Straight Edge as an Australian Youth Subculture

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Abstract:
This paper considers the phenomenon of straight edge in the context of Australian youth culture, with examples from Newcastle, New South Wales. Two claims of USA-based research on straight edge youth subculture are critically examined – representations of ‘hypermasculinity’, and the ‘new neo-conservatism’. Preliminary research conducted to point the way to a larger project indicates: Firstly, that much of straight edge gendered subculture strongly resembles hardcore punk subculture, and there is constant mixing between the two, despite the application of the three basic rules of straight edge – no sex, no drugs/alcohol, no smoking. Fighting, for example, is common to both, challenging claims about the new conservatism. Secondly, rather than representing the achievement of ‘hypermasculinity’, for some male youth in Newcastle struggling with the successful accomplishment of ‘ordinary’ hegemonic masculinity in the night-time economy, straight edge provisionally appears to function as a temporary, clean-living, largely female-free, subcultural space of refuge.

Introduction

will people harass me if i get sXe tattooed on my arm?
(Recent posting on an Australian straight edge website, n.d)
The acronym/symbol sXe - often just X¹ - signifies straight edge – a subsection of youth culture where members (intentionally) do not: drink alcohol or take recreational drugs, indulge in promiscuous sexual activity, or smoke tobacco. It is these three tenets of ‘clean-living’ lifestyle practice that bind members (predominantly male) of an otherwise rather diversified subculture (Wood 2003: 50) together. In their study of New Zealand youth aged seventeen to eighteen who do not drink, Nairn et al (2006) find that two ways in which non-drinkers negotiated the social spaces of youth culture were – ‘by constituting legitimate alternative subject positions’, and ‘reconstituting
the norm of alcohol consumption as abject’ (287). Although their study does not mention it as such, straight edge discourse performs both the (re)constitutions described in the New Zealand study, offering non-drinking male youth a legitimate alternative subject position in the form of a hardcore youth subculture to which they can belong.

**Straight Edge ‘Hypermasculinity’**

The second half of last century was marked by the visible emergence of a dominant global masculinity (Kimmel 2005: 415) - rough, tough, white, secular – what Connell in Australia terms ‘hegemonic masculinity’ (2000: 10). Haenfler’s study of American straight edge claims ‘hypermasculinity’ (2006: 121) to be one of the defining features of the subculture. Following Kimmel (1996: 44-5) he argues that ‘in a disordered, fragmented world, men seek comfort by controlling the only thing they can, themselves’ (Haenfler 2006: 122). Paradoxically, or perhaps logically, since sexual lust and drinking alcohol tend to define contemporary (ordinary) masculinity, controlling those things as a ‘technology of the self’ (Foucault 2005) comes to constitute ‘hypermasculine’ subjectivity within the discourse of straight edge.

Connell finds that ‘very violent movies’ in which the questing male heroes embody qualities of toughness, violence, bravery and winning, are extremely popular with men (1987: 185). This gendered cultural preference is important for grasping the gendered meanings of straight edge, because the subcultural subject position allows young men to be: ‘tough’ – taking a rebellious stand against conformity; violent (no problem there!); brave – standing up for what they believe in; and to be ‘winners’ – daily showing how they can easily ‘win’ the battle for control of lust and indulgence. In fact, they are ‘braver’ and ‘tougher’ than ordinary men – real ‘heroes’ – by not following the crowd.

However, in the streets and in the venues, it is difficult to distinguish straight edgers by general practice, appearance or behaviour from other hardcore male youth collectively enacting forms of ‘protest masculinity’, in which claims to an aggressive and potent masculine gender are exaggerated (Connell 1995: 111). It may be that while straight edgers might understand their controlled, clean-living choice as representing superior ‘hypermasculinity’, this constitutes an insider view. In fact, it could be argued that within hardcore male youth culture, straight edge and non-straight edge constitute variations on the same gendered theme. It should be noted that
in Newcastle, the straight edge scene is almost completely male-dominated, and women appear to figure in the subcultural landscape most often in the subsidiary role of ‘girlfriends’.

**Straight Edge as a Subculture**

In the sense implied by the discussion so far, it seems analytically productive to use the term *subculture* to describe straight edge because, as Muggleton (2002: 167) argues, subculture represents a symbolic status location where young people can construct an alternative identity – an expressive freedom – different from the status quo subject positions offered to them by school, work, gender, status/class, and, in this case, age peers. Moreover, taking Muggleton’s other defining point – straight edge is a *self-ascribed* label of subculture. As subculture, straight edge constitutes a distinctive alternative system of beliefs, values and norms – shared, and actively participated in, by a readily identifiable minority of young people within a particular culture. And, as the New Zealand study indicates, straight edge as subculture fills the definable need of a minority of young people seeking to ‘solve structural contradictions rising from the wider societal context’ (Brake 1985: 8; see also Hebdige 1979; Clarke 1976). The proffered solution is to live hardcore youth culture as daily practice, while not participating in its distinguishing indulgences [abuse of the body].

Apart from observing the three ‘rules of conduct’ for ‘clean’ living, the other unifying feature of straight edge subculture is the music (Haenfler 2006: 9; Wood 2003: 35), and this is characteristic of youth subcultures (Homan 2003: 9; Bennett 2000: 34-5; Rowe 1995: 9; Thornton 1995: 19). Straight edge is not only a term for a youth subculture but for a genre of hardcore [punk] rock music. Straight edgers enjoy a reputation for attending aggressively loud hardcore music gigs and moshing to the point of exhaustion. The point of distinction is though, as one Newcastle straight edger told me – ‘we don’t wake up with a hangover the next morning’. Applying the straight edge rules of conduct to oneself, maintaining them, exercising self-surveillance – represent ‘technologies of the self’ (Foucault 2005) – the process of consciously reshaping the ‘self’ to fit into legitimate discourses. Yet pleasure is an integral part of the straight edge experience. The discourse around straight edge hardcore music is that it speaks (literally) to the constitution of an alternative identity, and that the direct experience of the music is made far more pleasurable by the fact that
one is ‘straight’ while listening to it.

The term straight edge apparently emerged from a 1981 song by punk band *Minor Threat*. Singer Ian MacKaye chanted - ‘I’ve got better things to do/Than sit around and fuck my head/Hang out with the living dead/Inhale white shit up my nose/Pass out at shows/I don’t even think about speed/That’s something I don’t need/I’ve got the straight edge’ (Wood 2003: 35; Haenfler 2006: 7). Both Wood (2003) and Haenfler (2006) concur from their US research that the majority of straight edgers today are middle-class, white males aged eighteen to 28, who claim to find control, purity and strength in the subculture. As indicated above, Haenfler finds it a locus of clean-living, homo-social ‘hypermasculinity’ (2006: 121) – a bid for a distinctive kind of authoritative masculine identity that members express through - ‘music, dress codes (…) tattoos, body movements, gestures and handsigns (…) to identify themselves and to claim power and space’ (Moje 2002: 105).

In the late 1990s, there was something akin to a *moral panic* in the US media about straight edge subculture members who ‘use violence in enforcing straightedge ideals’ (Wood 2003: 45). However, this describes only a handful of straight edgers who constitute themselves as moral vigilantes. Another common misleading idea in Australia seems to be that straight edge is synonymous with Christian youth, but once again, this is only true of a minority. As a technologically-mediated, worldwide youth subculture, straight edge has evolved to include vegans, vegetarians, animal liberationists and body-builders, as well as Christians and those inclined to gratuitous violence, but it cannot be reduced to any one of these categories.

Originating in the Washington punk scene, straight edge ‘arrived’ in Australia in the mid-1980s. The fact that it is still thriving in 2006 in an east coast town like Newcastle, which is not a capital city, demonstrates that it is more than just a passing fad (Thorne 1993). In Newcastle, local straight edge subculture is identified as a subset of the local ‘hardcore punk’ music scene rather than an entirely separate scene in its own right. Nevertheless, straight edgers are readily identifiable in the local music scene, for example,

I hate how they [straight edgers] always judge you, you know, when you’re drunk at a gig (Belle, non-straight edge female informant, eighteen, Newcastle, 2005).

Newcastle straight edge exemplifies complexities and contradictions that it make it
difficult to characterise as simply neo-conservative. The subcultural roots are in traditional punk, yet because straight edge males often shave their heads, wear ‘straight clothes’ and fight, straight edge points in one direction towards skinhead subculture (see Petrova 2006: 192). In another direction, the vow taken by many straight edgers to avoid all intoxicants and eschew premarital sex leads in the direction of Christian youth groups, such as those associated with Hillsong (Huntley 2006: 159). As both Wood and Haenfler maintain, straight edge is a dynamic subculture and local variations abound. For example, although it is difficult to gauge the breadth of this sentiment in wider Australia, locally in Newcastle the word is that no-one can be taken seriously as straight edge before the age of eighteen, because you are not allowed to drink alcohol before then, so there is no real choice involved. At the same time, the term itself is migrating towards a more transitory semantic meaning – so that the designated driver in a group of young people out for a night of drinking in inner city Newcastle will say: ‘tonight I’m “straight edge”’.  

**Becoming Straight Edge in Newcastle**

T: And we’re there, at the Lass [Lass O’Gowrie Hotel] and the straight edgers come in, right? ‘Cos they heard the band.

I: How did you know they were straight edge?

T: Heads shaved, camouflage, black boots. All lookin’ the same, drinkin’ water. Then they leave, you know, and we go woo-hoo (Tegan, non-straight edge informant, 22, Newcastle, 2005).

Becoming straight edge can involve a radical reshaping of self. As Wood points out, moving into straight edge can mean a ‘conscious radical departure from a former lifestyle and a drastic re-articulation of a former identity’ (2003: 49). The quote which began this paper alludes to the potentially violent consequences of the straight edge ‘lifestyle’ transformation. The X (moral puritanism) of straight edge constitutes a symbolic counter-discourse to the dedicated hedonism and risky body-abuse practices of most of male youth culture, which age peers find irritating and provocative. To be straight edge is to take a (‘brave’, ‘tough’) moral stand and invite reprisals.

Confirming the assertions of Wood (2003: 48) there appear to be three pathways into straight edge subculture in Newcastle. The first is from Christian origins. Jone, nineteen, a young man from a Pentecostal family of Pacific Islander background, has by his own admission, always been ‘straight edge’ even though he no longer goes to
church. He has routinely avoided intoxicants, tobacco and pre-marital sex, even while playing guitar in hardcore bands since the age of sixteen. Until seventeen he had long dreadlocks, which he said expressed his Pacific ethnicity, but then he shaved them all off in the company of his straight edge brothers, announcing that he was becoming truly straight edge. Sean, 24, on the other hand, became straight edge because ‘my old man was an alcoholic’. After his father died of liver disease, Sean swore never to drink alcohol. He has X tattooed on his hand.

While both Jone and Sean seem set on long-term ‘clean living’, for many other straight edgers membership is much more contingent and short-term. A number of stories were told about male youth who became straight edge because they had ‘messed up’ their ‘heads’ with alcohol and drugs, and/or had broken up with a girlfriend. Because they were not ‘true’ straight edgers, it was said, they lasted only a year, or even just a few months, before reverting to their former indulgences.

Gigs and Violence

In a city the size of Newcastle, completely separate straight edge music events are rare. Most often, straight edgers attend hardcore music gigs at pubs and other licensed venues and stick together in a group. Although the words are very hard to hear in the blasting wall of sound, apparently straight edge hardcore music can be distinguished from other hardcore genres mainly in terms of lyrics. In the mixed context of Newcastle, straight edge ‘moments’ in a hardcore music gig are signalled by the playing of particular songs. There are several straight edge musicians on the local scene – like Jone above – who persuade their non-straight edge fellow band members to play some straight edge songs on a given night, and space is then yielded in front of the band for straight edgers to temporarily dominate the ‘mosh pit’ – such as it is. Distinguishing straight edge hardcore songs is not a problem for aficionados. As a specific characteristic of post-modern global subcultures, there is an amplification effect of straight edge music and culture through communication technologies, particularly the internet, which connects Australian straight edgers to the knowledge base of global straight edge subculture.

Conflicts with authorities over public space in Newcastle do not happen much in relation to straight edge because of the avowed taboo on drugs and alcohol. However, as a previously blue-collar dominated mining and industrial city, Newcastle has a
tradition of fights between men in the ‘night-time economy’ (see Chatterton & Hollands 2001 for a parallel claim regarding Newcastle in Britain). As Tomsen’s (1997) study of Australian male pub culture indicates, a ‘top night out’ for young males is frequently assumed to include either the direct experience of, or witnessing of, a fight. Fights often break out between straight edgers and other hardcore fans at hardcore gigs in Newcastle, precipitated by arguments over cigarette smoke for example, or by instances of non-straight edgers ‘mocking the X’, but no-one seems to think there is anything unusual about this, since fights between men in Newcastle night-time venues are so frequent.

**Conclusion**

Straight edge does not get much local media coverage in Newcastle (or Australia) because it confounds the usual semantic boundaries between ‘good’ youth and ‘bad’ youth, making it much less of an easy target for moral panic. In fact, it seems so ‘clean cut’ that straight edge is often taken to be an expression of the ‘new conservatism’ in Australian youth culture (for example Huntley 2006: 61). Certainly the basic straight edge tenets of avoiding alcohol and drugs, and eschewing promiscuous sex, are identical to Christian youth groups. But aggressive ‘hypermasculinity’ and endorsing violence is not.

This paper suggests that there is far less evidence for the applicability of the static ‘new conservative’ label to straight edge in Newcastle if we look beyond the three rules for clean living and examine gendered subcultural practices in the streets and in gigs. In fact, male straight edgers look, sound, and even act so much like male hardcore subculture members in Newcastle that the distinction does not seem really productive⁴. One of the most interesting aspects to emerge so far from this preliminary study of the straight edge phenomenon in Newcastle is how it seems to function as a temporary clean-living, female-free subcultural space of refuge for some male youth struggling with the successful accomplishment of ‘ordinary’ hegemonic masculinity.

**Footnotes:**
The symbol X was appropriated in the early days of USA straight edge from the management practice at mixed age gigs of marking the hands of those under 21 with an indelible black X to signal that they could not be served alcohol (Wood 2003: 35).

For an example of a subculture that never really gelled, see Locher (1998) on the demise of industrial hardcore in Ohio.

Names of informants have been changed.

Of course hardcore itself may be a manifestation of the ‘new conservatism’ in Australian youth culture, but that is another question.

References


