Do People in High-risk Occupations Seek High-risk Sports? An Ethnographic Approach to Explaining Participation in Skydiving

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Background and Significance
Within the rise of professionalism and commercialism in the sport industry, the social norm for identifying what constitutes a sport has been created and shaped by a large number of participants/spectators and widespread media coverage (Greenhalgh, Simmons, Hambrick, & Greenwell, 2011). These sports are labeled “mainstream sports,” but various other recreation activities have been introduced as “extreme sports,” which are characterized by extensive danger, organizational independence, and the pursuit of freedom (Lebeau & Sides, 2015; Stefanovic & Siljak, 2010). Despite having less media exposure, extreme sports have seen increasing popularity because these provide an avenue in which various personalities types and motivations can be indulged (Greenhalgh et al., 2011). Although the significance of participation in extreme sports has long been acknowledged, a variety of questions about the role of these activities in participants’ lives remain unanswered.

Purpose
A primary driver of participation in extreme sports is that these independent leisure activities, which involve a high risk of injury (e.g., waterfall kayaking, big wave surfing, high-level mountaineering, and extreme skiing: Brymer & Gray, 2010), afford participants a feeling of freedom from everyday life. Particularly in contemporary society, people spend considerable time at work, thus enabling work lives to considerably encroach upon personal lives. In freeing people from the limitations imposed by society (i.e., workplace), extreme sports can provide participants opportunities to relieve the stress caused primarily by job-related issues. Accordingly, the first core purpose of this study is to understand the relationship between occupational stress and participation in extreme sports, with particular focus on skydiving.

Depending on the location and environment of one’s workplace, different occupations cause dissimilar levels of job stress (Johnson et al., 2005). Across numerous careers, high-risk professions have recently received attention in connection with job stress and well-being (Johnson et al., 2005; Roberts, Jaremin, & Lloyd, 2013). For example, employees who have careers that are threatened by violence (e.g., social work) or characterized by lack of control (e.g., call centers) tend to suffer more frequently from problems associated with social, psychological, and physical well-being (Bosma, Peter, Siegrist, & Marmot, 1998; Johnson et al., 2005). Because extreme sports take place mainly in air, on the ground, in water, or in a combination of these environments (Stefanovic & Siljak, 2010), these leisure activities can be regarded as attractive opportunities to enter a new environment that is temporarily free from work-life constraints (Lebeau & Sides, 2015). Correspondingly, the second core purpose of this study is to explore the motivations, behaviors, and experiences of skydivers who work in high-risk occupations.

Literature Review
Participation in extreme sports can be explained by Type T theory (Self, Henry, Findley, & Reilly, 2007) and the sensation seeking theory (Breivik, 1996). The former maintains that the type T personality views extreme sports as the realization of deviant personality traits, such as thrill-seeking or risk-taking propensities (Self et al., 2007). In our context, participants who have a type T personality are more likely to involve themselves in extreme sports, such as skydiving, because of their thrill-seeking tendencies. On the other hand, sensation seeking theory argues that participants in extreme sports are motivated by the pursuit of new thrills that enable them to alleviate boredom (Breivik, 1996). In this regard, skydiving participants may consider leisure activities as a means of escaping from stressful work environments. This study extends the literature by examining the relationships among skydiving, job stress, and high-risk occupations.
Skydiving was introduced in the early twentieth century (Poynter & Turoff, 2007) and has progressively gained popularity as a new extreme sport because of the advanced technology and increased accessibility involved in the activity (Barrows, Mills, & Kassing, 2005). Several sport and leisure management scholars have recently attempted to determine in broad terms why and how people voluntarily participate in skydiving (e.g., Hardie-Bick & Bonner, 2016). The current research expands existing studies by delving into skydiving participants’ career experiences, job stress, and career types.

Methods
To achieve the research purposes, an ethnographic approach will be carried out because it allows researchers to engage with a specific group for the purpose of enriching understanding of their behaviors (Krane & Baird, 2005; Roberts, 2009). Through an ethnographic process, researchers can observe skydivers’ behaviors and culture in a natural environment from the participants’ points of view. Ethnography has provided valuable insights into extreme sport research that involves relatively small groups of participants (Donnelly, 2006). Aside from observations, 15 semi-structured interviews will be conducted with active licensed skydivers. The interviewees for selection will be those who represent different career types and skydiving experience levels. A series of questions will be included, such as those on (1) motivations for skydiving, (2) prior experience in other sports, (3) occupational designations and responsibilities, and (4) stressful work environments.

The first author, a participant observer, has a skydiving license issued by the United States Parachute Association (USPA) and holds a B license (progressive levels of skill from A through D). She has already established a trustworthy relationship with the prospective informants and obtained permission from the skydiving facility located in northeast Pennsylvania. On the basis of this rapport with the potential research participants, she will conduct fieldwork by directly observing other skydivers, engaging in informal communication as an insider, and writing field notes and a reflective diary on the ground and in air throughout the study. The co-authors, who are nonparticipant observers, will triangulate the data obtained. The data from the in-depth interviews will be recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the responses will be analyzed by using NVivo, a software package designed to aid qualitative data analysis.

Contributions
The study is expected to contribute to the literature in the following ways. First, the ethnographic approach offers a unique opportunity to derive insights into the diverse motivations and experiences of skydivers. Second, considering the types of occupations and stress levels experienced by skydivers enhances our understanding of how and why people who work in high-risk occupations desire equally high-risk sports. Third, our results will provide concrete information to skydiving facility managers who strive to identify intrinsic motivations for participation in the sport. Taken together, the contributions of the study are valuable not only for sport management research but also for the occupational psychology literature.