**Aid Work as Edgework – Voluntary Risk-Taking and Security in Humanitarian Assistance, Development and Human Rights Work**

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**Abstract**

Contemporary societies have been characterized as risk societies. While considerable research on individualised risk and risk management exists, voluntary risk taking has so far found less attention. This article explores the tensions between voluntary risk-taking at the individual level and risk management at the organisational level by analysing aid work as edgework. Between 1990s and 2009, the number of attacks on aid personnel including killing, kidnapping and armed attacks has steadily increased. Security and how to deal with it has become a central concern of aid organisations. While the increased insecurity of aid workers and the responses of aid organisations to security threats have been widely documented, less attention has been paid to the role risk-taking plays in aid workers lives. Edgework is a form of voluntary risk taking and has been primarily studied in the context of risk taking leisure such as action and adventure sport. Aid work encompasses a wide range of interventions, including development and emergency relief. Depending on assignment and region, people working in the aid industry find themselves in high or low risk situations. Based on biographical interviews with people working in aid, this article addresses motivations for getting involved in aid work and experiences of danger in Aidland. Contrasting individualized risks with security procedures of aid organisations, my article contributes to a better understanding of risk-taking behaviour in general and in the context of overseas aid in particular.

**Aid Work as Edgework -- Voluntary Risk-Taking and Security in Humanitarian Assistance, Development and Human Rights Work**

**Introduction**

Contemporary societies have been characterized as risk societies (Beck 1992; Zinn 2008) and the meaning of risk has increasingly become synonymous with ‘danger, ‘threat’ and ‘hazard’ (Lupton 1999, p. 10). Overall, risk research tends to frame risk as negative and something to be avoided. One central aspect of risk societies is the individualization of risk. Risk structures biographies and individuals are increasingly held accountable to avoid risks. The governmentality approach in particular focuses on techniques of self-government (O'Malley 2008). While risk management has found longstanding interest and considerable attention (Renn 1998), a smaller body of literature addresses the pleasures of risk taking (Lyng 1990; Kidder 2006; Lyng and Matthews 2007; Newmahr 2011) and thus addresses the relationship between risk, work and leisure.

This article addresses voluntary risk-taking in the context of Aidland (Apthorpe 2011) a term which I use as shorthand and umbrella term comprising people working in different positions for a range of aid organizations. I try to avoid the term ‘aid worker’ or ‘field worker’ because in addition to people based in the field, I include staff in regional or head offices or consultants who make occasional field visits. I therefore refer to ‘people working in aid’. Some understand humanitarianism as relief only, whereas others include development as a version of humanitarianism. There are of course huge differences between providing immediate aid to those in need in crisis situations and long-term development. Nevertheless, “many of the large NGOs are multi-mandated, meaning that they work in several sectors, such as advocacy, capacity-building, development, peace-building, and relief” (Fast et. al. 2013, p. 224; see also van Brabant 2010).

Given that aid work has increasingly become “dangerous business” (Thomas 2005, p. 123), I propose that aid work can be considered edgework. Edgework constitutes voluntary risk taking that involves “a clearly observable threat to one’s physical or mental well-being or one’s sense of an ordered existence (Lyng 1990, p. 857). Edgeworkers do not avoid risk, rather they are “drawn into these activities by the seductive power of the experience” (Lyng and Matthews 2007, p. 78). While I am not arguing that people working in aid are seeking out danger, aid work requires negotiating the edge “life versus death, consciousness versus unconsciousness, sanity versus insanity, an ordered sense of self and environment versus a disordered self and environment” (Lyng 1999, p. 857). Based on biographical interviews, this article focuses on the experience of people working in aid performing a range of different activities including long-term development, emergency relief, human rights work and protection. They encountered different levels of safety, situational and ambient security (Fast 2007).1

Aid work has so far not been analysed as edgework or voluntary risk-taking. The aim of this article is to explore tensions between motivations for getting involved in aid work and the experience of risk and risk management of aid organizations. I first describe the context in which aid workers live and work and I argue that aid work should be considered edgework. Next I will describe the data on which this article is based. Drawing on the interviews, I will first discuss what drew respondents to aid work and how they experience living on the edge. This is followed by a discussion of the acceptance and management of risk and the potential consequences of the introduction of security measures which constrain movement and increase the distance between international and national staff and the local population. I conclude that such security measures might undermine some aspects that attract people to Aidland.

**Working and Living Conditions in an Insecure Aid World**

After having been neglected by academic scholarship for a long time, recently people working in aid have gained the attention of anthropologists and sociologists (Cook 2007; Heron 2007; Lewis 2008; Fassin and Pandolfini 2010; Bornstein and Redfield 2011; Fechter and Hindman 2011; Mosse 2011; Fechter 2013). These studies have addressed the identities and subject positions of development workers (Cook 2007; Heron 2007), the “chronic mobility” of UN staff (Nowicka 2006) as well as the “protean career’s” and the “hero’s adventure” of volunteers (Hudson and Inkson 2006). People working in Aidland have been characterized as “professional volunteers” (Arvidson 2009), “selfish altruists” (Vaux 2001) and “parochial cosmopolitans” (Rajak and Stirrat 2011).

Furthermore, non-governmental organizations and UN agencies which were initially engaged in development have become involved in humanitarian assistance. The changing focus of aid organizations is related to an increasing proportion of overseas assistance devoted to humanitarian aid (Macrae, Collinson et al. 2002, p. 11) and by increased support for development projects in insecure environments through bi-lateral organizations such as the Department for International Development (DFID) (National Audit Office 2008, p. 5). At the turn of the millennium, Bakhet and Diamond (2002) found that staff in development projects were increasingly at risk without being necessarily prepared for work in insecure environments. Moreover, being involved in multiple activities has been identified as one of several risk factors for NGO actors (Fast 2007). Depending on their mandate and mission, organizations face different types of risks and therefore need to employ different security strategies (Martin 2003).

Aid work is challenging and requires volunteers and staff to rely on limited resources in foreign cultures and to deal with often unpredictable situations. Depending on status, type of assignment and the risk situation in the region, the living and working conditions of people working in aid can differ widely. In stable situations and on long-term assignments, aid personnel are able to rent apartments or houses and to live on their own or with their families. In contrast, volunteers and those working on short-term assignments, in particular in high risk situations, tend to live together in guesthouses and thus have less privacy and separation between work and leisure. The security situation might require that staff and volunteers live together in guarded compounds, travel in armed vehicles and are restricted in their movement after dark by curfews (Duffield 2010; 2012). Thus, in situations which are perceived as high risk, security regulations restrict movement beyond guarded living and working quarters and make it difficult or impossible to visit public places and interact with locals. In such situations, international aid workers are often posted for a short period of time and separated from partners and families. In particular for those working in emergency relief, it is not unusual to move from one country to the next within a few days.

Since the 1990s, the “humanitarian enterprise” (Minear 2002) is not only growing which resulted in an increase of the aid worker population (Harvey et al. 2010; Walker et. al. 2010), but it is also characterized by a number of interacting processes such as politicization, securitization2 and professionalization.3 The politicization (and militarization) of aid concerns the integration of different types of aid and assistance such as emergency relief, human rights and long-term development work in post-conflict scenarios. In addition, the cooperation between different actors (non-governmental organizations, UN agencies, bi-lateral organizations and the military) undermined the neutrality of purely humanitarian organizations (Torrente 2004). As a consequence, aid workers have been consciously targeted because humanitarian organizations are not (longer) seen as neutral but identified with the politics of donor governments (for a critical review see Fast 2010). Attacks on aid workers exploit humanitarian symbols through eliciting worldwide media coverage highlighting the level of insecurity and disregard of humanitarian principles (Hammond 2008, p. 177ff). However, this does not mean that each attack on aid personnel is covered, especially attacks on national aid workers tend to receive less media attention (Stoddard et al. 2006; 2008; 2011; Mahrouse 2009; Fast 2010).4  Although a slight decrease on the attacks of aid workers can be observed after the peak of violence against aid workers in 2009 (Stoddard et al. 2011), some aid organizations, including the UN recognize that

“… not all risks can be totally eliminated and [that] senior management, as well as informed and consenting staff, must be willing to accept whatever risk remains after they apply their risk management strategies (the residual risk).” (Egeland et al. 2011, p. 8)

Since the 1990s, aid organizations have reacted to attacks on aid workers with a review of their security management (Duffield 1997; Van Brabant 1998). Although security systems were in place prior to 2003, the attacks on the UN and the ICRC in Bagdad represented a turning point and have resulted in an increased interest in security and the creation of new structures such as the Department of Safety and Security through the UN General Assembly in December 2004. More international aid organizations started to develop security systems and to employ security advisors (Bruderlein and Gassmann 2006) and private security providers (Stoddard et al. 2008; 2009). The majority of organizations tended to employ international experts to provide security training, risk assessment and security management consulting as well as unarmed local guards while about one fifth employed armed guards (Stoddard et. al. 2008). However, there are variations in the adoption of security measures, for example Schneiker (2013) found that compared to UK and US aid agencies, German aid agencies have been comparatively slow in adapting security measures. Acceptance, protection and deterrence represent a range of security strategies employed by aid organizations (Von Brabant 2001; Martin 2003). Acceptance is grounded in the approval of an organization’s actions, protection includes the use of security guards, fortified vehicles and dwellings whereas deterrence comprises counter-threats such as withdrawal. Fast et. al. (2013) identify staffing as well as image and perception as cross-cutting components of acceptance which are based on good programming, knowledge of the local situation and communication with stake-holders. Another tactic is remote management, i.e. a delegation of tasks to local and national staff (Egeland et al. 2011). However, compared to international staff, the provision of security training to national staff has been neglected (van Brabant 2010). Among other aspects due to insurance purposes, aid organizations are more concerned with the well-being of international staff. Evacuations are problematic because they contribute to the inequality between international and national staff, are costly and threaten programmes. The established practice of removing international staff of aid organizations has recently has been replaced by the strategy to “stay and deliver” (Egeland et al. 2011). However, this strategy is associated with the bunkerization of international staff (Duffield 2010; 2012), i.e. international staff staying in compounds which are surrounded by high walls topped by barbed wire and guarded by armed security personnel. While acceptance emphasizes the close cooperation with local groups, protection tends to exacerbate the distance between international and national staff, aid workers and beneficiaries (Fassin 2010; 2012).

In addition to being potentially targeted, aid workers engage in risky behaviour such as alcohol and other drug use as well as unprotected sex (Dahlgren et al. 2009) and encounter a wide range of risks including vehicle and traffic accidents, landmines and health risks including being exposed to tropical diseases and traumatic events, riots between different factions or confrontations with child soldiers (Sharp et al. 1995; Simmonds et al. 1998; Peytremann et al. 2001; Holtz et al. 2002; Cardozo et al. 2005; Rowley and Burnham 2005; Larson 2006; Musa and Hamid 2008; Connorton et al. 2012). In addition, many aid workers hold short-term contracts, face job insecurity, experience de-skilling and thus might find it difficult if not impossible to return to previous careers (if they were in employment before entering Aidland). The highly mobile life-style of people working in aid also affects the ability to start and maintain personal relationships, thus they are also at risk of relationship breakdown or not being able to establish long-term relationships in the first place. Memoirs of international aid workers provide vivid accounts of dangers encountered on missions as well as the risky behaviour to release tensions (Olson 1999; Cain et al. 2004; Burnett 2005), however, voluntary risk-taking in Aidland has so far been neglected in the scholarly literature.

**Aidwork as Edgework**

Lyng (1990, 2005) contrasts two sociological perspectives on the role of edgework in late modern societies. On the one hand, edgework, for example the participation in extreme sports, can be understood as a response to stifling and alienating working conditions which provides an escape from constraints of everyday life and can be interpreted as resistance. On the other hand, edgework epitomizes the demands of the risk society with respect to individualized risk-taking and self-government. Lyng leaves it open, whether the two perspectives – escaping institutional constraints vs. better integrating oneself in existing institutional environments – are mutually exclusive or not (Lyng 2005, p. 10). In this article, I argue that both aspects intersect in aid work.

Initial studies of edgework and edgeworkers have focused on activities by white, middle-class, adult males (Lyng 1990; Laurendeau 2006; Lyng and Matthews 2007). A feminist critique followed swiftly and resulted in more insights about the gendered nature of edgework (Miller 1991; Lois 2001; 2005; Hannah-Moffat and O'Malley 2007; Newmahr 2011; Olstead 2011). For example, based on a study of a volunteer search and rescue group, Lois (2001) demonstrates that men and women experienced, managed and interpreted their feelings in the various stages of edgework differently. Women set low expectations for themselves, whereas men were confident and competitive. However, not only gender, but social class plays an important role as well. Edgework as leisure activity is performed by middle-class men and women (Lois 2001; 2005; Newmahr 2011), while paid edgework is undertaken by bike-messengers with an immigrant background (Kidder 2006), country boys who serve as firefighters (Desmond 2006; 2011) or soldiers from a working class background (Zinn 2010a). Thus, depending on class background, one either pays for or is paid for doing edgework.

Not least because of the involvement of celebrities, humanitarianism and development have become ‘sexy’ and attract a lot of media attention (Cameron and Haanstra 2008; Chouliaraki 2012). Young people’s interest in overseas aid is reflected in the growth of the gap year industry (Lyons et al. 2012; Vrasti 2013) and career choices. A concern with humanitarianism has replaced the involvement in solidarity and protest movements (Boltanski 1999; Boltanski and Chiapello 2005; Fassin 2007; 2012). Like rescue workers and firefighters, people working in conflict and post-conflict contexts take risks in order to improve or save the lives of others. As outlined in the previous section, they are confronted with a wide variety of risks, including job insecurity and divorce, health risks and traffic accidents, crime and politically motivated attacks. Based on the data which will be introduced in the next section, I will argue that aid work can be considered edgework.

**Data and Methods**

This article is based on fifty-seven biographical interviews5 with people working in development, emergency relief and human rights work employed by national and international, smaller and larger NGOs as well as UN agencies in a wide range of contexts. Biographical methods are still rarely used in risk research (Henwood et al. 2010; Zinn 2010b), but are very suitable to explore the decision to engage in voluntary risk taking. Respondents had experienced risky situations (including encounters with guerrilla, riots, child soldiers, attacks) and had been on assignments in a wide range of conflict or post-conflict settings including Afghanistan, Bosnia, Cambodia, Darfur, East Timor, Iraq, Sierra Leone and Syria. Within these settings, they had been involved in providing food supplies, education, medical or legal aid for local populations, IDPs and refugees.

The semi-structured interviews were carried out between 2004 to 2006 and between 2011 to 2013. After starting out with a snowball sample in 2004, the majority of the interviews were carried out in 2005 and 2006, during a university based training programme in humanitarian studies. Between 2011 and 2013, I did additional interviews with current and former people working in aid. Again, some of the interviewees were recruited through snow ball sampling, others through a training course in humanitarian studies. The interviews that I conducted since 2011 captured more recent developments and events. At the same time interviews conducted since 2011 indicated continuing lack of organizational support, lack of cooperation between organizations and limited diversity of staff in decision-making positions. Thus, (as elsewhere) the adoption of reforms does not necessarily mean that they are swiftly implemented. The 33 women and 24 men were born between 1937 and 1980.6 I first asked respondents to describe their lives prior to and the circumstances of getting involved in, pursuing and (potentially) leaving aid work. This was followed by questions for clarification and questions concerning positive and negative aspects of aid work and the experience of risky situations. The interviews were summarized, transcribed and coded using Nvivo. I employed tree nodes7 representing dimensions such as biographical continuity, identity, interaction, resources, values and empowerment. Under the tree node ‘biographical continuity’ I coded descriptions of the relationship between aid work and other forms of engagement, including volunteering, political activism and prior employment and whether the involvement in aid work was presented as sudden change or smooth transition from the previous life. The tree node ‘identity’ captured respondents’ identity construction (including political and religious identities). Descriptions of working and living together with national and international staff and volunteers, encounters with ‘beneficiaries’ and the local population as well as the exchange with friends and family in the home country were included in the tree node ‘interaction’. The tree node ‘resources’ comprised accounts of cultural, social and economic capital (Bourdieu 1984) and organizational and emotional support. Political and religious views were included in the tree node ‘values’, while the tree node ‘empowerment’ comprised experiences of power and powerlessness, dominance and inequality of self and others. While these dimensions guided the construction of the interview schedule and the analysis of the interviews, new themes and typologies emerged through the analysis of the interviews.

Some of the interviewees who had become involved in aid organizations in their teens or twenties had no previous job experience and started out as volunteers or in internship positions during or after finishing school or university studies.7 Interviewees, who had joined aid organizations in their thirties or later had worked in the private, public and third sectors in a variety of professions including banking and marketing as well as in helping professions (in education, law and medicine). Except for one interviewee, all were college educated and many had post-graduate degrees. Only three described themselves as working class. Several interviewees had research experience. A few had served in the military. Interviewees who had started out as national staff before they became expatriates were usually employed as translators, interpreters or in other supportive positions regardless of their qualifications and educational attainment. As noted earlier, national staff tend to be even more exposed to attacks than international staff. Furthermore, while some of the aid workers from high-income countries had left well-paying, prestigious careers behind in order to join Aidland, for aid workers from low(er) income countries aid organizations offered otherwise lacking job opportunities. While both groups emphasized their interest in doing meaningful work, their life chances (i.e. access to resources and alternative job opportunities) and thus their ability to leave dangerous situations varied. In this article I draw primarily on the interviews with those from high-income countries who left previous careers behind and contrast their previous working-conditions with aid work.

**Living on the Edge**

Aid work exemplifies the self-management typical for contemporary capitalist societies (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). The juxtaposition of respondents’ work experience prior and after becoming aid workers suggests that aid work is edgework in the sense of providing an exciting and stimulating work context which is shaped by questions of life and death as well as a high degree of flexibility and independence. Aid work thus can be seen as edgework in two respects, on the one hand as a search for challenging living and working conditions on the edge. On the other hand, aid work epitomizes the flexibility and self-directness that characterizes contemporary societies.

Respondents frequently mentioned that they were drawn to aid work by the desire to travel and to do something “worthwhile”. They appreciated the camaraderie with other aid workers and often referred to the most challenging living and working conditions as “the best time in my live”. Some respondents reflected on what attracted them to potentially dangerous assignments. A female human rights worker from Australia who had been on assignments in Bosnia and East Timor recalled:

So we would sit around and have drinks and we would all say, “What is it that brought us here? Is it for instance some sort of voyeuristic tendency that you are here, too? Is it because you like danger? Is it because you want to live on the edge? Is it because your life is more exciting by virtue that you can go home and dine out on it afterwards?” Do you know? To a certain extent, there is an element of that, includes me.

She thus described the fascination with danger as central in the aid worker experience.

When we would sit around, I know that particularly among the males there was this machoism, “I’ve been close to danger”, you know, and it’s a fascination with danger and excitement that is part of the human psyche. […] So there is a spectrum there of people constantly fascinated with that edge, cliff edge, and those who have actually gone over it, don’t want to talk about it. […] so we would always sit around analysing each other. Why are we here? Because it is a big part. You find yourself in some hell-holes, what is it about me?

In this quote, risk is very clearly described as attractive, however, at the same time there is a need to reflect on and explain the desire to go “into hell-holes”. Furthermore, the decision to voluntarily travel and stay in disaster and conflict-zones, needs to be justified towards friends and family. A female respondent and former teacher from Western Europe, who was in her forties when she started to work as an election observer and who had been on assignments in Afghanistan, Cambodia, East Timor and Iraq, stated that “there are a lot of people who think that I need psychiatric help, because I am prepared to go [laughs], they think I am off my head, they think I am total crazy to go” [why?] “Because of the danger”. Like other respondents, whom I prompted to talk about experiences of risk and how they dealt with it, she explained that she always carefully assessed the risks she was taking and accepted them as part of the job as I will discuss further below.

Moreover, respondents described how challenging living and working conditions made them feel “alive” pointing to self-realization they experienced doing Aid work. A female respondent from Western Europe who was working for an UN agency and had been based in Pakistan in 2001 recalled.

We started work, there was no office. Sleeping conditions were quite poor. But I have to say, I loved every minute of it, like I really felt alive. I had a couple of very bad security experiences. One was being shot at and the other was being stoned. Wrong place, wrong time, early days, where there was nobody else there and we were the first ones to arrive.

A male lawyer from Western Europe who had lost friends and colleges in the attack on the UN head quarter in Bagdad in 2003 described his reaction to this event:

“What on earth are we doing? Why are we arguing, worrying about stupid little things […], when you should actually go out and change something?” […] So I think that is really, who knows, our life is short, but it is so much messing around, stop messing around and get something done.

Aid work, especially in situations when saving the lives of other or being confronted with risks to one’s own life thus is characterized by an urgency that is absent from highly routinized and bureaucratized work places. As noted earlier, one sociological interpretation of edgework is that it constitutes a response to stifling and alienating working conditions (Lyng 1995). This applies in particular to respondents who came from a middle-class background and had left earlier jobs as teachers or lawyers behind because they felt that they were unsatisfying, monotonous, or “only about money”. They were interested in a challenging and interesting work with visible results and the opportunity to make a difference in beneficiaries lives. A male lawyer from Western Europe, who had volunteered in a human rights organization as a student and later on had provided legal aid to a non-governmental organization before changing to a commercial law firm, recalled:

I worked in this big commercial firm, for just over a year about, a year and a year and a half maybe, one of the biggest law firms in the world, which I didn’t like, I was in my first paid kind of legal positions, so I realized that I didn’t like that work at all, I hated it. So I went back to the refugee field.

Other respondents quit their previous employment because it had been affected by legislative or managerial changes at their workplaces which for example resulted in less time for pupils or patients. Although they worked in helping professions, they felt that they were constrained by bureaucratic changes. They experienced their work as boring and detached from reality and were interested in intellectual stimulation in what they considered “the real world”. For example, a female biologist from Western Europe explained why she resigned from her job in a research team to get involved in aid work:

So for me it [the research] was very detached from reality. And it was fundamental research so it did not even have a practical application. And the whole day, like we worked in a team, but your work is ‘you and the cell’, and ‘you and your bacteria’, ‘you and your molecule’ and it requires a lot of patience as well in the sense that the result of your action you might see it in six months’ time or one year or ten years, or I don’t know. And all those things, really it did not correspond to who I was and what I was expecting. So I decided to stop.

In contrast to their previous employment which they considered as lacking impact, respondents felt that aid work was urgent and had immediate results. Aid work thus offered an escape from institutional constraints, had direct impact on people’s lives and was experienced as meaningful. A female North American interviewee in her thirties who worked for an NGO that focused on children and education explained her attraction to aid work in the following way:

And I guess I really liked the energy of it. I liked the urgency of it. Like every day, you are needed, what you did really did make a difference for people.

Motivations for getting involved in aid work were multi-fold and complex and even contradictory. Although many respondents, not only from high income countries, got involved in aid work because they “wanted to make a difference” and “give back” they emphasized that they felt privileged working in aid and frequently stated that they received more than what they gave. They felt that challenging and difficult living and working conditions contributed to their personal growth. Furthermore, they stressed that they greatly enjoyed the opportunities to see places and meet people whom they would have never encountered if they had travelled as tourists to these countries. The beauty and the suffering encountered in aid work are reflected in the title of aid worker memoirs such as “Another Day in Paradise” (Bergman 2003) or “A Cruel Paradise” (Olson 1999).

In addition to the aspects of safety and security discussed above, aid work can also involve giving up the security of a permanent position due to the prevalence of short-term contracts. While this could be experienced as stressful, some respondents found it liberating. In this respect aid work represents individualized risk-taking and self-government. The interviews indicate that respondents were not only highly capable but embraced the opportunity to deal with these challenges. A female respondent from Western Europe who had given up her work as teacher in her forties when she started to work for the UN explained:

This is the thing: you give up security when you do this kind of thing. You don’t know when the next job is coming or where, which is part of the fun bit for me. I don’t know where I will be in a year’s time and that is always fun.

Time in between assignments was spent catching up with friends and family or attending training or university programmes adding to education and skills. Of course, these respondents could afford enjoying the time off in between assignments, either because their previous job had been well-paid or because they had savings or inheritances. Those who did not have financial assetts had social capital (Bourdieu 1984) and were able to stay with friends and family. Furthermore, few of the respondents had dependents or someone they had to maintain financially and thus could afford to live temporarily on a small budget if necessary.

Some respondents enjoyed the autonomy and decision making power in their field positions, far removed from the control of a supervisor in a head office. A male lawyer who had worked in a Western European capital before he got involved in human rights work explained:

The boss is four-thousand miles away, he is not going to complain, you know. You get up late one day or you stay late one day. […] so I felt the, advantages outweighed the disadvantages, I kind of like that detachment personally between me and the organization, the boss was in London.

To sum up, in contrast to prior employment that seemed detached from reality and lacked immediately visible results, aid work was seen as making a difference and thus being “worthwhile”. In addition, difficult working conditions, for example being forced to improvise due to limited resources or unforeseeable circumstances, were experienced as a welcome challenge. Furthermore, having the autonomy of organising one’s workload was appreciated. This section has highlighted that aid work reconciles the two dimensions of edgework. On the one hand, aid work contrasts with stifling and alienating working conditions that are characterized by bureaucratization and constraints. On the other hand, working in Aidland requires adapting to organisational and cultural contexts often with limited prior information, hand-over and support, thus demanding flexibility, self-government and the ability to integrate oneself in highly complex environments. This will be further explored in the next section.

**Accepting and Managing Risk**

Interviewees stated very clearly that accepting risk is “part of the job” and necessary “to reach the population”. Risk taking is thus a requirement in order to function in highly complex environments and respondents accepted that doing aid work can involve exposure to dangerous situations. However, they carefully reflected on the risks they were taking as a male nurse from Asia explains:

Yes, I thought that, maybe we are being too much adventurous, why are we taking risks like this? So, but then, later I thought, it doesn’t happen every day. The thing is, if you are a little bit careful or, the thing is if everybody thinks like that, nobody would go on humanitarian missions. So because you are not going on humanitarian missions if the situation is calm and quiet, ok. So wherever there is a problem, we have to face these kinds of things. But having said that, if I have the choice, I do choose a better place and I am not just accepting anything without thinking.

He carefully assessed whether he was taking on too much risk (“being too adventurous”) with the fact that risks are limited (“does not happen every day”). Furthermore, he acknowledged the fact that risk is inherent in aid work and that if everybody would avoid it, it would be impossible to recruit aid personnel. However, he also admitted his preference for more secure assignments. Organizations experience difficulties recruiting staff, especially highly qualified and experienced staff to high risk environments (National Audit Office 2008). Not only is the acceptance of risk a precondition for carrying out aid work, respondents also pointed out that their presence can contribute to improving the situation by drawing the (media) attention on situations in which human rights are violated. An African interviewee who had started out as national staff before he became an expatriate staff member and who had worked in various African countries for an international relief NGO recalled:

The places that I have been working, especially I have seen gross violations of basic human rights. Protection, those were supposed to protect the most vulnerable people are violating their rights. And also I found out that our presence alone, the presence of humanitarian actors, workers, helps to reduce that. We are not peace keepers, peace enforcers, peace monitors, but it really helps to reduce that. […] That’s why I like MSF [Medecins sans frontiers/Doctors without borders] - they don’t run away. They just stay on the ground. And because of that, some of the things that some of the bad guys could do, they don’t do it.

By accepting risk as part of the job, aid workers constantly engage in individualized risk-taking and self-governance by carefully assessing the situation and making a conscious decision whether to take an assignment or not. A female respondent from Western Europe who had been based in Iraq and considered taking another position in the country stated very clearly:

If I felt that I would be killed within two days of arriving in Iraq, I wouldn’t go. I actually think that we will be kept so secure that there is relatively little danger. There is always danger, for instance from [rockets], you can’t stop those.

Some single respondents stated that the fact that they are unattached contributed to their willingness to accept assignment in high-risk situations where it would be impossible to bring partners and children. Younger, childfree and single relief workers are characterized by the “biographical availability” (McAdam 1986) to engage in high-risk activism, meaning that they are not constrained by family obligations. Keeping in mind that the sample is small and not representative, it is striking that nearly half of the male interviewees and two-thirds of the female interviewees were single or divorced, while 85% of the female interviewees and 71% of the male interviewees did not have children. In addition to these gender differences, there were some regional differences. Men from low(er)-income countries were most likely to be married and have young children, while men and women from high income countries and women from low(er) income countries were more likely to be single and childfree. Respondents took into consideration that their parents, siblings or friends might be worried if they took on an assignment in a dangerous situation.

In their accounts of how they experienced and dealt with risk, respondents employed three comparisons. First, they contrasted dangers they might encounter on assignments (for example landmines or organized crime) with those typical for post-industrial societies such as traffic accidents or being a victim of theft or robbery. They pointed out that while they were aware of risks – and took every precaution to avoid them – one takes risks everywhere all the time. The risks simply vary according to the circumstances. Second, they pointed out that they were getting used to security threats, which were seen as “normal” in the field, while they seemed “scary” at home. Furthermore, they experienced that over time, their perception what they considered dangerous changed due to the fact that they had learned to deal with dangerous situations. They thus highlighted their ability to integrate themselves in highly complex environments. Third, the respondents not only rationalized the risks by normalizing them, but also by contrasting their – privileged – position as international aid workers with local staff and beneficiaries who did not enjoy the same protection – for example through armed or unarmed guards, travelling in fortified vehicles or being evacuated and entitled to “rest & relaxation” in safe and pleasant surroundings. In addition, some interviewees pointed out that their fate was pre-determined, thus there was no need to avoid potentially dangerous situations [reference removed to maintain the integrity of the review process].

Like Fast and Wiest (2007) I did not find gender differences in perceptions of risks. Both men and women emphasized their careful risk assessment and were critical of those who put themselves and others at risk through thoughtless behaviour. Men and women who were responsible for the security management of their organization, for example in their roles as logisticians or heads of mission, emphasized that good communication skills and awareness of the local situation were crucial to avoid risk. Some were frustrated that those who had been in incidents, for example, had been kidnapped, had “bragging rights” and a higher standing that those who through careful planning were able to dangerous situations. Respondents emphasized that they were very conscious of and carefully considering the risks they were taking and stressed, that it was their decision whether they went on a mission or not. Once they had made the decision to take an assignment, they evaluated on a day to day basis which risks they were prepared to take thus constantly engaging in individualized risk-taking and self-government.

**Conclusion**

This article contributes to a better understanding of aid work by focusing on voluntary risk-taking or edgework. I have argued that aid work reconciles two different sociological perspectives on edgework. On the one hand, people working in aid have left previous careers behind in order to find more challenging and meaningful work and are attracted by the urgency of aid work. In this respect aid work represents an escape from constraining and alienating working conditions and offers the experience of feeling alive and living on the edge. On the other hand, aid work represents an extreme case of individualized risk-taking and self-government which are typical for contemporary risk societies. Like firefighters (Desmond 2011) or mountain rescuers (Lois 2001) people working in aid carefully assess the risks they are taking, are cautious, but accept that in the end there are limits to control risks. People working in aid are capable of negotiating highly complex environments which can be especially challenging on first assignments with limited experience, knowledge and preparation.

Risk-taking in Aidland is shaped by the security regulations of aid organizations. Bunkerization and remote programming result in an increased distance and mistrust between international and national aid staff and the local population. This is not only problematic in terms of providing efficient aid, i.e. aid that actually benefits the local population (rather than assuring that the aid organization and its staff stays in business). Moreover these processes also run counter to the motives that had attracted the interviewees to Aidland in addition to making a difference in people’s lives, the experience of exotic places and foreign cultures. Security measures which are employed by aid agencies to provide a safe(r) environment might result in an increased regulation of aid work and undermine opportunities to engage with the local population. If the growing attraction to aid work is an expression of an search for authenticity and a shift from the involvement in social protest to humanitarianism (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005; Fassin 2012) it is an open question, what impact the increased risk and the security management processes have on the experiences of aid workers and how they transform aid work. In particular security measures that focus on protection rather than acceptance and result in an increase distance between international aid personnel and ‘beneficiaries’ might undermine the attraction of aid work. Thus security measures might not only increase the inequalities between aid personnel and the local population, but might take the edge off aid work.

**Endnotes**

1. Safety threats are for example related to traffic accidents and health issues whereas acts of violence constitute security threats which can be generalized or random (ambient) or targeted (situational) (ibid, p. 138f.)
2. Securitization refers to the fact that after 9/11 development policy has been increasingly shaped by foreign policy and security agendas (Howell and Lind 2009). Securitization is distinct from but related to the security management of aid organizations: The (renewed) politicization of aid has resulted in an increase of attack on aid personnel to which aid organizations have responded with intensified security management.
3. Professionalization processes in humanitarian assistance include the introduction of codes of conduct and standards as well as the proliferation of academic and non-academic training opportunities (Rainhorn et. al. 2010; Walker and Russ 2010). They are a response to the increased complexity and challenges that contemporary aid workers face (Walker et. al. 2010).
4. The risks for national and international aid workers differ, while international aid workers tend to be kidnapped, national aid workers are more likely to be killed (Stoddard et al. 2008). Although local and national aid worker represent about 90% and thus the vast majority of the aid worker population, security measures still primarily target international staff (Stoddard et al. 2011).
5. In addition to these interviews, I also spoke with human resources staff of an NGO and a UN agency as well as with instructors on humanitarian studies courses. Furthermore some of the biographical interviews or short conversations with people working or planning to work in aid were not recorded and thus not included in this analysis.
6. At the time of the interview, eight (14%) were under 30, thirty (52%) were between 30 and 39, thirteen (23%) were between 40 and 49 and six (11%) were over 50, including two who were 60 or older.
7. In contrast to ‘free nodes’, ‘tree nodes’ comprise sub-categories.
8. Fifteen interviewees (26%) were under 25 when they got first involved in aid work, including three who were under 20, nineteen (33%) were between 25 and 29, seven (12%) between 30 and 24, eight (14%) were between 35 and 39 and six (11%) were over 40 including one who was over 50 when she got first involved in aid work.

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