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# "Getting Mad Wi' It"
# Risk-Seeking By Young Women[1]

## Susan A. Batchelor[2]

*Introduction*

Risk-management and risk-taking are an important part of young people's identity formation within late modernity (Mitchell et al. 2001). 'Youth' is contemporaneously constructed as a period of dangerousness and deficiency (Muncie 2004). That said, whereas young men are more likely to be referred to as 'troublesome', young women are represented as 'troubled' (Green et al. 2000). In other words, young women are more often portrayed as the passive victims of risk rather than as active risk seekers. This is clearly demonstrated in the literature on women and violence, which tends to focus on women's victimisation, or explains their offending as a response to an abusive situation or past abusive experiences. The disadvantages of this approach are that it contributes to the falsehood that young women who actively seek risks are in some way abnormal or bizarre; it denies young women any agency or choice in their lives; and it leaves us with little understanding of the meaning of risk-seeking behaviour from the point of view of young women.

This chapter draws upon data from a recent ESRC-funded project exploring young women's violent behaviour.[3] Challenging conceptions of risk that focus solely on women's risk avoidance, the data point to the positive contribution risk-seeking behaviour can have in terms of young women's sense of self and self-efficacy. As Lyng's (1990) notion of 'edgework' acknowledges, voluntary risk-taking can be used to achieve a semblance of control in a life that is experienced as out with control. However, an important criticism of early versions of this work is that it yielded conceptual models rooted in the experience of men (Miller 1991) and thereby failed to recognise the gendered nature of the edgework experience (Lois 2001). Through the

use of direct quotations, the chapter will show that while young women are initially drawn to risk-seeking behaviour as a result of the shared adrenaline 'rush' or 'buzz' they experience, as their 'risk pathways' progress they increasingly come to rely on edgework as a means to *block out* powerful emotions. The data also show that, unlike men, who tend to retrospectively redefine their edgework experiences as an expression of exhilaration and omnipotence (Lyng 1990), young women are more likely to look upon their behaviour as irrational and therefore feel guilty about what they have done.

*The sociology of risk seeking*

The most oft-cited analysis of risk-seeking behaviour is Stephen Lyng's (1990) article on 'edgework'. Lyng's analysis, which is grounded in his empirical research with male skydivers (Lyng and Snow 1986), departs from previous (predominantly psychological) approaches by conceptualising risk taking from a sociological perspective and linking it to the alienated and oversocialized nature of the late modern period. According to Lyng, edgework activities involve 'a clearly observable threat to one's physical or mental well-being or one's sense of an ordered existence … [and] the ability to maintain control over a situation that verges on complete chaos' (1990: 858-9).[4] In other words, he conceptualises risk taking as a form of 'boundary negotiation' in which the point is 'to get as close as possible to the edge without going over it' (ibid.: 862). Through the rational calibration of risk and skill, edgeworkers seek to push themselves to their mental and physical limits in order to encounter an intense sensory experience that gives them a feeling of agency and control. According to Lyng, individuals engaging in edgework 'experience themselves as instinctively acting entities … with a purified and magnified sense of self' (ibid.: 154). Despite being largely illusory, this heightened sense of control is psychologically *necessary*, Lyng argues, because of the shared absence of control individuals experience at this particular historical moment:

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[4] The classic edgework experience is one where 'the individual's failure to meet the challenge at hand will result in death or at the very least debilitating injury' (ibid.), for example bungee jumping, hang gliding, skydiving, or motorbike racing.

The general tendency towards a 'deskilling' of work in economies dominated by mass production industries and authority structures means that workers at many different levels, ranging from service workers to certain types of professionals, may be forced to work under alienating conditions. (Lyng 1990: 876)

O'Malley and Mugford (1994) develop this idea further, arguing that edgeworkers seek excitement in response to controlled emotionality of the modern industrial experience:

The separation of reason from emotion, the identification of the former with the intellect and the latter with the body (carnality) was a crucial element of the Enlightenment project … one of the key assumptions that formed the modern world-view [was] the identification of emotions as being within the body, and therefore as base and subordinated to reason. Culturally constructed in this fashion, emotions become controllable or manageable. Indeed, the idea is that they *must* be controlled … (O'Malley and Mugford 1994: 197, emphasis added)

Thus, edgework can be seen as the 'flipside of modernity' (Lupton 1999: 156), a way of asserting control in the face of the alienating nature of work in the modern, rationalised age. Its seductiveness is linked both to the inherent thrill of the act and the feelings of 'self-realisation' and 'self-determination' to which the thrill gives rise.

One of the key criticisms of the edgework model has been that it draws on examples that are 'engaged in by white men with attachment to the labor force' (Miller 1991: 1531). Yet understandings and experiences of risk are different for different groups. There can be little question that class, gender and ethnicity impact upon both the opportunities for edgework and its underlying imperatives. Socially excluded and socio-economically disadvantaged young people, for example, have little connection with the world of work and typically lack access to pre-arranged excitements such as skydiving or base jumping. Rather, they spend much of their time 'bored', hanging about street corners with their peers. As Lyng (2005) has himself recently acknowledged, within this context '*criminal* edgework is a much more relevant and accessible means to re-enchantment than the pursuit of leisure edgework or postmodern consumption' (Lyng 2005: 29, emphasis added).

*The 'Pathways through violence' research*

In a society where concerns about crime are firmly embedded within a youth discourse, violent young women are increasingly presented as a new source of the 'youth problem' (Batchelor 2001/2002, 2005; Batchelor et al. 2001). Increasing numbers of girls and young women are being drawn into both the criminal justice and the penal systems for violent behaviour (Batchelor and Burman 2004), leading to calls for more research on and surveillance of young women's risk-taking, risk factors and risk profiles (Kemshall 2004). The relative infrequency and distinctive nature of female offending means that existing actuarial predictors, derived from studies of male offenders, are increasingly considered inaccurate and inappropriate (Hannah-Moffat and Shaw 2001; Hannah-Moffat and Maurutto 2001; Worrall 2001). Consequently there is a need for empirical evidence examining the ways in which young women who offend understand and respond towards risk-related discourses and strategies.

Funded by the ESRC, the 'Pathways through Violence' research sought to challenge existing portrayals of violence by young women through an examination of the feelings, beliefs, and experiences of young women convicted of a violent crime. One of the key aims was to bring the voices of young women to the centre of theoretical and methodological debates about 'youth violence' and, in doing so, to acknowledge the often inconsistent and even contradictory ways in which subordination and agency are simultaneously realised in young women's lives. Methods employed by the study included in-depth oral-history interviews with young women detained in HMPYOI Cornton Vale in Scotland, interviews with adults that work with such young women, and documentary analysis.[5] All of the young women in the interview sample were single and all were white, and ages ranged from 16 to 24 years.[6]

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[5] Cornton Vale is Scotland's only all-female establishment, and the majority of Scotland's female prison population is housed there, including young offenders. Fieldwork was completed in August 2001, when there were 38 young women under the age of 25 serving a custodial sentence who had at least one previous conviction for violence. Each of these young women was sent a letter asking them if they would be interested in participating in the study and, of the 24 who agreed to be involved, 21 were eventually interviewed. These interviews ranged in length from one to two hours, all of which were tape-recorded, transcribed and analysed by the author.

[6] In February 2005, minority ethnic groups made up five percent of the female prison population in Scotland (SPS, personal correspondence, 24/02/05). In the general population of Scotland, 98% is white. The disproportionate number of ethnic minority women in prison in Scotland is therefore much

*Risk pathways*

The research identified four pathways to violent offending among the women interviewed:[7]

(1)     The *abused adult*, who attacks her abuser whilst under the influence of alcohol. The abused adult has no previous convictions and considers her actions to be in self-defence. (Rare in current sample due to age range, but more common in the wider female prison population.)

(2)     The *teenage fighter*, who drinks heavily and experiments with recreational drugs and/or prescription medication, often as a means to avoid problems at home. Her violent offence typically relates to a street fight that is initiated whilst the offender is under the influence of alcohol and where things 'get out of hand', resulting in the victim receiving a severe injury. The (sub) cultural norms and values of this group promote pre-emptive violence and the defence of respect, and victims are generally (but not solely) other young women.

(3)     The *drug offender*, who engages in property crime and/or prostitution as a means to support her drug habit. Her violent offence typically relates to an assault on a police officer/security guard/householder who has attempted to apprehend her. Often abused as a child, the drug offender relies on substance abuse to dull emotional pain. She is generally intoxicated at the time of the offence and considers her violent actions to be in self-defence.

(4)     The *hurt and hurting child*, who assaults and robs unknown victims, often threatening them with a weapon. This group of offenders represent perhaps the most 'damaged' young women: they have extensive histories in care, poor family relationships and significant experience of physical and sexual abuse within the family. This small group of young women experience overwhelming feelings of anger and rage and express these feelings by hurting other people.

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lower than in England and Wales, where minority ethnic groups make up 26 percent of the female average population (compared to six percent of the population at large).

[7] While it was developed independently, this classification has much in common with Daly's (1992) typology of women appearing at felony court. Daly identified five main groups: street women, harmed and harming women, battered women, drug-connected women, and economically motivated women.

As these pathways suggest, one of the central findings of the research was that young women's violent behaviour was motivated by a complex interaction involving active risk-seeking and risk management. Further, young women made a distinction between their motivations for starting and maintaining risk-seeking behaviour. As the sections that follow demonstrate, most of the young women initially became involved in violence and other forms of offending for nonpecuniary reasons: to have fun, to impress their mates, to stand up for themselves (Pathway 2). For the three-fifths whose substance use progressed to dependence, however, the importance of excitement sharply declined as drug addiction replaced peers as a central organising feature (Pathways 3 and 4). For this latter group of women, risk-taking behaviour principally became a means of managing emotional pain.

**'Jist wan o' the troops'**

The significance of the peer group as a source of identity and status is well documented. Young women in particular commonly describe their friendships as 'the most important thing' (Burman et al. 2003; Griffiths 1995; Hey 1997). Spending time with friends is a prime social activity for most young people and – according to the literature – young people often congregate in groups for a sense of belonging, as well as sociability. As Quicker (1983: 80) summarizes: 'To be in a gang is to be part of something. It means having a place to go, friends to talk with and parties to attend. It means recognition and respected status.' Research also points to the protective functions of 'gangs' (Seaman et al. 2006), especially for young women (Joe and Chesney-Lind 1995; Miller 2001). Most of the young women in the current study came from families characterised by problems such as domestic violence and/or parental drug or alcohol abuse (Batchelor 2005). Two-fifths had been the victims of physical abuse and two-fifths had been sexually abused, usually by a family member. As a result, the young women turned to their peers as a source of emotional and social support, spending much of their time away from the family home.

Most of the young women had been persistent truants who spent their teenage years 'hanging round' drinking and taking drugs with friends. Four-fifths reported 'heavy' alcohol consumption during this period (drinking daily or partaking in regular

binge drinking, for example) and a similar proportion reported experience of illicit drug use (initially 'recreational' drugs, such as cannabis, speed, acid, or ecstasy, along with tranquillisers and/or sleeping tablets). Joanne's experience was fairly typical:

> Ah was a pure terror at school. Ah was ayeways getting into fights a' the time. Just being a pure little brat! Just ayeways arguing wi' ma teachers and stuff and never listening to anybody […] They started expelling me, throwing me oot. By the time Ah got tae fourth year, Ah ended up havin' to go to tae stay in a [children's] home.
>
> 'Cause Ah didnae get any guid grades fae school and because Ah wasnae settled anywhere, livin' rough, Ah just ended up hangin' aboot wi' the wrong people. Ken, people who obviously werenae workin' or goin' tae college or any'hin'? It was all people sittin' aboot, gettin' drunk, daein' 'hings like that. Ah just thought it was cool tae be hangin' aboot wi' all the big boys.
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> Ah started drinkin' when Ah was 13. Like at nights after school, hanging round. That was just like bottles o' cider, 'hings like that, ken, a bottle o' Buckfast. Then it was like Ah was runnin' aboot wi' ma pals all during the day and drinkin' wi' these aulder folk. And they're drinkin' bottles o' vodka and Ah would drink it as well. And that's when Ah started offending real bad. Ah was drinkin', like 24 hours a day. Drinkin' fae when Ah opened ma eyes until Ah closed them, a' the time. Takin' vallies and jellies and stuff like that. (Joanne)

While most young women refuted the influence of 'peer pressure' (this was something that was seen to affect other people), they spoke about not wanting to be 'left out' and said that they started drinking/taking drugs/offending because 'everyone else was doing it'.

Almost three-quarters of the young women in the study reported previous social work involvement and over half had experienced being looked after by the local authority (e.g. in a children's unit). Powerful peer group cultures are a common feature of residential care (Renold and Barter 2003; Wade et al. 1998) and young people who spend time in care are often subject to multiple changes of placement (Triseliotis et al. 1995). Interviewees frequently remarked that they 'went along with' risky behaviours in order to 'fit in' with a new peer group and said that taking drugs, 'being pure cheeky tae the staff', and/or offending, provided a way to instantly 'bond' with existing residents. Alternatively they would initiate violence, drug use or

offending in an attempt to establish respect or status. Stephanie, who was placed in local authority care for a second time at age 13, gave the following account:

> See since I got put in a home, that's when I started getting wilder and wilder and wilder. See the home I was in, I was wi' aulder people. So we were getting brought up wi' older people and I was watching them daein' things and I was following along, ken just watching them taking drugs and going aboot mad wi' it, battering people, and I was going along wi' them, eh? You see them daein' 'hings and you're like that, "Aww, I want tae dae what they're daein" and you just keep on going wi' them. (Stephanie)

Again Stephanie didn't feel *pressured* into offending; she 'followed along' because she looked up to, and wanted to emulate, her residential peers. Like a number of the young women, she suggested that while she 'learned' to offend through the tutelage of older residents the *decision* to offend was ultimately her own: 'at the end of the day I know what I am daein'. I know I'm getting the jail, but I still dae it'.

This emphasis on personal responsibility was reflected in Pauline's account of her entry into in prostitution. Pauline was an only child, born and brought up in a 'good working-class' area of a large Scottish city. After her parents' separation (when Pauline was five), she spent much of her childhood in and out of residential school. At age 17, she left care and moved into supported accommodation:

> Ah was in flats run by the social work department […] Ah wis gettin' aulder, so that jist made me mature a bit, 'cause Ah started to fend for masel', basically […] That's when Ah went into prostitution. Money. Curiosity. Ah was younger – Ah was aboot 17 – and two lassies that Ah was pally wi', Ah wondered where they were gettin' their money fae. Jealousy, basically. Ah was wonderin' "How the hell are they comin' in here wi' loads o' money and clothes?" Ah didnae know anything like that. And Ah spoke to the guy they were workin' wi' and that was it. Ah did it a couple o' times, liked the money, it was easy money and that was it. (Pauline)

Unlike Stephanie, Pauline's involvement in offending wasn't motivated by a desire to be the same but rather to *have* the same. Acknowledging her lack of educational qualifications and non-existent family support, she made what she saw as a rational choice to become involved in prostitution.

Karen's account demonstrated a similar weighing of options. Karen initially became involved in shoplifting after moving to a new primary school. Like Pauline, she said her offences were driven by a desire to 'keep up with the Joneses' and show she was 'as good as' her new peers. As she grew older, however, her motives changed and she began using the skills gained to impress new peers:

> I haven't lived in any one place for a long time […] My mum and that stayed in Linncraig until I was five and then I lived in England. I spent nine years travelling England and then back up here to jump fae place to place for the past few years.
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> I had been like shoplifting since I was seven or something, ken, *really* young.  See ma pals at school, we used to all walk to school thegither because it was a dead safe little town doon in England. It was dead posh […] And they all used to get money for sweeties, but me and my sister didn't used to get any […] So I used to steal things. Like I used tae steal things for my wee sister, because she was only at nursery and I couldnae send her to school without sweeties because *everybody* had sweeties.
>
> Up until I went to the high school I was top of the class.  I was not a bad kid.  I was a good kid.  I was quite a loner, but I wasn't […]a bad kid. When I went to high school, for the first time in ma whole life it wasn't just me that was the new kid. *Everybody* was the new kid. I seemed to- I don't know, my personality just- and everybody respected me.
>
> That's when I started shoplifting all the time […] I used to steal all these tapes and toiletries and make-up and stuff and then clothes, just anything ma pals wanted.  If any of ma pals needed stuff I would steal them for them. (Karen)

One explanation for young women's risk taking, then, is the desire to establish new and maintain existing peer relationships. Theories of women's psychological development propose that women cultivate a sense of self and self worth via their connection with others (Chodorow 1978; Miller 1976; Gilligan 1982). For young women whose home experiences are characterised by disconnection and violation, peers offer an important source of social and self-identity.

**'Daein it fer the buzz'**

The thrill of transgression was another central theme. In line with the findings of Matza and Sykes (1961), along with work carried out under the rubric of 'cultural criminology' (for an overview, see Ferrell 1999), young women often cited the adrenaline 'rushes' involved in offending behaviour, stating that offending was 'fun, something to do'. As Annie put it, 'Ah wasnae wanting to hurt anybody, it was just *boredom*'. Likewise, Kelly said, 'Offending was jist some'hin tae break up ma day, it gied us something to pass the time'. She gave the following example:

> When we was drinkin' we used to jist [...] cause a fight wi' somebody. Lassies that never even done nothing to us, for the sake ay it. Eh, one night it was me and ma pals, and there was this lassie sittin' in the grass, an' they were all like pushin' me an' sayin' like, "Go on, Go on!" [...] makin' oot she'd took the cunt oot me an' all that when she hudnae. So jist for the sake ay it ah went an' done it. Even though ah knew it was wrong. Ah jist went up an' battered her for nae reason. Jist fer some'hin tae dae. (Kelly)

The excitement associated with violence was emphasised more forcefully by Zoë:

> I get very excited. I get sick. I get- I take the bile I get that excited aboot it. See aifter I dae something in all, I always need a pee wi' excitement. That's terrible, innit? I get a buzz aff it. I get a buzz aff of being violent, *when I am violent*.
>
> I'd love tae [bite someone's ear off]. I've thought aboot ripping it off. But I've naw. I don't know. With ma teeth. [Laughing, embarrassed] Just imagining all the blood popping oot. That's terrible innit? Aw naw! (Zoë, emphasis added)

Both Kelly and Zoë took pleasure in remembering and describing their violent escapades, and became visibly agitated when recounting stories of fights between groups of young people. This is significant because, while accounts of male offenders have emphasised their thrill-seeking and controlling nature (c.f. Katz 1998), dominant discourses depict young women as risk averse and women's violence tends to be explained as loss of control, about which women feel guilty and ashamed (c.f. Campbell 1993). Yet for young women in the current study such violence was

considered deeply meaningful; it served to maintain group solidarity, reinforce friendships, affirm allegiances, and enhance personal status within the group.

Violence wasn't the only criminal activity that the young women referred to as exciting. Angela referred to 'the buzz' associated with stealing cars, for example, while Lesley discussed feelings of elation after a successful housebreaking:

> I used tae dae it fer the buzz! Because you were daein' something you werenae supposed tae be daein' and you thought, "Oh, if I get caught here I'll get a chase!" Everything starts running through your mind. You don't actually sit and think, "Well, if I take this car, this person's gonna be 'Ma car, ma insurance!'" You don't think o' how the person's gonna feel; you just think aboot how you're gonna feel inside yourself. (Angela)

> Your adrenaline is going and stuff like that. […] Because you know that you could get caught or they could wake up and you're fucked. But it's a buzz. It's a good feeling. See when you come oot that hoose and you open up a purse or a bag and you see all this money, you're like that: "Oh my God! It takes some people a week to earn that amount of money and I've just earned it in five minutes". So you don't think of the consequences or the hurt you're causing or anything like that. (Lesley)

For Karen, the value of the goods stolen was of less importance than the sense of euphoria and exhilaration associated with 'pulling a fast one' or 'putting one over' on someone:

> I lost my bottle for shoplifting […] One day I put on a black hat and a black jacket and broke into a house. I found it dead easy. And adrenaline rush I got off it was *amazing*. It was much better than shoplifting. I used to *love* shoplifting. I still do […] When you're waiting fer somebody to grab you and they don't, it's like, "Cool!" When you're breaking into a hoose it's even better 'cause it is *dark* and just the sneakiness o' it. I liked breaking into the houses better than I liked the money and the drugs. I actually enjoyed the thieving better than I enjoyed the takings. (Karen)

Thus offending presented some young women with a measure of self-esteem and self-efficacy; a sense that they had crossed the boundaries into someone else's world and 'gotten away with it'.

The status and sense of superiority young women said they felt was sometimes linked to the 'masculine' nature of the offences they committed. Karen, for example, took pride in her status as 'the only female housebreaker in Midvale', while Zoë claimed to be one of the few prisoners 'that's been done fer car theft'. Committing traditionally 'male' offences made both women feel special or unique. It also afforded them respect amongst their male peers:

> I used to be at the high school with five of my male pals, ken, there was six of us, and we used to wrestle […] Like we would take it in turns and whoever wasn't wrestling was drinking. It started off quite mild, but by the end of the night we would have black eyes and we would basically be battered to death. And not one of them made an allowance for me being a female, not one of them. There was only two of them that could actually beat me […] I just preferred the company and liked the things that guys done better than the things that lassies done. (Karen)

Hence some young women initially engaged in offending, particularly violent offending, because it carried with it an excess of masculine meanings (e.g. independence, strength, emotional stoicism, toughness), and confronting expectations that women should not steal cars, break into houses, engage in violence and so on provided an additional source of excitement, pleasure, self-respect and status. That is not to say, however, that the young women embraced a masculine *identity*. Rather, they appropriated an ideology of femininity according to which the use of violence was socially sanctioned. As reported below, one of the primary motivations young women in the current study gave for engaging in violent behaviour was to protect and/or prove their allegiance to their family, their friends and/or their local area. In other words, they justified their behaviour by reference to norms of emphasised femininity (e.g. selflessness, loyalty and caring for others).

### 'Better a sair face than a red face'

Like the North American street youth studied by Anderson (1999) and Bourgois (2002), young women placed a high premium on being treated with 'respect',

believing that if you allowed other people to disrespect you, you would be left with nothing:

> I've realised now that I've got to defend for masel' [sic]. And if that means doing anything, that means doing anything, no matter what it takes.
>
> If you let folk think that they can just come up and they can just smack you, you're gonnae get that all the time, you're gonna get treated like a pure bam. And you are gonnae get targeted and targeted and targeted. You cannae just stand there and let somebody punch you, or stick the head in ye, know what Ah mean? You're obviously gonnae hit them back. (Carol)

Much of the young women's violence, then, was motivated by a desire to gain respect, but this search for respect was in itself a form of risk management, an attempt to pre-empt bullying or victimisation through the display of an aggressive or violent disposition. Almost without exception, the young women expressed the importance of being *seen* to 'stand up for yourself', repeating the mantra: 'I'd rather take a sore face than red face'. Adopting a tough, aggressive approach was regarded as an *unavoidable* aspect of life growing up in a 'rough' area and was something that many of the young women said that they were explicitly taught by their parents from a very early age.

Against this backdrop, some of the seemingly trivial sources of young women's anger and annoyance are rendered intelligible. Within the prison setting, for example, Zoë attacked a fellow inmate for lifting a slice of bread that she put in the toaster: 'I'd toasted it and she's just buttered it and taken it away. That's treating ye like a daftie', while Stephanie got involved in a fight over a cigarette:

> I got put in with this girl and her fag went oot and I says, "Cool doon! You'll get a light. We've only got 10 minutes to go!" and she went, "You shut up!" I went, "Who are you telling to shut up, you bam?!" She went, "You're the bam!" I says, "Prove me the bam!" and she went, "Naw, *you* prove me the bam!" I says, "Naw, *you* prove *me* the bam!" […] and she jumped up and grabbed us. I was like that, "I'll have tae fight fer maself here" and I just started punching fuck oot 'er. (Stephanie)

Both women felt that they *had* to react in such circumstances or they would be seen as 'a daftie' or 'a bam' (i.e. easy prey). Far from being irrational, then, viewed within the hostile world of the prison setting their behaviour could be regarded as a 'necessary survival strategy' (Maher 1997). The young women confronted real danger on a daily basis. At any given moment, their victim, their offending peers, or various agents of the state, could attempt to take advantage or 'put one over' on them (Katz 1988). By communicating that they were prepared to stand up for themselves, physically if necessary, the young women maintained a level self-respect and status, and in doing so protected their emotional and physical selves.

### 'Just tae black oot'

Young women also engaged in risk-seeking behaviour as a means of managing negative feelings. As previously stated, disruptive family backgrounds, histories of physical and sexual violence, and childhood experiences of institutional care were common among the young women interviewed. As a result of these experiences, many of the young women expressed feelings of unresolved grief and rage, and said that these emotions contributed indirectly to their offending. Clear correlations exist between the victimisation of young women and high-risk behaviours such as substance misuse, suicide and self-harm (Acoca and Dedel 1998; Howard League 1997). One third of the sample were drinking daily and half described a pattern of regular binge drinking prior to their 'current' offence. Three-fifths of the young women were addicted to heroin. Most said that while they initially started drinking, or taking drugs, because it made them feel good, they soon came to rely on it as a way to avoid unpleasant memories. As Joanne explained,

> When Ah started off taking everything it was just tae be the same as everybody else and fer tae ever'hin' and just fer the buzz. But then through time, as each year went on, Ah was taking mair and mair different 'hings and that was just to black oot, forget a' the stupid 'hings Ah'd obviously already done, eh? 'hings like that. (Joanne)

Similar themes pervaded Cathy's account. Cathy had been sexually abused by her paternal grandfather between the ages of seven and 11. Following a fight with her

father, she was received into local authority care aged 11, at which point she started experimenting with drugs (temazepam, ecstasy, and cannabis). As her drug use escalated, Cathy became involved in offending to get money for drugs. She was eventually sent to residential school after being caught stealing charity boxes:

Wi' ma friends I would take, like, jellies and eccie and then when I was sitting on ma own I would smoke hash. I done it to blank everything oot. But then when I woke up in the morning it was still there, so I just took drugs again. And that's how I started getting intae committing crime. And the crimes that I were committing were shoplifting, thefts, just so I could get money, just tae get me them drugs, just tae forget fer a wee while.

See at the start, it was a really positive thing. It was making me happy and it was making me forget and it was gieing me a laugh wi' ma pals and then it started to get beyond a joke. I got caught stealing […] and put in residential school. (Cathy)

As their drug use progressed, then, the young women's offending pattern altered. Offences that were initially engaged in alongside peers for the buzz or a shared sense of experience became financially motivated – driven by the need to fund escalating drug problems. When the young women attempted to reduce their consumption, in an effort to regain some degree of control, negative feelings resurfaced and were often compounded by guilt and shame arising from their own behaviours (hurting others, for example, or allowing their children to be put up for adoption). This became a self-perpetuating cycle, as Angela, who was sexually abused by her uncle over a 12-year period, explained:

When I took drugs I didnae have the thoughts, I didnae have the nightmares, or the flashbacks. So I was free. And then for a while I wasnae able to get drugs, em, I was working. I'd got masel a job and I wasnae able to get the drugs. And that's when it started coming back and I couldnae handle it.

If I took the drugs the abuse was gone, and if I didnae have the drugs the abuse was there. And I thought, "If I take these drugs, and I keep taking them, I'll no need to think about it and it will no be in ma mind". (Angela)

A major draw of drugs, then, was that they prevented conscious thought and provided temporary relief from intense feelings. In contrast to the reflexive actors depicted by

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Giddens (1990, 1991) and Beck (1992, 1994), the majority of young women in the current study gave little thought to the past, or indeed the future, preferring instead to take themselves out of themselves, living their lives in the moment, focusing on the next hit.[8]

**'A way to make you feel'**

Some of the young women said that they felt emotionally 'numb' much of the time and no longer experienced 'natural' or 'normal' feelings. Joanne's account was typical of this group:

> Through drugs Ah've become totally immune. Ah don't feel the way normal folk feel. Ah've just lost every bit o' confidence and every'hin' […] Ah'm all withdrawn fae everybody. Ah'll no sit wi' anybody, Ah'll just sit masel'. Ah 'hink that's just like wi' havin' heroin, because Ah've been that used tae it. (Joanne)

Carol, too, said she felt 'detached'. She spoke about 'closing down' emotionally so that no one could hurt her, and of no longer knowing how to react appropriately to someone else's distress:

> It just doesn't hurt anymore […] Ah used tae be dead, dead quiet and just used to never bother and then Ah just got sick o' it. You just think to yersel', "Awff, what else can anybody else do tae ye?" So you just start getting immune tae things. I'll be honest, see when Ah see people crying in here, Ah laugh. But it's not because Ah'm thinking they're pure pathetic, it's just Ah dae ken what tae dae. (Carol)

Risk seeking, in this context, was understood as 'a way to make you feel' and reminded young women that they were 'alive'.

Self-harm was a relatively popular method of *expressing* negative emotions. In much the same way that Karen and Lesley talked about housebreaking in order to experience the 'buzz' or 'rush' that comes with a successful theft, young women who

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[8] In this sense, they can be characterised as 'reflexivity losers' (Lash 1994).

self-harmed said it gave them a 'release', a sense of omnipotence and self-control. Others engaged in violence for the same reasons:

> To be honest wi' you Ah like rollin' about wi folk! [Laughs] It's like seeing how much Ah can tolerate. Like say in here, there's been fuckin' times when they've like jumped on me, prison officers, they jumped me right and it is bloody sore. And your mind just goes intae somewhere else so that you're tolerating it. And it makes them worse because you are tolerating it. They're like that, "Why the fuck is she no squealing?" Ah just sit there and smile, but it fucking hurts, you're like that, "Mmm". But it's like seeing how much Ah can tolerate. (Carol)

For certain young women, then, violence (whether directed at the self or at others) was motivated by a desire to feel physical pain, and the ability to endure physical pain was in turn understood as an assertion of power and control.

Another means of expressing negative emotions was hurting others. All three of the young women convicted of robbery, for example, cited vengeance as a basis of their actions. Debbie said she liked 'robbin' boys' as a way of exacting retribution on her abuser:

> Ah robbed somebody. And it *wisnae* for money 'cause Ah *had* money […] Ah *liked* robbin' people. […] Ah *liked* the feelin'. Ah felt kinda relieved […] Ah wanted people tae hurt. 'Cause Ah wis hurtin. Selfish. [Short pause] Ah think it wis tae get some o' ma anger oot. Like [when] some people cut thairsels, sort o' hing.  (Debbie)

This account supports Katz's (1988) theory of robbery as learned. Katz argues that those who persistently engage in robbery are making a choice to continue involvement in a form of behaviour they have previously discovered to be instrumentally and expressively useful. Against structural explanations and cost-benefit analyses, both of which regard monetary gain as the robber's prime motivation, Katz argues that most robberies result in relatively low levels of financial recompense and, further, have a comparatively high rate of detection. Put another way, if the offender's aim is the rational pursuit of cash, then there are easier, safer and more lucrative ways to make a living, both legal (working in McDonalds, for example – see Goode 1990: 8) and illegal (e.g. burglary). Both Debbie's and Carol's

offences were largely prompted by anger. Their primary aim was to attack 'somebody … anybody' and the level of violence utilized often exceeded that which was required.


*The illusion of control: Different for young women?*

As the preceding data have hopefully made clear, young women in the current study employed risk-seeking behaviour in a deliberate attempt to exert control over lives that were experienced as out with control. However, unlike Lyng's (1990) edgeworkers, who engaged in voluntary risk taking in response to the dehumanising, alienating nature of work in the post-industrial era, they cited *families* as the source of estrangement and disaffection. This is unsurprising considering that 'emphasised femininity' is associated with the intimate emotionality of family rather than the competitive rationality of work (Connell 1987). Disruptive family backgrounds, histories of physical and sexual abuse, and childhood experiences of institutional care were common among the young women interviewed, and many claimed that they did not feel 'wanted' at home or that their parents were emotionally distant or didn't pay them enough attention. Consequently they turned to their peers for an enhanced sense of sociability and belonging. Risk seeking, in this context, permitted the young women to construct an enhanced sense of self and self-efficacy, 'a realisation of immediacy and a reassertion of identity and ontology' (Hayward and Young 2004: 267). As their risk pathways progressed, however, risk seeking became a coping mechanism to manage overwhelming emotions.

This raises an important question of how we should understand the term 'voluntary' in relation to young women's risk-seeking behaviour. According to Lyng's (1990) definition, edgework involves the *active* pursuit of risky situations, rather than these situations being forced on the individual. As Miller (1991) acknowledges, women's ability to make choices is bounded by structural constraints and so it could be argued that they are not entirely free to engage in risk taking voluntarily. This means that 'We have to be very careful … about what we mean when we say risk so that we do not confound this concept a priori with simply being male' (Chan and Rigakos, 2002: 750). Chan and Rigakos (2002) argue that women are required to engage in *instrumental* risk in the course of their daily activities, where

they are exposed to risks such as harassment, intimidation and/or assault on a routine basis. Voluntary (i.e. non-instrumental) risks, Chan and Rigakos claim, are almost exclusively 'the purview of the privileged' (i.e. white middle-class males). That said, there was undoubtedly evidence of some young women pursuing especially risky situations, above and beyond the level necessitated by their social position: deliberately offending in front of security cameras, for example, or electing to engage in robbery as opposed to burglary. Young women like Zoë, Stephanie, Karen, Carol and Debbie clearly took pride in their ability to 'push the edge' and make it home unscathed, but they did so in ways that were stereotypically feminine – just as Lyng's skydivers behaved in ways that were stereotypically masculine.

In her influential work on aggression, Anne Campbell (1993) demonstrates that whereas for men aggression is often regarded as 'a means of exerting control over other people when they feel the need to reclaim power or self-esteem', women typically describe aggression as 'a temporary loss of control caused by overwhelming pressure and resulting in guilt' (Campbell 1993: viii). On the basis of these findings, Campbell claims that men's aggression is 'instrumental' and that women's is 'expressive', emerging as a release only after they can no longer control their pent-up frustration and anger. Not only does this construction – of the relationship between gender and aggression as a duality – reinforce a stereotypical conception of women's true nature as irrational, emotional, out of control and so on, it oversimplifies what is in fact a complex issue. Whilst my own data would seem to support Campbell's assertions about the sense of guilt and humiliation some women feel after perpetrating a violent act, the young women's remarks about the relationship between control and aggression were more contradictory. For example, 13 of the 21 young women said that feeling or doing something aggressive made them feel guilty, while 12 said that it made them feel better. Twelve reported feeling 'out of control', nine reported feeling 'in control', and seven said that feeling or doing something aggressive made them feel both 'in' and 'out of control', depending on the time frame. This last group of young women usually clarified their responses by explaining that they felt in control during the violent act, but out of control when they looked back at what they had done. Some of the young women were also able to distinguish between different forms of violence, i.e. violence that was controlled (usually pre-meditated, for example against someone perceived to be a deserving victim) and violence that was out of control (or committed 'in the heat of the moment'). Negative feelings (guilt, remorse etc.) were

usually attributed to events in the latter category, because the young women felt that they had 'gone too far' and couldn't explain or sometimes even remember what had actually happened. Conversely, 'controlled' violence, which was generally violence that was regarded by the interviewees as justified, was more likely to be described as enjoyable.

The significance of 'retrospective interpretation' to the experience of edgework is explored by Jennifer Lois (2003) in her work on search and rescue volunteers. Lois demonstrates that, while edgeworkers are often drawn to risk-seeking behaviour as a result of the adrenaline 'rush' or 'buzz' it affords, the prominent 'emotional culture' of edgework is emotional suppression, what Lois terms 'emotional cool':

> Edgework challenges individuals' ability to retain self-control by invoking intense, life threatening emotions that *must* be suppressed. Failing this, the consequences are dire. Thus, it appears that edgework is the ultimate test of emotional cool … (Lois 2003: 181, original emphasis)

Lois's analysis offers a four-stage model through which rescuers prepare for and experience their work. During preparations for and performance of their mission, volunteers share the belief that all emotions (but especially negative emotions) should be suppressed. Pent-up stress is released in the third stage by laughing, joking, drinking, or crying. On the one hand, rescuers feel energized, and this is generally associated with positive feelings of control and competence. On the other hand, they may experience negative emotions such as fear or alarm, or have to deal with emotionally disturbing memories of dead or maimed bodies. In order to safeguard their future edgework ability, these negative feelings have to be redefined, thus in the fourth and final stage of edgework rescuers engage in what Hochschild (1983) calls 'deep acting', deliberately visualizing a substantial portion of reality in a different way.

One of Lois's key findings was that men and women interpreted and managed the emotions associated with edgework differently. For example, she found that while male rescuers thrived on the 'excitement' of missions, interpreting adrenaline rushes as urgency, female rescuers were more likely to express trepidation, interpreting heightened arousal as fear or anxiety (gender appropriate, but socially devalued emotions). Cultural norms in Western societies make strong distinctions between the

ways in which men and women are permitted to express emotions. Masculinity norms dictate that men are 'emotionless' and may only display 'powerful' emotions such as anger, excitement or thrill – hence their proclivity for edgework, which allows them to act out their emotions in a socially acceptable context. Feminine gender norms, on the other hand, encourage women to be 'emotional' and to express such emotions as grief, anxiety or fear but not anger or aggression. Women internalise these standards, which in turn impact upon their tastes for risk, likelihood of shame, level of self-control, and assessment of the costs and benefits associated with 'risking it'. As Lois's work demonstrates, although female rescuers *actually* perform edgework competently (i.e. they manage their anxiety in a relatively effective way during their missions), they still come to *believe* that they are 'emotional deviants', viewing their lack of confidence as problematic and declining tasks they think might overwhelm them.

Lois's work sheds light on the current findings in two important ways. Firstly, she shows that while edgeworkers initially seek situations of risk for a sense of danger and excitement, during the experience itself 'they narrow their focus so dramatically that they lose awareness of everything extraneous to the risk activity itself' (2001: 393). It is precisely this sense of dissociation that the young women in the current study come to learn as expressively useful. While their initial drug use is described as 'exciting' and 'fun', for example, the progression to more regular use is motivated by a desire to 'lose it' or 'to forget'. These young women do more than 'crowd the edge', they go over it – in much the same way as Katz's (1988) 'badass' loses control in order to take control. By deliberately pursuing a path of drug use, offending and/or self-harm, young women were able to master an internal sense of helplessness and anger. While their actions may ultimately be misguided, reinforcing alienation and exclusion, the young women took comfort from the fact that they were creating a situation of their own making. As Annie explained, 'It's like you cannae control what's happening around you, so you control what you dae to yoursel'. Hence risk seeking was not regarded as something that is imposed on the offender, but rather a lifestyle that has been *chosen*.

By showing that the emotional rewards of edgework only take place after the experience itself is actually over, Lois's work also demonstrates the way in which feelings are constructed according to gendered cultural norms. As young people, young women are controlled by a set of ideological forces that encourage them to

'live for today', 'let go', 'give in' and take risks, but as females a contrary force cautions them to avoid risk and exercise self-control. Where young women, looking back on their past behaviour, feel unable to explain their actions by recourse to (sub)cultural norms and values, 'scripts' regarding deserving victims for example or the need to stick up for friends, they are more likely to rely on discourses of normative femininity, which interpret their behaviour as pathological and/or irrational, and therefore feel guilty about what they have done. This perhaps explains why younger women (mainly those in the 'teenage fighter' category) were more likely to experience risk seeking as exciting, viewing violence in particular as an expression of control, while older offenders' accounts were more likely to characterized by ambivalence, shame, and embarrassment. Risk seeking was very much considered 'a younger lassie's game', something that 'normal' women should 'grow out of'.

*Conclusion*

There is a paucity of literature exploring the risk-seeking behaviour of girls and young women. The current study suggests that young women can be involved in the same range of risky behaviours as young men, often for what seem like very similar reasons (i.e. fun, excitement, self-respect and status). However, the young women in the current study were acting in a different social, familial and personal context than the male skydivers described by Lyng (1990) and families and peers appeared to have a greater impact on their pursuit of risky situations, in part reflecting the greater awareness women have about the importance of relationships compared to men. In line with research into the backgrounds and characteristics of young women convicted of violent offences in North America (e.g. Baskin and Sommers 1998; Miller 2001; Ryder 2003), the current study suggests a pattern of female risk seeking that begins with family problems and experiences of abuse. Hence, while young women are initially drawn to risk-seeking behaviour as a result of the shared adrenaline 'rush' or 'buzz' they experience, as their 'risk pathways' progress they increasingly come to rely on edgework as a means to *block out* powerful emotions. The data also show that, unlike men, who tend to retrospectively redefine their edgework experiences as an expression of exhilaration and omnipotence (Lyng 1990), young women are more likely to feel ambivalent, for example looking upon their behaviour as irrational and

therefore feeling guilty about what they have done. However this is not the same as saying that their behaviour is in actual fact 'a loss of control'. Quite the contrary:  for many it can be the most integrative and self-preserving *choice*, albeit from a very limited field of options. Young women are perhaps more tightly regulated than any other social group. As young people, adults control nearly every aspect of their lives and they rarely, if ever, have the chance for 'genuinely free, creative, exciting, self-directed behaviour' (Miller 2005). As women, they are also subject to powerful disciplinary discourses of domesticity, sexuality and pathological 'otherness' (Carlen and Worrall 1987). In particular, they are acculturated from an early age not to express anger, to avoid risk and thereby to prevent their own violent victimisation. By challenging dominant discourses of femininity, female risk seeking is thus an important source of 'gender trouble' (Butler 1990). For the young women in the current study, it was a vital survival strategy.

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