinking so that when people are reflecting upon their actions, they have already appeal to *Me*, in other words – to social constrictive self. We will argue in this paper that the subjects we interviewed act spontaneously, they report of “doing things without thinking”, instinctively, here and now, without looking to the consequences. By voluntary taking risk behaviors, individuals feel actually objects of their personal selves, “prisoners” of the attempt to find limits and break them down. Once a limit found and broken it will follow another one, and another one because each achieved limit is actually a returning to social self acknowledging the present normative environment.

Social environment is important because gives it the individual the permanent swinging from *Me* to *I* and recent researches (Horswill and McKenna, 1999) actually show a different dynamic in risk taking judgments, while individuals are in groups. Individuals also tend to undertake higher risks in groups or competitive dyads (Lupfer *et al.*, 1971). Present research suggests also that social environment can have a decisive influence over the individual’s first experience with a edge behavior, and his desire to go further.

When introducing the concept of *edgework*, Lyng (1990, 855) referred to voluntary risk behavior when individuals are living the experience as a problem of “negotiating the boundary between chaos and order”. He researched (Lyng and Snow, 1986) situations where it was a direct and observable threat to individual welfare (psychical or physical), including here motorcycle riding, parachutism, drug abuse or prostitution and reported the intense need of people to control the environment, to focus their attention and avoid being paralyzed by fear. He also suggested that people solve the conflict associated with an incident or an injury of a friend by saying that he did not have what was needed to survive. In other words, the individuals researched by Lyng considered the ability to succeed in such limit situations as an inher-

ited trait that one could have it or not. Complementary to such an approach, we interview people about their experience in detail when they were first in their sports and also the meaning of the experience for their life in generally and their willing to replicate the experience. We are also interested in find out what motivate them to be on a edgework, how their image about themselves and others has changed by time when doing this, and what is the relation between work and pleasure, pride and competence or training ship in what they are doing. Is indeed edge-behavior in case of physically threatening sports an alternative behavior to monotonous, ordinary and constrictive life?

## Project summary

We analyze audiotape and transcribed in-depth interviews with ten individuals who are involved in motorcycle riding, parachutism, and mountaineering for more then two years, frequently doing this in their spare time and over 20 years of age. We deliberately exclude adolescents from our sample and also individuals who are practicing such sports as a part of their job (as is the case with military parachutism for example). We use pseudonyms to protect the identities of the interviewees. We asked questions related to their first experience (first ride, first jump), about the feelings they had when they have been involved in edgework and immediately after, about relationship with peers doing the same sport and those surrounding them: friends, colleagues, parents and about the way they perceive risk and what might be risky in what they are doing. We stress of self perception and self image while understanding what makes edge behavior accepted and socially valued.

## Findings

As we predicted, social environment proved to have a decisive role when determine individuals’ first experience. Most of the subjects

reported having close family or friends being involved with those sports or at least practicing them in the past. Even though parents were surprisingly the most important motivating factors, they were not always approving their sons' decision to follow their steps.

My father was a military parachutist and I knew about it from him. I was waiting to turn eighteen because he didn't agree for me to start jumping at sixteen and I needed his signature. When I turned eighteen, even he didn't allow me, I start the courses at *Romanian Air Club*. Even today he doesn't agree with it and we don't discuss it. The fact is that military parachutism was different than sport parachutism today and the techniques were too old and he had seen some incidents, that is why he considers this to be dangerous (Adrian, student and full time employee).

My father owns a motorcycle school in Bucharest and at the beginning I was not interested in learning how to ride. All my friends were saying that I am crazy not to try and when I tried it, I start to like it and then I don't have to spend money on buying expensive motors, I can use those from his school (George, student, and part time employee).

One way to get involved with a particular sport is to develop a clear differentiation of other sports or spare time activities which might not have the same benefits. For example, motorcycle-riders usually call those using cars *cane-guys*, hinting to the fact that they drive inside, like in a cane, without "feeling the air". At the same time, when it comes to risky sports, they will eventually perceive other sports as being more risky than the one they practice.

Motorcycle is something different. Firstly when you ride you are not trapped inside. We actually call the car owners as *cave-guys*. In our case you feel the air and it is incredible beautiful when the weather

is right and there are curves on the road because on the straight way you always get bored. You feel the motor between your legs and it vibrates and then you are sometimes trembling. It could be better then sex, at least for me. I can give up to a lot of things, but not this. You can't compare. It is something unique (Ștefan, 27 years, mechanic, doing both motocross and sport touring motor).

I am scared by mountaineering. I have an image related to accidents when I think to this sport even I have never practiced it. It looks awkward, but as a parachutist it seems impossible for me to have an accident, at least if you have your head on your shoulders and of course if you know what you are doing and you don't venture yourself, then of course something might happen. But just think about mountaineering, you can loose the rope, fall down and broke your legs. Ok, you can also break your legs when doing parachutes, but I don't see myself breaking my legs when doing it (Alexandru, student, part-time employee and having already 1.000 parachute jumps).

It is interesting that all perceive risk as being outside of their activity, guided by external factors or by incompetence, whereas if you "have what is needed", "your head is on your shoulders" and you have practiced enough there is no risk involved.

You are borne with this passion. Either you have what is needed or not. There are people who come here for the first time (*he refers to Romanian Air Club*) and they never leave and people who don't give a penny on this (Adrian, student and full time employee)

You don't have to take crazy risks. Firstly this means to wear the proper equipment, if you care about yourself and then not to compete on the road with friends or strangers you meet and who provoke you. I took crazy risks several times, but I try to temper myself, to practice more, to think serious when I

am riding. And then you can take crazy risks when you are tired and ride more kilometers than your muscles can. You always have to know your limits and cross them. Those who don't know their limits take crazy risks. They have eighteen and buy a new very powerful motor, they think they know how to ride it, they think they are good, but they didn't test their limits. It is better to take it as I did: first with a less powerful motor, then with a more powerful one and increasing speed gradually. Maybe that is why I didn't have major incidents. We use to say all the time: don't fly higher than your angel (Ștefan, 27 years, mechanic).

Subjects actually mention the ability to control fear as a main competence to succeed and not to think too much when you jump or ride. The instinct to control things is the one who gives subjects the feeling of power which is associated with the feeling of "flying" reported both by parachutists and motorcycle riding. In the case of mountaineering, the feeling of power is also present when reaching the top of the mountain.

When I start to "play" I felt scared. Your legs were sliding on the rocks, and then I was setting right and again I slide away. When you gain control you start to trust yourself and when you are on the top you have a victory feeling (Vlad, mountaineer). When I do my jumps (*it is about motocross*) I really feel like I am flying. You actually fly. When you start the jump you are a bit afraid that you didn't start well, the position of the motorcycle was not well and then you have to re-arrange it in the air, but generally speaking you are afraid only when you land. Being in the air, sometimes even 10 meters above ground is the nicest sensation (Ștefan, 27 years, motocross).

We have estimated that the first experience (of riding, jumping or climbing) will be especially emotional for the subjects, since it marks the decision to practice a particular

sport. However, a lot of them were better in reporting details about subsequent attempts, not necessary the first one, but the ones when they were finally starting to reflect on things related to death or life. The flash memories of their experiences are mainly related to the moments when they challenge their limits no matter if they succeeded or not. The ability to control the "uncontrollable" made those experiences especially emotional and guidelines future behaviors.

I fell down and for the moment I didn't feel any fear, but after one month, when I started to realize what happened, when I had a slant on my motor, I had the feeling of loosing it. I had an empty stomach and a strange feeling that it is actually very easy, that you can die in a moment or you can break your leg. If you don't fall you'll say to yourself: "I am good, I can control everything, I am powerful" (Alex, speed biker).

First time when you jump everything is chaotic. You know nothing. You are just enthusiastic and you just can't wait to jump. Everyone will think that is a terrible fear at the first jump, but it is not like this. In fact, the second and third jumps are the most fearful. I had few jumps when I simply trembled from all my muscles. In fact, the fear is all the time. Those who claim they have no fear are lying or are just crazy. The most fearful I felt at the 14<sup>th</sup> jump, when I saw on the plane 1.200 meters altitude and it was something new and I had to perform a free jump (to open myself the parachute). Every time you are doing something new you are very fearful, but after you perform five-six times the same jump, it becomes a routine. At the 40<sup>th</sup> jump I felt very much fear because I had to change the jumping style and then also when I jump from 4.000 meters. This is what I like about this sport: you can always do something new. If it wasn't for this, I couldn't have done it. I tried different other sports: karate, basketball, football, but they couldn't offer this to me. Parachutism –

it's my third year now – and I think I will do it my whole life (Alexandru, student, part-time employee and having already 1.000 parachute jumps).

The subjects are choosing those sports as a reaction to an ordinary life which does not offer them enough challenges. Being “everything new and everything the same” in those sports, they have the feeling of defending life triviality by being different and always challenged by something new. Besides, they all reported strong relations with peers practicing the same sports, a feeling of an “unusual world”, with other rules than the regular one.

Those who are coming here (*Romanian Air Club*) are special, because this sport is not suitable for everyone. When I came in Bucharest I didn't know that people can lie and then look at you. I was surprised that those things can happen. Here people are sincere; we help each other if we have any problem. They help everyone and don't say no if they can do it and this is unconditional, without looking for something in exchange. Here people have a strong character. Those who are not 100% made for this will give up. Maybe those are loving life too much and are thinking too much “what happens if...”. Statistically once in 500-600 jumps the parachute does not open and you have to use the substitute one, but from my point of view bad things could happen only if it is your fault and not of the parachute (George, parachutist).

These people develop a kind of *esprit de corps*, while performances are those who create hierarchies and maintain community solidarity. Contrary to the real world where status is not always distributed by competence, here individuals find a place where individual competence is the only one to be judged. Those who are performing unusual jumps have higher speed or manage to control the motorcycle, the rope and so on in

difficult, uncontrolled situations will gain social status and recognition, finding themselves apprentices willing to step on their feet and one day to defend them.

## Discussion

The results proved that subjects have experienced a profound need to take the control of their lives and to develop their potential through those risky spare time activities because they find themselves in a society where commonplace or ordinary repetitive things are not valued anymore. They are willing to be continuously challenged, gradually pushing their limits and our hypothesis is that mass-culture has an important role on such an approach. The “go for it” strategy of life, which appears clear within the subjects' answers, is mainly present in popular culture: films, commercials, articles, documentaries. People are encouraged to take out of their ordinary live and do unusual things, to be “special” to find their limits and cross them and the sport we are talking about offers individuals such occasions. They all reported that friends and colleagues, those who are not practicing, are admiring them, thinking that they are “unusual”, “crazy” and some even start the first experience within those sports following their example. Especially because it is an area where social status and power are judged exclusively by the performance and you can easily get respected if you get a new jump or have a higher speed than others, individuals feel secure in a predictable and controllable world, even though from outside those activities seem risky and highly determined by hazarded.

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