EX-XXX: MAKING SENSE OF THE STRAIGHT EDGE SUBCULTURE
AND COMMUNICATING AN EX-STRAIGHT EDGE IDENTITY

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Ex-XXX: Making Sense of the Straight Edge Subculture
and Communicating an Ex-Straight Edge Identity

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DEDICATION

For my family, who has never let me down and has always driven me to be the best I can be.
“The way I see it, 90% of this world will be like that. It is selective few who decide to step off the path of what is ‘normal’ and stand out in that manner of being sXe. And the kids that really step aside, even if it is for a limited period of time, I support. ‘Cause they aren’t normal and that is rad.”

-Ryan Creamer

“Sometimes, if not most of the time, you find out who you are by figuring out who and what you are not.”

-Kelly Cutrone
Young people, teens and young adults in particular, are constantly looking for ways to construct a desirable self. This search for belonging, meaning in life, and escape from peer pressure often leads to subcultural participation, such as Straight Edge. Straight Edge is a predominantly male youth subculture that commits against drinking, smoking, and promiscuity, fostering a conceptual space for constructing an identity alternative to the more dominant narratives of experimentation within these arenas. As with any subculture, the Straight Edge collective identity is not stable, and most adherents denounce their commitment to Straight Edge in their early twenties due to their changing ideas of who they are and who they want to be. Despite the movement away from the everyday adherence to the strictures of Straight Edge, the influence of the group remains strong. Using qualitative research, this study examined the narratives of ex-sXers to illuminate how they made sense of their prior subcultural participation, and how their experience is reflected in the way they communicate their present personal identity. Three communicative tensions in communicating an ex-sXe personal identity emerged, including: a) certainty versus uncertainty; b) community versus gang; and c) “true ‘til death” versus “thinking for yourself.” In communicating an ex-sXe personal identity, participants illustrated three communicated concepts: a) responsibility for self and other; b) open-mindedness; and c) authenticity.
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Spending over one year writing about Straight Edge has given me great respect for the subculture and the youth involved in it. There is a side to Straight Edge this is confusing, contradictory and dark, yet the bottom line is that most youth who did or still do participate in sXe have an intriguing outlook on life. I’d like to thank my participants for sharing their experiences with me and for their willingness to open up and let me explore their stories and voices. This thesis allowed me to speak with some of the coolest guys I’ve ever met.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

What shall I do? How shall I act? Who shall I be? These are central questions we all ask ourselves as we continuously construct and reconstruct our identities (Giddens, 1991). Our identities are comprised of personal and collective identities. Personal identity is an individual’s perception of the characteristics that make him or her unique, whereas collective identity is a person’s connection with a group or community (Poletta & Jasper, 2001). The interplay between these two types of identities makes up a person’s identity as a whole, although one that may be in flux. For example, identity can be defined as a constant tension or balance between personal and collective identities (Williams & Copes, 2005). Personal identities are constructed through a wide range of sources (Wheaton, 20000); however, subcultural participation is a popular source of attaining a collective identity (Williams & Copes). Promise keepers (Heath, 2003), punk-rockers (Davis, 2006), and skinheads (Clarke, 1993) are just a few examples of collective identities. Youth, in particular, seek collective identities to aid in the (re)construction of their personal identities. Straight Edge (XXX, sXe), a predominantly male youth subculture that commits against drinking, drugs, and promiscuity, is a venue that affords a space for the complex identity work of youth. Straight Edge fosters a place for identity experimentation, for youth to explore the question of, “Who am I?” (Haenfler, 2004d). However, as the Straight Edge subculture continues to gain thousands of adherents (Haenfler, 2004a), each modifying and individualizing sXe ideologies (e.g., veganism, militancy, activism), the subculture grows contradictory and confusing to members who attempt to define themselves through their Straight Edge identity. Although sXers originally subscribe to the notion that they would be “true ‘til death” (Lahickey, 1997), most sXers denounce their collective identity in the latter years of their youth (Haenfler, 2004d). Regardless of the amount of time spent within the Straight Edge scene, the communication within the subculture has a profound influence on ex-sXers personal identities.
Much research has been conducted surrounding the subject of music subcultures and the large presence of young males in the punk, grunge, and rock ‘n roll scenes (Brake, 1980; Hall & Jefferson, 1993). Youth identifying as Straight Edge continue this trend, outnumbering female sXers three to one (Haenfler, 2006). Similar to punk, the masculine communication and behaviors, such as the aggressive sounding music and the tough attitudes of many youth members are a few reasons why female youth may be less attracted to the subculture. Male youth identify more closely with the Straight Edge scene, and often are more impacted by the subcultural values.

The influence of subcultures on their members’ identities have also been explored. Male subcultures such as sport subcultures (Manzenreiter, 2008), the promise keepers (Heath, 2003), and leathermen (Mosher, Levitt, & Manley, 2006) serve as a way to reconstruct or affirm traditional gender and social norms (Pelak, Taylor, & Whittier, 1999) and reinvent male identities. However, prior research has rarely examined the impact of subcultures on members who denounce the collective identity of the group. Ex-adherents provide a particular perspective on subcultural identity in that they can reflect on their experience without the “collective reality” of subcultural ideologies and norms influencing their statements (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 181).

In exploring identities of former members, a focus on communication is of particular importance because identity is (re)constructed and manifested through communication (Young, 2007). As Scott (2007) explains,

it is through communication with others that we express our belongingness (or lack thereof) to various collectives, assess the reputation and image of those collectives, that various identities are made known to us, and the social costs and rewards of maintaining various identities are revealed. (p. 124)

In other words, communication is the vehicle through which individuals understand their identities as members of a group and how such membership influences their identities. This study investigates the communication of ex-sXe identities and how ex-sXers come to understand their subcultural involvement.

This thesis begins with a review of literature that provides a description of Straight Edge culture and the trajectory of male youth’s involvement with and disassociation from the Straight Edge identity. Following the literature review, the methodology section provides a description of the participant criteria, the interview procedures, and the use of fieldwork in
this research. The results section presents the patterns found in participants’ biographical interviews, or identity narratives, and displays how ex-sXers communicate their identity. Last, the discussion section offers conclusions, conceptual, theoretical and methodological implications, and suggestions for future research.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The trajectory of male youths’ involvement in Straight Edge includes attaining the collective identity, experiencing identity fluctuation, and (re)evaluating their personal identity. The purpose of this chapter is to describe this identity process. First, a background on Straight Edge is needed.

WHAT IS STRAIGHT EDGE?

Straight Edge is a male youth subculture that rebels against mainstream notions of drinking, drugs, and promiscuity, communicating their identity as responsible and clean living through their commitment to abstinence. The Straight Edge subculture began in 1984 with its like-titled song, including lyrics that promoted a sober and celibate lifestyle and provoked youth to reject mainstream ideals and to think for themselves. Although not intentionally trying to start a counter-culture, lead singer and lyricist Ian MacKaye was aiming to make a statement against the punk music world he lived in prior to creating the hardcore scene (Lahickey, 1997). MacKaye was enlightened by punk rock’s chaotic, cathartic, and free-thinking atmosphere, yet despised the fact that young people could rarely get into shows due to the consumerism and capitalism involved with alcohol sales that went hand-in-hand with punk (Lahickey). MacKaye admired punks’ declaration of individualism, but he believed they contradicted their anti-conformity stance through the youth cultures’ “fixation with substance use” (Haenfler, 2004a, p. 786). He saw the self-destructive behaviors of punks, and determined that “the path of true resistance required a clear mind” (Haenfler, 2004a, p. 786). While voicing these frustrations in the songs “Straight Edge” (See Appendix A) and “Out of Step (With the World)” (See Appendix B), MacKaye caught the attention of many young concert-goers, who soon took on the title of Straight Edge to proclaim their clean-living, anti-mainstream, “think for yourself” identity. The lyrics, boasting the phrase, “don’t drink, don’t smoke, don’t fuck” (“Minor Threat”, 1984, track 8), became the three commitments of the subculture, and sXe bands and the hardcore scene
expanded. Hardcore, a heavier and faster punk sound, became the subculture’s preferred genre of music, and hardcore shows became a safe-haven for those looking to escape the pressures of alcoholism, drug use, and promiscuity (See Figure 1). As Haenfler (2004d) explained, “many youth felt pressure to drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes, or try illegal drugs . . . the group gave them a way to feel accepted without using and helped them maintain control over their personal situations” (p. 417). In other words, sXe provided its adherents with the option of a healthy lifestyle and a place to meet others with similar preferences.


To communicate their commitment, and to identify themselves to fellow sXers, Straight Edge youth took on the symbol of “XXX” standing for their three abstinences: no drinking, no smoking, and no sex. The last “X” is particularly contested. It stands for no sex outside of a monogamous relationship, until marriage, or until love, and many sXers disagree on the preferred reading. The symbol “X” is derived from the “X” marked on youths’ hands at concerts to show that they were under the drinking age (Lahickey, 1997). Today, the “X” has also transferred onto clothing, body tattoos, and online screen names of sXers, ironically becoming a symbol of consumption of music and the Straight Edge lifestyle. In addition to expanding the symbolic communication of their identity, sXers have also expanded upon the verbal communication of what it means to be Straight Edge. As Wood (1999) explains, “Straightedge is a socially constructed frame of reference, which individuals both refer to and
reconstruct as a means of formulating for themselves a straightedge identity” (p. 146). What started as three basic commitments, expanded within a decade of its origin to include a multitude of identities within the scene. Straight Edge now arguably encompasses such lifestyles and ideologies as environmentalism (Haenfler, 2004a), feminism, religion (e.g., Krisha consciousness and Christian), veganism and animal rights (Hamelman, 2006; Williams & Copes, 2005). As certain sXers adopted additional ideologies, new terms emerged within the scene to communicate these identities. For instance, coll-Edge was coined to mock sXers who remained committed only until entering college, breaking the “true ‘til death” slogan of the subculture (Haenfler, 2003). Militancy, a group of sXers who resorted to violence against others who drink or smoke, also became a prevalent identity (Williams & Copes). Last, posi-Straight Edge derived to identify those sXers who modified Straight Edge to mean a lifestyle of positive thinking (Good Clean Fun, 2002). While these identities often overlap with one another (Williams & Copes), not all members adapt their Straight Edge identity to encompass these modifications made by “second generation” (Tsitos, 1999, p. 404) sXers, or those who joined a decade after the subculture’s origin. These expansions in Straight Edge identities as well as many new ones that have formed more recently has created conflict amongst sXers, even in regard to how Straight Edge is defined.

The referent of Straight Edge as a lifestyle, movement, or counter-culture has become a source of debate amongst scholars. Many scholars have argued Straight Edge is a lifestyle due to the conscious decision making that occurs in the everyday lives of sXers (Haenfler, Johnson, & Jones, 2008). The argument of lifestyle is captured by Giddens (1991) who addresses how individuals manage the question of, “How shall I live?” arguing that it “is answered in day-to-day decisions about how to behave, what to wear and what to eat- and many other things” (p. 14). Straightedgers make decisions to not drink, to not smoke, and not to behave promiscuously, in addition to other modified behaviors. Haenfler et al. add that a lifestyle is about individuality, a component embraced by many sXers through MacKaye’s sentiments to think for themselves and to resist mainstream notions. Haenfler (2004a), a sXer himself, also endorses sXe as a movement, arguing that Straight Edge members’ individual actions and choices contribute to a collective social cause. He argues that the individual decision of members to refrain from vices communicates a political stance in a “lead by example” fashion. Beyond taking the position of being role models, Straight Edge has also
been framed as a counter-culture because it is a form of resistance (Tsitos, 1999). As Hamelman (2006) proclaims, “straight edge was (is) a protest against a protest” (p. 191). Straight Edge protested punk, which protested conformity. While punk took the stance of anarchy as rebellion, sXe took the stance of abstinence as protest to mainstream pressures (Haenfler, 2004d). For the purpose of this paper, I will refer to Straight Edge as a subculture.

A subculture is a simultaneously inclusive and exclusive network “of people who come to share the meaning of specific ideas, material objects, and practices through interaction (Williams & Copes, 2005, p. 70). Although there is disagreement among sXers about the meaning of sXe and the exact ideologies included in the subculture, the majority of members share the same basic principles of abstaining from drinking, drugs, and promiscuity. They maintain these mores through engagement in hardcore music, reinforcing their participation through buying sXe music, and attending sXe “shows” (small-venue concerts). As Wood (1999) points out, subcultures are not a stable and continuous group, rather, “they may also change, fragment and disappear entirely” (p. 147). For whatever period of time an individuals’ membership in the subculture lasts, they attain a collective identity.

**THE COLLECTIVE IDENTITY OF STRAIGHT EDGE**

Collective identity is a component to subcultures that focuses on the relationship between the group and the individual. As Polletta and Jasper (2001) define, a collective identity is “an individual’s cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution” (p. 285) and “describes imagined as well as concrete communities, involves an act of perception and construction[,] . . .is fluid and relational, [and] provides categories by which individuals divide up and make sense of the social world” (p. 298). A fundamental aspect of collective identities is the distinction members make between themselves and others (Snow, 2001; Young, 2007). A collective identity provides members “with a shared sense of ‘one-ness’ or ‘we-ness’” (Snow, ¶ 5), bonding them through commonalities while sustaining the exclusivity needed to provide meaning to participants.

Straightedgers communicate their insider statuses through identity work, or “life politics” (Giddens, 1991, p. 223), which can be defined as the many ways in which
individuals express and communicate who they are in comparison to others. This includes using the “X” as a symbol of expression; the identity talk of militant sXers who speak of their collective identity as soldiers fighting a war (Williams & Copes, 2005); the evocative slogans and song lyrics of sXe, including “True ‘til Death!” and “Out of Step” (“Minor Threat”, 1984, track 10) which invite participation in the subculture and establish group values; and the gestures used by sXers, including sXer’s fists crossed in front of them to form an “X” (Snow, 2001). Through these distinguishing factors, the collective identity of Straight Edge serves to construct identity.

In fact, many sXers take on the collective identity of Straight Edge to construct a “desirable self” (Haenfler et al., 2008, ¶ 21). As Wood (2006) specifies, youth enter the subculture under two basic circumstances: their fundamental ideologies were already in congruence with sXe ideals, or they are seeking a shift in their identity. In the former circumstance, a process Snow (2001) terms “identity convergence” takes place (¶ 19). Since these youth already did not drink, smoke, or have casual sex even before considering themselves sXe, the collective identity provides them with a “venue to act in accordance with... [their] personal identity” (¶ 19). In the latter circumstance, youth (consciously or unconsciously) seek an identity “transformation,” “extension,” “consolidation,” or “amplification” (Snow, ¶ 20). In other words, subcultural participation causes youth to either radically transform their identity, in the case of being an alcoholic prior to becoming sXe; extend their identity to take on a significant collective obligation or role, including those who believe their individual actions communicate a political stance; consolidate or unify two identities, such as a celibate and activist individual; or amplify an identity that did not carry much weight prior to sXe participation, for example, a person who didn’t drink but now commits to lifetime sobriety (Snow). In all of these circumstances, identity work takes place in the “craft[ing] [of] a morally coherent sense of self” (Haenfler et al., 2008, ¶ 12). In short, sXe participation constructs through a youth’s newfound sense of belonging, escape from peer pressure, and established meaning in life.

Attaining a sense of belonging is one of the main attractions of taking on a subcultural collective identity, in general and a sXe identity in particular (Haenfler, 2004d). Traber (2001) argues that minority subculturists, such as sXers, self-marginalize themselves on purpose to create a strong bond with others who are like them. By participating in an
alternative and small group against mainstream culture, sXers find a sense of belonging among youth who share the same ideologies in their music scene. As mentioned previously, the distinction of “us” versus “them” is an important factor in identity (re)construction (Haenfler, 2003; Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Snow, 2001; Young, 2007) and establishes a platform in which youth can find others to identify with while distinguishing themselves from mainstream youth (Wheaton, 2000). Belonging to sXe provides youth with a way to avoid the pressures of drinking, smoking, and promiscuity through the communication of community, “family,” and “brotherhood,” created by the hardcore scene as a “supportive space to be different together” (Haenfler, 2004d, p. 416). In this way, the sXe collective identity not only creates a sense of belonging, but also a safe-haven from mainstream youth peer pressure.

Male youth, in particular, feel a certain peer pressure due to mainstream American youth culture’s popularization of drinking, smoking, and sex as a way of “proving manhood.” Establishing manliness has long been important to young males, and has become known as a “defining experience” in a man’s life (Kimmel, 2006, p. 1). In attempt to communicate their masculinity to their peers, boys and men employ many different strategies. As Haenfler (2004c) states, “There may be many ways to ‘be a man,’ but dominant culture values some over others” (p. 95). For example, some male youth distance themselves from homosexual men and what are stereotyped as homosexual traits to avoid being labeled feminine or not a “real” man (Theodore & Basow, 2000). Displaying hyper-masculine behaviors, which are often homophobic, and sexist, are strategies men use to communicate their masculinity and prove their manhood. In addition, drinking alcohol has become a mark of manliness.

Through drinking, many men feel they are demonstrating and confirming their masculinity. As Haenfler (2004c) argues, “drinking alcohol has long been a signifier of manhood, solidarity with other men, and resistance to female influence” (p. 88). Examples of these displays of masculinity are seen at fraternity houses/brotherhoods, hazing/initiation to sport teams, and youth parties. Treise, Wolburg, and Otnes (1999) found that many young people believe excessive, or binge, drinking is a “right of passage” into dominant youth culture (p. 18). These “drinking rituals” reinforce hyper-masculinity by implying that alcoholic consumption is a “manly” behavior. As Darnell and Wilson (2006) explain, these celebrations are damaging to society because conformity to these ideals creates a culture of
widespread social problems. These social problems extend beyond excessive drinking and drug use to the oppression and mistreatment of women.

Young males who adhere to these dominant norms may often treat women as “meat” and “sexy props or prizes” (Messer, Dunbar, & Hunt, 2000, p. 387), and use their sexual conquests to prove their manhood. Straight Edge male youth escape these pressures and communicate a reformed masculinity by identifying themselves as separate and different from their drinking, drug-using, and promiscuous peers. Through communicating an identity of rebellion against typical teenage cultural codes, and “gaining recognition for new identities” (Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 286), sXe allows them to escape the peer pressure to drink, smoke, and attain sexual conquests. Through these abstinences, sXers also achieve a sense of meaning or direction in their lives.

Many youth are in a “crisis of meaningfulness” (Williams & Copes, 2005, p. 68) that is associated with identity. As youth seek to answer the identity question of “Who am I?” they search for meaning within their lives. This search can sometimes result in subcultural participation, such as sXe (Williams & Copes). Straight Edge serves to (re)construct youth identity by providing meaning on both a personal and social level. As Haenfler (2004d) argues, many youth subscribe to the sXe identity with an underlying quest for their “authentic selves”. The Straight Edge collective identity provided many of its adherents with a way to communicate a “true” or “authentic” identity amid a world that they felt encouraged conformity and mediocrity (Haenfler, 2004d). In other words, Straight Edge enabled them to better resist conformity to these dominant norms. Straight edgers claimed that resisting social standards and expectations allowed them to follow their own, more meaningful path in life toward greater self-realization” (Haenfler, 2004d, p. 422). The ability to live life with a clear mind can provide more fulfilling and satisfying lives for sXe youth. In addition, Straight Edge culture’s implementation of ‘zines (small-scale magazines), newsletters, shows, and online communities encourage a connection amongst sXers and foster a medium of meaningful expression of self (Haenfler, 2004a). Straight Edge also transcends the individual level to a social level through the subcultural belief that personal actions lead up to a collective cultural change (Haenfler, 2004a). In believing in this political stance of sXe, youth can find meaning through partaking in something greater than themselves (Haenfler et al., 2008).
Youth may participate in sXe to (re)construct a desirable self through achieving a sense of belonging, escaping peer pressure, and finding meaning in life. Through these processes of subcultural participation in sXe, adherents encounter self-realization, social transformation (Haenfler, 2004d), and personal transformation (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). However, this does not mean that sXe youth identity is stable and unchanging.

**FLUCTUATING IDENTITY**

As with any group or movement, the Straight Edge collective identity is not stable. Rather it is fluid, uncertain, and can be temporary (Snow, 2001). Wood (2006) elaborates on this idea by noting that subcultural identity can be a repetitive process that emerges, fades, and restores. In fact, many adherents “experience a substantial amount of identity fluctuation throughout their affiliation with sXe” (Wood, p. 88). Even long-standing identities experience a fluctuation over time within the subculture (Polletta & Jasper, 2001) in response to communication and exchanges that occur with their social world (Wood).

The social world of Straight Edge is what St. John (2001) terms a heterotopia, and Polletta and Jasper (2001) call free spaces, in that it is a counter-site in which oppositional ideas and identities arise. In other words, because sXe rejects the mainstream “parent culture” rules and conventions, the sXe scene is a counter-space in which to “challenge the way we think” (St. John, p. 53). Straight Edge challenges the popular male youth norm of drinking, smoking, and behaving promiscuously. Additionally, it is defined as a site of “identity contestation” and “competing interpretive claims” (St. John, p. 53), which can be seen in the multitude of definitions of what constitutes Straight Edge (e.g., vegan, Christian, no sex until monogamy versus love). These multiple meanings can produce confusion and uncertainty for sXers, causing their identities to fluctuate (St. John; Poletta & Jasper).

In negotiating their identity, sXers engage in reflection on the subculture and their participation in it (Haenfler, 2004d), evaluating and questioning their collective identity, as it corresponds with their personal identity. As Giddens (1991) argues, “the self becomes a reflexive project. . .the altered self has to be explored and constructed as part of a reflexive process of connecting personal and social change” (p. 33). Especially when faced with contradictory input from social surroundings, such as when conflicting meanings are waging in the scene, personal identity becomes particularly salient (Snow, 2001). In other words,
sXers are constantly exploring their identity as it is being constructed through communication in the subculture, and trying to make the connection between personal transformation and changes in their social surroundings.

**(RE)EVALUATING PERSONAL IDENTITY**

Personal identity is a person’s perception of the characteristics and traits that make them unique (Haenfler et al., 2008; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Collective identity plays a part in shaping personal identity, although the two are distinct (Polletta & Jasper). The relationship between the two identities is the embracement and incorporation of the collective identity into a sXer’s personal identity and sense of self (Snow, 2001). In fact, Social Identity Theory posits that an individual communicates their identity in reference to the values and norms derived from their social group or organization (Scott, 2007). Therefore, an individual’s personal identity is clearly influenced by their collective identity. Giddens (1991) explains that individuals routinely evaluate what elements of the collective identity they produce and reproduce through their behavior and communication. However, in reflecting upon their collective identity, sXers can experience what Giddens terms a “fateful moment” (p. 142), in which they reach a point of self-awareness and re-evaluate their “inner wishes” (p. 71). This moment can become a transition point in which a sXer may realize his dissatisfaction with the scene (Haenfler, 2004b). In other words, what emerges from this reflection may not match the original intentions and motivations which brought sXers into the subculture (Polletta & Jasper, p. 288). For many Straight Edge male youth, their participation does not last for life, as their commitment promises. Despite their initial insistence that they would stay “true ‘til death” (Lahickey, 1997), many sXers denounce the sXe collective identity in their early to mid-twenties (Haenfler, 2004d).

The main reason for this may be the reflexive nature of the subculture, since the moral foundation of the Straight Edge commitment was based upon urging members to think for themselves in critiquing mainstream norms. As Haenfler (2004b) argues, in asking members “to question everything, [sXe] sow[s] the seeds of [its] own destruction. . . they inevitably turn their critical lens upon themselves, uncovering the inconsistencies within their own movement” (Haenfler, 2004b, p. 17). The reflexivity that Straight Edge encourages of its members often causes a recognition that the “desired self” they were constructing through
the scene takes on a different definition. For instance, some sXers recognize the constrictions of conforming to sXe ideologies. Although originally finding Straight Edge as an opportunity to be liberated from peer pressure, “many sXers realize that sXe does not and could not provide all of the answers. At some point, sXe becomes limiting rather than liberating, confining of possibilities rather than creating new ones” (Haenfler, 2004b, p. 4). For some, sXe offers no growth past a certain point in their youth. While the movement aided them through an important and difficult time when first being exposed to drinking, drugs, and sex, a sXer matures as he spends years within the subculture, and may begin to feel restricted in his choices (Haenfler, 2004b). The commitment against vices can become over-bearing once a sXe male youth feels ready to partake in activities responsibly, such as having an occasional drink (Haenfler, 2004b). In addition, a sXer’s sense of belonging may be weakened by the peer pressure that seeps into the scene, and the meaning of the subculture changes, which I detail below.

What at first seemed to be a collective identity that promoted individualism while fostering a place of unity to be different together, the “modern” sXe subculture has caused the onset of a different kind of peer pressure. Although Haenfler (2004a) contends that varying levels of commitment are accepted by all sXers, this seems to not be the case. More recently, through the development and use of blogging and other websites, the pressure to prove sXers’ “edge,” or communicate they “really” fit the subcultural identity based on their attitudes and behaviors (Williams & Copes, 2005), has become prevalent. Minor Threat lead singer, Ian MacKaye, explains,

I had this one kid say to me— I was outside the van drinking ice tea— and he says to me, ‘I can’t believe you’re drinking ice tea.’ I was like, ‘What?’ and he said, ‘In my book, caffeine is a drug.’ I said, ‘Fuck you.’ These kind of people were so hard and so ready to attack me because they didn’t think I was hard enough.

(Lahickey, 1997, p. 108)

Although the scene did not begin with these displays of “hardness,” commitments such as “don’t smoke” became contested. Proving themselves as more drug-free, more committed, or more “edge,” became a trend that MacKaye himself was disgusted to see. The expansion of ideologies that now get grouped with Straight Edge, including veganism, pro-life activism, animal rights activism (See Figure 2), and Krishna Consciousness (Lahickey; Williams & Copes), have become pressures to prove a youth’s sXe collective identity, rather than simply being expansions of personal identity.
These pressures can become overwhelming for some, and contribute to a shift in what the subculture originally meant to adherents.

A significant cause of ceasing sXe participation is that the meaning of the collective identity is no longer linked with a sXer’s personal identity (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). In other words, “[they] stop believing that the movement ‘represents [them]’” (Polletta & Jasper, p. 292). For instance, the label of Straight Edge in and of itself has a connotation of restriction. Even Ian MacKaye, originator of sXe, said, “To me, classifications make you dismissible. If there is a name on you, then they can easily file you into a drawer, and we didn’t want to be filed into the straight edge drawer” (Lahickey, 1997, p. 105). Straight Edge can become a defining element of a member’s identity, yet sXers often get defined solely by this one-dimension while other factors of their identity are ignored (Haenfler, 2004b). While some sXe male youth decide to modify and individualize their commitment to Straight Edge while maintaining their membership, others grow to find that the collective sXe identity is overpowering their personal identity (Haenfler, 2004b). For many sXe male youth, they realize they can sufficiently communicate their personal self without relying on the collective identity (Poletta & Jasper, 2001) to find meaning in their lives (Haenfler, 2004b). As the desired self they once sought shifts due to a weakened sense of belonging, added peer pressure, and constrictive connotations of Straight Edge, many sXers “break edge.” Even in
breaking their commitment to the subculture, ex-sXers continuously reflect on the trajectory of their personal identity.

**MAKING SENSE OF IDENTITY**

Spending significant time within a subculture has a profound influence on a young male’s personal identity, even after detaching from the collective identity (Giddens, 1991). As Polletta and Jasper (2001) state,

> Participation usually transforms [ex-members’] subsequent biographies, marking their personal identities even after the [subculture] ends, whether or not this is an explicit goal. This is not only true of people whose active participation was of long duration or high intensity, but also many casual participants. (p. 296)

In this sense, biographies are narratives of a person’s identity, constructed and communicated by that person (Giddens). In denouncing the sXe identity, ex-sXe male youth revise their narratives to communicate a personal identity fitting to the sense they make of their subcultural experience. Ex-sXers exercise this sense making to understand how and why they participated in and exited the Straight Edge subculture.

Sense making is a three-phase process of enacting, selecting, and retaining their interpretations (Weick, 1995). The initial phase, called enactment, is simply the sense maker’s action, and the responses received following the action. Individuals must act before they can reflect and make sense of their actions. After an individual does something, they “receive stimuli as the result of their own activity” (Weick, p. 32). This activity and the reactions that follow are comprised of random and sometimes contradictory actions, communication, and interplay of responses from the sense maker’s environment. For ex-sXers, the action they are making sense of is their participation in and departure from the Straight Edge subculture. Next, in the selection phase, the sense maker interprets the action to make sense of what occurred, “making connections” and recognizing “plausible interpretations” (Tracy, Myers, & Scott, 2006, p. 294). Last, the retention phase constitutes what the sense maker retains as knowledge for future use. In other words, how the sense maker understood the action, then is referenced in similar situations. This is not to say that the sense making process is never re-visited, rather, as Weick argues, sense making is an ongoing process. The latter two phases are the focus of this study, to explore how ex-sXers make interpretations and integrates information from their participation in sXe to give coherence to past experience and help shape their new personal identity. Youth come to
know themselves through this reflexive process and realize a greater awareness of “being-in-the-world” (Ochs & Capps, 1996, p. 21), including a consciousness of their past and future. As ex-sXers make sense of their past Straight Edge collective identity, they modify their narratives to (re)construct their present personal identity. Ex-sXers’ narratives therefore reveal their sense making of their abandoned collective identity and their transformed personal identity. However, while much research has examined this process in regard to volunteerism (Isbell, Pfiester & McDonald, 2007), activism, and social movements (Polletta, 1998; Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Snow, 2001), few studies have addressed reflection and sense making with a focus on Straight Edge.

This research seeks to explore the accounts of ex-sXe male youth to examine their sense making narratives of their participation in the Straight Edge subculture, and how their experience is reflected in the way they communicate their present personal identity. The following research questions were developed after examining prior research:

RQ1: How do ex-sXe male youth communicatively make sense of their identity?

RQ2: How does Straight Edge participation influence the communication of identity in ex-sXe male youth?

Since biographies and the reflexive process of sense making often is best illuminated through narrative, these research questions will be addressed through the use of qualitative research, as detailed in the following chapter.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research is of important use in studies of group membership. This method serves to expand knowledge of subcultural participation by exploring how group identities are constructed through communication, by producing new theories regarding the tension between individual and collective interests, and by problematizing traditional knowledge surrounding shared goals of the group (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Straight Edge is a complex subculture of contested definitions of the collective identity and conflicting values and goals of each individual member. Experiences of subcultural participation, departure, and present identities are best revealed through qualitative research.

In addition, the reflexive communication of ex-Straight Edge identities further warrants a qualitative method. Straight Edge’s encouragement to “question everything” suggests that sXe members, and ex-members, think critically about what they want to represent, and what they want to oppose. In other words, they continuously evaluate, re-evaluate, and engage in sense-making of their participation within the subculture. As Foreman-Wernet (2003) states, “Sense-Making looks at the hows of communicating (how individuals define situations, how they bring past experiences to bear, how they make connections, and so forth)” (p. 9). Studying the contemplative process of how sXe male youth make sense of their experiences is best captured through narrative research. Narratives highlight an individual’s awareness of their experiences (Ochs & Capps, 1996). In exploring their experiences through narrative, we can understand how ex-sXers communicatively make sense of their subcultural involvement and how it has influenced their personal identity. To illustrate this concept, Dervine (2003) uses the analogy of a person taking steps along a path. When an interruption of that path occurs, and the individual finds a resolution to the disturbance, it leads us to question how they bridged the gap between moving steadily along and changing direction. She asks, “How do they see situations which interrupt their journeys? . . . How do they construct bridges over the gaps? How do they start their journeys again? How do they proceed after crossing?” (p. 68). For ex-sXe male youth, their narratives
expose the sense making of their identity journeys, revealing how they communicate their Straight Edge experience and how they have bridged the gap between their collective and personal identities. Furthermore, because our collective identities “significantly influence our knowledge and experiences” (Pearson & VanHorn, 2004, p. 286) which in turn, influence our identity, observations of online discussion forums were also utilized.

In the following sections, I describe my participant criteria and recruitment. Next, I explain my research procedures, including the use of narrative interviewing and design of the interview guide. Last, I explain how data was analyzed and justify why I chose to represent the results as displayed.

**PARTICIPANT CRITERIA AND RECRUITMENT PROCEDURES**

Three research criteria were developed for this research. Since sXe is a “male-centered movement” (Haenfler, 2004a, p. 78), participants in this study consisted only of males. In addition, because sXe is considered a youth movement, and youth is considered a crucial part of identity construction (Hall, Coffey, & Williamson, 1999), only participants ranging in ages 18-25 were included. Last, due to the research focus on the reflexive nature of subcultural involvement (Polletta & Jasper, 2001), participants consisted only of ex-sXe members. Ex-sXers provide an important lens in which to examine subcultural participation since they have been removed from the organizational influence of the subculture (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Their experiences are told in relation to their subcultural experience, without the “collective reality” embedded in them (Lindlof & Taylor, p. 181). Ex-members provide the perspective of an individual with inside experience, who now is looking in from the outside.

One participant was a prior collegiate colleague of mine and was recruited upon the start of this research. Due to a lack of ex-sXe meeting places, online forums, or other sources of outreach, additional participants were recruited through the use of snowball sampling (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). As such, the latter six participants were recruited based on referrals. Through networking, a total of seven participants ranging from one to ten years of sXe involvement were included in this research. Since six out of the seven participants were long-distance, including Bay Area locations and Germany, with only one participant residing in San Diego, interviews were conducted via Skype, an internet based video-calling system.
Through Skype, a voice-recording device called Pamela (“Pamela for Skype,” n.d.) was utilized to capture narrative data.

**RESEARCH PROCEDURES**

Participants were interviewed one time each, with each interview lasting 40-60 minutes. An interview guide (See Appendix C) was utilized to direct the conversation, while follow-up questions allowed participants to elaborate upon their experiences. Narrative interviewing was employed, as it encompassed the “whole story” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 179) of participants’ experiences before, during, and after identifying as Straight Edge. Narrative interviews capture the core of participants’ sense of self (Lindlof & Taylor), or sense of personal identity, through the communicative ways in which a participants describes themselves and their story. As Lindlof and Taylor explain, “narrative [is] a way of studying people’s identity work and conflicts in their self-presentations” (p. 180). Since the purpose of this study is to understand how ex-sXers communicate their current personal identity and make sense of contestations from their past Straight Edge collective identity, narrative interviewing is warranted over other partial-story interview approaches. As such, questions were asked in chronological order of occurrence, provoking participant narratives by eliciting their stories of first learning about sXe, participating in sXe, exiting the subculture, and experiences after leaving the subculture. Questions 1-3 were created to explore the backgrounds of each participant. Questions 4-8 were designed to investigate the stories of participants’ adoption of the sXe collective identity and how they made sense of their participation in the subculture. Questions 9-17 were designed to explore how participants made sense of their decision to break their commitment to sXe. Questions 18-34 were constructed to reveal how participants communicate their personal identity now that they are no longer sXe, and how the subculture has influenced that construction. Questions 35-36 were asked to wrap-up each interview. The interviews were transcribed no more than 24 hours after each interview, producing 59 single-spaced pages of data.

In addition, since websites became a popular form of communication amongst sXers beginning in the mid- to late 1990’s (Haenfler, 2004a), observations of Straight Edge online discussion forums and blogs were conducted, such as: xsisterhoodx.com, straight-edge.net, and straightedge.tribe.net. As Lindlof and Taylor (2002) state, computer mediated
communication (CMC) is useful in exploring “mystified social phenomena” (p. 253) that is rarely displayed in conventional methods of communicating. Online discussion boards and blogs facilitate opportunities for sXers to communicate their thoughts while allowing others to reply to, confirm, or debate comments posted by other forum users. These observations were used to provide further knowledge about how sXers communicate their identity with one another and make sense of the collective identity of Straight Edge, but were not represented in the results. Rather, online observations served to expand my knowledge of Straight Edge experiences beyond participants’ point of views and were used to provide foundational information regarding the Straight Edge subculture.

**DATA ANALYSIS AND REPRESENTATION**

After collecting all research data, interview transcriptions were analyzed to find themes in sense making and identity in the context of the ex-sXe culture. Data analysis was conducted in three phases. First, I employed open coding, marking documents with asides to note reoccurring themes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Second, I grouped common themes into categories. Last, I made interpretations of the meanings of each category, and assigned titles to each in order to present the practical implications of the data. This process of analysis was used to examine identity quests from the participants’ perspectives, paying particular attention to the contradictory nature of the Straight Edge subculture (Haenfler, 2004d).

Although analyzing narratives, the voices of participants were represented in pieces of their experiences in order to demonstrate the themes found. As Fine (1994a) states, qualitative research employing interviews “typically involves carving out pieces of narrative evidence that we select, edit, and deploy to border our argument” (p. 22). Using pieces helps illustrate the themes derived through analyzing the narrative as a whole. Initial categories included: (a) Communicating a Straight Edge Identity, (b) Contestations of sXe, and (b) Communicating an Ex-sXe Identity. The two former themes were grouped together to produce the category of Making Sense of a Straight Edge Identity, since the conflicting nature of Straight Edge presented many tensions in communicating subcultural identity. The last theme remained the same, but sub-categories were combined to provide concise results. For instance, normalcy and self-awareness were two sub-categories integrated into authenticity and responsibility, respectively. Through this process, ex-sXe male youth’s
narratives were analyzed for tensions and communicative strategies with which they shape their personal identity after breaking from the scene.

In the following sections, the data is represented into the two categories found through analysis: (a) Making Sense of the Straight Edge Collective Identity, and (b) Communicating an Ex-sXe Personal Identity. I chose to represent these sections as the themes derived from coding the data to best distinguish them. On the topic of making sense of the sXe collective identity, three communicative tensions emerged, including: certainty versus uncertainty; community versus gang; and “true ‘til death” versus “thinking for yourself.” On the topic of communicating ex-sXe personal identity, three communicated qualities are presented: responsibility for self and other; open-mindedness; and authenticity.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Through participation in Straight Edge, youth communicatively (re)construct their identity. However, most find that the collective identity to which they subscribed does not match the personal identity they seek as they mature within the scene. This fact leads to consideration of how ex-sXers communicatively make sense of their experience, as well as how sXe influences the communication of identity in ex-sXers. Using retrospective sense making to negotiate the tensions experienced in the sXe scene, ex-sXers communicate an identity that both embraces and resists the values of the sXe subculture. Regardless of the amount of time spent identifying as sXe, ex-sXers carry remnants of sXe ideologies while adapting new ways of communicating their personal identities.

MAKING SENSE OF THE STRAIGHT EDGE COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

In speaking of their subcultural experience, ex-sXer participant accounts revealed three tensions: (a) certainty versus uncertainty; (b) community versus gang; and (c) “true ‘til death” versus “think for yourself.” It is important to note that these tensions are not on a continuum, where as one tension reduces, the other increases. Rather, they should be seen as two separate continua, where a youth can experience feelings of equal tensions simultaneously. For example, a youth may experience a high level of community communication even while experiencing a high level of gang-like communication. To explain further, each tension is detailed in the following sections.

Certainty versus Uncertainty

One tension emergent in ex-sXer’s sense making narratives was between certainty and uncertainty about their identity. Whether conscious or unconscious of this during the time of their sXe experience, most participants recognized the search for certainty they initially sought prior to becoming sXe. Furthermore, participants also acknowledged the
certainty sXe provided them in their quest to find themselves, as well as the uncertainty that also surfaced through the communication within the sXe scene.

As they reflected on their sXe experience, participants expressed the uncertainty they felt before identifying as Straight Edge. Pete, a 23-year-old musician who claimed Edge for nine years, recalled,

Prior to claiming Edge [joining the sXe scene]. . . I didn’t know what I wanted in life. . . I would kind of go into a lot of phases-- like music phases, or how I dressed, or who I hung out with, so I think I was kind of all over the place before I claimed sXe. And then once I did, I felt like I had a really solid-- and somewhat bizarre—identity, but I thought that was cool. (Interview 12-22-09, p. 1, lines 11-15)

Pete’s statement displays the uncertainty he experienced in his identity as he sought one with which he could feel secure and which he ultimately found with sXe. By claiming the sXe identity, Pete reduced his uncertainty about himself. As Hogg (2009) explains, an effective way of reducing self-uncertainty is to identify with a group. In self-categorizing themselves as sXe, adherents learn who they are, how to behave, and how to treat others through the communication of the subculture (Hogg). Straight Edge provided Pete with the certainty of who to be and how to act, giving him security in his identity through attaining the ideologies of the group.

One of the specific ways that participants learned this certainty was through the communication of pride and assurance within the scene. Participants expressed finding certainty in the confirmation Straight Edge provided them in their abstinence from alcohol, drugs, and casual sex. Ryan, a 22-year-old club promoter who spent four years committing to Straight Edge explained, “Most people see [sXe] as being different, and as our world has proved to us, if you’re different you’re the outcast and you should be ashamed. . . [the scene made me] proud to be straight edge” (Interview 1-8-10, p. 11, lines 213-124). Brian, a 24-year-old who claimed Edge for five years until he turned 21, also experienced finding certainty through other sXer’s communication of assurance in being sober and celibate. He stated, “there was just a lot of people I started meeting through the scene that reinforced that behavior with me and that it was okay that I was a square and not going out with everybody and drinking and everything” (Interview 12-20-09, p. 1, lines 22-24). The uncertainty that youth felt in being different from their peers was turned to certainty through the communication that occurred through identifying as sXe. As Brian explains, “it [his
behavior] was okay” (Interview 12-20-09, p. 1, line 23) However, the certainty participants experienced was offset by strands of uncertainty within the sXe identity.

Groups differ in effectiveness at reducing uncertainty for those who self-categorize with the identity and behaviors of the subculture (Hogg, 2009). Hogg argues that the capacity in which a group will provide certainty for its members depends on the level of “entitativity” (p. 222), or clear group structure and goals which makes a group group-like. High entitativity groups communicate a distinct collective identity, whereas low entitativity collective identities are not as clear (Hogg). For the ex-sXers interviewed, the subcultural identity became ambiguous as adherents learned about the multitude of identities within the scene that stepped further and further away from what they considered to be Straight Edge. Marcus, a 21-year-old who recently denounced his sXe commitment after 5 years of participation but still remains sober and celibate, explained,

Within one idea, [there’s] vegan sXe kids, Christian hardcore kids. . . It’s like, people start taking the original idea and start adapting it to their lifestyle. You’re not supposed to adapt it to your lifestyle, you’re supposed to take that, and be like it. Not take that and make it like you. . . it’s hard to find people these days that understand and know the full true meaning of Straight Edge and what it means to be. (Interview 1-11-10, p. 9, lines 220-226)

Marcus expressed difficulty in subscribing to the sXe identity because no clear boundaries were apparent to establish common, consistent, unified goals and values among sXers. In other words, to Marcus, sXe’s entitativity decreased and the group no longer felt. Brian described similar sentiments when discussing the newer generation of sXers and their differing definition of what constitutes Straight Edge hardcore music. He stated, “there are a lot of kids that don’t know what hardcore really is. They don’t know bands like Misfits, Minor Threat, even going up to Youth of Today, Gorilla Biscuits” (Interview 12-20-09, p. 5, lines 171-173). Brian’s disappointment in younger sXers’ lack of knowledge about original sXe bands caused him to experience feel disconnected from the subculture. Brian and Marcus eventually felt as though too many identities were merged into the sXe scene, making the subcultural identity unclear, and causing them to question their commitment to the collective identity.

Straight Edge can provide its adherents with certainty in their identity by prescribing behaviors and attitudes that correspond with the subcultural norms and values. This certainty is reinforced by the communication of pride and assurance, as Pete, Brian, and Ryan
experienced. On the contrary, Straight Edge also causes its members to experience uncertainty in their identity due to the subculture’s ambiguous structure and unclear boundaries, as Marcus and Brian exemplified. Other tensions within the scene also contributed to youth leaving the subculture, such as the tension between community and gang.

**Community versus Gang**

In making sense of their participation with Straight Edge, ex-sXers also communicated a tension between the community atmosphere of the subculture and the gang-like environment that emerged. The community atmosphere conveyed a place of acceptance and unity among sXers, providing the affiliation with others that many youth seek through groups and/or subcultures (McArthur, 2009). Yet the resulting gang-like environment communicated exclusion, superiority, and violence.

As participants reflected upon first committing to Straight Edge, they described feeling as though they had found a place of belonging and a safe-haven from the peer pressures of mainstream youth. Marcus explained that before Straight Edge he did not have many close relationships or people to care about. Through the subculture, he found a close bond with a large group of people, stating, “I felt like I belonged to a group. . . you become like, ‘The Edge Family,’ and it’s cool” (Interview 1-11-10, p. 5, lines 117-119). Ryan, Brian, and Keith also expressed this sense of belonging, stating their relief in finding a group of people who were just like them. As Keith, a 23-year-old student who participated in sXe for two years, explained, “When you’re at the shows, at least what I felt, was that’s kinda like your sanctuary. Everybody around you is similar to you, and you kinda feel a part of something when you’re at these shows” (Interview 12-19-09, p. 2, lines 35-37). Basson (2007) confirmed Keith’s statement in her study of punk identity, finding that subcultural meeting places such as music shows and websites communicated belonging by placing an emphasis on shared experience and the “realization of the collective identity” (p. 77). In other words, Straight Edge fostered a place of community through establishing commonalities in music and interests among all sXers. While sentiments of community remain a part of ex-sXer’s memories of the scene, participants also recognized a contrasting element of the subculture.
Gang-like behavior became apparent in the scene through the violence of militant sXers and the superiority and aggression communicated by many others (See Figure 3). Keith and Marcus recalled the militant sXers, or those who escalate their commitment to the extreme of forcefully imposing their ideologies on others by beating individuals with opposing values, such as Suicide Crew and The Lords. Marcus reflected back upon scared feelings he had during a show where a youth “almost got curb-stomped [a violent act where the aggressor forces a victim to bite a sidewalk, then kicks the back of their head]. . . that kinda scared me, like, if these are the guys that are around and do these kinda shows, I don’t know if I wanna go or be a part of this” (Interview 1-11-10, p. 5, lines 101-104). Marcus made sense of this incident as a realization, that to participate in the community of Straight Edge, he would also have to be around the militant sXers. Furthermore, even the sXers that were not physically violent were often verbally aggressive, communicating superiority and snobbery. As Pete explained, “it just became this elitist scene where kids just thought they were better than others” (Interview 12-22-09, p. 2, lines 55-56). Marcus added, “It’s like a reverse-role. They are technically the sub-culture, but they act like the majority and [like they] have the ultimate say in things. . .[acting] stuck-up and snobby” (Interview 1-11-10, p. 3, lines 62-64). This “othering” (Fine, 1994b) communicated by many sXers excluded certain scene members, which often resulted in a loss of meaning associated with Straight Edge (Stillman & Baumeister, 2009), and a denouncement of the collective identity.

However, even members who were the excluders, versus excluded, also felt the weight of the aggressive mentality that consumed many sXers. For Keith, he realized that the superior attitude of sXers was actually a part of his communication while he was part of the scene: “I’ll admit it myself, I... thought I was better than people because my lifestyle choices I made to not drink” (Interview 12-29-09, p. 3, lines 88-90). Haenfler (2004d) argues that while some sXers simply feel confident in their rejection of mainstream youth activities, other sXers elevate their pride to the level of superiority. This “the few, the proud” (Interview 1-31-10, p. 3, line 84) mentality, as Dan described it, could be explained as an attempt to establish a secure identity. For instance, Hogg (2009) argues that some individuals communicate extremist attitudes in order to have strict rules and boundaries prescribing who they are. However, this security can turn exclusionary and undercut feelings of community.

While many youth enter the Straight Edge culture seeking security in their identity, most realize that it does not need to be taken to an extreme level. Brian made sense of this notion, explaining,

Instead of drinking or doing drugs, you’re just being an asshole to people. It’s like you’re trading one vice for another, or you have this super snobby attitude when it’s like, yeah, you’re doing something positive for yourself, but at the same time, you’re just being a prick to everyone else too. (Interview 12-20-09, p. 8, lines 267-269)

Pete commented that even in leaving the scene, these attitudes were prevalent; causing him to keep few ties to his sXe friends. He stated, “Some people treat it as a gang. Like you dropped out of a gang-- like you’re getting nixed” (Interview 12-22-09, p. 2, lines 57-59). However, the communicated superiority and gang mentality were not the only severe elements to the Straight Edge scene.

“True ‘til Death” versus “Think for Yourself”

Another strict aspect of Straight Edge is the “True ‘til Death” (See Appendix D) slogan of the subculture, which constitutes a pledge to remain sXe for a lifetime. This pledge conflicts with another popular slogan of sXe, “Think for Yourself” (See Appendix E) which indicates personal choice and an ability to live life according to a person’s own desires. While there are rare occasions of compatibility between the two slogans, in which a youth makes a personal choice to stay committed to sXe for life, for most it creates a tension between personal desire and collective commitment. For instance, if a youth does not want to
be Straight Edge for life, they can be said to be thinking for themselves and making a choice to leave the subculture. Yet, the “True ‘til Death” slogan prompts some to feel they must remain sXe forever, an attribute others may argue does not illustrate thinking for themselves. Brian explained the severity of the commitment, stating, “It’s like signing a contract in blood” (Interview 12-20-09, p. 5, line 164). Staying sXe for life can make the accompanying commitments feel imposed rather than voluntary. In addition to the obligatory strain this puts on sXers who do not want to remain sXe, this dictum also communicates feelings of failure. The “True ‘til Death” (See Figure 4) slogan insinuates that a youth fails if he leaves the subculture, belittling their experience as not meaningful unless it is “‘til death.” As Joel, a 20-year-old who became sXe to prove to himself that he would not become an addict like his parents, explained, “if you’re going to claim Straight Edge, you’re supposed to be doing it for life, and like, ‘If you’re not now, you never were’ is the commitment that they feel” (Interview 1-17-10, p. 4, lines 66-67). Because of this restrictive slogan, many ex-sXers struggled with breaking edge. Ryan reflected, “everything that I pretty much lived for [became] worthless” (Interview 1-8-10, p. 5, line 88), and Brian expressed, “It was a big conflict” (Interview 12-20-09, p. 3, line 76). Ex-sXers are made to feel as though their experience is not worth anything since they did not remain sXe, even though these young people made a mature decision to resist the vices that mainstream culture popularizes.

In committing to Straight Edge, youth make a lifetime pledge before even living a quarter of their lives. While choosing sobriety and celibacy is a healthy decision to make for themselves, “the commit or get out” (Pete, Interview 12-22-09, p. 7, line 246)
communication of other Straight Edge members was framed by participants as implausible. As Dan, a 20-year-old military policeman who claimed Edge for 3 years, reasoned, “you haven’t even lived your life yet, how do you know that Straight Edge is what you want?” (Interview 1-31-10, p. 3, line 79). In other words, many youth do not have the life experience to make a commitment “‘til death.”

The rigid commitment causes many men to feel trapped in the subculture, even after realizing that their personal desire was to drink, smoke, or have sex. Dan made sense of a moment where he felt this tension, stating,

There were times where I was at a party and I really wanted to drink, but I was kinda like, scared that all my friends that were sXe would look down on me because of it. And I’m like, ‘Aw man, I really want to drink, but I’m not going to because all of my friends would be pissed!’ At that point, you’re living your life for someone else and you’re not living it for yourself. (Interview 1-31-10, p. 8, lines 246-248)

Joel and Pete expressed similar sentiments, recognizing that they were bound to a commitment they no longer believed in when thinking for themselves. Yet even with this realization, sXers may feel confused about what to do since they are receiving mixed messages from their social world about whether to remain sXe for life or to think for themselves. Stern (2007) argues that youth refer to their social environments to find cues about what values and traits they should internalize. However, he adds that in this process, youth inevitably receive conflicting signals that bewilder them about what values and behaviors to adopt as a part of their identity. Dan, Joel, and Pete make sense of their participation in a similar way, as evidenced in their characterization of the struggle to negotiate between thinking for themselves and being true ‘‘til death.

Ultimately, participants in this study were able to overcome the tension of the contradictory slogans of sXe, eventually breaking their commitment to the subculture. Marcus, an ex-sXer who remains against alcohol, drugs, and promiscuity explained, “remembering that I made those choices for me and me alone to live my life that way, [and] not just to fit in with a group, is why I chose to stop claiming edge” (Interview 1-11-10, p. 9, lines 251-252). Pete also described his feelings about making this difficult decision, stating:

People can give up their religion, and some people may say it’s losing faith and it’s devastating and it’s going to ruin your life, and other people think it’s great, like, ‘I’m seeing more clearly,’ and I think it’s along that plane. I’m seeing more clearly in life. Take off the blinders. (Interview 12-22-09, p. 7, lines 225-228)
Pete’s statement shows that breaking Edge alleviated him of the communicated influence of sXe when making personal choices about who he is and who he wants to be. He makes sense of his identity, although ever-changing, as more of a choice than an obligation. However, even in breaking away from the subculture, Pete and other ex-sXer’s current personal identities have remnants of sXe notions and ideologies.

**Communicating an Ex-sXe Personal Identity**

Even with the many tensions associated with Straight Edge participation, ex-sXers made sense of their sXe participation by explaining that their experience helped shape who they are today. As Dan stated, “[there’s] certain events that people go through... [to then] utilize that information within themselves and make themselves a better person... [sXe] taught me a lot about myself” (Interview 1-31-10, p. 6, lines 178-180). In communicating their personal identity, ex-sXers acknowledged positive qualities about themselves that they ascribe to sXe, and also described aspects differing from the collective sXe identity. A quality many participants kept with them is responsibility for self and other. On the contrary, through recognizing the attributes of sXe they did not like, ex-sXers made sense of their present personal identities as open-minded and authentic. In the following sections, each facet is described.

**“I’m playing Mommy a lot: Responsibility for Self and Other**

From beginning of sXe, a responsibility for self and other was communicated. By committing to sXe, individuals make a vow to themselves to act responsibly in abstaining from vices. Furthermore, the “lead by example” belief of some sXers seemed a part of ex-sXer’s identities. Many ex-sXers contended that the ideology of responsibility remained a part of their identity even after leaving the subculture.

Through bypassing the popular American male youth habits of drinking to excess, experimenting with drugs, and racking up sexual conquests, ex-sXers were able to experience parties with a clear mind, recognizing many negative aspects of partying. As Pete rationalized, “dudes get girls drunk and sleep with them... [they] abuse drugs... drink and drive-- these are all bad things that ethically aren’t good. There’s no moral compass, it’s just bad” (Interview 12-22-09, p. 10, lines 332-335). Furthermore, Ryan and Brian both described
their frustration with the “drinking mentality” of popular male youth culture. Brian stated, “I don’t like the people that feel like they need [alcohol] to function or have a good time. . . don’t you have any hobbies?. . . It’s a weird mentality” (Interview 12-20-09, p. 9, lines 307-311). Ex-sXers have a particular viewpoint that many youth lack. In witnessing the drinking world through a sober and celibate lens, ex-sXers who now partake in partying activities recognize the extreme they do not want to reach. Keith reflected,

When you are sXe and you do go to parties where people are drinking-- maybe smoking-- you kinda see how they act when they’re drunk or when they’re high and it opens your eyes and reinforces the fact that you don’t want to be that idiot when you’re drunk. (Interview 12-29-09, pp. 6-7, lines 190-192)

Participants declared their opposition to drunk driving, refrainment from drinking or smoking on a school or work night, and their awareness of knowing their limit. Brian explained, “even now when I drink, there’s that voice in the back of my head saying, ‘Hey, you’ve had too much, you’re done,’ and it cuts me off” (Interview 12-20-09, p. 7, lines 235-237). Even in denouncing many of the morals of Straight Edge, ex-sXers make sense of their subcultural experience as having an impact on their current drinking behaviors. Ex-sXers communicate that these values are still a part of their identities.

Beyond self-moderation in drinking and drugs, ex-sXers’ experience in the subculture taught them a responsibility for others. “I’m playing Mommy a lot” (Interview 12-20-09, p. 6, line 198), Brian says, explaining his tendency to watch his friends’ alcohol intake when out drinking at the bars. While Brian learned his sense of responsibility from being sXe, Pete’s responsibility for friends and close relationships partially derived from the process of breaking Edge and communicating his decision to others. He explained,

Once I actually told [my girlfriend I broke Edge], she got really upset about it, so I’m like, ‘How am I going to be more responsible in telling people things like this, and responsible with my life and my relationships?’ So I became more intuitive to how she felt or how my friends felt. . . I just started thinking about other people rather than just myself. (Interview 12-22-09, p. 5, lines 170-175)

While Pete talks about learning responsibility through participating in Straight Edge, he makes sense of his denouncement of the sXe identity as furthering of his awareness and responsibility toward others. Giddens (1991) argues that letting go of the past produces opportunities for self-development. In letting go of Straight Edge, Pete narrates a higher regard for those around him. Many other instances of increased self-development after
denouncing Straight Edge were emergent in this research, including the communication of open-mindedness in ex-sXer’s personal identities.

“I respect them because that’s their choice”: Open-mindedness

One of the main critiques about sXe, from ex-sXers and in scholarly literature, is the subculture’s communication of narrow-mindedness. This is partially communicated through their gang-like behavior, as discussed previously, in which sXers communicate superiority over other sXers. However, the communication of an open-minded ex-sXe identity is adopted through recognizing the closed-mindedness of sXer communication. Hamelman (2006) points out that the confined age range, music genre, and commitments of sXe make adherents closed off to other music, people, and lifestyles. Marcus concurs: “[If I was still sXe, I’d be] very limited to the world around me” (Interview 1-11-2010, p. 10, line 256). Many participants expressed that this non-accepting attitude toward opposing viewpoints was a part of the collective identity. Pete reflected,

I definitely locked myself in to my beliefs and my system of friends. I definitely knew who I hung out with. . . . I regret not. . . getting to know people on different levels. . . . I just identified way too hard with Straight Edge, punk rock, and hardcore. For instance, the only music I’d listen to in high school was stuff revolving around Straight Edge and hardcore. . . now I listen to bands that I would like laugh at if I was 16 and call myself a douchebag. I think in that sense I regret being closed-minded to anything like pop culture or girls and parties. I think I just inherently judged things because it was who I was. (Interview 12-22-09, p. 9, lines 317-326)

In this statement, Pete highlights the differentiation sXers make between themselves and others through the use of music and friends within the collective identity. Copes and Williams (2007) explain this narrow-mindedness as an affirmation of their deviant, or counter-mainstream, communication and behavior. They elaborate that while many individuals avoid “self-identifying as different,” sXers proudly communicate their differences, “creating a sense that they were ‘better’ than their mainstream peers” (Copes & Williams, p. 259). Joel stated, “I thought [partying youth] were all low-lifes. . . if I saw people smoking or drinking, I thought I was better than them” (Interview 1-17-10, p. 5, lines 96-97). In their study of religious individuals’ open-mindedness toward others who violate their values, Goldfried and Miner (2002) found that religious bias caused people to judge
others strictly based on their out-group status. Ex-sXers’ statements mirror this finding, recognizing that only after denouncing the sXe collective identity could they be open-minded toward others. Marcus, commented that when hanging out with youth who drink now, “I respect them because that’s the choice they make, whether it be drugs, cigarettes, or alcohol, and in return they respect my decision to not do that” (Interview 1-11-10, p. 7, lines 183-185). Marcus’ statement expresses a sense making that embraces growth and exceeds the narrow-minded attitudes of the scene. In addition to being open-minded, ex-sXers also communicated the authenticity that they feel now that they have matured beyond the scene.

“I just felt that I was becoming someone different than I wanted to be”: Authenticity

When thinking of “authenticity” in terms of subcultural identity, it can be thought of as socially constructed (Morrison, 2009). The social world’s perception of an “authentic” subcultural identity influences the standards that must be met in order to be considered “authentic” or “inauthentic” (Morrison). For instance, in order to be regarded as an authentic sXer, an individual must display the behavior and communication that the social world characterizes to be sXe, such as listening to hardcore music, not drinking or smoking, and wearing X’s. Many sXers often face pressure to prove themselves as Edge (Williams & Copes, 2005), or as authentic sXers. On the contrary, ex-sXers express their relief in not having to prove their authenticity to others. Instead, ex-sXers’ redefine their authenticity in terms of being true to themselves and setting their own standards. They make sense of this authenticity as something noticeable only after departing the subculture.

Youth enter the subculture when their identities are not fully formed. In a way, Straight Edge acts as a stepping stone, or crutch while a youth is in transition to adulthood, allowing the youth to rely on the collective identity as they make sense of their personal identity and discover what they regard as their authentic selves. Pete described this process, stating, “I found this anchor where I could grow up, in a sense” (Interview 12-22-09, p. 1, lines 16-17). Brian added, “It was just a point in my life that helped me push forward into who I am now” (Interview 12-20-09, p. 7, lines 213-124). Once the transition phase is over and a sXer feels confident about his personal identity, the collective identity is no longer needed. Dan reflected upon the moment when he realized he was ready to break away from the sXe identity, saying,
every time I meet someone [I’m introduced as] ‘He’s Straight Edge’. . . like, ‘We have all these people to introduce you [to]—this is Alli, this is Nick, this is Dan and he’s Straight Edge’. It’s like, ‘Oh, is that a bad thing?’ . . . [breaking Edge] was almost just-- so normal, because you don’t have to be that guy. (Interview 1-31-10, p. 4, lines 127-131)

Dan recognized that he no longer needed to rely on the collective identity, and furthermore, that he did not want to rely on it. He wanted to simply be introduced and known as Dan, and not “Straight Edge Dan”. Ryan communicated similar sentiments, stating now that he is no longer sXe, “it has been nice to not have to always elaborate who I am to people who don’t really know me” (Interview 1-8-10, p. 7, line 133). Even though sXe still is a part of ex-sXers, as it helped them construct their personal identity, the men describe feelings of being more themselves and more “normal” now that they do not have to constantly define themselves in relation to Straight Edge. Participants expressed that they feel more authentic and true to themselves now that they are no longer defined solely by this one dimension. They explained that having to continuously explain and justify one facet of their identity heightened their feelings of abnormality through having to communicate their sober and celibate selves to others. Marcus explains his relief of now feeling authentic through defining himself in his own terms, instead of as Straight Edge, stating, “[Now,] it’s more- I’m me, who doesn’t drink and doesn’t do drugs, rather than, I’m a Straight Edge kid, in the Straight Edge world” (Interview 1-11-10, p. 4, lines 96-97). Pete elaborated,

I honestly feel like I was being more honest with myself. More authentic as to who I was. . . I felt like I needed to expand and break out. I feel like in life, you have to be bigger than yourself and do bigger things. You can’t always just confine yourself to one thing or one identity. (Interview 12-22-09, p. 6, lines 201-209)

Pete describes his identity now as true to himself, while still allowing for continuing change. Brian’s comment builds on Pete’s, explaining, “you don’t always have to have this us versus them mentality or you don’t need to either do one thing, or do another. There is that area where you can flux a little” (Interview 12-20-09, p. 9, lines 312-113). In essence, participants described authenticity as having the ability to define, explain, and change themselves as they choose, rather than being labeled and regulated by one aspect of their identity.

Many of the men communicated that ridding themselves of their sXe identity gave them more opportunity to be who they think they are and who they can be. The men now describe a broad scope of possibilities to choose from, and do not accept a set-in-stone
identity with restrictions. Through reflection, Ryan recalled the moment he recognized that
his authentic self was not an identity he could place boundaries upon, stating,

I remember I was watching [this] band play and [the lead singer] was giving the
speech about how it was okay to not be sure. He just kept going like, ‘Life isn’t
black and white, you don’t have to do this or be that. It’s ok to be in the grey and
say I’m not sure if I want to be vegan or I’m not sure if I want to be sXe.
(Interview 1-8-10, p. 4, lines 73-76)

While Straight Edge helped shape who ex-sXers are today, their ability to continuously
reconstruct their personal identity without the confinement of the collective identity helps
them to feel like they are living life as their authentic selves. As Giddens (1991) argued,
authenticity, or “being ‘true to oneself’ occurs through personal growth and conquering
“tensions that prevent us from understanding ourselves as we really are” (p. 79). Straight
Edge is a subculture rife with tensions, but through the process of sense making, an ex-sXer
discovers their authentic self.

Ex-sXer narratives extend and problematize the sense making process and
communication of identity in ex-sXers. While this study offers insight into a perspective
rarely explored, that of subcultural members who denounce their collective identity, it also
highlights the complexities and contradictions in the Straight Edge subculture. The accounts
examined in this research expand considerations of identity communication studies and
subcultural communication studies in several ways. The following chapter presents a
summary of interpretations, limitations, implications, and directions for future research are
presented.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The results of this research illuminate how ex-sXers made sense of their subcultural participation. Specifically, the results provide insight into the two research questions that were posed, RQ1: how do ex-sXe male youth make sense of their identity; and RQ2: how does Straight Edge participation influence the communication of identity in ex-sXers? Ex-sXers make sense of their participation in Straight Edge as a series of tensions, including certainty versus uncertainty, community versus gang, and “True ‘til Death” versus “Think for Yourself.” They communicate identities that encompass the Straight Edge ideology of responsibility for self and other, and also communicate aspects that diverge from the subculture’s, including open-mindedness and authenticity. These findings display a rich site of study for communication in subcultures and in youth identities, and suggest conceptual, theoretical, and methodological implications warranting future research. The following sections offer a summary of the findings, an outline of directions urging extended research on the topic of Straight Edge, and a discussion of the limitations encountered in this research.

SUMMARY

The communicated tensions of Straight Edge paint the subculture as complex and difficult to understand. Straight Edge simultaneously provides members with certainty in finding a sense of identity to anchor themselves in and an uncertainty rooted in the contradictions of the subcultural identity. Straight Edge offers a safe-haven from the peer pressures of mainstream youth but encourages gang-like pressures from their sXe peers. It also promotes a “think for yourself” mentality and imposes a “true ‘til death” commitment. These tensions make it difficult to understand what the concept of Straight Edge truly signifies. For instance, is Straight Edge about community or exclusiveness? Does “think for yourself” trump the “true ‘til death” slogan? Does identifying as Straight Edge simply denote an “I don’t drink, don’t smoke, don’t fuck” pledge, as their founding song (“Minor Threat”, 1984, track 8) stipulated, or is there more than just the literal messages of the songs that built
that sXe identity? All participants made sense of the meaning of Straight Edge as something that lies beyond their commitments of abstinence. Yet, none could define the subculture in terms consistent with other participants. Definitions ranged from positive thinking (Pete, 12-22-09, p. 1), to being pure (Keith, 12-09, p. 1), to being all about the music (Ryan, 1-10, p. 1). The mixed definitions and the multiple tensions lead one to wonder what Straight Edge really is or means to its members.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Straight Edge is the fact that the subculture has no headquarters, no membership list and no formal rules, in additional to conflicting informal rules (Haenfler, 2004a). In fact, MacKaye himself was not looking to start a subculture, and stated in an interview that he “fears that individuality is lost in movements” (Marc, personal e-mail, 1-2-10). MacKaye insists that he was merely expressing his opinions, which led to a following of youth who started and sustained Straight Edge. Yet even with the large following that now is worldwide, the subculture of Straight Edge remains rife with tensions and ambiguous in description. Everyone from MacKaye, to present sXe bands, to sXe members cannot definitively articulate what it means to be Straight Edge. Rather, it “is a concept that exists only insofar as individuals subsume themselves collectively within its label and thereby impute it with meaning” (Hamelman, 2006, p. 197). In other words, the meanings of Straight Edge are communicatively constructed by its youth members, which are varied and contradictory. However, even with the tensions associated with the subculture, many positive aspects are communicated by those who at one time identified as sXe.

Ex-sXers communicate responsibility for themselves and others, open-mindedness, and being authentic to themselves. Youth who participate in Straight Edge, even if only for awhile, expressed a more nuanced and complex understanding of the risks of drinking, drug use, and sexual conquest. Ex-sXers carry that consciousness beyond the scene, communicating responsibility when partaking in these activities. Furthermore, ex-sXers expressed feeling true to themselves through filtering which aspects of sXe they chose to incorporate, abandon, or modify to feel authentic to their personal identity. Through this process of reflection, sense-making, and filtering ex-sXers seem to employ the very concept MacKaye originally communicated through his songs, to think critically rather than to conform.
Participants noted that MacKaye’s original message, to think critically about the world around us, is more clearly encompassed by ex-sXers than current sXers. Current sXers seem to follow the literal message of the songs, abstaining from drinking, drugs, and sex. However, as Hamelman (2006) states, “perhaps the cruelest irony about straight edge is that its efforts may be in vain” (p. 203) due to its contradictory actions of ironically conforming to a different majority. In other words, Straight Edge originated through notions of individuality and anti-conformity, the conformity being popular youth who drink, smoke, and act promiscuously. Yet, these notions are contradicted through youth member’s devotion to Straight Edge, causing them to merely conform to a collective of a different sort and thereby lacking individuality. Ex-sXers, on the other hand, communicate perceptions of deeper messages in the songs, like to think for one’s self rather than merely being anti-mainstream. Ex-sXers reflect on their experience within the scene, determine for themselves which aspects of sXe communicates the identity they want to embrace, and rid themselves of the qualities that conflict with this identity. The ex-sXer’s sense making provides an important lens with which to examine subcultural communication and identity, and offers many implications to be explored in future research.

**Implications & Directions for Future Research**

This study illustrates the importance of studying the complex identity work of youth participating in, and leaving, the Straight Edge subculture. It also illuminates the communication of identity in their transition from youth to adulthood. Straight Edge, even with its many tensions, provides a space for communication scholars to explore the ways this unique subculture influences an individual’s communication of identity. While this study explored the communicative tensions existing in a youth’s development toward constructing a desirable self, and how they communicate their identity having resolved those tensions, there are several avenues of directions for future research. The sections presented below provide the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological implications of the sXe subculture, while simultaneously offering suggestions for future research in this understudied topic.

**Conceptual Implications**

Participants expressed a heightened awareness toward alcohol, drugs, and sexual behavior, having taken part in Straight Edge. Even in rejecting the sXe ideals of abstinence
against these vices, ex-sXers communicate a level of responsibility that exceeds the knowledge of risks communicated by many youth who experiment with drinking, smoking, and sex. Much research has found that the earlier in life a youth begins experimenting with alcohol, drugs, and sexual behavior, the more at-risk they are for developing addictions or practicing unsafe sex (Staton et al., 1999, p. 147). Straight Edge adherents and ex-members do not typically start experimenting with such activities until early adulthood, if at all, and practice responsibility if and when partaking in these vices. This implies that the Straight Edge subculture holds important communicative strategies for teaching youth about risky behaviors. Such strategies include promoting abstinence from alcohol, drugs, and sex through the medium of music, which may be a more effective way of communicating such risks to youth, than health campaigns that use sophisticated terminology and are lead by adults with whom youth cannot relate. For example, Slater (2009) found that youth are most influenced, in regard to substance use, by music, movies, and television shows portraying contemporary youth lifestyles. Since Straight Edge is a youth lifestyle, whose values are communicated primarily through the medium of music, sXe displays a potentially effective risk communication strategy. In addition to the music, Straight Edge provides a physical space of clean living. The communicative strategy of fostering a clean living atmosphere where youth can take pride in their abstinences, rather than pressured to indulge in vices, seems effective in aiding youth awareness of healthy living options. Music shows provide such a space, which is often extended to gatherings outside of concerts when sXers meet others with similar values. Since all sXers have the same core values, the communal quality of shows makes it easy for members to find others to relate to. Last, a strategy that seemed to have a boomerang effect on risk communication was the communication of militant sXers. Militant sXers, who are violent with non-sXers, pressure youth to not drink or smoke out of fear of being beaten. It seems like this would cause sXers to not want to break their commitment to abstinence against drinking, smoking and sex, by adding fear of violence to the list of risks associated with alcohol and drugs. However, as participant accounts revealed, this strategy actually perpetuated opposite reactions. The presence of militant sXers played a part in sXers ultimately leaving the scene, often reconsidering drinking, smoking, and sex.

Further research regarding the topic of risk communication during the course of identity work within the Straight Edge scene may contribute to health campaigns,
communicating alcohol, drug, and sexual awareness, and other valuable findings. For instance, interviewing youth about the appeal of Straight Edge hardcore could explore how music communicates risks and influences their decision to be abstinent. What do the lyrics mean to them? What about the genre of music speaks to them? Does the reputation of the singer and the band add to the appeal? Also, the notion of enforcing abstinence, as the militant sXers did, can be investigated to see what other risk communication strategies are viewed as imposing. Are youth school programs such as D.A.R.E. (“About D.A.R.E.,” 1996) viewed by youth as forced upon them, since they do not have the option to opt out? How do they interpret alcohol and cigarette laws? Last, exploring concert venues that do not offer alcohol may provide insight as to how “clean” spaces communicate a safe-haven from risks. MacKay’s dismay with punk rock and other genres was partially due to the music venues’ affiliation with alcohol. Many sXe shows do not offer alcoholic beverages, which seems to enhance Straight Edge’s appeal for youth looking for a social atmosphere without the pressure to experiment with alcohol or drugs.

 Sense making narratives also displayed the dialogic nature of participants’ decisions to break Edge. Once participants felt the pressure of committing to sXe was greater than the initial pressure they faced from drinking, smoking, and sexually active peers, many participants sought confirmation in their doubts of sXe and validation in breaking from the collective identity. For instance, Brian communicated with his mom in making this difficult choice. He recalled,

I talked to my mom about it, making sure there were responsible decisions being made. . . [She told me] “You’re an adult, you can make your own decisions”. . . [and] “Whatever decisions that you make, make sure that you are comfortable with them, and that it’s what you want to do.” (Interview 12-20-09, pp. 3-4, lines 97-103)

Brian’s statement, along with other participants’ remarks, indicated their concern about disappointing others in leaving the sXe scene. Future research could examine the communicative phenomenon that occurs in the decision making process of breaking Edge to explore how sXers communicate when hitting a turning point in their life trajectories.

Last, participant accounts revealed the failure of Straight Edge members to fully communicate and act as a counter-culture. While Straight Edge takes an anti-mainstream, anti-conformity stance in abstaining from drinking, drugs, and promiscuity, certain conventional notions seep into the scene. As Haenfler (2006) confirms, “Youth
counterculture[s] often seek to undermine dominant [notions] but in reality sometimes reinforce exactly the values they challenge” (p. 103). For instance, Straight Edge originated through the concept of individuality and freedom to act according to personalized wishes, yet obliges its members to a strict lifetime commitment. Straight Edge’s counter to conformity, in actuality, merely creates a different sort of conformity, contradicting its original stance on individualism. Interestingly, even ex-sXers who left the scene due to this contestation, communicate sentiments of disgrace toward others who do not maintain their conformity to Straight Edge. Ryan stated,

I knew this girl who said she was straight edge and I knew she didn’t know shit about it ‘cause my first response was ‘So you won’t drink after your 21 or wine at your wedding?’ and she was like, ‘oh no I’m just straight edge ‘til I’m 21 than I’ll drink!’ And to hear people say that is just like, ‘Wow you’re an idiot!’”  
(Interview 1-8-01, p. 11, lines 212-218)

Ryan’s frustration with the girl’s comment, in actuality, coincides with the trajectory of his experience. He stopped identifying with sXe as he approached the legal drinking age. Many other participants expressed similar frustrations with sXers who left the subculture, yet also contradicted their comments with their actions of breaking Edge themselves.

Further research could explore the concept of conformity, as highlighted by the sXe subculture. While Straight Edge began as a promotion of individuality, the contradictions in participants’ accounts imply that young people may want or need a sense of conformity to feel a connection with others and to take part in something greater than themselves. It would be interesting to explore if ex-sXe youth conform to something other than sXe after departing the subculture. Does conformity communicate community and belonging to youth? Is it possible for youth to communicate individuality? To what extent can individuality be communicated before a youth feels isolated? To what extent can conformity be communicated before a youth feels constrained? In addition to expanding upon conceptual implications such as communicating conformity and risks, theoretical implications are offered for future research.

**Theoretical Implications**

This research has significant implications in regard to Social Identity Theory (SIT), which posits that an individual communicates their identity in reference to values and norms derived from their social group or organization (Scott, 2007). This study elaborates on SIT
by illustrating that even individuals who *exit* a social group communicate their identity with regard to aspects of the organization. For instance, because Straight Edge was their social group for a period of time, ex-sXers still communicate their identity as “(re)creations and expression[s]” (Scott, p. 126) of their Straight Edge collective identity. Through reflection and sense-making, ex-sXers recognized the aspects of sXe that they wanted to maintain, abandon, or recreate as a part of their identity. For ex-sXers in this study, they attributed their sense of responsibility for self and other to their experience with Straight Edge. Participants’ communication regarding the topics of alcohol, drug use, and sexual behaviors may have been different, had they never committed to Straight Edge. In other words, ex-sXe individuals communicate their identity in reference to values from their *prior* social group. SIT therefore can be expanded to incorporate individuals’ communication of identity in regard to their *past* organizational memberships. Although the collective identity of a social group may reach a point of less significance to an individual, it has not dissolved completely; rather a different identity has become more salient. Future research is needed to examine the breadth of this implication.

In addition, this research has important implications for reflexive narratives of identity and sense-making. Giddens (1991) argues that identity “presumes reflexive awareness” (p. 52) constituted in an individual’s ability to interpret their experiences and make sense of them to maintain an on-going narrative about themselves. Without reflection upon our experiences, we cannot understand ourselves (Giddens). Ex-sXers communicate their identities through narratives that make sense of their experiences in the sXe scene. Beyond Straight Edge, making sense of life events such as illness, divorce, death, graduation, marriage, job promotion, and resignation is imperative to (re)constructing our identities. This study sheds new light on reflection, in that, even life occurrences that *remain* in tension can contribute to sense making about an individual’s experiences and identity. In other words, the result of sense making is not always clear-cut. For ex-sXers, making sense of their experiences resulted in a series of tensions that remain as such. This implies that reflection upon life events may entail that the sense making outcome of those experiences remains complex and only describable as a series of tensions.
Methodological Implications

Another important implication is the use of narrative interviewing in examining ex-subcultural members' identity communication and experiences. This study illuminated the usefulness of narrative interviewing in studies of identity. As Holt (2010) argues, “it is through the telling of stories that such identities are claimed, confirmed and validated.” Narrative interviewing allowed each participant to share their stories, each manifesting their identity through the communication of their experiences. Through evoking narrative in full-circle interviews, participants were able to reflect upon their Straight Edge experience and make sense of their collective and personal identities. I do not believe there is another method that would enable participants to recall and recognize the emotions and situations that led ex-sXers to develop into who they are. This study is a testament to narrative as a powerful tool for future studies of identity communication, subcultural communication, and sense-making. Through narrative, participants were able to make sense of their experience within the sXe scene by reflecting on the communication that occurred before, during, and after they committed to sXe.

Future research might also connect this reflection with how we perform these narratives as part of what Goffman (1959) terms the presentation of self. The sXe community, including concerts, seems to provide a space in which youth feel freer to experiment with the ways in which they present themselves to others. Examining how youths’ presentations of self in the context of sXe might offer additional insight into the fluid nature of identity and the ways in which we improvise and adapt our performances based on informal “feedback” or reactions of others in our peer group.

In addition, utilizing narrative interviewing was important in exploring the accounts of ex-sXers, since their stance is typically not considered for studies. Ex-sXers are not a part of the subculture, yet do not seemingly fit into another category of particular interest for research. Yet, their prior experience proved just as insightful and informative as studies about current sXers. Narrative interviews with ex-sXers provided a significant view, from the outside of the subculture looking in, to add to the body of research regarding reflection and sense making. Future studies examining identity construction and communication should consider interviewing individuals who are now removed from the subculture, health issue, or life circumstance. For instance, exploring the narratives of prior organizational members or
survivors of an illness or disaster would allow for great reflection and sense-making as they are now removed from the experience, yet the experience is still a part of them.

**Limitations**

A limitation of this study was the range of sXe scenes included in participant’s experiences. Since most participants were from the Bay Area, their scene differed from that of other locations. For instance, the Salt Lake City and Boston sXe scenes consist primarily of militant sXers, most resorting to violence when witnessing other youth drink or smoke, whereas the Bay Area scene is more diverse in sXe identities, ranging from aggressive sXers to “Posi,” or positive thinking sXers (Boland, 2008). While participants in this study witnessed some violence and superior attitudes of sXers in the Bay Area, they did not experience as intense behaviors and communication as the more extreme scenes. Exploring the identity work of youth participating in a variety of scenes may present differing accounts of the tensions of the sXe subculture and the communication of identity in ex-sXers.

Another limitation of this research was that data was collected solely through interviews. Ex-sXers do not have an accessible sight of study, as they no longer typically attend sXe shows, and their circle of friends are diverse beyond just sXers or ex-sXers. Participant’s reflections on their past experience therefore became the only evidence to this research, whether or not their memories were sharp and accurate. However, although narrators sometimes deceive, they move us toward a new and deeper understanding and questioning of phenomena (Ochs & Capps, 1996) such as Straight Edge. Even if their accounts were skewed due to memory or other factors, their stories still led to complicating and understanding the Straight Edge subculture and the communication of ex-sXe identities. Future studies could employ focus groups for participants to stimulate experiences and stories from the interplay with one another (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The group environment provides an atmosphere ideal for discussion and may provoke disagreement and agreement among participants (Lindlof & Taylor). Such a method would allow the researcher to explore how ex-sXers communicate identity amongst one another, what contestations about the subculture they agree or disagree about, and how their experiences differ.
CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates the importance of exploring Straight Edge through a perspective rarely studied-- those who denounce the subcultural collective identity-- and the insight gained through discovering how they make sense of their experience to communicate a post-sXe identity. The intention of this research is neither to deter youth from participating in Straight Edge, nor advocate adherence to the subculture. Rather, this study seeks to provoke critical thinking about a subculture that scholars still know little about, and display the power lifestyle choices such as drinking, sexual conquest, and abstinence have in communicating identity on both personal and collective levels.
REFERENCES


Central Texas. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, Chicago, IL.


APPENDIX A

“STRAIGHT EDGE” BY MINOR THREAT
I'm a person just like you
But I've got better things to do
Than sit around and fuck my head
Hang out with the living dead
Snort white shit up my nose
Pass out at the shows
I don't even think about speed
That's something I just don't need
I'VE GOT THE STRAIGHT EDGE

I'm a person just like you
But I've got better things to do
Than sit around and smoke dope
'Cause I know I can cope
Laugh at the thought of eating ludes
Laugh at the thought of sniffing glue
Always gonna keep in touch
Never want to use a crutch
I'VE GOT THE STRAIGHT EDGE
APPENDIX B

“OUT OF STEP (WITH THE WORLD)”
BY MINOR THREAT
(I) don't smoke/ I don't drink/ I don't fuck
   At least I can fucking think
I can't keep up/ Can't keep up/ Can't keep up
   Out of step with the world

(I) Don't smoke/ I Don't drink/ I Don't fuck
   At least I can fucking think
I can't keep up/ Can't keep up/ Can't keep up
   Out of step with the world

(spooken) Listen, there's no set of rules. I'm not tellin' you what to do, all I'm saying is I'm thinkin' of three things that are like, so important to our world I don't have to find much importance in because of these things, whether they are fucking or whether it's playing golf, because of that I feel
I can't keep up/ Can't keep up/ Can't keep up
   Out of step with the world
   Cashing in.
**Background Information**

1. How old are you?
2. Tell me what you think of when you hear the words “Straight Edge”.
3. How would you describe yourself before making your commitment to sXe?

**Straight Edge Collective Identity**

4. How did you first hear about the Straight Edge lifestyle?
5. How old were you when you adopted the Straight Edge lifestyle?
6. Why and how did you make the commitment to sXe?
   i. Was there a specific moment or dramatic turning point that you can recall?
   ii. Where and when did you find yourself solidifying this commitment?
   iii. What single event epitomized the commitment?
7. What prompted you to become Straight Edge?
8. I want to understand the pledge. Talk to me about how you communicated with others to let them know of your commitment.

**Fluctuating Identity**

9. Can you describe a moment when someone commented on, criticized, or challenged sXe and/or your commitment?
10. Can you describe a time or moment when you first began to question your commitment?
11. When did you first feel the urge to “break edge”?
   i. Did you “break edge” right at that moment? Why or why not?
   ii. Did you feel any pressure to remain edge? Explain.
12. What finally caused you to “break edge”?
13. How did you go about breaking your commitment?
14. How old were you when you broke your commitment to Straight Edge?
15. Is there a story or instance that you recall, when you were ready to break edge but were still acting like you were sXe because you hadn’t told anyone yet?
16. Did you talk to anyone about “breaking edge” before you actually declared the break to others?
   i. If yes, what feelings did you discuss in this conversation?
17. Respond to this statement: A male youth is able to escape peer pressure to drink, smoke, and have casual sex by committing to the Straight Edge lifestyle. However, eventually, Straight Edge feels like a different kind of peer pressure– urging its members to be overly responsible, and can feel restricting.

**Ex-Straight Edge Personal Identity**

18. Would you say that you feel more like yourself now that you are no longer Straight Edge?
19. What is the biggest difference you feel in your identity and/or lifestyle, now that you are no longer Straight Edge?
20. Besides maybe adopting the activities of drinking, drugs, and sex, are there any other ways in which you feel different?
21. Would you say that you are happy, indifferent, or disappointed that you spent a part of your youth committing to Straight Edge? Explain.
22. Do you still feel any kind of connection to Straight Edge?
   i. Do you still listen to sXe music? If so, what role does sXe music play in your life?
   ii. Do you feel you still have responsible views on drinking, drugs, and sex?
   iii. Do you still have sXe friends? If yes, has your relationship changed now that you are no longer sXe?
23. Did breaking edge stimulate you to question other’s participation?
24. Have you ever been called a “sellout”?
25. Are there certain activities and/or ways of communicating that you feel are more “acceptable” now that you are no longer Straight Edge?
26. Were there certain activities and/or ways of communicating that you felt more comfortable doing when you were still Straight Edge?
27. Would you say that you now feel totally comfortable around youth who drink, smoke, and/or have casual sex?

28. Was there anything about being Straight Edge that you did not like?

29. Is there anything about drinking, smoking, and sexually active youth (as a culture) that you dislike?

30. What are your current views on drinking?

31. What are your current views on drugs?

32. What are your current views on sex?

33. How do you think your life would be different if you were still Straight Edge?

34. Respond to this statement: Ex-sXers have captured the true essence of Straight Edge, in that, they have followed Ian MacKaye’s true bottom-line message- to think for yourself.

**Wrap-up**

35. Is there anything else about the living a post-sXe lifestyle that I should know?

36. What would you like your pseudonym to be?
APPENDIX D

“TRUE TILL DEATH”

BY CHAIN OF STRENGTH
You said it shouldn’t be taken too seriously
You said it was just your personal ideas and opinions
You said it was only meant to relate directly to your life
What about my life?

Has the Edge gone dull?

Well maybe now that you’ve grown dull and old
We’ll pick up where you left off
To you if was just music
But to us it was so much more
When we put our heads together
We’ll prove we got the Edge that can never be dull

True Till Death
Has the Edge gone dull?
APPENDIX E

“FORCED DOWN YOUR THROAT”
BY SS DECONTROL
What's there to do weekends here
Go to a party drink some beer
Everybody's drinking why shouldn't you
Be a part of the drinking crew

That's real cool you're a man
Forced down forced can
Forced down your throat
Forced down your throat

Conditions set conditioned to drink
Too much pressure just won't think
Look what's next smoking a J
Think for yourself break away

Do the hard stuff its real fast
Do it straight the buzz will last
Fuck off you I ain't no waste

Why drink that when I just can't stand the taste