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# Risk, control and self-identity: Young drunk drivers' experiences with driving under the influence of alcohol and drugs

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ABSTRACT

AIM – This article explores how young Danish drunk (and drug) drivers relate to the risk of driving under the influence (DUI). DESIGN – The study is based on qualitative interviews with 25 convicted drunk drivers who in 2010 participated in mandatory alcohol and traffic safety courses. The analysis follows Stephen Lyng's concept of "edgework", focusing on volitional risk taking and its effect on the acting individual's self-identity. RESULTS – Drawing on the interviewees' accounts of being arrested for drunk driving, the analysis discusses three different categories of young drunk drivers. Those in the first category view a DUI arrest as a loss of control and a reminder of the risk of DUI. Those in the second present DUI as a reaction to what they perceive as untenable social demands. Those in the third see loss of control – such as causing a traffic accident – as the ultimate way of claiming control over their lives. CONCLUSION – The study shows that young drunk drivers have different associations with DUI-related risks. The more constrained they feel in relation to society, the more likely it is that they will divorce negative experiences related to DUI such as being arrested or causing a traffic accident.

KEYWORDS – Driving under the influence (DUI), edgework, risk, control, qualitative interviews.

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## Introduction

In this article, I analyse the risk behaviour of young Danish drunk drivers by focusing on the relationships between the young people's driving under the influence (DUI), their social world and their self-identity. I understand DUI as individually performed and socially coherent action that carries a risk (Emirbayer, 1997; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). This means that I study DUI as volitional risk from a relational and sociological perspective.

Many studies of risk-taking action view risk as "a means of calculating the norm and identifying deviations from the norm" (Lupton, 1999). Deborah Lupton relates these studies to a "techno-scientific" paradigm in which risk is conceived as something that can be "counted and ordered… [and brought] under control." Likewise, according to Jens O. Zinn (2005), social scientists have sought to eradicate the techno-scientific paradigm's "professional hegemony over risk definitions" on three grounds: (1) relying too heavily on methodological

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individualism and rational choice theory (e.g., Douglas, 1992), (2) not paying enough attention to the relationships between the identification of risk and the social structures and discourses of specific socio-cultural and historical contexts (e.g., Lupton, 1999), and (3) failing to understand and account for the element of uncertainty in risk (e.g., Taylor-Gooby & Zinn, 2006).

These critics of the techno-scientific paradigm suggest that we let go of the idea of risk as something objective and real that can be deciphered, and instead "look at the ways in which…risk operates,…and its implications for how we think about our selves [and] others" (Lupton 1999).

Building on Douglas (1992), Lupton (1999), Zinn (2005) and Taylor-Gooby & Zinn (2006), I introduce the concept of "edgework" (Lyng, 1990), which focuses on volitional risk-taking and the possible experience of risk as a positive expression of individuality. In the theory section preceding the analysis, I describe two different readings of edgework, one as liberating, the other as illegal. I argue that edgework represents diverse relationships between edgeworking individuals and society and expresses edgeworkers' individuality very differently.

## Danish drunk and drug driving

In Denmark, driving with illegal drugs in the blood or with a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) level of 0.05 percent or above is illegal, punishable by confiscation of the driving licence and, sometimes, by imprisonment (Danish Road Traffic Act, 2013). Survey data indicates that 15 percent of all Danish drivers have driven while drunk at least once in their lifetime (Jensen, Frydkjær, & Fisker, 2011) and that 2 percent have driven under the influence of illegal drugs (Behrensdorff & Steentoft, 2003). National forensic statistics show that alcohol is involved in one out of five traffic accidents, and illegal drugs – often in combination with alcohol – in one out of ten (Bernhoft, Steentoft, Johansen, Klitgaard, Larsen, & Hansen, 2005). Young men between 18 and 30 years of age are overrepresented in both accident and crime statistics (Wiese Simonsen, Steentoft, Hels, Bernhoft, Rasmussen, & Linnet, 2012; 2013).

International research shows that DUI is increasingly subjected to public condemnation, viewed as a sign of bad individual judgment, irresponsibility, individual deficiency or all three (Lapham, Baca, McMillian, & Lapidus, 2006; Jensen, Frydkjær, & Fisker, 2011; Järvinen & Fynbo, 2011). Young drunk drivers are seen as especially careless (Christens, 2001), because their lifestyle embraces a high level of risk-seeking behaviour, including frequent DUI (Krüger & Vollrath, 2004).

Within the social sciences, different types of high-risk behaviour performed by individuals in subcultural settings have been studied as "edgework". This article about young drunk drivers' risk experiences and self-identities builds on the existing literature about "edgework". However, in contrast to many "edgework" studies, this article studies drunk drivers who are not necessarily members of a minority ethnic community, a skydiving club or a group of rescue volunteers.

## Liberating edgework

Edgework relates to risky activities that acting individuals impose upon themselves. Not surprisingly, edgework is a


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Download Date | 12/16/16 12:01 PM

fundamental element in many dangerous leisure sports often performed within specific subcultures. From a sociological perspective, edgework refers to relationships between the individual edgeworker and society. Edgework is thus associated with a certain sensation of individuality in relation – and often in reaction – to contemporary social processes seen as denying individuals "an opportunity for creative, skillful, self-determining action" (Lyng, 1990). Edgework therefore has a norm-breaking character, and one of its chief characteristics is the self-actualisation that those who perform it find in relying more on individual "instinct [and] survival skills" rather than following societal norms or rules (Laurendeau & Van Brunschot, 2006).

Gerda Reith (2004) points out that edgework is an example of "disordered consumption", arguing that it is a logical consequence of the fact that "governance through freedom" in contemporary societies is carried out largely through a consumerist ethic. She argues that edgework is characterised by an oppositional stance that is concerned with lack of freedom and choice. According to Reith (2004), edgework is an element in an ongoing expansion of a "myriad of so-called addictive states".

Thus edgeworkers use risk as a means of feeling or being in control and of successfully experiencing an "immediate sensation of control" (Lyng, 1990), similar to a feeling of "sudden being" and best understood as a "bodily sensation" at "the most 'private' level of individual experience". Similarly, edgework produces a sense of "self-realization", "self-actualization", and "self-determination" (Lyng, 1990; Laurendeau, 2006).

From a public health perspective, edgework is a way of negotiating the boundary between control and loss of control that also presents a risk to society. However, the risk of causing harm, especially harm to others, differs among different kinds of edgework. Furthermore, activities such as skydiving (Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993; Laurendeau, 2006; Laurendeau & Van Brunschot, 2006), motorcycle riding in isolated areas (Lyng, 1998) and volunteer rescue work (Lois, 2003) clearly do not cause the same level of public concern as, for example, drug addiction (Reith, 2004; 2005), crime (Ferrell & Websdale, 1999; Ferrell, 2004) or violence (Rajah, 2007; Bengtsson, 2012). Therefore, although the experience of various kinds of risk-taking may be understood in terms of edgework, the social implications and public conceptions of particular kinds of edgework differ accordingly.

## Illegal edgework

Intentions to deliberately negotiate the edge between life and death may indeed be fundamental to traditional forms of edgework, such as skydiving, motorcycle riding and rescue work. These activities are risky but not illegal. The nature of the threat is more subversive when individuals perform illegal edgework such as consuming drugs (Reith, 2005), fighting in the streets (Bengtsson, 2012) or engaging in other criminal activities (Hayward & Young, 2004; Rajah, 2007).

Jeff Ferrell views risk as a central element of contemporary, "neo-liberal", societies (Ferrell, 2011). Socially, risk is controlled because it is harmful, whereas individually, people see it as a way of obtaining pleasure and adding to social


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Download Date | 12/16/16 12:01 PM

progress (e.g., through innovative entrepreneurship). Thus Ferrell's perspective could lead to the conclusion that anti-authoritarian skydivers and motorcycle riders present a constructive challenge to a contradictory social and political order: they evade "universal" risk management, instead using risk to focus on individual sensations (Ferrell, 2005). "Risk reaps reward", writes Zaloom (2004), and Ferrell (2011), in line with classical critical theory, even holds that risk has been adopted by the cultural industry "now [selling] the *illusion* of risk". Today, bored individuals can purchase a long list of risky adventures when they want to spice up their lives and feel free from the social constraints of a risk-managing society (see also Arnould & Price, 1993).

Yet the contradiction between "a politics of risk-management and a culture of risk-taking" (Ferrell, 2011) and between "ideological forces that caution [individuals] to consume moderately" and "a contrary force [that] encourages individuals to 'let go,' and take risks" (Reith, 2005) also conditions a type of edgework that does not represent (the illusion of) pleasure or social progress. Drug use (Reith, 2004; 2005), road rage (Vaaranen, 2004) and violence (Bengtsson, 2012) are examples of illegal edgework that may be said to represent the "underlying contradictions of late-modern consumer societies" (Reith, 2005) without necessarily enabling "pleasurable self-actualization" (Ferrell, 2011).

Valli Rajah (2007), for example, studies the way in which female drug abusers in violent relationships resist their partners (and survive) by mastering their social contexts as edgework. To these women, "edgework" is more concerned with staying alive than with feeling emancipated. As Jeannine A. Gailey (2009) writes, "for marginalized individuals edgework is construed in a different context" and "socially marginalized individuals must negotiate a space away from the edge as part of their everyday life". In line with this approach, Tea T. Bengtsson (2012) shows how edgework among young criminal offenders is inseparably connected to the experience of "advanced marginality" in everyday life.

According to Reith's (2005) analysis of drug consumption and its "dramatic" effect on the body and the mind, illegal edgework radicalises the uncertain boundary between individual control and loss of control in contemporary societies, showing that ultimately the only way of maintaining control is to keep losing it (see also Hayward & Young, 2004). Thus a common outcome of illegal edgework is the apparent lack of individual liberty. Instead, "outlaw risk-taking" (Ferrell, 2011) is prone to causing such adverse social consequences as social exclusion, penalties and imprisonment.

I believe that a similar relationship between an illegal action and its potentially negative outcome is relevant for convicted drunk drivers, who have not only broken the law and risked harming innocent others, but who have also been arrested and thus had to regard themselves as immoral individuals. In this article, I therefore sample a group of convicted drunk drivers and interview them about their experiences with risk-taking actions, their accounts of control or feelings about eventual loss of control, and their ways of relating the risky action to their self-identities.


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Download Date | 12/16/16 12:01 PM

## Method and data

The 25 interviewees for this study were contacted in Denmark in 2010 while they were attending courses in "Alcohol and Traffic (A/T) Safety". These are mandatory courses for people convicted of drunk driving if they want to regain their driving licence. Teachers at different course locations within the same Danish region invited the participating DUI offenders to contact me for an interview about their DUI experiences. Those who agreed to participate were given a gift voucher worth 300 Danish kroner (equivalent of €40).

The interviews were conducted in accordance with the International Sociological Association's Code of Ethics and approved beforehand by the Danish Data Protection Agency. Informed consent was received from each interviewee both before and at the end of the interview. No information obtained before, during or after the interviews (e.g., about criminal activities) was shared with the A/T teachers or anyone else. To ensure full anonymity in the analyses, I have given each interviewee a pseudonym and altered possibly recognisable characteristics such as age, BAC level or detailed descriptions of accidents.

The interviews were conducted at the interviewees' homes, at my office or in an empty classroom away from the A/T course location. The average interview duration was 80 minutes. In all locations, the setting was kept as informal as possible. The semi-structured interview guide focused on risk assessment, drinking habits, retrospective accounts of DUI experiences and relationships with family, friends, and co-workers. Rather than adhering meticulously to the interview guide, I conducted the interviews as "narrative interviews" (Rosenthal, 2003; Rosenthal & Fischer-Rosenthal, 2004), encouraging the interviewees to tell their personal stories. These narratives included stories about their arrest, upbringing and family-life relationships, different social groups to which they belonged, and above all, stories about drinking, drugs and driving.

At the time of the interviews, the youngest participant was 20 years old and the oldest was 69. The average age of the 25 interviewees was 38. Six were young adults (below 25), seven were somewhat older (aged 25–35), and 12 were mature adults older than 35. The sample consisted of five women and 20 men. One third of the sample, all men, had been arrested for DUI at least once before their current conviction, and all except two agreed that they had been drunk driving at least five times before or after their arrest. More than half of the sample reported regular DUI over long time spans.

For this analysis, I focus on the younger drivers, aged 20–35. This group consisted of 13 persons, one woman and 12 men. These drivers, overall, had more frequent arrests and were more experienced drug users than the older drivers (above 35 years). The younger drivers had also often been involved in other criminal activities, such as burglary, drug trafficking and fighting, which did not apply to the older drivers. Finally, six of the 13 had been involved in severe accidents, five as drivers and one as a passenger in a car with a drunk driver, but they had nonetheless continued drunk driving.

I will focus on three variations of young drunk drivers' risk experiences and attitudes towards drinking and driving, and analyse all three from an edgework per-


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Download Date | 12/16/16 12:01 PM

spective. I therefore relate their drunk driving to the boundaries between individual control and loss of control, and how some of them believe that they have found a balance.

## Category 1: Edge control

The type of DUI that mostly resembles the kind of edgework initially studied by Stephen Lyng is characterised by an urge for control of risk and a heightened sensation of self. However, it also differs from Lyng's studies in that the interviewees frame their arrests as *accidental* losses of control when they were performing DUI.

Interviewees in this category (Lisa, 20 years; Tommy, 20; Tim, 22; and Theo, 32) mostly performed drunk driving on weekends, when they drove between friends' homes and parties or went out for some fun with their friends. They also, but less frequently, drove while drunk on weekdays.

They described drunk driving on weekdays as "bag excursions" ("bag" here refers to a shopping bag full of beer). These were drives where two or three friends got together to drive somewhere close to their hometown and drink beer in the car while talking. Interviewees described these excursions as nice and "comforting", and as "a time where you can tell the guys about your problems without needing to come up with particular explanations" (Theo).

However, as previously mentioned, for most of the interviewees in this category, DUI mostly occurred on weekends, as in the following examples.

Tim lost his licence when he was 19, after driving a car full of friends from a weekend party at the local high school to a disco in a nearby town. On the trip, he had a BAC of 0.20 percent. Lisa was arrested when driving from a party where she had "probably been drinking about ten drinks". She knew she "was over the limit" but still chose to drive because she "knew, very well, how to control a car when drunk". Tommy was arrested while racing within city limits, "out drinking with the boys" on a Friday night.

Each of these interviewees related drunk driving to being part of a loosely connected social group in which drunk driving was common. Each of them spoke of going on bag excursions after school or work, as well as driving on weekends with friends who were also drunk drivers. Tim described his social group as follows:

> Usually, we just sat in the car and talked.… And later we met up with the rest of the group…. Then we drove around a bit, but most of the time we just sat in the car and talked... about work and what we had been up to in the weekend – about ordinary stuff.

Lisa said that in her social group it was common to drink, smoke hashish and drive cars and motorcycles. She mostly drove off the main roads and was "never uncontrolled or too heavily intoxicated". She added, "Obviously, I was part of the group because I found it exciting". Lisa also talked about running away from her parents and from "the dullness at home" and then driving under the influence. She said that from the time she was about 14–15 years old, "friends with scooters, cars or motorcycles often passed by to pick [her] up". Her parents rarely allowed her to go, but she went anyway – "for the sake of the excitement". She said, "After 7th grade


Unauthenticated
Download Date | 12/16/16 12:01 PM

we began smoking hashish…. Lots of people would drink and there were different drugs…. We drove around, and sometimes we raced on the fields. I did that, too".

The social factor to which Lisa referred was also touched upon by Tommy and Tim, who both said that they were going out on most weekends intending to "drive with friends". As Tommy put it, "It's difficult to refrain from [drunk driving] because of the culture you are part of when you socialise with other drinkers".

Thus the young people's DUI activities were rooted in relationships to a social environment in which alcohol, illegal drugs and cars were predominant. These social environments functioned as communicative spaces where young people shared ideas and thoughts, and where they spent time together. In such a social environment, the young drunk drivers could combine social life with risk action and experience individual excitement at what Lyng (1990) describes as a "most 'private' level of individual experience".

For example, Lisa referred to closing in on the edge as a "way of testing [her] individual limits". She said that she had always seen the risk related to her action as "important…because it motivated [her] towards defining [her] own personal limits". Tommy said that he went drinking with his friends "every weekend", sometimes to road race "for the fun of it". Tim described how he could get drunk merely because he was "looking for excitement". He also associated drinking with doing risky things such as drunk driving, and he sometimes viewed risky behaviour as a sought-for outcome when he wanted to start drinking:

> I actually think that [I am] looking for these kinds of things. [I] wish for something crazy to happen when [I] get drunk.... Sometimes something really cool happens. I think that this is what [I] search for when [I] start drinking.

When asked about the danger related to the action, Tim said that danger was indeed part of it: "Now when I think about it, I do think that I seek the danger.... It just comes to me to try to see if I can do it". In another example, Lisa described knowing that "a lot of things could go wrong and things could end badly". "It's just like every time you act you know that there are consequences, no matter what", she said.

> Interviewer: But what if the consequences are that it can end badly?
> Lisa: That is something that you think about when you make the choice.... But if you don't do it you'll miss out on the experience.
> Interviewer: Do you think that it is exciting because it can go wrong?
> Lisa: No risk, no fun.... To some extent, I think so.

To sum up, some of this category's different accounts of DUI do not resemble "edgework" in Lyng's terms. For example, the driving between parties or sport clubs, which the interviewees described as a means of transport rather than a means of excitement or self-actualisation. But the DUI performances of this category of young drunk drivers also fit two central elements in Lyng's theory of edgework: (1) their acceptance of and (to some extent) search for risk in order to achieve indi-


Unauthenticated
Download Date | 12/16/16 12:01 PM

vidual control, and (2) the relationship between their individual risk performance and their social network – a relationship capable of sustaining individual risk as something socially achievable. Almost as an outcome of the functioning of these two elements, this category of drunk drivers also touched upon a further social reward deriving from the (socially contextualised) individual action, i.e., the respect of one's social group, a respect constituting an important benefit of edgework.

However, by being arrested and, thus, being forced into experiencing a loss of control of the action (as well as the loss of their driving licence), this category of young people also differ from edgeworkers who have not experienced losing control. Indeed, the young drunk drivers appeared to accept the experience of losing control as a welcome, if unexpected, intervention of action that they themselves viewed as socially unacceptable. This self-recrimination may also be why all five interviewees said they would never again drive under the influence.

## Category 2: Edgework without consequences

Another category of young drunk driving is characterised by a stronger focus on the immediacy of the action than in the first category of drunk driving. Moreover, while the young drivers in the first category were affected by their conception of having lost control, drivers in this second category tended to regard their arrests as insignificant. They therefore relate differently to the negative consequences of DUI.

The three young adults in this category (David, 26; Mick, 28; and Michael, 35) were older than the interviewees in the first category. They came from small towns in the countryside and generally regarded their hometowns as "boring" (Michael), "rundown" (Mick) or "rigid" (David). Retrospectively, they saw DUI as a means of obtaining a rush of excitement in times of generally "boring and meaningless" social settings (Michael).

The aspect of having one's "own will" submitted to the "dullness" of social and geographical surroundings (Michael) or being subjected to the "nothingness" and "patchy mediocrity" of life in small towns (Mick) came up frequently. The interviewees felt socially constrained by the nature of their surroundings and by what they saw as humdrum everyday lives.

Each of the interviewees in this category accounted for many DUI incidents, along with a good deal of drinking and the use of other drugs, as the following examples will illustrate: Mick said that DUI "simply grew out of a pronounced lack of things to do". He began drinking as a teenager, and over about ten years he frequently drank and used other drugs. His alcohol and drug use often entailed driving, and he accounted for "hundreds and hundreds of incidents of drunk driving" simply "for the sake of the excitement". Mick described his small, provincial home town like this: "There is nothing at all. It's a boring little town where nothing ever takes place at all [and] when all you do is work and sleep, you miss a little excitement."

David explained that he was born in a town "with an incredible lack of things to do". From his teenage years onwards, he frequented the nearest petrol station, where he was part of a group of adolescents and young adults. They drank, consumed drugs and drove cars: "My brother


Unauthenticated
Download Date | 12/16/16 12:01 PM

introduced me to drugs, because he said it was impossible to detect drugs.… Then we raced together or against each other."

Michael, who was brought up in a middle-class family in a provincial town, related another kind of feeling of social constraint, one that enhanced his "urge for alcohol and drugs". He said that he was "too rebellious" to live according to the social norms of his family and "social class": "I had to break as many rules as possible, because life was so dull and empty", he said. Throughout his adolescence, he was not allowed to relate openly to his alcohol and drug consumption because "according to [his] parents it did not appear right", and, as he put it, "Within my social class it's taboo to even *talk* about drugs". He thought of "the taboo" as a way of social control:

> It's like you try to hold your social class together.… If somebody first begins to talk, then we don't know what might happen. It might set off an avalanche of events. Then everybody will begin defying each other.

Michael insisted that "part of [his] drug use" was "rooted in [his] resentment of [his family's] provincial prudishness": "I had to get myself dirty", he said, "I had to find places where I could get myself filthy.… To escape…to be me…and not just do what they wanted me to do".

When the young adult drunk drivers in this category discussed their upbringing, they often touched upon feelings of constraint, as well as explaining how they dealt with these feelings through alcohol, drugs and risk actions such as DUI. Yet they said that they did not consider the potential consequences of DUI, such as being arrested or losing their licence.

Mick's story best exemplifies this pattern. He was first arrested at the age of 19 with a BAC of 0.26 percent. The second arrest came shortly before the end of his first driving ban. This time he was 22, driving with a BAC of 0.25 percent. At the time of the interview, Mick was 28 and had been banned from driving for seven and a half years. He did not appear overly annoyed or concerned, although losing his licence had affected his working life by not allowing him "to advance at work because [he] had no driving licence". He described the incident that led to his first arrest as follows:

> Some friends and I had been…drinking. Everything was nice and easy. But then…it just became too boring and something had to happen…and we decided to see if we could steal a bus. I knew that at the company where I had been working, the buses were always parked with the keys in the ignition. Everything went well. It was very easy. Then we were driving around for some time. But after a while, they realised that the bus was missing because they were going to use it. And, of course, they reported it stolen.... The buses have a GPS device installed and therefore the police could track us down easily.... They found us pretty fast. Suddenly a lot of police cars surrounded us. We couldn't say a word.

The lack of attentiveness to the obvious consequences of stealing a GPS-equipped bus from one's former employer and taking it for a drunken drive in the middle of the


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Download Date | 12/16/16 12:01 PM

night manifests even further in Mick's second arrest three years later when he stole another bus from the same company.

> Interviewer: You must have known that you would be caught when you stole the second bus.
> Mick: Yes, somehow, I probably knew it but I didn't think much about it.
> Interviewer: Not even after having been through an almost identical situation some years before?
> Mick: No.
> Interviewer: You even knew that the bus had a GPS device?
> Mick: Sure!
> Interviewer: You must have known that you would be stopped.
> Mick: ... Maybe we just didn't care.

By disregarding the known consequences of drunk driving, even after having experienced such negative consequences as being arrested, the attitude of these three young adults resembles another important element of edgework, namely, that the "meaning" of action stems from the immediacy of the action itself.

Jason Laurendeau has pointed towards a similar lack of focus on negative consequences among skydivers. He shows that when skydivers are hurt, they usually attribute the consequences to "another realm" than the skydiving itself (Laurendeau, 2006). According to the skydivers in his study, nobody dies while in the moment of skydiving. Instead, accidents "occur" when skydivers lose their immediacy in the action (see also Carocci, 2009).

Like the skydivers, the young adult drunk drivers in this second category show a marked lack of interest in the problems that their DUI had caused them (arrests, loss of the driving licence for long periods, lost job opportunities, etc.). According to their accounts, everyday life was boring and their social surroundings or society in general were unreasonably demanding, not allowing them to pursue the (exciting) lifestyle they preferred. They depicted their drinking and drug-related actions as a way of fighting these restrictions. Furthermore, during the interviews, they often maintained that they had been in control of the situations that had gotten them arrested.

Thus, similar to the skydivers studied by Laurendeau, these drunk drivers viewed action and their consequences as belonging to two different modes of time and space (what Laurendeau calls "realms") – two modes that never intersect. Instead, the action itself was all that was meaningful to them when separating their individuality from the particular social circumstances that did not allow for them to "be themselves". In other words, either they disregarded the potential consequences of DUI, or they viewed these consequences as simply part of the "nothingness" of the social surroundings from which they had tried to dissociate themselves in the first place.

## Category 3: Over the edge

Traffic accidents signify both a particular loss of control and a hazardous consequence of DUI. Nine of the 25 interviewees in this study had been in severe accidents. Of the nine, six were drivers below the age of 35 (Jonathan, 20; Julius, 20; Ian, 21; Adam, 27; Jim, 28; and Patrick, 34). In contrast to the older drivers (above 35 years) who had also been in accidents, all of these younger drunk drivers had contin-


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Download Date | 12/16/16 12:01 PM

ued drunk driving after recuperating from their accidents. These young drivers make up the last category of drunk driving for this study. They appeared to take their neglect of the negative consequences of DUI a step further than those in the two other categories, as the following examples illustrate:

Ian was experienced with alcohol and drug use and road racing. He crashed his car a few weeks after his eighteenth birthday while racing between two parties. Drunk at the time, he "made a total wreck of the car". He thought he was "lucky to come out alive" and only managed to escape prosecution because the parent of one of his friends owned a tow truck and towed his car without reporting the accident to the police. Ian reflected that

> something could have gone really wrong. I could have hit somebody. But you just don't consider this when you are drinking.... You become a kind of Superman and can control everything.

Less than a year after the accident, Ian was stopped for speeding within city limits. This time he was breath-tested and arrested with a BAC of 0.11 percent. He talked about these accidents very matter-of-factly, as if he did not view them as important but rather simply as things that "just happen along the way".

Likewise, Julius said that he had been frequently using illegal drugs since age 16, stopping only about one year before the interview. During that year, he tried to refrain from consuming Ecstasy and cocaine, and to limit his substance use to alcohol and hashish. Before he lost his driving licence, he was involved in a serious car crash as a passenger in a car with a teenage drunk driver. He was "minutes from bleeding to death", he said, "and comatose for four days". Less than a year after this accident, he was arrested for DUI while road racing within city limits.

When asked why he drove under the influence knowing from experience that doing so could kill him, Julius replied:

> Well, I don't think that you consider the consequences when you drink and drive. You may consider them afterwards, but then, when the weekend comes, you do it all over again.

Jonathan reported "an endless array of DUIs". They often included hashish, cocaine or amphetamines. He knew of "a few guys who had been badly hurt while drunk driving", and he had lost a close friend in a DUI accident. Less than a month after he first obtained his driving licence, at age 18, he was arrested for DUI on his way to a party. Two weeks later, he crashed his car under the influence of alcohol, hashish and amphetamines. He was arrested again, this time with a BAC of 0.13 percent. Although he continued drinking, consuming drugs and drunk driving, he also maintained that "every time you have been drinking, you know that it can go really wrong and bad things can happen". He added:

> Well, yes, of course you always know... that it can end badly.... But on the other hand, you don't think seriously about it.... I have driven home dead drunk so many times… I know that I can control the car. Nothing will happen to me because I'm the best driver in the world…. Often, I wake up in the


Unauthenticated
Download Date | 12/16/16 12:01 PM

> morning remembering nothing, and then I look out of the window and see that the car is there.... And then I just do it again the next day…. Nothing happens.

According to Jonathan, one main reason for drunk driving is that once one has become experienced, one just keeps building on that experience and continues as long as "nothing happens". However, to the young drunk drivers in this category, something *had* happened. Not only had they been arrested and lost their driving licence, they had been in severe traffic accidents. Although they had experienced losing control of themselves, these young people appeared to actively ignore these actual experiences in order to accommodate their individual risk actions in a more radical fashion than those in the two other categories. To apply Stephen Lyng's concepts, they kept closing in on the edge as long as they could remain focused on all the times they had been successful in controlling DUI, rather than recalling incidents involving their loss of control. This particular narrowing of focus allowed them to maintain a sensation of personal control, fundamental to their identity.

The difference between this category of drunk drivers and the two other categories is that they had demonstrably been involved in DUI that (studied from the outside) had caused severe losses of control, i.e., they had been in life-threatening accidents. However, where participants in the first category accepted the consequences of their risk-taking action (i.e., their arrest) as a wake-up call, and participants in the second category tended to relate the negative consequences of DUI to what they considered unreasonable societal demands, participants in the third category followed a different, more radical line of reasoning. On the one hand, they appeared to take responsibility for the accidents they had caused (and typically did not regard the arrests as unreasonable). On the other hand, they treated the dangerous consequences that they had experienced as somewhat insignificant rather than recognising or acknowledging these episodes as examples of their individual loss of control. This somewhat paradoxical relationship between their individuality, risk-taking and the surrounding society may be connected to a kind of radical edgework in which the boundary between control and loss of control is demolished rather than negotiated.

## Conclusion

One can associate DUI with similar risks as those associated with other edgework activities, such as the risk of being injured or dying, the risk of losing friends or the risk of being arrested. DUI also embodies similar structures between the action, the individual and society as other types of edgework. That is, an innate ability to master the risk in the immediate moment of action, a prolonged sensation of control, a heightened perception of self and a subversive attitude towards normative society and general societal rules. But DUI also differs from edgework, primarily because it endangers the lives of others. Therefore, drunk drivers are more exposed to public condemnation than other types of edgeworkers. DUI thus becomes an example of edgework on the edge of society.

The life stories of the young drunk driv-


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ers in this study, as they presented them in the interviews, reiterate the well-known feeling of young people of having their agency restricted by the demands and expectation of their parents, social surroundings or society at large. Thus the interviewees' self-identities were often based on a perception of society as unreasonably demanding and unsupportive when it came to the young people's possibilities for realising their individuality. To create a space for themselves in which they could escape such constraints, the interviewees were drawn, albeit to different degrees, towards edgework.

The interviewees in the first category related risk to an immediate and positive sensation of self. However, they saw the feeling of losing control, which they experienced when they were arrested, as a challenge to their sensation of self – and all claimed to have stopped drunk driving after their arrests. Those in the second category did not relate their arrests to losing control over themselves. They associated the arrest with social problems on a more general level, rather than with their own agency. Not only did they continue drinking and driving after their arrest but their urge to "get away" was also heightened.

The young drunk and drug drivers in the third category, at first glance, followed the same path as those in the second category. However, the manner in which they disregarded the risk of DUI was tied more radically to their life situations and much heavier alcohol and drug abuse. Even though they had been in life-threatening accidents and lost friends, this group continued mixing alcohol and drugs with driving. They did not blame others for their accidents (or their arrests) but rather saw both as a natural and somewhat insignificant part of DUI and of life. They were accustomed to taking risks and to feeling socially alienated. If anything, they focused on the many times that their DUI had *not* led to accidents, presenting these events as proof of their ability to balance on the edge. I argue that, over time, this "balance" slowly broke down, so that the boundary between control and loss of control disintegrated through the continual heavy use of alcohol, drugs and DUI.

Young DUI offenders are social pariahs in a contemporary society in which self-management and individual responsibility are highly esteemed values. The young offenders are also condemned for being dangerous. Yet young drunk drivers regard drunk driving in a very different light from those who condemn their behaviour. In their own eyes, they are reacting to unreasonable societal demands by pushing themselves towards a way of life in which risk is a positive, self-enhancing phenomenon, and in which the consequences of risk-taking are (at least partly) separated from the individual and his or her actions.

This study shows that when young people drive while drunk, they may regard the consequences of DUI in many different ways: as loss of control over themselves (the first category), as unrelated to their own agency (the second category) or, somewhat paradoxically, as proof of their self-control (the third category). The study also shows that the more constrained young people feel in relation to society, the more likely it is that they will divorce negative experiences related to DUI (such


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as being caught by the police or wrecking their vehicle) from the action itself or use those experiences to prove that – despite accidents and arrests – they are in control. To some young risk takers, this separation of experience from a realistic interpretation of its meaning or consequences means that life can become a way of surviving by constantly putting it at risk. In other words, they live a life in which to sustain control ultimately becomes a matter of losing it.

**Declaration of interest** None.

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