

a supreme expression of masculinity, sXers saw abstinence from "promiscuous" sex as a powerful form of resistance. Rejecting the casualness of many youth sexual encounters, they believed that sexual relationships entailed much more than physical pleasure. They were particularly critical of their image of the "predatory," insatiable male, searching for sex wherever he could get it. Kent, a twenty-one-year-old university student with several colorful tattoos, said, "My personal views have to do with self-respect, with knowing that I'm going to make love with someone I'm really into, not a piece of meat." Kyle, a twenty-three-year-old senior architecture major at Clearweather University, said, "For me personally, I won't sleep around with a bunch of people just for health's sake. A good positive influence. [Sex] doesn't mean anything if you don't care about a person." Walter, the university student, said,

For me it's just choosing how I want to treat my body. It's not something I'm just going to throw around. I'm not going to smoke or use drugs. My body is something that I honor. It's something we should respect. I think sex, if you're gonna do it you should do it, but you shouldn't throw your body around and do it with as many people as you want. If you love your body so much as to not do those things to your body you should have enough respect to treat women and sex how they deserve to be treated.

Though sXe values regarding sexuality appeared conservative when compared to many other youth subcultures, sXers were neither anti-sex nor homophobic as a group. Premarital sex was not wrong or "dirty" in the sense of some traditional religious views, and numerous sXers and sXe bands took a strong stance against homophobia.¹² Sex could be a positive element of a caring relationship. Believing that sex entailed power and emotional vulnerability, sXers strove to minimize potentially negative experiences by rejecting casual sex. Kevin, a twenty-seven-year-old martial artist who had dropped out of high school, said,

To this day I'm by no means celibate; however . . . in the last eight years I've had sex with three girls. I'm not celibate by any means but I also don't believe in fuckin' bullshit meaning less sex. So those tenets kind of took place in my life even though I didn't take it to the actual celibacy extreme. . . . It should be on an emotional level. It's an addiction like everything else. My first understanding of sXe was to not be addicted.

There was no direct religious basis for sXe views on sex. In fact, many of the sXers I associated with grew up with no formal religious involvement, and almost none of them were presently involved in formal religion. While a few sXers connected their sXe and Christian identities, the group advocated no form of religion, and most adherents were deeply suspicious or critical of organized faiths.

Most sXers also believed that objectifying women was pervasive and wrong, rejecting the stereotypical image of high school males. A local sXe band (five male members) decried sexual abuse and rape: "This song is the most important song we play. It's about the millions of women who have suffered rape.

One out of four women will be the victim of a sexual assault in her lifetime. We've got to make it stop."

The movement's "rule" against promiscuous sex was more difficult for members to enforce, and thus there was greater variation in belief regarding sex than substance use. Several of my participants, both males and females aged twenty-one to twenty-three, had consciously decided to postpone sex because they had not found someone with whom they felt an intimate emotional attachment. Most of the young women believed not drinking reduced their risk of being sexually assaulted or otherwise put in a compromising situation. Jenny, an eighteen-year-old college freshman and activist, said,

Like I said, it's all about control over your own body, over your own life. It's about reclaiming, claiming your dignity and self-respect. Saying I'm not going to put this stuff into my body. I'm not going to have you inside of my body if I don't want you in there. It all just very much ties together. I like sXe because it allows me to make very rational, intelligent decisions. That's one of the decisions I think it's really important to think through very carefully. I'm not against premarital sex at all. But personally, I've got to be in love.

Some adherents insisted that sex should be reserved for married couples, while a few believed sXe placed no strictures on sexual activity. Only one young man with relatively little connection to the Clearweather scene had a reputation as a "player." A minority of sXe men were little different than the hypermasculine stereotype they sought to reject. Most insisted that sex between strangers or near strangers was potentially destructive, emotionally and possibly physically, and that positivity demanded that sex should be part of an emotional relationship based on trust.

SELF-REALIZATION

Like members of other subcultures, sXers sought to create and express a "true" or "authentic" identity amid a world that they felt encouraged conformity and mediocrity. Straight edgers claimed that resisting social standards and expectations allowed them to follow their own, more meaningful path in life toward greater self-realization. Like punks, they abhorred conformity and insisted on being "true to themselves." Similar to hippies, sXers believed that as children we have incredible potential that is "slowly crushed and destroyed by a standardized society and mechanical teaching" (Berger 1967, 19). Subcultures, like social movements, engage in conflict over cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization; they are often especially concerned with quality of life, self-realization, and identity formation (Habermas 1984–87; Buechler 1995). Straight edgers believed toxins such as drugs and alcohol inhibited people from reaching their full potential. This view sharply contrasted with the hip version of self-realization through dope (Davis 1968). For sXers, drugs of any kind inhibited rather than enabled self-discovery; they believed people were less genuine and true to themselves while high. A clear, focused mind helped sXers

achieve their highest goals. Kate, the activist, said, "If you have a clear mind you're more likely to be aware of who you are and what things around you really are rather than what somebody might want you to think they are. A little bit more of an honest life, being true to yourself." Elizabeth, a twenty-six-year-old with an advanced degree who had been sXe and vegetarian for many years, said,

You're not screwed up on drugs and alcohol and you can make conscientious decisions about things. You're not letting some drug or alcohol subdue your emotions and thoughts. You're not desensitizing yourself to your life. And if you're not desensitizing your life, then yeah, you're gonna feel more things. The more you feel, the more you move, the more that you grow. . . . I truly believe [sXers] are living and feeling and growing, and it's all natural growth. It's not put off. That's a unique characteristic.

Like adherents of previous subcultures, sXers constructed a view of the world as mediocre and unfulfilling, believing society encouraged people to medicate themselves with crutches such as drugs, alcohol, and sex to forget their unhappiness. Straight edgers felt the punks', skinheads', and hippies' associations with these things blunted their opportunities to offer meaningful resistance. Substances and social pressures clouded clear thought and individual expression. Claiming that many people used substances as a means to escape their problems, the movement encouraged members to avoid escapism, confront problems with a clear mind, and create their own positive, fulfilling lives. Brent emphatically insisted that self-realization did not require drugs:

There are ways to open your mind without drinking and smoking. . . . You definitely don't have to take mushrooms and sit out in the desert to have a spiritual awakening or a catharsis of any sort. People don't accept that. People think you're uptight. . . . There is a spiritual absence in the world I know right now, in America. To be money driven is the goal. It's one of the emptiest, least fulfilling ways to live your life. . . . The way people relieve themselves of the burdens of their spiritual emptiness is through drugs and alcohol. The way people see escape is sometimes even through a shorter lifespan, through smoking. To be sXe and to understand and believe that means you have opened the door for yourself to find out why we're really on this earth, or what I want to get out of a relationship with a person, or what I want my kids to think of me down the line.

Straight edgers rarely spoke openly about self-realization, and they would likely scoff at anything that suggested mysticism or enlightenment (which they would connect to hippies and therefore drugs). Nevertheless, for many, underlying the ideology was an almost spiritual quest for a genuine self, a "truth." Some connected sXe to other identities: "queer edge," feminism, and activism, for example. For others, sXe offered a means of overcoming abusive family experiences. Mark, a quiet sixteen-year-old new to the scene, claimed sXe as a protest: "Straight edge to me, yeah, it's a commitment to myself, but to me it's also a protest. I don't want to give my kids the same life I had from my father."

SPREADING THE MESSAGE

Straight edge efforts at resistance transcended members' simple abstention. 35 Straight edgers often actively encouraged other young people to become drug and alcohol free. Some hippies believed their "ultimate social mission is to 'turn the world on'—i.e. Make everyone aware of the potential virtues of LSD for ushering in an era of universal peace, freedom, brotherhood and love" (Davis 1968, 157). Likewise, many sXers undertook a mission to convince their peers that resisting drugs, rather than using them, would help create a better world. A minority of sXers, labeled "militant" or "hardline" by other sXers, were very outspoken, donning Xs and sXe messages at nearly all times and confronting their peers who used. While sXe promoted individuality and clear, free thought, for some adherents the rigid lifestyle requirements created conformity, close-mindedness, and intolerance, a far cry from the "positivity" the movement promulgated. There was an ongoing tension within the movement over how much members should promote their lifestyle. At one extreme was the "live and let live" faction—individuals should make their own choices, and sXers have no right to infringe on that choice. At the other end was the more militant branch, often composed of new adherents, who believed sXers' duty lay in showing users the possibilities of a drug-free lifestyle. Most sXers maintained that their example was enough. Jenny, the student-activist, said,

I wanna show people there's a community out there that it doesn't make you a fucking dork to be sXe. There are other people out there who are really, really into it. There's a whole group of people you can belong to. You don't have to belong to just them obviously. I just think it can be a really positive thing for people. I go to a dorm where you walk down every fucking hall and the smell of pot knocks you upside the head. I just think that in that case it's really important to get your message out there. . . . I think the best political, social, personal statement you can make is to live by example. That's definitely what I try to do.

Cory, an artist and veteran of the scene at age twenty-one, explained why sXers should set an example for others:

It's all about calling yourself straight edge. You could be drug free and you can not drink and not smoke and go to parties and do whatever, but you're not helping out. There's a pendulum in society and it's tilted one way so far, and sitting in the middle of the pendulum isn't going to help it swing back. There needs to be more straight edgers on the other side to help even it out, at the least.

Thus, while adherents maintained that sXe was a personal lifestyle choice rather than a movement directed toward others, many members "wore their politics on their sleeves" in a not-so-subtle attempt to encourage others to follow their path. Wearing a shirt with an sXe message may be a personal stylistic decision, but when an entire group of people wears such shirts that so clearly defy the norm, style has the potential to become collective challenge.

Straight edge resistance also targeted the corporate interests of alcohol and tobacco, which adherents claimed profit from people's addictions and suffering. Kate, who clearly connected sXe with her activism, said, "By rejecting Miller Lite and Coors, they have less control over me and my life because I'm not giving them my money; I'm not supporting them." Brent, the outspoken vegan, said,

Each individual in society is connected to one another. When you hurt yourself, you're hurting your society. You're leading by example; your kids will see what you're doing and they'll pick it up. . . . Resisting temptation, resisting what's thrown at you day after day, by your peers, by your parents, by their generation, by businesspeople, by what's hip and cool on MTV. Resistance is huge. That's why sXe is a movement. . . . It's all connected: resisting drugs, resisting rampant consumerism, resisting voting Democrat when you can vote third party.

By focusing their message at their families, subcultural peers, mainstream youth, and the larger society, sXe created a multilayered resistance that individuals could customize to their own interests.

INVOLVEMENT IN SOCIAL CHANGE

Like members of the other subcultures, sXers often became involved in a variety of social causes. The sXe youth with whom I associated insisted that working for social change was not a prerequisite of sXe. Indeed, only a few belonged to the substantial activist community in our city. However, many viewed involvement in social change as a logical progression from clean living that led them to embrace progressive concerns and become directly involved at some level. Clean living and positivity led to clear thinking, which in turn created a desire to resist and self-realize. This entire process opened them up to the world's problems, and their concerns grew.¹³ Tim, twenty-seven, the singer of a very popular sXe band, explained,

The reasoning behind [sXe] is to have a clear mind and to use that clear mind to reach out to other people and do what you can to start thinking about fairness, thinking about how to make things more just in society and the world as a whole. . . . It's about freedom. It's about using that freedom that clarity of mind that we have as a vehicle for progression, to make ourselves more peaceful people. And by making ourselves more peaceful people we make the world a more just place. (Sersen 1999)

Jenny considered sXe central to her activism:

I think every element of my life philosophy is very much interconnected. They all sort of fit together like a puzzle piece. The connection I make between sXe and political activism is sort of that whole attitude like you see something wrong, fix it. I don't like the things that drugs and drinking bring about in society so I fix it by fixing myself. When I see other

problems in society as well, I have the same drive to fix it by doing everything that I can do. It's all about claiming power, saying, "All right, I'm in charge of my life. I can do as much good as I want to do."

Kevin, the martial artist, believed that sXe was fundamentally about becoming a strong person in every aspect of life. Strength included rejecting stereotypes and prejudices:

Technically, according to the "rules," you can be homophobic and racist and fuckin' sexist and shit like that and still technically be sXe. You're not drinking; you're not smoking; you're not doing drugs. But I don't personally, on a personal level, I wouldn't consider that person sXe. Because they're weak. I don't think you can be sXe and weak.

Again contrasting against the hippies, punks, and skinheads, for sXers, a clear, drug-free mind was pivotal to developing a consciousness of resistance. The movement provided a general opening up or expansion of social awareness. Kent, the rather quiet young man with many tattoos, said, "I would never have even considered being vegetarian or vegan if it wasn't for sXe. Once you go sXe, I don't really think you're supposed to stop there. It's supposed to open you up to more possibilities. . . . It just makes me think differently. It makes you not so complacent."

In the mid-1980s to late 1980s, sXe became increasingly concerned with animal rights and environmental causes. Influential leaders in bands called for an end to cruelty against animals and a general awareness of eco-destruction. At least three out of four sXers were vegetarian, and many adopted completely cruelty-free, or vegan, lifestyles. Among the approximately sixty sXers I associated with regularly, only fifteen ate meat. Several individuals had "vegan" tattooed on their bodies. Others led or actively participated in a campus animal defense organization. Essentially, the movement framed (see Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford 1986) animal rights as a logical extension of the positivity frame underpinning the entire lifestyle, much like reserving sex for caring relationships and self-realization. Brian, an extremely positive and fun-loving twenty-one-year-old, explained vegetarianism's connection to sXe: "sXe kids open their minds a lot more. They're more conscious of what's around them. . . . Some people think it's healthier and other people like me are more on the animal liberation thing." Elizabeth, the older veteran, said,

If you are conscientious and care about the environment or the world, which perhaps more sXe people are than your average population, then [animal rights is] just going to be a factor. You're going to consider "How can I make the world a better place?" Well, being vegetarian is another place you can start. . . . I'm glad it's usually a part of the sXe scene because it just goes along with awareness and choices. What kind of things are you doing to yourself and how is that impacting the world and the environment? The big corporate-owned beef lots and cutting down the rainforests . . . the most impactful thing you can do for the environment is to stop eating meat.

Some sXe youth involved themselves in social justice causes such as homelessness, human rights, and women's rights. They organized benefit concerts to raise money for local homeless shelters, and often the price of admission to shows included a canned good for the local food pantry or a donation to a women's shelter. I observed several sXers participating in local protests against the World Bank and International Monetary Fund in conjunction with the large 1999–2000 protests in Seattle and Washington, D.C., and others took part in a campus anti-sweatshop campaign. Similar to progressive punks, some sXe youth printed 'zines on prisoners' rights, fighting neo-Nazism, challenging police brutality, and various human rights and environmental issues.

Many sXe women disdained more traditional female roles and appreciated the scene as a space in which they felt less pressure to live up to gender expectations, and the movement encouraged men to reject certain hypermasculine traits and challenge sexism on a personal level. A majority of bands wrote songs against sexism, and many young sXe men demonstrated an exceptional understanding of gender oppression given their ages and experiences. However, despite the movement's claims of community and inclusivity, some sXe women felt isolated and unwelcome in the scene. Men significantly outnumbered women, often creating a "boys club" mentality exemplified by the masculine call for "brotherhood." The almost complete lack of female musicians in bands, the hypermasculine dancing at shows, and the male cliques reinforced the movement's own unspoken gender assumptions that women were not as important to the scene as men and ensured that many women would never feel completely at home.

While some sXers joined animal rights, women's rights, environmental, and other groups, most strove to live out their values in everyday life rather than engage in more conventional "political" protest (e.g., picketing, civil disobedience, petitioning). Instead of challenging tobacco, beer, or beef companies directly, for example, a sXer refuses their products and might boycott Kraft (parent company of cigarette manufacturer Phillip Morris), adopt a vegetarian lifestyle, or wear a shirt to school reading "It's OK not to drink. Straight Edge" or "Go Vegan!" In sXe and other youth movements, the personal was political. Subcultures are themselves politically meaningful, and they often serve as a bridge to further political involvement.

CONCLUSION

Straight edgers' understandings of the group's core values show that resistance is much more complex than a stylistic reaction to mainstream culture. I conclude by discussing an analytical framework for understanding the individual and collective meanings, multiple sites, and personal and political methods of resistance of any subculture.

Members of youth subcultures construct both individualized and collective meanings for their participation. Participants may hold individualized

meanings that are not central to the group's ideology while simultaneously maintaining collective understandings of the subculture's significance. Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995), for example, found that "punk may be constituted both through shared goals, values and so on, and through individual members" (p. 204). Subcultures help define "who I am" during the uncertainty of coming of age (p. 25). They offer a space for experimentation and a place to wrestle with questions about the world, creating a "home" for identity in a modern era when personal identity suffers a homelessness brought about by the forces of modernity (Melucci 1989; Giddens 1991). Thus, at the individual level, resistance entails staking out an individual identity and asserting subjectivity in an adversarial context. In addition, for most participants, individualized resistance is symbolic of a larger collective oppositional consciousness. The collective meanings central to the sXe identity included defying the stereotypical "jock" image, setting a collective example for other youth, supporting a drug-free social setting, and avoiding society's "poisons" that dull the mind. Youth claimed the sXe label rather than simply remaining "drug free" specifically because they believed their individual choices would add up to a collective challenge. Here, resistance involves collectively showing disapproval for some aspect of culture, questioning dominant goals, making an invisible ideology visible, and creating an alternative.

Members of youth subcultures understand their resistance at the macro, 45 meso, and micro levels.¹⁴ Past theorizing on resistance has privileged mainstream hegemonic adult culture, the class structure, or the state as the macro-level target of subcultural resistance (Hall 1972). Indeed, sXers rejected aspects of a culture they believed marketed alcohol and tobacco products to youth, established alcohol use as the norm, promoted conformity, and glorified casual sexual encounters. In addition to challenging culture at the macro level, youth movements offer resistance at the meso level. Straight edgers focused much, if not most, of their message toward their fellow youth, reacting against mainstream youth and perceived contradictions in other subcultures. Overall, sXe illustrates that subcultures form in reaction to other subcultures as well as the larger social structure. Members resisted what they saw as youth culture's fixation on substance use and sex; punks' "no future" and nihilistic tendencies; skinheads' patriotism, sexism, and working-class ideology, as well as some members' racism; and hippies' drug use, passivity, and escapism—believing that these undermine the resistance potential each of these groups share. However, despite its insistence on countering counterculture, sXe co-opted many values of the previous youth movements, clearly owing its "question everything" mentality and aggressive music to punk, its intimation of self-realization and cultural challenge to hippies, and its clean-cut image, personal accountability, and sense of pride to skinheads. Analyzing youth movements at the meso level in terms of their relationship to other youth cultures is vital to an accurate understanding of these groups, as is recognizing the identity battles within the group. Youth reflexively examine their own groups and often attempt to resolve intragroup contradictions. Leblanc (1999, 160) noted, for example, that female punks

"subvert the punks' subversion" just as some sXers resisted militant "tough guys" within their scene. All youth movements share disdain for the mainstream; how they express their contempt and challenge existing structures depends in large part on current and previous youth subcultures that often become meso-level targets for change. No doubt the contradictions in sXe will provoke new innovations both within sXe and from other subcultures seeking to transcend sXe's limitations.

Finally, sXers also reported resistance at the micro level as they rejected the substance abuse within their families and made changes in their individual lives. Many sXers claimed that they abstained from drugs and alcohol at least in part in defiance of family members' substance abuse or their own addictive tendencies. Clearly, meanings of subcultural involvement extend beyond contradictions in adult culture and the class structure.

Furthermore, sXe demonstrated that subcultures use many methods of resistance, both personal and political. Distrustful of political challenges and organized social activism, subcultures often embody a more individualistic opposition. Many sXers did seek to change youth culture, but their primary methods were very personal: leading by example, personally living the changes they sought, expressing a personal style, and creating a space to be "free" from their perceived constraints of peer pressure and conformity to mainstream culture.¹⁵ As Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995) noted in their study of punk identity, "We observed in particular that these oppositional narratives do not invoke radical activities or public displays of resistance; rather, they are fashioned around the routine, the personal and the everyday" (p. 204). Everyday resistance has political consequences (Scott 1985), and (collective) resistance and (individual) authenticity/realization are not mutually exclusive (Muggleton 2000). Buechler (1999, 151) wrote, "In the case of life politics, the politicized self and the self-actualizing self become one and the same. The microphysics of power also points to identity as the battleground in contemporary forms of resistance" (see also Giddens 1991).

Though focused on personal methods of resistance, sXers understood their involvement in political terms as well.¹⁶ Their abstinence from drugs, alcohol, and casual sex was an essential component of a broader resistance to dominant society and mainstream youth culture. As Buechler (1999) pointed out, "Although this form of politics originates on the microlevel of personal identity, its effects are not likely to remain confined to this level" (p. 150). The movement engages in what Giddens (1991, 214–15) called "life politics"—a "politics of choice," a "politics of lifestyle," a "politics of self-actualization," and a "politics of life decisions." Through their individual actions, sXers seek a "remoralizing of social life" (Buechler 1999, 150). For example, becoming a vegetarian or vegan may be an individualistic dietary choice, but when a subculture does so and advocates their choice, it opens up possibilities for other youth. As Leblanc (1999) noted, the intent to influence others is an important component of resistance: "Accounts of resistance must detail not only resistant

acts, but the subjective intent motivating these as well. . . . Such resistance includes not only behaviors, but discursive and symbolic acts" (p. 18).

Looking at resistance through the lens of meanings, sites, and methods forces us to reexamine the "success" of subcultural resistance. Analyzing sXe's core values shows that members' understandings of resistance are many layered and contextual. The issue of resistance goes beyond whether a subculture resists dominant culture to how members construct resistance in particular situations and contexts. Certainly, sXe, like other subcultures, has illusory tendencies; the movement's contradictions include its antisexist yet male-centered ideology. However, examining sXe with the framework I suggest shows that involvement has real consequences for the lives of its members, other peer groups, and possibly mainstream society. Personal realization and social transformation are not mutually exclusive (Calhoun 1994). Although sXe has not created a revolution in either youth or mainstream culture, it has for more than twenty years, however, provided a haven for youth to contest these cultures and create alternatives.

NOTES

1. Straight edgers abbreviate straight edge as sXe. The *s* and the *e* stand for straight edge, and the *X* is the straight edge symbol.
2. Hardcore is a more aggressive, faster style of punk. Though punk and hardcore overlap, in the 1990s the two scenes increasingly became distinct. While present in both scenes, sXe is considerably more prevalent in the hardcore scene. The hardcore style is more clean-cut than punk.
3. Punks and sXers draw a sharp distinction between "shows" and "concerts." Shows attract a much smaller crowd, are less expensive, feature underground bands, often showcase local bands, and are set up by local kids in the scene at little or no profit. Concerts are large, commercialized, for-profit ventures typically featuring more mainstream bands.
4. Straight edge individuals never refer to themselves as *straight edgers* and find the term quite funny. It likely comes from media portrayals of the group. Adherents call themselves sXe "kids," no matter their ages. I use *straight edger* in this article simply for ease of communication.
5. See Muggleton (2000) for a discussion on the importance of grounding any subcultural analysis in members' subjective experiences.
6. I encountered one antiracist skinhead who also claimed to be sXe. He eventually dropped out of both groups, however. An older Latino sXer I knew, a veteran of the scene, claimed he was a skinhead many years ago.
7. Individuals or small groups produce 'zines filled with artwork, stories, record and concert reviews, band interviews, and columns on everything from police brutality and animal rights to homelessness and freeing journalist and former Black Panther Mumia Abu-Jamal from prison. 'Zines, like concerts, are generally DIY; that is, kids