techniques of affirmation: deviant behavior, moral commitment, and subcultural identity

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Previous studies have examined how individuals act in ways that are considered deviant by mainstream standards and how these individuals neutralize their actions to maintain a positive self concept. But little is known about how individuals who defy social norms by ''not doing'' socially accepted behaviors construct meaningful subcultural identities. We explore the overlap between ''deviant behavior'' and subcultural identity through a case study of an abstinence-based subculture called *straightedge*. Through an analysis of online, textual interaction among participants of an internet forum dedicated to the straightedge youth subculture and focused

discussions with forum members, we develop the concept of *techniques of affirmation* to frame how participants' beliefs regarding abstinence from drugs, alcohol, and promiscuous sex are articulated in subcultural discourse. We identify five affirmation techniques through which straightedge youths remain steadfast to their ideals, beliefs and non-actions: (1) acknowledgment of responsibility, (2) acknowledgment of injury, (3) acknowledgment of the victim, (4) discounting condemners, and (5) reference to priority relationships. We suggest that people and groups who orient themselves to subcultural frames of reference are more likely to utilize techniques of affirmation as part of constructing a positive sense of self.

Theorists across numerous disciplines agree that people's identities take a narrative form in which we account for what we do and why we do it (McAdams 1985; Sarbin 1986; Giddens 1991). Because our lives often consist of discontinuities or behaviors that fall outside the norm, we have developed ways to tell our stories so as to maintain a positive sense of self. Numerous investigators have elaborated on this process, but Sykes and Matza's (1957) neutralization theory is perhaps one of the most influential in the realm of criminology and the sociology of deviance. According to Sykes and Matza, actors rely on neutralization techniques in their everyday talk to maintain a positive self-image when they break societal norms. Thus neutralization theory can be viewed as a theory of both narrative sense-making and identity construction (Maruna and Copes 2005).

Although many studies have looked at how deviant individuals behave or act in ways that are considered immoral by mainstream standards, our research focuses on subculturalists who defy social norms by *abstaining* from socially accepted behaviors. We argue that when constructing identities that center around ''not doing,'' subcultural members rely on *techniques of affirmation*, which we link to two discrete processes. First, in contrast to techniques of neutralization through which individuals allow themselves to drift among various subcultural value systems, techniques of

affirmation represent how individuals remain steadfast to specific subcultural ideals, beliefs and norms related to non-action. Second, as an extension of labeling theory, which shows that a necessary step in developing a deviant career is taking on a deviant identity, affirmation techniques are part of the process through which individuals construct a meaningful subcultural identity and thus rationally enter into a subcultural career.

We identify five initial techniques of affirmation and discuss their relation to neutralization techniques and the development/persistence of a subcultural career. First, we situate the concept of affirmation techniques within the neutralization literature. We then briefly describe the straightedge subculture, which serves as the case under investigation. After discussing our research design we show how straightedge members attach meaning to their subculture and to the mainstream. This is followed by our analysis of affirmation techniques in straightedgers' everyday ''talk'' online. We conclude with a discussion of affirmation techniques in terms of labeling theory and its possible use in criminology, the sociology of deviance and subculture studies.

NEUTRALIZATION THEORY

Fifty years ago Sykes and Matza (1957) developed what is now referred to as neutralization theory to explain how delinquents make sense of their deviant actions. Prior to the development of the theory, sociologists such as Cohen (1955) argued that many youths who found themselves unable to solve everyday problems through culturally sanctioned means rebelled against the dominant social order by rejecting middle-class culture outright and replacing it with new, often delinquent, sets of norms and values (see also Arnold 1970). Along with the creation of this subcultural ''frame of reference'' (Cohen 1955), delinquent youths were also likely to construct a collective subcultural identity vis-à-vis mainstream culture.

Sykes and Matza (1957) disagreed with this portrait of delinquent subcultures, contending that it overstated the extent to which youths identified with subcultural frames of reference. They believed that everyone, even deviant actors, retains some commitment to the dominant cultural system.

Because of this commitment, deviant behavior negatively impacts an actor's self-concept through experiences of guilt or shame when s/he contemplates norm violations. It is these negative appraisals, and their potential for producing negative self-feeling, that prevents most people from engaging in crime or deviance. However, people *do* engage in deviant behavior. How?

Sykes and Matza argued that, in order to avoid negative self-appraisals, actors who engage in deviant behavior rely on techniques of neutralization rather than orient to a subcultural frame of reference. Neutralizations provide episodic relief from moral constraint and allow individuals to drift back and forth between deviant and conventional behavior (Matza 1964). Drift is possible because these techniques blunt the moral force of dominant cultural norms and neutralize the guilt of deviant behavior in specific situations. Thus, actors can remain ''committed to the dominant normative system and yet so qualifies [their actions] that violations are 'acceptable' if not 'right''' (Sykes and Matza 1957:667). Sykes and Matza (1957) outlined five techniques of neutralization that allow offenders to engage in wrongdoing: denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of condemners and appeal to higher loyalties. Their original list should not be viewed as a complete inventory of offender accounts, however. In fact, numerous scholars have reported new techniques (see Maruna and Copes 2005) and it is almost certain that the list of neutralizations will grow.

Sykes and Matza (1957) made explicit that only those actors who are committed to conventional norms rely on neutralization techniques to protect their self-concept when committing crime or delinquency. After all, it is because of their commitments that they experience guilt or shame for engaging in deviant behaviors. Recent research suggests that the assertion that all people are committed to the dominant culture is overstated. For example, many offenders are committed to their misdeeds and need not take effort to justify them (e.g., Copes 2003; Hindelang 1970, 1974; Regoli and Poole 1978; Schwendinger and Schwendinger 1967; Sheley 1980; Topalli 2005; 2006). Even Matza (1964) agreed that a small proportion of people become highly committed to delinquent values. Because these individuals are relatively

unattached to mainstream values, there may be nothing for them to neutralize. Topalli (2005), for instance, shows that persistent street offenders do not experience guilt about engaging in serious forms of crime and thus often do not neutralize their criminal actions. They do, however, need to neutralize when they violate subcultural norms that oppose doing ''the right thing'' in their social world, like snitching or failing to retaliate when wronged.

There is also evidence that those who have a strong commitment to conventional norms do not employ neutralizations. Using the Richmond Youth Survey, Costello (2000) examined the relationship between parental attachments and use of neutralizations and found that youths who were strongly attached to their parents were less likely to accept neutralizations than those with weaker parental attachments. Mitchell, Dodder and Norris (1990) surveyed 694 university students and found that church attendance (a measure of normative socialization) was negatively related to the acceptance of neutralizations.

Reconsidering Cohen's (1955) work, we suggest that there is a curvilinear relationship between use of neutralizations and commitment to conventional norms. Neutralization use should be most commonly associated with individuals who either identify as members of mainstream society or who are in a state of drift: partially committed to conventional values and to a certain lifestyle or set of behaviors that is labeled as deviant. An absence of neutralization should be associated with people and groups who are either hyper-committed to dominant moral values or else strongly committed to a subcultural frame of reference. For those who are strongly attached or who exaggerate conventional morals (like those adult virgins studied by Mullaney 2001), neutralizations are simply ineffective (Thurman 1984). For those who are weakly committed (like those persistent offenders studied by Topalli 2005), neutralizations are simply not needed because these individuals are strongly committed to a subcultural lifestyle. Thus, it is only those whose commitments fall somewhere in the middle who both accept and rely on neutralizations to excuse their behaviors.

In the remainder of this article we explore further one extreme ends of society where individuals are unlikely to rely on neutralization techniques. Our primary interest is in the

affirmation techniques through which subcultural youth construct a set of norms and practices that satisfy their collective desire for a better life. We focus specifically on the everyday ''talk'' among individuals who actively participated in an internet forum dedicated to the straightedge youth subculture and who expressed especially high moral standards. This research offers new insight into the relationship between a subcultural identity grounded in abstinence or ''not doing'' (Mullaney 2001) and the rejection of traditional neutralization techniques, which allow ''doing.'' Individuals' beliefs regarding abstaining from drugs, alcohol and promiscuity are articulated in ways that clearly mark them as different from others.

THE STRAIGHTEDGE LIFESTYLE

Straightedge arose in the early 1980s in Washington, D.C. and signified a reaction to mainstream, middle-class American youth culture of that time, which was seen as revolving around disruptive and dangerous leisure time activities such as drug use and promiscuity (see Haenfler 2006). Like its punk and hardcore parent cultures, straightedge formed as a music subculture and grew during the 1980s and 1990s via the distribution of straightedge music recordings and face-to-face interaction facilitated through music concerts in local communities.[1] Since its emergence twenty-five years ago, straightedge subculture has changed in several ways, including (in different geographic areas and to different degrees) the adoption of animal rights activism, vegetarianism and/or veganism, a broadened anti-drug stance, the adoption of militant codes of action (Wood 1999), as well as the emergence of vibrant internet-based scenes (Williams 2006; Williams and Copes 2005; Wilson and Atkinson 2005).

[1]It is necessary to note here that there are two overlapping but different meanings of hardcore at work. In the first, hardcore is an ideologically ''pure'' version of punk that de-emphasizes style and emphasizes social change. In the second, hardcore is a music genre derived from punk but influenced by metal. Straightedge history is grounded in both meanings: the subculture was spawned by hardcore punks in the early 1980s but grew in popularity in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the development of straightedge hardcore music scenes.

The term straightedge comes from a 1981 song entitled *Straight Edge* by the Washington, D.C. band Minor Threat (Minor Threat 1981a). The members of Minor Threat identified themselves not as straightedgers, but as punks who were unhappy with what they construed as negative behavior among youth who were being manipulated by adult consumer culture. Other punk and hardcore bands in the early 1980s also explicated their dissatisfaction with the model of instant gratification that predominated the larger youth culture of that time (Mattson 2001; Moore 2000). Nevada's Seven Seconds, Boston's SS Decontrol and DYS, California's Uniform Choice and others combined the speed and energy of punk/hardcore music with lyrics that had positive messages to spread upbeat and activist voices within the punk parent culture.

Minor Threat was also instrumental in defining the early parameters of the subculture. Whereas the song *Straight Edge* gave the subculture a name, a song off Minor Threat's second 7'' EP provided a rudimentary ideology. *Out of Step* (Minor Threat 1981b) states:

> I don't smoke / I don't drink / I don't fuck / At least I can fucking think / I can't keep up, can't keep up, can't keep up / Out of step with the world.

These lyrics became the founding rules for the straightedge subculture and were based on ''a deep hatred for the lifestyle'' of the larger youth culture of the late 1970s and early 1980s (MacKaye in Small and Stuart 1982). Since then these rules have been broadened into a complex subcultural discourse that varies among straightedge scenes as well as within them (for a more thorough discussion see Williams 2004).

Although straightedgers often struggle to counteract or otherwise resist negative portrayals of them in their everyday lives, they have also been keen to express the extent to which they are not average youths. Much like others who are ''out of step with the world,'' straightedgers have developed a discursive repertoire to account for their decisions to be different, in this case to remain abstinent. This repertoire, which we characterize as *techniques of affirmation*, help them construct identities that are seen as separate and superior to mainstream America (Atkinson 2003).

METHODS

We collected and analyzed data from an internet forum to gauge how a group of straightedgers affirmed their commitment to subcultural norms and practices. We studied an asynchronous internet forum wherein individuals posted messages that anyone with an internet connection and a web browser could access. The forum under investigation consisted of participants from all over the world. These members were quite active and it was not uncommon to have dozens of posts each day. Over the course of our research the forum had more than one thousand registered participants, but the data analyzed here included posts from about one hundred participants.

Participants could interact with one another by participating in textual conversations that were organized chronologically on the forum's main webpage. Members could read statements or questions posted by other participants and add their own voice to the conversation. Forum posts were semi-permanent and could be read and responded to at any time. Participants did not have to be online at the same time to engage in a conversation. Most conversations were directly related to the experience of being straightedge in a society that promotes alcohol, drugs and sex. Participants discussed dealing with friends and family that used drugs, strategies for living a clean lifestyle and resisting peer and mainstream pressures to consume drug- and sex-related culture, and perhaps most importantly, support for each other's decision to embrace a straightedge lifestyle and identity.

Our research was facilitated by the fact that we had been active members of the forum for several years. It was during this time that we realized straightedgers used various techniques to construct subcultural identities in opposition to mainstream society. As we categorized and analyzed these techniques, it became apparent to us that thinking of them in terms of Sykes and Matza's neutralization techniques was a theoretically important exercise. We collected data using two strategies. First, between 2002 and 2005 we conducted qualitative media analysis (Altheide 1996) of forum posts by unobtrusively observing naturally occurring interaction among forum participants. Although we examined all thread titles, we focused our analysis on threads in which participants

discussed their relationships with members of mainstream culture as well as their affiliation with the straightedge subculture.

In addition to analyzing posts unobtrusively, we used the themes that emerged during our coding and constructed ''focused discussions,'' which were new threads within which participants could interact. For example, we started conversations by asking participants about why moderation was collectively deemed unacceptable and whether drug use was a victimless crime. By focusing and monitoring the discussions, we could guide conversations, ask follow-up questions based on initial responses, and request participation from those who might be following a discussion but who may not have posted. The goal of this method was not to force within-group consensus, but rather to gather the opinions of individual participants as they interacted with other forum members.

RESISTING THE MAINSTREAM

Before describing the affirmation techniques that straightedge participants used in their everyday interactions on the forum, we need to look at how they constructed a collective identity in contrast to the ''mainstream.'' The boundary between subcultures and mainstream culture has been a point of contention among subculture theorists for decades. In his criticism of the British tradition of subculture studies, Clarke (1997:178) noted that many subculture researchers see ''the power of subcultures [in] their capacity to symbolize Otherness among an undifferentiated, untheorized, and contemptible 'general public'. . . . As a result, [subculture] theory rests upon the consideration of the rest of society as being straight, incorporated in a consensus, and willing to scream undividedly loud in any moral panic.'' Other scholars have similarly criticized some subculture research for uncritically accepting the idea of a so-called mainstream. Although sometimes difficult, it is both possible and necessary to identify the ''mainstream'' when studying subcultural groups. Williams (2003:71) found that straightedge youth:

> cast themselves in terms that emphasized their individuality vis-à-vis the mainstream and their similarity to subculturally-similar others. Yet the dominant culture they resisted was

amorphous and remained largely hidden from view. Thus perhaps the idea of a mainstream 'dominant culture' has become tenable only as a construct that subculturalists use to mark themselves as different . . . .

Most significant is the idea that young people construct both the mainstream and the subculture, marking both as dialectically related. This conception parallels theoretical developments in the study of youth cultures generally. Distinctions between subculture and mainstream "occur through the construction of a. . .mainstream Other as a symbolic marker against which to define one's own [identity] as authentic" (Weinzierl and Muggleton 2003:10). The boundaries between the subculture and the mainstream are not concrete, but are negotiated by individuals and groups through an on-going process of (re)classifying certain tastes and behaviors as legitimate or illegitimate, "high brow" or "low brow," decent or immoral, and so on.

Thus, when correspondent Douglas Rushkoff (Frontline 2001) questioned three young white male subculturalists waiting outside a venue featuring a "rage rock" band and asked: "People seem to sense a lot of anger [in your culture]. . . . Who is the middle finger to?", his respondents confidently replied:

R1: The middle finger is to everybody who doesn't understand what we're doing.
R2: The mainstream.
R1: It's to the world.
R2: [repeats] The mainstream.
R1: It's to these people who don't understand. The people like these people who drive by honking their horns, drive by laughing at us. We don't care. That's who the middle fingers and the fuck you's are for.
R3: I mean to Hell with society. I mean why worry about society and what they think? They control what goes on in our bedrooms, what we dress like, what our hair color is. Why let them control it here? This is where we have fun.

Young people's claims about the "mainstream," while deemed vague and inarticulate by many adults (including

social scientists), are real for the participants themselves. As such, the claims subculturalists make ''are real in their consequences'' (Thomas and Thomas 1928:572).

Other researchers have found that members of alternative youth subcultures regularly construct meaningful identities in contrast to the mainstream, although the articulation of mainstream differs across time and space. Becker (1963) found that jazz musicians constructed a superior sense of collective identity by negatively stereotyping mainstream people as ''squares.'' Akerstrom (1985) found that offenders embedded in a criminal lifestyle portrayed ''straight'' people as ''working stiffs'' who led dull and boring lives. Carroll and Holtzman (2002) found that members of the Long Island hardcore scene defined the mainstream in terms of shopping malls, passive consumption and economic competition. Lowney (1995) discovered that teenagers who self-identified as Satanists were less interested in the religious aspects of worship and more interested in the positive sense of self and community that derived from their collective resistance to the dominant, overtly Christian high school culture. And in her study of riot grrrls, Schilt (2003) found that girls and young women constructed the mainstream as a paternalistic adult world that silenced girls' voices.

In our research, we found that participants talked about straightedge in different ways. Some defined straightedge in terms of how it differed from a promiscuous, overindulgent world where people (adults and teens) engaged in self-destructive behaviors that were condoned and even praised by their peers.

Amalek: [Straight edge] is better. I can say that with 100% confidence. Who ever died of straight edge overdose? Straight edge poisoning? It is better for me and for everyone, but it's not FOR everyone. Straight edge is better, but that doesn't make *me* better, it just makes the way I live my life better.

xHCgrrlx: Do I think I'm better than people who drink and do drugs? Yes, I do, partially. I think I'm better than people who go out and get shitfaced every weekend and puke and forget everything that happened, people that are huge potheads who can't remember anything, etc because I am not fucking myself up like that. I think I'm better than people

who just have a drink every now and then to lose inhibitions or people that rely on drugs to relax, etc because I am not weak and I don't have that crutch.

In these and similar examples, participants drew on a series of socially promoted behaviors that they believed were harmful or counter-productive and then expressed their orientation to a contrasting, subcultural frame of reference. Some participants saw the mainstream as a malevolent social force:

Crazy Hair: Straight edge kids feel threatened by the fact they are a minority in their lifestyle preferences. A lot of the feeling of ''resistance'' to the mainstream might just be kids lashing out in fear of others' perceptions of them.

Other kids saw straightedge not as resistant to a hegemonic mainstream culture, but rather as a reaction to the punk parent culture from which it emerged:

Bugyi: If you want to consider the origins of straightedge then you could say it was a backlash towards the destructive trends in the punk subculture. It's kind of like a counter-culture to a subculture.

In each case, straightedge participants saw themselves as distinct and different from other youth and from the adult world. They recognized that by refusing to engage in drug- and sex-related behaviors, they were marking themselves off as deviant in the eyes of mainstream society. For example, in an online discussion about how mainstream media portrays young people's behaviors, four participants of the forum wrote:

411Straight: Has anyone noticed that more and more the media is showing kids that either use to or still casually do drugs. And just brushing it off like that's just what kids do. Almost like you're suppose to ''experiment'' to be normal.
    PunkGriffin: Well they're right it is a very normal thing for young people to do. We're the ones being unusual by abstaining.
    xLapx: Yeah…We're deviants, in a sense.
    Rice: We're the bad guys, haven't you heard? Evil and loving it.

Rather than attempting to neutralize the potential negative consequences of self-identifying as different, straightedgers almost invariably affirmed their differences, creating the sense that they were ''better'' than their mainstream peers. In the following sections, we describe in detail our conception of techniques of affirmation and then look at five specific techniques participants used to affirm their subcultural selves and to reject behaviors they saw as immoral, yet promoted in mainstream culture.

TECHNIQUES OF AFFIRMATION

Our analysis of straightedgers' ''talk'' suggests that they are aware of the strategies active deviants use to deflect negative reactions. Yet straightedgers actively dismissed the neutralizations given by others, often by turning neutralizations on their heads. Instead of neutralizations, straightedgers expressed affirmations as part of their commitment to a set of ideals grounded in ''not doing.'' In contrast to neutralization techniques, techniques of affirmation are discursive devices that shield individuals from the temptation of wrongdoing; that is, they sharpen the moral force of internalized subcultural norms instead of blunting it. Their social psychological function is to support individuals' desires to avoid engaging in behavior that violates subcultural norms through a subcultural ''vocabulary of motives'' (Mills 1940). Thus, instead of allowing for drift (as neutralizations do), they impede drift. These techniques also serve a social function by allowing straightedgers to publicly construct resistant identities. For people who orient themselves to alternative frames of reference, these affirmation techniques become an expression of that orientation.

Techniques of affirmation are structurally ordered in the same way as neutralizations. The techniques are not idiosyncratically derived, but are learned through interaction within and across subcultural boundaries (see Williams and Copes 2005). Some of the affirmations oppose traditional neutralizations (e.g., acknowledgment of responsibility, acknowledgement of harm, and acknowledgement of victims), while others compliment traditional neutralizations (e.g., reference to priority relationships and discounting condemners). Examples of each of these affirmation techniques

were expressed by straightedgers in the internet forum to account for their high moral commitment, that is, abstinence from alcohol, drugs and sex.

Acknowledgment of Responsibility

If offenders can define the situation in a way that relieves them of responsibility for their actions, then they can mitigate both social disapproval and a personal sense of failure. Offenders deny responsibility by claiming their behaviors are accidental or are due to forces beyond their control. They see themselves as victims of circumstance or as products of their environment. Children who grow up in areas where drugs and alcohol are conspicuously consumed believe they had no choice in the decision to try either. College students who binge drink are more likely to agree with the statement ''It's OK to drink when partying where everyone else is drinking'' than are students who do not drink (Dodder and Hughes 1993:68). Although abstinence from alcohol may not be seen as deviant among adults, drinking is often considered normal and expected behavior within many youth leisure cultures. Individuals often neutralize their over-indulgent behaviors by relocating responsibility to the social situation.

In contrast, participants in the straightedge forum acknowledged individual responsibility regarding alcohol and drug use. They took pride in the fact that they were in control of their actions and were not controlled by external influences. They interpreted the drug use of others in terms of a lack of self-control or will power. The following posts represent this belief.

> StayTrue: How can you be in control of your life if you are not in control of yourself? If you are in control of yourself, you can do whatever you aspire to do.
>
> PrettyNclean: I got drunk once and didn't like that I had no control; saw other people lose control. Never liked drugs and casual sex is kinda outta the question for me. So I became straightedge, and guess what? The day I did I felt so very good.

In these posts, straightedgers expressed their disdain for individuals whose behaviors were seen as uncontrollable or

as being controlled by outside factors, such as drug or alcohol addiction. There was an explicit acknowledgement of responsibility, or lack thereof, directed at the individual who engaged in behaviors that straightedgers considered excessive.

Straightedgers also rejected the claim that inappropriate behavior, such as sexual indiscretions, could be excused because of the presence of drugs or alcohol. They claimed that youth often use alcohol consumption as an excuse to deny responsibility for engaging in promiscuous sexual behavior. This was not the case among straightedgers themselves, who imputed responsibility to the individuals involved.

> TrueEdge: When it comes to drugs and alcohol . . . every single person I have met . . . has just had that little bit of maturity or responsibility lacking. I go to a party, [and] I'm the only one not drunk, the only person that has their wits about them, the only person that isn't sleeping with someone they don't even know, the only person that can walk straight . . . And what happens? I am the one that gets no respect at all, whilst the drunkest most idiotic fool is a hero.

Straightedge forum participants emphasized that sex-related behaviors were the responsibility of the individuals engaging therein, rather than being attributable to outside influences. TrueEdge expressed his opinion that sex- and drug-related behaviors were a consequence of immaturity and irresponsibility on the part of mainstream youth. He expressed the idea that it was not the social situation or the drugs that resulted in potentially harmful behaviors. Rather, it was the lack of control on the part of individuals. In these posts straightedgers express the belief that outside factors should not absolve individuals of their responsibility for doing what is right.

Acknowledgment of Injury

A second neutralization technique, *denial of injury*, focuses on the extent of harm or injury resulting from a deviant or criminal act. The wrongfulness of one's behavior is determined by whether anyone was hurt and/or by whether the actor intended to do any harm. Deviants state that even though their behaviors run counter to societal norms they do not cause any ''real'' harm and are therefore excusable. Bodybuilders who use illicit steroids to enhance their

performance and physique often point out that steroid use is not as harmful as ''real'' drugs such as heroin or other opiates, or they reject the idea that steroids are physiologically addictive (Monaghan 2002). Similarly, those who engage in overtly sexual behavior, such as strippers or topless dancers, account for their occupational choice by pointing out that their behaviors are harmless (Thompson and Harred 1992; Thompson, Harred, and Burks 2003).

Straightedgers in the forum took a significantly different perspective on the extent to which drug- and sex-related behaviors injured themselves and others. They pointed to the psychological and physical harm of drug and alcohol abuse done to users, the family and friends of users, and society as a whole. Many of the straightedgers claimed to have used drugs in the past but stopped using drugs because they ''didn't feel like ruining [themselves] anymore'' (posted by Leavenow). The sentiment of the following post is common among those straightedgers who had used drugs in the past:

> xLucasx:[2] I used to do weed, smoke and drink a lot. One day I drank so much I was unconscious, then I started to vomit and nearly chocked to death, until a mate turned me over. I didn't even know it had happened till I woke up.

Straightedgers constructed drugs, including alcohol and cigarettes, as types of poison that injured those who ingested them—this is why so many straightedgers call themselves ''poison free.''

In addition to highlighting the injury caused to oneself, straightedgers also emphasized the harm caused to close, significant others. They rejected the claim that the harm of alcohol and drug consumption does not extend beyond the user.

> X4Life: I don't drink because my father was an alcoholic for years, and messed up a lot of his life, my life, and the lives of my close family members. My mom was almost killed by a

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[2]Straightedgers regularly use an X to represent straightedge. Thus, the Xs in xLucasx represent the user's subcultural affiliation. Also, the acronym sXe is shorthand for ''straightedge.'' It is comprised of the S and E from straight edge surrounding an X. See Williams (2003) for a history of straightedge symbols.

drunk driver. People get stupid and do stupid shit when they drink.

Stories such as these were used to resist or reject users' neutralizations by focusing on the negative consequences associated with those behaviors. The events listed by X4Life represented social problems prevalent in mainstream society—problems that are regularly neutralized by individuals who engage in them.

Acknowledgment of the Victim

Sometimes deviants admit that their actions are harmful. In these cases deviants can neutralize moral indignation by *denying the victim.* Deviants might contend that victims acted improperly and thus deserved whatever happened to them. Offenders can define their own actions as a form of rightful retaliation or punishment and see themselves as avengers of the wronged. Denial of the victim also occurs if the victim is absent, unknown or abstract. In many situations offenders can easily ignore the rights of victims because the victims remain unspecified in the offender's conscience.

Straightedgers in the forum actively pointed to the victims of alcohol and drug use. While straightedgers acknowledged that drug use harms those who partake in them, just as pressing was acknowledging the victims surrounding drug and alcohol users, such as family members, friends, and peripheral others. The following two quotes exemplified this sentiment.

> SexySxE: [Drug use] is classified as a victimless crime as far a the legal system goes, but almost any criminal justice class or text book will tell you that while drug use and prostitution are listed a victimless crimes, the term is grossly inaccurate in the greater scheme of things considering family and friends affected, the monetary costs it results in, and children who are victimized or who lose the support of a parent when they turn to drugs or use them to help traffic. The ripples keep on spreading from there, and so in a literal sense, they are not entirely victimless.
>
> ThisIsWhy: In every case of drug abuse, there is always at least one other victim: the people that care about the addict. Having to sit there, and try as hard as they can even though they know there's nothing they can really do, having to deal

with their own pain at watching someone they love go
through so much pain of their own, and having to deal with
the realization that someday this may end in the death of
someone they love so much.

These posts made it clear that victims exist and should be
taken into account when justifying the use of drugs and alco-
hol. By pointing to specific people who are harmed by drug
and alcohol use, victims were no longer ''absent, unknown,
or vague abstractions'' (Sykes and Matza 1957:668). The
awareness of victims was brought to the foreground and
could not easily be denied. Straightedgers made it clear that
they abstained in order to avoid causing harm to themselves
or to others.

Discounting Condemners

The fourth neutralization technique discussed by Sykes and
Matza is the *condemnation of the condemner*. Instead of
focusing on their own actions, deviant actors shift the focus
of attention to the motivations or behaviors of the people
who are expressing disapproval. One might claim that their
critics ''are hypocrites, deviants in disguise, or impelled by
personal spite'' (Sykes and Matza 1957:668) and as such have
no right to pass judgment on others. Delinquents accuse
police of being corrupt and teachers of being unfair. Thus
deviant actors reflect the labels back, allowing them to more
easily justify their actions and shield themselves from a
bruised self-concept. When accused of being drug users,
steroid-using bodybuilders call their accusers hypocrites.
They often try to portray their accusers as being unhealthy
(Monaghan 2002). Becker (1963:74) pointed out that ''mari-
huana [sic] smoking cannot really be wrong when such
things as the use of alcohol are so commonly accepted.''
    When using the condemning the condemner technique,
deviants make it clear that they know those in authority
are engaging in similar behaviors and as such have no right
to judge. Although straightedgers rejected condemners, they
did so by showing how they were unlike the condemners.
Participants described themselves as stronger and morally
superior to those who criticized them and thus had no desire
to follow the dictates of the condemners (see for example
xHCgrrrlx's quote). Straightedge participants related how

they are condemned by members of mainstream or drug-using subcultures for being narrow-minded, square or uptight regarding the use of drugs, especially within the context of it being a ''victimless crime.'' Straightedgers resisted such labeling by pointing out that they have no interest in being like those who ''need'' to rely on drugs or alcohol for social reasons. They delegitimized those who try to promote drug and alcohol use by referring to them as weak and pathetic. One straightedger commented, ''I really feel that being drunk is counterproductive to being a person'' (posted by XribX). This resistant mentality was also exemplified in the following post:

> TrueEdge: [Using] alcohol as a mind altering drug to be able to enjoy one's experiences is unnecessary. If one cannot function in a social situation without the use of a drug they have perhaps some sort of psychological social dysfunction. This is a big issue. So many people say they drink [in a social context] because they wouldn't be able to function without it. Doesn't this say something? If alcohol is encouraging a drugged up society because it says that people need a drug to feel confident enough to interact with people other than your close friends and family . . . then there is something drastically wrong there.

TrueEdge, like many other straightedgers, argued that those who ''must'' rely on chemical substances to properly function in society are not worthy of respect. By marginalizing those who condemn them, straightedgers affirmed their abstinent frame of reference.

Reference to Priority Relationships

The final neutralization technique described by Sykes and Matza is the *appeal to higher loyalties*. By using this technique, deviants neutralize internal and external controls by claiming that their behaviors are consistent with the moral obligations of a specific group to which they belong. This should not imply that deviants reject the norms they are violating. Instead, other norms are seen as more pressing or deserving of precedence. This technique is common among tightly-knit peer groups that have developed sub- or idio-cultural lifestyles, such as young members of fraternities or

gangs who might put loyalty to their peer groups above all else.

In two distinct ways, straightedgers argued that this mode of thinking did not make sense. First, if one truly cared about their priority relationships then they would abstain from behaviors that harm those who they claim to love. It is because they respect and care for their friends and family that straightedgers reported abstaining from certain behaviors.

> Evo: Both sides of my family had a history of alcoholism. I also want to be a good role model for my little brother, and to show him you don't have to kill your brain cells or whore yourself out to have a good time.
>
> sXefun: I watched a couple of close friends die in high school as a result of drug use. I stopped using and became edge after having their moms cry on me and realized I couldn't let that happen to the ones who love me.

In forum posts, straightedgers often pointed to close family members as part of their inspiration and motivation for abstinence. They typically referred to the detrimental consequences of other family members' drinking and drug use to affirm their decisions to abstain. Thus when deciding on whether it was acceptable to indulge in drug or alcohol use, straightedgers expressed the belief that abstinence signified their priority to others.

The second way in which straightedgers rejected this neutralization technique was to reject peer loyalties outright in favor of loyalty to a subcultural value system. Many forum participants wrote about negative experiences with drug-using or promiscuous peers, even losing friends because of their straightedge identity. For these individuals, the straightedge identity was so central to their self-concept that their adherence to a policy of abstinence won out over their desire to maintain relations with peers who were users or promiscuous.

> XbillX: Because I want an identity, and a rebellious one at that, I am not some goody-goody who doesn't do drugs so people like me or any shit, I don't do chemicals because I'm rebelling against a society that wants to pollute my mind and dilute my will. I claim sXe because I'm smart and angry

and rebellious, and I will question everything that society tries to force me to swallow.

In each example, straightedgers focused on a different dimension of affirmation. Some straightedgers affirmed a *social* identity grounded in relationships with significant others. In these cases, friends and family represented a higher loyalty and because of them they rejected the neutralizations of others. On the other hand, some affirmed a *personal* identity characterized by commitment to the straightedge lifestyle. For these individuals the higher loyalty was represented by the abstract concept of the subculture itself. Their commitment to the subculture took precedence over loyalties to peers or others who might condone drug use or sexual promiscuity.[3]

DISCUSSION

In this article we have developed the concept of techniques of affirmation by showing how these techniques are used by young people as they engage in everyday ''talk'' on a subcultural internet forum. Our primary goal has been to develop a better understanding of how some people, especially those who self-identify as members of subcultures, abstain from socially accepted behaviors and orient their lifestyles in contrast to the dominant cultural order. Subcultures that stand in contrast to the mainstream may be grounded in either above-average or below-average moral commitments. We focused on how members of the straightedge youth subculture affirmed their non-actions and their subcultural identities by denying or rejecting the neutralizations of mainstream societal members.

Techniques of neutralization and techniques of affirmation are forms of motive talk (Mills 1940). Techniques of neutralization function by allowing individuals to defuse the potentially damaging reflected appraisals of deviant behavior for their self-concept. They facilitate the construction and presentation of a self that maintains a commitment to the dominant moral order (i.e., to mainstream society).

[3]For a detailed discussion of the social and personal dimensions of subcultural identity, see Williams (2006).

Typically, techniques of neutralization are used by people who transgress conventional norms. Techniques of affirmation, on the other hand, enable people outside the dominant culture to actively resist engaging in behaviors they see as morally reprehensible. Straightedgers used these affirmations to combat internal and external challenges and temptations; thus affirmations often take the form of neutralizing neutralizations.

We do not think that the use of affirmations is unique to straightedgers. Instead, these or similar affirmations are used by anyone who accepts an identity based on ''not doing'' (Mullaney 2001). Research on neutralizations has pointed out that different types of deviant actors use different neutralizations (Maruna and Copes 2005). This is likely true for techniques of affirmations as well. Although it is important to catalogue the different affirmations, the individual use of specific affirmations should be understood within the wider context of narrative sense-making and subcultural frames of reference.

In addition to its relevance to neutralization techniques, affirmation techniques may also be understood as a key component of a subcultural career. Becker (1963) and others (e.g., Lemert 1951, 1967; Schur 1965) have argued that, in order for individuals to regularly engage in deviant behavior, they must at some point internalize the labels that mainstream societal members attach to them. Coming to self-identify as a deviant, a delinquent, a criminal, and so on is a key step in the deviant career. Like deviant actors generally, subculturalists behave in ways that the mainstream deems abnormal (or in the case of straightedge, do *not* engage in behavior that the mainstream deems normal). In order for straightedge youth to reflect positively upon their choices, they use affirmation techniques as part of the identity-building process. Through affirming their choices and non-actions, straightedgers construct meaningful subcultural identities that mark them as morally superior to others, especially those they consider ''mainstream.''

Although neutralization theory was created to explain initiation into delinquent behavior, Maruna and Copes (2005:271) argue that ''neutralization theory is best understood as an explanation of persistence or desistance in [behavior] rather than a theory of onset of [behavior].'' People use

neutralizations as mechanisms to continue a line of behavior. Neutralizations free an individual from the guilt or negative self-image that may be associated with deviant behaviors. Consequently, if the acceptance of neutralizations is important for maintaining deviant involvement, then the rejection of these neutralizations should be associated with the process of desistance from deviance. This is certainly the theory behind countless cognitive correctional interventions that promote the removal of neutralizations to end the behavior.

Although not directly tested here, the process of desistence from a deviant career (or becoming an ''ex'') may be facilitated by the use of affirmation techniques. Ebaugh (1988) detailed the steps that individuals go through to disengage or exit from a role that was once central to their identity. To become an ''ex'' an individual de-emphasizes his/her old-self. Maruna (2001) has found that successful ex-cons (those who have desisted from crime) go through a cognitive reconstruction. That is, they separate their past selves from their current and future selves. They no longer accept their old identities as offenders. Instead, they create new identities that explain both their past selves and their current behaviors. Affirmations may be one way that individuals construct their new identity. Thus when ex-deviants can both stop relying on neutralizations (which allowed them to persist in the deviant behavior) and start accepting affirmations (which allows them to resist the deviant behavior) one can more easily take on the ''ex'' identity. Similarly, by rejecting neutralizations and creating affirmations, straightedgers also actively take on a meaningful subcultural identity.

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