

COLLECTIVE IDENTITY IN THE STRAIGHT EDGE MOVEMENT: How Diffuse Movements Foster Commitment, Encourage Individualized Participation, and Promote Cultural Change

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Although social movement scholars generally study movement organizations, a great deal of significant collective action occurs in diffuse, noninstitutional contexts. This article uses the straight edge movement to explore the less structured aspects of movement activity and discuss the roles collective identity plays in diffuse movements. The straight edge collective identity promotes individual action within the context of a commitment to a strong identity. This paper shows how a strong collective identity is the foundation of diffuse movements, providing “structure,” a basis for commitment, and guidelines for individualized participation. Finally, the article demonstrates that organizational conceptualizations of social movements fail to capture important avenues of cultural protest.

For much of the late 1980s and the 1990s, the study of social movements has been in a state of flux. The Resource Mobilization (RM) and Political Opportunity (PO) paradigms that dominated the discussion about social movements since the late 1970s have fallen under increased scrutiny as theorists challenge the “structural bias” in movement research (McAdam 1994, p. 37). These theories emphasize the importance of organizations in gathering resources and challenging authority structures (McCarthy and Zald 1977) and highlight the social and political contexts in which movements operate, including the structural factors that facilitate or inhibit potential insurgents’ efforts (Tilly 1978; McAdam 1982; Tarrow 1994). While RM and PO models have promoted rich research and theory in a variety of contexts, their failure to capture movements’ less structured and more ideological aspects has left many researchers searching for a new approach. In particular, movement theory has had trouble accounting for diffuse, identity-based movements that lack traditional organization and target institutions other than the state.

The main attempts to explain less institutionalized movements have come from scholars of New Social Movements (NSM) who insist that much of the life of a movement takes place outside organizational and political contexts (Melucci 1989, 1994; Buechler 1993, 1995; Laraña, Johnston, and Gusfield 1994). NSM theorists have brought renewed

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attention to culture, lifestyle, expressive action, ideology, grievance construction, the micro level of movement activity, and the connection between individual and collective identity. They distinguish between older, class-based labor movements and more contemporary, identity-centered political challenges such as the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and gay and lesbian liberation. NSMs concern themselves with social reproduction (Habermas 1981), moral crusades (Eder 1985), and culturally oriented challenges (Touraine 1985). They are often reformist rather than revolutionary (Cohen 1985) and issue symbolic challenges focused on civil society as much as or more than the state (Melucci 1985). In sum, the "New" of NSM theory implies not so much a temporal relationship as a difference in structural form, modes of participation, focus of change, and commitment.¹

Even NSM theories fall short of adequately explaining decentralized movements. Despite their theoretical leanings toward less structured forms of social protest and recognition of the importance of identity, NSM theorists have primarily studied conventional social movement organizations (SMOs), as if collective identity were simply another dimension of movement organizations. The lack of empirical studies on diffuse movements has produced a vision of cultural challenge, lifestyle politics, and collective identity mediated through bureaucratic organizations. In fact, social movements exist on a continuum of structure, with one extreme being fully bureaucratized, formal SMOs and the other being very diffuse movements devoid of any formal structure (Scott 1990).² The former tends to focus on institutional and political change while the latter emphasizes cultural and lifestyle-based change. At the bureaucratic extreme of the continuum, the social movement literature abounds with examples of formal SMOs struggling for political change (Freeman 1983; Tarrow 1994; Zirakzadeh 1997). Theoretical development of examples at the diffuse extreme is less common. The precise role of collective identity in diffuse, culture-based movements has yet to be fully explained.

In this paper I use the straight edge movement, a youth movement connected with the punk rock music scene, to explore the less structured features of movement activity and discuss the particular roles collective identity fulfills in diffuse movements. The movement illustrates the crucial functions collective identity serves in lifestyle-based social change and demonstrates that organizational conceptualizations of social movements fail to explain important avenues of cultural protest. Movements without formal organization have significant social impacts and deserve scholarly attention. This paper will show how a strong collective identity is the foundation of diffuse movements, providing "structure," a basis for commitment, and guidelines for participation.

STRAIGHT EDGE

Straight edge (sXe)³ emerged from the punk rock subculture as a clean living movement whose members abstain from alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs in an effort to resist peer pressure and create a better world (Lahicky 1997; Wood 1999; Haenfler 2004). The punk rock scene of the late 1970s encouraged youth to be individuals, become creators of music rather than simply consumers, and "question everything" about dominant society. However, the scene also had a self-destructive bent, evidenced by its "no future" slogan and insistence that the world was in irreversible decline. Punks therefore lived for the moment, disdaining conventional work and often using alcohol and drugs to excess.

Frustrated by what they viewed as punk's self-destructive, nihilistic attitudes and behaviors, some punks took an antidrug, antialcohol stance, calling themselves "straight edge" after a song of the same name by Washington DC band Minor Threat (Anderson and Jenkins 2001). Ian MacKaye wrote the song in response to the chiding he endured for not using these substances; sXers "made a virtue out of what they weren't allowed to do: since they were underage, they were forced out of the clubs. So they simply declared it cool not to drink" (Azerrad 2001, p. 136). Straight edge arose from the contradictions inherent in the punk rock subculture (see Haenfler 2002). The movement's originators believed that while punks professed individualism, they enforced their own brand of conformity reflective of youth culture's fixation with substance use. Further, sXers felt that punks undermined their own resistance potential by living in a drug- and alcohol-induced haze; the path of true resistance required a clear mind. Finally, by making education and work irrelevant, punks reinforced their position in the very class structure they often critiqued (see Willis 1977). Straight edge retained the punk ethos of resisting mainstream culture while seeking to counter counterculture as well (Helton and Staudenmeier 2002).

Since the early 1980s sXe has spread from the East Coast into a worldwide movement via music recordings, fan literature, and, more recently, the Internet.⁴ In the last two decades sXe has gained thousands of adherents and infiltrated virtually every community of at least moderate size. Straight edge appeals to youth tired of constantly trying to prove themselves to their peers through drinking, smoking, and sexual exploits. Many have personally experienced or witnessed firsthand the destructive potential of drugs and alcohol in their own families.

In the United States the movement is predominately white, middle class, male, and young (typically aged 16–23). Adherents often wear the movement's symbol, an X, on their clothing, tattoo it on their body, or apply it on their hands with a black magic marker.⁵ Members assume the sXe identity as a lifetime commitment to never use drugs or alcohol. For sXers having a clear mind and maintaining personal control leads to self-actualization and empowers them to resist what they view as the negative aspects of both youth and mainstream culture (Haenfler 2004). The intention of sXe, versus simply being drug free, is both personal and social; members seek to improve their own lives *and* issue a strong cultural challenge. As a group sXers believe their individual choices and actions add up to a collective cultural change. Many adherents also avoid sex outside of caring relationships, follow strict vegetarian or vegan diets, and become involved in other forms of social change such as animal rights, human rights work, and environmentalism.

I begin by discussing my involvement in the sXe scene and the methods I employed throughout my research. In the body of this paper, I describe sXers' commitment to identity, individualized forms of participation, and focus on cultural change, extending my findings to other less-structured movements. Straddling the boundary between subculture and social movement, sXe serves as an ideal type toward the unstructured extreme of the structural continuum, thus providing a good opportunity to examine movements with little structure. Finally, I discuss collective identity's central role in less structured movements and in evaluating the importance of movements directed primarily at cultural, as opposed to political, change.

METHODS

I first encountered sXe in 1989 at the age of 15 through my involvement in a Midwest punk rock scene. As I attended punk shows and socialized with the members, I noticed that many kids⁶ scrawled large Xs on their hands with magic marker before they went to a concert. I eventually learned that the X symbolized the clean-living sXe lifestyle and that many punks in our scene had taken on a totally drug- and alcohol-free way of life. Having tried the alcohol-laden life of most of my peers, I quickly discovered it was not for me, so I adopted the sXe ideology and became a fully recognized member of the group. Since then I have attended over 300 hardcore punk shows, maintained the lifestyle, and regularly associated with sXers. The data I present result from over twelve years of observing the sXers in a variety of settings and roles.

My youthful involvement in the Midwest sXe scene grew into a sociological interest in this largely unstudied movement. After completing my undergraduate career, I moved to "Clearweather," a metropolitan area in the western United States, to begin graduate training. I lived in a predominantly white university town of approximately 100,000 people, attending a large research university with 25,000 students. Soon after arriving, I sought out the local hardcore scene and began attending shows. The setting's richness and my interests led me to take advantage of this opportunistic research situation (Riemer 1977). My personal involvement and knowledge of the sXe ideology, history, style, and vernacular enabled me to gain entrée into the local scene very quickly. Since the Fall of 1996, I have participated in the sXe scene as a complete member (Adler and Adler 1987), attending shows, sXe parties, movies, and pot lucks, contributing artwork to a local fan magazine, and occasionally participating in a local animal rights group. My experiences, dedication to the sXe lifestyle, and longevity in the movement intrigued some of the younger adherents, motivating them to seek me out for conversation.

I gathered data primarily through longitudinal participant observation (Agar 1996) with sXers from 1996–2003. Most were area high school or university students from middle-class backgrounds. My friendships grew to include approximately 50 sXers in the local area and another 30 sXe and non-sXe acquaintances associated with the larger metropolitan hardcore scene. My contact with the group occurred primarily through social events at sXers' homes as well as hardcore shows. Hardcore shows⁷ are the key meeting place for sXe youth. These events usually take place at small music clubs/bars, VFW halls, or college campuses. Usually between 50 and 200 youth attend the events, although "fests," weekend-long shows with over 20 bands, attract many more. Local members of the scene book bands, promote the shows, and secure venues at little or no profit to themselves. This "Do It Yourself" (DIY) ethic, prominent in the punk and hardcore scenes, reflects young punks' attempts to avoid the capitalist, profit-driven music world by promoting their bands, shows, and records themselves or through small companies, thereby avoiding "selling out."

In addition to my participant-observation, I conducted unstructured, in-depth interviews with 20 sXe men and 10 women between ages 18 and 35. I began by contacting my closest associates in the scene and eventually worked my way to acquaintances and youth with whom I had less contact. In order to learn from a variety of individuals, I selected sXers with differing levels of involvement in the scene, including new and old adherents, and individuals who had made the movement central or peripheral to their lives. I sometimes asked for referrals in a snowball fashion (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981),

though I knew most participants well enough to approach them on my own. For an additional perspective about movement careers and meaning, I interviewed four former sXers still associated with the scene but no longer committed to the movement. These varieties of participants allowed me continually to cross-check reports and seek out evidence disconfirming my findings (Campbell 1975; see also Douglas 1976; Stewart 1998).

In an effort to expand my knowledge of sXe beyond my primary friendship circle, I sought out adherents outside of the local scene, individuals from other cities, members of touring out-of-state bands who played in Clearweather, and contacts with individuals around the country via e-mail. I also spent several days in New York City, Los Angeles, and Connecticut to experience the scenes there. Finally, I examined a variety of other sources including newspaper stories, music lyrics, Web pages, and homemade sXe fan magazines, or "'zines."⁸ In the mid- to late 1990s, Web sites and e-mail list servs became the latest forum for sXe discourse.

To record and organize my data, I took brief notes at shows and other events that I expanded immediately afterwards into more full field notes on computer. Using headings and subheadings, I coded data according to particular topics of interest, beginning the process of organizing data into useful and interesting categories (Charmaz 1983). Throughout my research, I sought patterns and emerging typologies of data (Lofland and Lofland 1995). Reexamining the coded field notes and transcribed interviews led me to analyze several themes, including sXe movement dynamics such as structure and participation. I continually refined these themes as I gathered more data through emergent, inductive analysis (Becker and Geer 1960).

STRUCTURE, COMMITMENT, PARTICIPATION, AND TARGETS IN THE STRAIGHT EDGE MOVEMENT

As a diffuse movement, sXe raised interesting questions about several general movement characteristics, including structure, commitment, participation, and focus of change.

Diffuse Structure

Though social movement scholars have developed a rich theoretical tradition explaining how movement organizations challenge institutionalized politics, they have been less sure of how to account for diffuse, extrainstitutional challenges that target civil society, as the American Sociological Society's section on Collective Behavior suggests (Snow 2001, p. 2):

While theoretical elegance and conceptual tidiness may be gained by limiting the conceptualization of movements institutionally and in terms of the institutional locus of changes sought, it is important to ask about the costs of doing so. If movements are conceptualized under the rubric of contentious politics, for example, what is to be done conceptually and analytically with collective challenges or adaptations outside of traditional political arenas, such as retreatist and communal movements, movements of self-help and -renewal, lifestyle movements, not to mention the array of religious movements?

Theorists have known for years that the vast majority of people will likely never become actively involved in causes that they support (Lichbach 1996). Yet we continue to focus our attention on the minority of SM actors actively participating in SMOs, who, while certainly important, do not account for the range of participation in social change.

The sXe movement had no headquarters, held no meetings, and kept no membership list. There was no charter, mission statement, newsletter, or formal set of rules. The movement recognized no leaders, collected no dues, gathered few resources, and rarely challenged institutionalized politics. Yet sXers around the world agreed on the fundamental principles of the movement and acted accordingly. Despite its complete lack of bureaucracy, the movement had thrived since 1981 and showed no signs of fading away. "Kate,"⁹ 22, a university student and animal rights activist originally from the East Coast, explained her thoughts on sXe as a movement:

In a sense I think it's a movement, but it's not a typical movement the way people perceive movements. There's no president, there's no organization, there's no meetings, no sXe rallies or anything like that, but . . . you can't deny that such a large group of people choosing to live their life a certain way *and* labeling themselves and putting themselves out there is gonna have an effect on other people around them. Younger people that look up to them, stuff like that. It's almost like an unconscious movement. Not like people aren't thinking, [but] they're not thinking about being a social movement when they decide to be sXe.

Like the virginity pledge movement, sXe was "loosely organized" and relied upon "the development of new products and cultural symbols" including music and the Internet (Bearman and Brückner 2001, p. 860). Straight edgers used creative avenues to engage in an *active* process of identity construction.¹⁰ Lacking formal avenues of communication, continuity, and diffusion of ideas, sXe held more "cultural" arenas in special importance. The scene was inseparable from the hardcore music genre, and sXe bands served as the primary creators of the sXe ideology, reinforcing the movement's core values. The music preserved the movement's history, reflecting the goals and concerns of each sXe era (Wood 1999). Bands repeatedly sang about the virtues of a clean life, resisting mainstream society, supporting one's friends, staying positive, and a variety of social issues including racism, sexism, and environmentalism. For example, when popular bands Youth of Today, Insted, and Earth Crisis sang about vegetarianism and veganism, a majority of the scene adopted these lifestyles. Independent underground record companies¹¹ distributed CDs and vinyl records around the world. Hardcore shows provided consistent central gathering places to celebrate and reaffirm values and share new ideas while 'zines documented the scene with photos and interviews with bands, in some ways substituting for a formal sXe "newsletter." Contributors discussed political concerns, reviewed music recordings, and debated problems within the scene. The Internet enabled contemporary sXers to create a virtual community (Pileggi 1998; Helton and Staudenmeier 2002), and messages boards, Web sites, and e-mail revolutionized networking, allowing greater diffusion of movement values and ideas.

All of these avenues of sXe expression fostered a meaningful collective identity that created an immediate connection between adherents. Members experienced a bond that was difficult for them to describe yet felt very real. Kendra, a 23-year-old artist who had recently graduated with a BA in fine arts, explained, "There's a bond. There's an unspoken thing when you're sXe—you don't have to explain yourself to those people, you don't have to feel weird. There's a commonality." This bond, even between strangers, led sXers to support each other whenever they could, including opening their homes to each other, sharing resources, buying sXe recordings, setting up shows, or backing each

other up in confrontations at shows. On numerous occasions I witnessed veterans of the local scene welcome new sXe kids who had recently migrated to Clearweather from the East or West Coast. Such newcomers had an instant community. Andy, 19, a working-class sXer from the East, explained the value of sXe friendship:

The kids that don't sell out are the ones that are your friends forever. That would do *anything* for you. Like if you get thrown out of your house they'd be right there, they'd be picking you up, they'd be bringing you to work. You'd be sleeping on their floor. Friends like that you can't live without. . . . You treat 'em like they're family. They're not your friends because they're sXe, but you saw 'em at shows with an X on their hand and you went up and talked to 'em and you've been hanging out ever since. Or like nowadays, kids talk to each other online, meet each other online. You just meet people all over the world and you can basically go anywhere. . . . It's something that's never undersold. Your friends are your friends, but when you make friends when you're sXe and they're all sXe, it's a little . . . it's tighter, because your friends are just there whenever; they're not at a party. Your sXe friends are there whenever you need 'em no matter what. I would put my life into every one of my friends' hands without a problem.

Straight edge formed a loose national (even global) network of strangers who would support one another simply based upon the fact that they self-identify as sXe. Thus despite its lack of formal structure and membership, the sXe collective identity was very salient for adherents, creating a basis for commitment and encouraging personal actions in line with the identity.

In the absence of formal structure, collective identity not only provides potential constituents for SMOs, a receptive audience to a variety of more formal movements, and an arena for cultural change but also forms the foundation of a movement in and of itself. Melucci (1988) recognized that collective identity is created in "submerged networks," or small groups of people concerned with the "ongoing routines of everyday life" (Mueller 1994). A variety of less structured movements rest on submerged networks and symbolic challenges. Examples of relatively diffuse SMs include simple living (Elgin 1993; Schor 1998), What Would Jesus Do (www.wwj.com), postpartum depression (Taylor 2000) and other self-help movements, virginity pledges (Bearman and Brückner 2001), and some men's movements (Kimmel 1995; Jesser 1996). Cultural forms such as music, the Internet, and printed material form a collective identity-based "structure" that links the individual to a collective and reinforces behavior, an especially crucial concern for diffuse movements. Collective identity may be important to participation in all movements (Buechler 1993), but in diffuse movements such as sXe, it is critical.

Commitment and Accountability

Sociologists have generally written about commitment in terms of commitment to an organization or group and its goals (e.g., Kanter 1968; Hirsch 1990). Movement actors with strong commitment are more likely to fulfill the organization's day-to-day maintenance, take on extraordinary movement tasks (including high-risk actions), and stick with the group in times of decreased political opportunity or unfavorable social conditions (Becker 1960; McAdam 1988; Taylor 1989). Activists bond to ideologies, leadership, and

communities, all of which are usually grounded in identifiable organizations (Downton and Wehr 1997). Straight edge demonstrates, however, that in focusing on participants' commitment to conventional SMOs and movement tasks, researchers have overlooked the fact that many individuals have instead committed to *collective identities* that reflect personal value identities (Gecas 2000).

Though they lacked a discernible organization with concrete tasks or goals, sXers often spoke of their commitment to sXe, bonding primarily to the *identity* itself, rather than a particular goal, specific organization, or abstract cause. Throwdown, a popular Los Angeles sXe band, demonstrated the commitment the identity demanded of participants: "With confidence to fight addiction / Take the second step / Stand among as we stand as one / Live straight edge / Until the day you die, straight edge." Straight edge fostered a community of like-minded individuals that participants often framed as a brotherhood. Brian, a 21-year-old university student and member of a sXe band, said,

I think mostly sXe brotherhood [means] we have something in common right away. The instant we meet we have something in common. Right there it gives us one up on someone else. That's huge. That's a lifestyle. It's not just like, "Oh, you like hockey, too?" It's a lot more than that. That's where brotherhood comes from. So if something happens to any of my friends I'll stick up for them, I'll help them out. Like brothers.

Framing their commitment in terms of personal integrity, honor, and accountability, sXers offered very individualized explanations of commitment, showing how individual and collective identities blend. Kent, 22, a vegan, tattooed college graduate from New York, said, "It defines part of who I am. Straight edge and hardcore have done more for me than anything." Kendra, the artist, said,

In a sense [sXe] has become my identity. It's just like saying your social security number. Kendra Derber: 075 62 9637 straight edge, white, female, 5'9", 130 pounds. It's just part of who you are. We're all labels and we're all a certain mix of something. Irish/German, English/straight edge [laughs]. It's just who I am and I never want to get rid of it. Now as an adult you think back on all your childhood experiences and now you look to the future and I just don't want to change. Not even when I'm 80 years old. I'm gonna sit there with a blaring sacred heart [tattoo] with a triple X on it. It's informed my life and the choices I've made and the individual I've become.

The sXe identity held differing levels of salience for various adherents. For many, however, sXe was central to their identity, i.e., sXe ranked high on their hierarchy of identities and was therefore very salient (Stryker 1981). Straight edgers frequently invoked their sXe identity in a variety of situations and contexts, indicating a high level of commitment to the identity. Wearing an X meant demonstrating one's values to the mainstream world and symbolized sXe commitment (Wood 1999). For example, I observed sXers wear Xs to graduation ceremonies, disclose their sXe identity to critical students in college courses, place Xs in their e-mail addresses, and wear sXe messages in a variety of situations. Straight edge bands adorned their record covers with Xs and sang lyrics demanding intense commitment: Bold and Earth Crisis evoke images of crucifixion with their songs "Nailed to the X" and "Forged in the Flames" (Bold 1988; Earth Crisis 1993). Popular with both men and women in the scene, tattoos were the most permanent symbols of sXe commitment (Helton and Staudenmeier 2002). Both my perusal of sXe

Web sites and my observations at shows revealed a variety of sXe tattoos, ranging from “XXX” on the forearm and “STR8 EDGE” across the knuckles to “Vegan” on the stomach and “Drug Free” across the chest. Two male Clearweather sXers had enormous stylized Xs across their entire backs.

Straight edge differed from most movements in that it explicitly required a lifetime commitment from its proponents. T-shirt slogans such as “Straight edge: it’s for life,” “One life drug free,” and “Straight edge: If you’re not now, you never were” exemplified members’ rhetoric about the lifelong nature of sXe. Clearly, such a promise made in the hubris of youth is difficult to enforce. The absence of formal membership “rules” (e.g., a written covenant) required sXers to create informal methods of enforcing commitment and accountability. George, a 22-year-old engineering major, said, “There’s definitely accountability. But that’s part of the movement. Other movements have their phone lists. We kind of have this unspoken thing going on.” Informal shaming included labeling sXers who began smoking or drinking “sellouts.” When sXers sold out, their sXe friends often felt disappointed, though rarely to the point of abandoning the friendship. However, rather than simply a personal “failing,” selling out became a betrayal of friendship and the entire sXe identity. New Jersey sXe band Floorpunch, like many bands, equated selling out with stabbing a friend in the back: “Dedication is what you lack / I turn my head, pull the knife out of my back” (“No Exceptions”). The insistence that sXe be a lifetime commitment intensified sXers’ dedication to the lifestyle. Movements with high expectations of their participants often receive greater commitment (Kanter 1968). There was no “partial” sXe; the identity demanded all or nothing. One sip of beer, one drag off a cigarette meant the revocation of any claims to sXe. B.K., 25, a talented tattoo artist, was very accepting and tolerant of people who used and sXers who sold out. However, he still felt strongly about sXe being a one-chance opportunity:

I’m very adamant about saying . . . if you were once sXe and you gave it up, decided it wasn’t for you, you can never be sXe again. . . . If you don’t stick with it or whatever, that’s fine, but you have nobody to be disappointed in but yourself. Nobody else should really be disappointed. In essence, it’s a big deal but it’s not that big of a deal. But it’s important enough that you should realize that once you make the decision to be sXe it’s a decision you make for life. So when you decide *not* to be, that’s also a decision you make for life. Straight edge is a vow, a commitment, for good.

The fact that many sXers sold out didn’t faze new adherents’ belief that they would be sXe forever.¹² Enough sXers maintained the sXe lifestyle into their late twenties and beyond to fuel the belief that sXe *could* be for life.¹³

Strong convictions support identity politics and collective identities (White 1989; Taylor and Raeburn 1995; Whittier 1995; Robnett 1997; Taylor 2000), but not everyone with strong convictions joins an SMO. For example, the 1999 World Trade Organization protests in Seattle featured thousands of individuals acting out their convictions and their commitment to an anticorporate or fair trade collective identity. While many participants belonged to SMOs, many others were committed to the fair trade, global justice, or global democracy collective identities rather than a specific group or groups. Commitment to the larger movement’s collective identity may outweigh commitment to a movement organization (see Hunt and Benford 1992). The global justice collective identity governs behavior in adherents’ everyday lives and creates a

pool of willing participants when massive protest actions arise. Commitment to a collective identity *may* lead to involvement in an SMO, which in turn reinforces commitment to the identity. However, commitment does not rest on membership to a formal organization.

Customized Participation

Commitment to a meaningful identity is fundamental to a variety of forms of participation. As McAdam and Paulsen (1993, p. 154) point out: "neither organizational embeddedness nor strong ties to another volunteer are themselves predictive of high-risk activism. Instead it is a strong subjective identification with a particular identity, *reinforced by organizational or individual ties*, that is especially likely to encourage participation." However, participation in less structured movements, based upon commitment to an identity, is more individualized than participation in a social movement organization. Straight edgers did not "participate" in the movement in ways theorists typically conceptualize movement involvement: strikes, picketing, signing petitions, lobbying, writing letters, joining and/or maintaining an SMO, civil disobedience and other common avenues of social protest. Bound loosely by a guiding collective identity and united in their commitment, sXers customized their participation to meet their own interests and needs.

Rather than a formal group pursuing an explicit political goal, sXers' more individualized forms of participation, taken together, amounted to a collective cultural challenge. Committing to the sXe identity included forging behavioral expectations just as committing to an organization would. Of course in any movement, participants' commitment to the collective identity varies (Stryker 1968; Snow and McAdam 2000), and it follows that adherents' behavior varies as well. The sXe collective identity encouraged a continuum of behaviors, including *essential*, *secondary*, and *peripheral* behaviors. Everyone who claimed the collective identity had to fulfill the essential behaviors; they were prerequisites to "membership." Many adherents fulfilled the secondary behaviors; doing so often indicated a higher level of commitment, but secondary behaviors were not required. Finally, the collective identity suggested a variety of possible peripheral behaviors, unnecessary to claim the identity but indicative of even greater commitment.

All sXers refused drugs, alcohol, and tobacco products. Abstinence was *essential* to the collective identity's behavioral expectations and was the most crucial criterion of membership. Many sXers abstained from "promiscuous" sex (sex outside of a caring relationship), followed strict vegetarian or vegan diets, got sXe tattoos, and involved themselves in more formal social causes such as women's rights, animal rights or environmentalism. These behaviors were *secondary* to the collective identity. Some sXers avoided caffeine, legal and/or over-the-counter medication, and mainstream jobs, connected sXe to their religion,¹⁴ or contributed to the scene (setting up shows, running a record label, printing a 'zine, playing in a band). Such *peripheral* manifestations of commitment were common enough to constitute a pattern, yet relatively rare compared with more central behaviors. Thus, barring the core behaviors, sXers were free to customize their commitment and participation to their individual interpretations and values, tailoring the identity to match their own biography. For many, sXe served as a support system for individualized action and individual consciousness shifts beyond substance use. Katherine, a 22-year-

old working-class sXe woman, explained how identifying as sXe opened up other avenues of political involvement, a common claim among sXers:

Once you get involved in sXe, then a lot of people get involved in something like vegetarianism, veganism, different humanitarian things. They start getting involved in political things. Then you get the political bands like Boy Sets Fire and Good Riddance, bands like that that talk about all different topics going on in the world today. I think people in the scene are more open and willing to help and try to understand what's going on. Help other people out with whatever situation is going on with them. Not to say that people who aren't involved in the scene don't care, but I think when you're involved you end up getting more exposure because of all the 'zines, and all the pamphlets and everything that's all around. The political bands talk about what they want to talk about between songs. It kind of makes you think.

While the essential behaviors were the same for everyone, the openness of the secondary and peripheral behaviors encouraged different *interpretations* of straight edge. Abstinence, for example, held a variety of meanings for participants (Haenfler 2004), including: individual freedom, corporate resistance, personal empowerment, defying family history, defying social norms regarding substance use and abuse, challenging a sick, corrupt society in general, stepping toward enlightenment, keeping a clear mind for other pursuits, and being an example for other young people. The movement actually encouraged participants to make the ideology their own, to create their own meanings. The flexibility of sXe meanings led adherents to incorporate a variety of others beliefs and issues into their sXe identity. Most adherents agreed, however, that sXe should be more than an abstinence movement. Kevin, a 27-year-old professional martial artist, believed that sXe provided an avenue to living a stronger life, which meant many things to him, including examining every aspect of life.

Kids get into sXe cause they're looking to improve themselves and better themselves and become strong and break away from the weaknesses around them. But when they start that, it becomes a habit and it makes you look at *everything*. So these people are like "Being a carnivore is weak!" and they get into that. If you look at most sXe kids, there's like a common core of being sXe—we don't drink, we don't smoke, we don't do drugs—but then if you look at them, there's also other things. They're vegetarian, or they're vegan, or they're political, or they're feminist, or they're gay rights, or they're militant and they work out and do 9000 bench presses a day. They're all pursuing strength in other areas. I don't think they're pursuing it because they're sXe, but I think their interest in sXe spawned an interest in becoming strong which manifests itself in different ways.

Similarly, the owners of Commitment Records, a sXe label located in the Netherlands, claimed that sXe should create in its members a general progressive outlook:

For the people involved in Commitment Records Straight Edge means more than just not drinking, not smoking and not using drugs. In our eyes these are just necessary conditions to be able to strife [*sic*] for the really important things: creating a society, based on mutual respect, without prejudice, hate and ignorance; working for a world without the big differences in welfare which exist nowadays, a world where humans, animals and the environment have priority, and not economic growth and

monetary considerations. There is no place for hardline attitudes, racism, sexism, homophobia, nationalism, satanism and machoism (including violent dancing!) in Straight Edge.

Adopting the collective identity often led to other consciousness shifts. Walter, a middle-class 21-year-old who eventually became a law student, explained how sXe impacted his beliefs:

I've been brought up really Catholic. Before sXe I was a little homophobic. I'm not saying that I'm not [now], but I've definitely opened up a lot more. Plus where I work, at [a hotel], there's 5 or 6 gay people that work there that I don't think . . . if I hadn't learned about this stuff through sXe, through the movement, I don't think I would be as accepting to them as I would be. I'm not knocking on the Catholic Church; I still hold a lot of the beliefs. But I think sXe has led me to look at the world with open eyes, to see things how I want to see them rather than how I've been taught to see them. I'm not saying I'm totally cured of homophobia but I'm definitely a lot more open.

In an individualistic culture many people live out their values as individuals connected by a collective identity. Individuals bonded by a collective identity experience a *community of meaning* that makes the personal political and gives new politicized meaning to everyday actions. It creates an oppositional consciousness and a framework for understanding social problems that leads to a politicization of everyday life (Whittier 1997). Adherents committed to the collective identity live out a set of core values and/or behaviors, but then they are able to fit the collective identity to their individual preferences. They tailor the identity to match their interests, biographical availability, and values.¹⁵

Although sXe was a relatively individualistic movement, sXers interpreted their individual actions and consciousness shifts as a collective challenge. A strong sense of collective identity created expectations that sXers uphold *at least* the essential behaviors and often more. As individual and collective values overlap, failure to uphold commitment to the collective identity amounts to a personal failure as well: "To falter or fail in the pursuit of these values, therefore, is to falter morally" (Gecas 2000, p. 97). Likewise, individuals experience satisfaction when they live in accordance with their values (Shamir 1990). The values and meanings inherent in a collective identity encourage individuals to live an integrated life, a life in line with their values. People experience unease or even cognitive dissonance when they realize their actions contradict their values (e.g., Can I call myself an environmentalist if I don't recycle? Can I call myself a feminist if I don't attend the local Take Back the Night march?). They also experience efficacy and fulfillment when they consciously act according to their values and are more likely to participate in something that strengthens their sense of efficacy.

Cultural Targets and Tactics

Straight edge's diffuse structure, commitment to identity, and individualized forms of participation combined to create a primarily culturally, rather than politically, oriented challenge. Generally, scholars have studied SMOs that challenge the state (Tarrow 1994; McAdam and Snow 1997), although a few have focused on more cultural movements

(e.g., Eder, Staggenborg, and Sudderth 1995; Gamson 1996). Political challenges typically seek institutional change via the political system, although activists use many creative and extrainstitutional means to engage the state. Cultural challenges focus more on lifestyles, asserting and/or reclaiming an identity, and creating alternative institutions. Social movement scholars, feminists, and activists have debated (without reaching definite resolution) whether social change efforts are most effective in the cultural or political realm (e.g., Cohen 1985). Theorists now see through this dichotomy and realize that movements have both cultural and political elements (Scott 1990; Polletta 1997). However, a movement may lean more toward one than the other.

The culture/politics debate raises interesting questions such as who is the “enemy” and who/what is the focus of change. Some movements engage in a more generalized “resistance” rather than singling out a particular opponent. For example, it is difficult to specify the Promise Keepers’ enemy or exactly who the fair trade movement is targeting. Gamson (1989, p. 357) points out that sometimes “the enemy is invisible, abstract, disembodied, ubiquitous.” Likewise, members of the American Sociological Association’s Collective Behavior section discuss the possibility that movements engage a variety of *authority structures* rather than simply the state (Snow 2001). Such “extrainstitutional challenges” might include creating alternative institutions (e.g., lesbian feminist bookstores; support groups), making lifestyle choices that reflect personal values (e.g., shopping at local businesses; pledging virginity), or promoting consciousness shifts by setting a personal example (e.g., wearing a “What Would Jesus Do” bracelet or “Hate is Not a Family Value” T-shirt).

Straight edge was a culturally oriented challenge that created a space for young people to feel “cool” for *not* using drugs. They interpreted their individual choices as taking a stand against an alcohol-obsessed society, setting a positive example, and forging a personal form of resistance that had broader consequences. A participant on an Internet message board responded to another sXer’s claim that sXe is simply an individual choice and not a movement:

Some people are just straight edge because it suits them, not because they feel there is something wrong with the world. But I guess that’s the difference between you and I. I want to have an impact on society, where as you might not be interested in sharing your ideas with other people. . . . I simply think that the movement should still be a movement, and not just a claim for the sake of personal gain. . . . My goal isn’t to cause everyone I know to be straight edge. I’ve said this several times before. My goal is to advocate and promote a poison free society. I’m straight edge because I chose to be. It’s purely symbolic. Being drug free for yourself is one thing, but to actually go out there and stand for something is entirely different.

Although they questioned society at large, many sXers focused on resisting what they perceived as a youth culture obsessed with alcohol. Sid, a 21-year-old college dropout turned Mohawked anarchist, said, “I guess that had a lot to do with sXe because it was a rejection of the whole beer culture thing. Definitely that’s what [Clearweather U] is all about. Especially freshman year in the dorms. It’s really hard to hang out if you’re not into doing that. It’s just not a good place to be.”

For many sXers, being part of the movement meant setting a positive example, particularly for other youth. Rather than overtly trying to convince others of their ideology, most sXers believed their lives demonstrated their convictions. Elizabeth, a 27-year-old

high school counselor, explained both the collective significance of sXe and how she strove to set a positive example:

You can be sXe on your own, but there's not a lot of significance to that. You're more powerful as a group. . . . I wanted to claim sXe because I think the more people that know about living a clean lifestyle, it gets people thinking about that as an option. Truly, some people may never hear of anybody living a drug free or alcohol free lifestyle by choice. . . . I know that everything I do is modeling. People see what you do and hear what you say. People are always searching for people to act according to what they say, and live in correspondence to their beliefs and ideas and thoughts. Unfortunately, that's not that common. So I know that personally I have an impact in that regard.

Some sXers were very persistent and vocal about their movement.¹⁶ Most, however, were suspicious of "preaching" about their cause. They were more likely to spread their message through T-shirt slogans, 'zines, and personal example. B.K., the tattoo artist, said, "Making people aware is an important thing and I think most of the time it's best accomplished just through your daily interactions with people. It needs to be something that's kept very personal." Sid, the anarchist, explained further:

It is important . . . not to push it, but to say, "I'm sXe. It's OK to be sXe. Straight edge is cool." I think it is important. It's just like anything else. I'm vegetarian, I'm vegan. It's easy, it's cool. There's nothing hard about it and it's good for X, X, and X. You lead by example. You lead by showing people you *can* have something else.

While being sXe was an individual choice and a lifestyle, individuals often interpreted their personal resistance as having consequences beyond their own lives. Carrie, 24, a sXer who worked for a nonprofit corporation, said:

It's definitely taking a stand and hitting the major tobacco and so forth corporations in the only place where they really are concerned. Even if it's unintentionally political, I think that it's political. . . . Most of the kids I've known who are sXe have been pretty politically active. They are very strong-minded about specific issues. . . . It would be pretty hard for me to go to a show and listen to somebody talk about all these politics and then go, "Yeah, I agree with that, I agree with that!" and then walk into some corporate firm and work all day. I'd feel kind of like a hypocrite. I think most people would.

Like many NSMs, sXe engaged in what Giddens (1991, pp. 214–215) calls "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 sought a "remoralizing of social life" (Buechler 1999, p. 150). To be effective, diffuse movements must find a way to bridge individual choices to collective action and transform them from "self-improvement to world improvement" (Helton and Staudenmeier 2002, p. 463). Collective identity fulfills this role by giving meaning to individual participants' actions, adding an additional layer of meaning to what could be isolated, individual acts (Taylor and Whittier 1992). Calhoun (1994, p. 28) claims, "the politics of personal identity and the politics of collective identity are . . . inextricably linked," suggesting that personal actualization and social transformation are not mutually exclusive. As Melucci

(1996, p. 115) writes, "To an increasing degree, problems of individual identity and collective action become meshed together: the solidarity of the group is inseparable from the personal quest." For example, coming out of the closet for lesbians or gay men became more than a personally fulfilling and beneficial choice. It became a political act, a statement, an action that ultimately made the world a better place for *all* lesbians and gays. While most sXers refused alcohol, drugs, and tobacco for individualized reasons, their collective choices added up to meaningful resistance to youth and mainstream culture. Abstinence was an individualized mean to a collective end; sXers' intention was not only to live a fulfilling life as an individual but also to create new possibilities for youth culture.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have given an account of the sXe movement, highlighting its diffuse structure, adherents' commitment and accountability to the identity, individualized forms of participation, and the movement's cultural targets and tactics. I have suggested that collective identity is the foundation of diffuse, culture-based movements that promote individual action within the context of a commitment to a strong identity. As Laraña, Johnston, and Gusfield (1994, p. 8) write, "in contrast to cadre-led and centralized bureaucracies of traditional mass parties, new social movement organizations tend to be segmented, diffuse, and decentralized." Even this statement, however, highlights *organizations*; sXe shows that a great deal of noninstitutional social resistance occurs in extraorganizational contexts. Social movements are not commensurate with social movement organizations. Even RM originators McCarthy and Zald (1977) originally distinguished between *social movements* and *social movement organizations*, treating movement organizations as separate entities within movements as a whole.¹⁷ Clearly, much movement activity is manifest via SMOs, but limiting our focus here reinforces a structural bias that misses whole arenas of social change action. In short, movements with little structure matter, and the "newest" (i.e., least structured, most reliant on collective identity) forms need further theoretical development.

Straight edge demonstrates that participants in diffuse movements commit to a collective identity rather than an organization. In fact, most of the adherents of a collective identity will never become regularly active in an SMO. For example, many Americans now claim the "environmentalist" collective identity, yet only a small minority is active in environmental organizations. Rather, based on their commitment to the identity, they recycle, buy some environmentally friendly products, send a check to an SMO on occasion, compost, buy organic food, and take other eco-friendly actions in their daily lives. Commitment is encouraged through cultural products and informal networks and is loosely enforced via shaming, exclusion from the identity, and connecting personal failure to betrayal or "selling out" the collective. Straight edge showed how collective identity supports a commitment to putting personal values into action. Collective identity is a *support structure*; people call on it (i.e., look to the identity for guidance) in a variety of situations where they might otherwise rely on organizational and/or a leader's guidance.

Ultimately, participation in diffuse social movements depends on creating a sustainable *community of meaning*. The more individual and collective identities link, the greater participants' commitment to the cause (Gamson 1991). Movement actors are creating personally customizable identities and action repertoires based upon guidelines

and structure provided by a community of meaning. Changing everyday actions and living out value identities is potentially more sustainable for the vast majority of people. More people participate in this level of social change, and such movements often serve as a bridge to further political involvement.

As sXe shows, collective identity is crucial to issuing a cultural challenge. Melucci (1988, p. 75) sheds light on how diffuse movements such as sXe symbolically issue cultural challenges, claiming that submerged networks “challenge and overturn the dominant codes upon which social relationships are founded. These symbolic challenges are a method of unmasking the dominant codes, a different way of perceiving and naming the world.” A vast movement constituency focuses very little on conventional institutional politics, if at all. Rather, its members are busy creating and living alternatives that reflect the world they want to live in, seeking “social change through the transformation of values, personal identities, and symbols” (Scott 1990, p. 18). They contest entrenched values. While the goal of such movements includes creating communities of meaning that support individual efforts at living out value commitments, the results amount to more than “safe spaces” and subcultures. Such movements pose a meaningful cultural challenge.

New Social Movement scholars contend that collective identity is especially important in modern societies characterized by complex power relationships (Habermas 1984; Melucci 1989; Giddens 1991). In an increasingly individualized world, the politicization of everyday life becomes central to movement activity. “The insistence that the construction and expression of a collective vision is politics, or the politicization of the self and daily life, is . . . the core of what is ‘new’ about the new social movements” (Taylor and Whittier 1992, p. 117). “Activism” has become embedded in everyday life (Scott 1985), supported by a loose community of meaning; “many contemporary movements are ‘acted out’ in individual actions rather than through or among organized groups” (Johnston, Laraña, and Gusfield 1994, p. 7). As Calhoun states (1993, p. 414):

Most theories saw movements as challengers for state power or as contentious groups pursuing some other set of instrumental objectives. There was little recognition of how “the personal is political” or of how important political (or more generally macrostructural) results may stem from actions that are not explicitly political or instrumental in their self-understanding.

The trend parallels the “believing not belonging” thesis in the scholarship of religion; people continue to hold beliefs that shape their daily lives but are less likely to actively participate in a religious organization (Davie 1994).

Indeed, the cultural outcomes of movement activity may generate longer-lasting and more far-reaching consequences than political or legislative victories. The black civil rights movement’s legal victories overturning segregation and other injustices were important, but “de-facto” segregation is still prevalent over forty years later, affirmative action is under assault, and blacks still face structural discrimination. Perhaps of greater significance were the ways the movement changed cultural norms regarding interaction between whites and blacks. The same could be said for the women’s movement. Certainly, suffrage, legalized abortion, and other legal rights have proven pivotal in advancing the power and status of women. But the movement’s greatest impact lies in how it changed relations between men and women, made the personal political,

and destabilized taken-for-granted gender expectations on a cultural level. Many movements have had significant cultural impact in addition to any political gains: gay and lesbian, environmental, and conservative religious movements to name a few.

I do not mean to declare culture the victor in the debate around the relative influence of culture and politics; it is not an either/or question, as each has its importance, and one generally emerges with the other. Nor am I claiming that cultural challenge and lifestyle-based movements are replacing more “political” forms of social protest, or that cultural/lifestyle change is necessarily more significant than challenging institutionalized politics. I simply suggest that expanding our focus outward from “political” SMOs and even “organized” NSMs to cultural, lifestyle-based, diffuse movements will reveal interesting and significant forms of social change. We need to study the role of collective identity in diffuse movements, the “newest” forms of movements that seek, exclusively or primarily, to change culture rather than politics, instead of implying that cultural change is a byproduct of political collective action.

NOTES

1. See Calhoun (1993) for a discussion of nineteenth-century movements with “new” social movement characteristics.

2. “Contrary to culturalist interpretations, no categorical distinction can be drawn between social movements, pressure groups and parties. Social movements are best understood in terms of a continuum stretching from informal network-like associations to formal party-like organizations” (Scott 1990, p. 132).

3. Straight edgers often abbreviate straight edge as sXe, the “s” being “straight,” the ‘X’ being the movement’s symbol, and the “e” meaning “edge.”

4. Straight edge has truly become a worldwide movement. A recent collection of sXe music from around the world called *More Than the X on Our Hands* represented 30 countries and each populated continent. Examination of the bands’ lyrics, Web sites, and photographs demonstrated remarkable ideological similarities.

5. The X became the sXe symbol when club owners would mark underage kids’ hands with an X so the bartenders would not serve them alcohol. The X quickly changed from a solution allowing young people to see bands play in bars to a symbol of defiance to the rest of the punk scene. Straight edgers wore the X with pride to make a statement: “Not only can I not legally drink, I don’t *want* to drink.”

6. Straight edgers called each other “kids” often no matter what their age.

7. Members of the underground music scene sharply distinguish between “shows” (small intimate gatherings) and “concerts” (large, profit-driven, professional events).

8. 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 create them at home, distribute them, and rarely make any money off of them (in fact, ‘zines often cost the producers a great deal of money).

9. All names are pseudonyms.

10. NSM theory acknowledges the active process of identity construction by problematizing “the often fragile process of constructing collective identities and identifying group interests, instead of assuming that conflict groups and their interests are structurally determined” (Buechler 1995, p. 442).

11. Among the most well-known and influential record companies to release sXe recordings are Revelation, Victory, New Age, and Equal Vision.

12. Another Floorpunch song, "Persevere," illustrates a common theme that while others may sell out, the remaining sXers' commitment will stay strong: "Then that day finally came / You lost the edge, but I'll never change / . . . You're long gone, but I'll never quit / Through thick and thin, I'll stick with it."

13. The relatively small Clearweather scene included eight sXers aged 29 to 32. Though most were much less active in the scene as they had once been, their commitment inspired younger kids.

14. In the early 1990s a significant number of sXers became Krishna devotees. Several "Krishnacore" bands toured the United States and Europe combining hardcore with spiritual teachings. There have also been a number of Christian sXe bands.

15. Calhoun (1993, p. 408) discusses this mix-and-match process of commitment construction: "One may thus combine feminism with pacifism and not be much moved by environmental concerns, and no organization will divert one's feminist and pacifist dollars or envelope licking to environmentalist uses. This is described sometimes as a consumerist orientation to political involvement, with a variety of movement products to choose from. The various movements are knit together into a field but not a superordinate umbrella organization."

16. A vegan sXe offshoot called "Hardline" was very outspoken and confrontational. Its popularity faded, but certain small factions of sXe, often called "crews," remained extremely vocal.

17. "A *social movement* is a set of opinions and beliefs in a population which represents preferences for changing some elements of the social structure and/or reward distribution of a society. . . . A *social movement organization* (SMO) is a complex, or formal, organization which identifies its goals with the preferences of a social movement or a countermovement and attempts to implement those goals." (McCarthy and Zald 1977, pp. 1217–1218).

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