Straightedge Bodies and Civilizing Processes
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In Western cultures that are progressively criticized for hyper-individualistic and avaricious consumption ideologies, we often ignore how small clusters of like-minded actors actively resist consumption pressures through embodied restraint. Sociologists have studied, for instance, how esoteric religious groups reject mainstream forms of consumption and body indulgence via the practice of asceticism; or simply through morally grounded lifestyles predicated on intense body purification, restriction and control. Ascetics approach the body as a ‘natural’ entity needing protection from ‘noxious’ physical pollutants (e.g. drugs, alcohol, disease and, in some cases, medicines), or risks to its moral integrity created by cultural standards (e.g. sexual or eating norms and preferences). Often, an ascetic philosophy is buttressed by a belief that it is one’s duty to align pure body practice with pure spirit. Recent sociological analyses of ascetic lifestyles have focused on the ways in which cultural messages regarding self-control, mind–body holism and social interdependence are purposefully embedded in ascetic practices.

Shepherd’s (2002) analysis of the Australian anarcho-environmentalist movement, for example, suggests how resistance to environmental degradation may be waged through asceticism. The group Shepherd describes rejects capitalist philosophies of mass consumption in favour of a ‘less is more’ approach to resource use. In the hope of minimizing their collective environmental footprint,
members practise Spartan discipline over their own consumption practices and attempt to initiate ‘a moral [environmental] regeneration of the social world’ (Shepherd, 2002: 142). According to Shepherd (2002), the way members police themselves and advocate for social change is a contemporary, secular example of collective asceticism (Harpham, 1987; Weber, 1958, 1968).

Sociological analyses of ascetic lifestyles like anarcho-environmentalism are rare, though, in the extant literature. Yet the relative absence of a literature on asceticism does not signify an absence of secular ascetic lifestyles around the globe. Since the early 1980s a small cadre of North American youth, for example, have practised a brand of asceticism known as ‘Straightedge’. Like the anarcho-environmentalist lifestyle described by Shepherd (2002), Straightedge is founded upon principles of intense self-restraint and personal responsibility; culminating in the practice of abstinence, sobriety and protection of the body from noxious or addictive agents (Atkinson, 2003a; Irwin, 1999; Wood, 1999). Straightedge enthusiasts commonly reject hedonistic body pleasures and vices, and instead advocate ongoing self-improvement through body purification. Their position on physical consumption and corporeal practice starkly opposes expressions of self-indulgence and hedonism common in other Western youth groups like Skaters (Beal, 1995), Goths (Tait, 1999), Ravers (Wilson, 2002) and Hip-hoppers (Martinez, 1997).

The cultural origin of Straightedge in North America is pivotal for understanding the logic(s) of resistance underpinning the ascetic practice, and the group’s relative ‘uniqueness’ among youth subculture formations. In 1981, an American punk rock band named Minor Threat wrote a song titled ‘Out of Step (With the World)’. The song extolled the virtues of self-restraint, personal responsibility and social awareness. By rejecting the largely nihilistic messages offered to youth by other punk rockers of the day, Minor Threat challenged their fans to embrace more positive social attitudes about the body (Wood, 1999, 2001). Specifically, instead of being encouraged to aggressively resist their own political disenfranchisement and cultural dislocation through present-centred body hedonism, a new generation of punks was asked to adopt strict corporeal practices that would enrich their lives. The credo of this inverted punk philosophy, dubbed Straightedge, became ‘Don’t drink, don’t smoke, don’t fuck. At least I can fucking think.’ These underlying ideas suggested that if young persons could first take control over their own bodily impulses through asceticism, they could collectively stimulate positive cultural change (Irwin, 1999). In effect, Straightedge evolved into an ascetic lifestyle of rebellion against the physical excesses associated with youth cultures in North America.

Through the early 1980s, the first and second waves of Straightedge
practitioners fabricated brands of punk music, clothing and language to represent their philosophies of corporeal asceticism. Closely aligned with more traditional punk styles (e.g. ripped clothing, Mohican hairstyles, shaven heads, thrasher music and Doc Marten boots), Straightedge physical style drew attention to an alternative message of ‘walking the edge’ through ascetic self-restraint. By the mid-1980s, Straightedge developed into a fully subterranean lifestyle of ascetic resistance, with practitioners’ alternative physical styles entwined with messages of physical purity (Wood, 2001). Reaching the apex of its initial popularity during this period, the lifestyle waned in appeal by the latter part of the decade as Rap, Grunge, Goth, and other socially rebellious (and more nihilistic) style cultures blossomed in suburban scenes.

However, facing social uncertainties initiated by globalization processes, economic expansion, biological threats and cultural fragmentation characteristic of the 1990s (Hannerz, 1990; Muggleton, 2000), a new generation of North American youth started to explore the viability of Straightedge. Tired of the nihilistic messages offered by other youth subcultures in the era, the new cadre of Straightedgers sought proactive solutions to their feelings of disenfranchisement, risk and anxiety. Straightedge spawned a variety of ideological offshoots during this time, and practitioners often incorporated Vegan and/or Animal Liberation Front ideologies into the lifestyle. Groups of Straightedgers in the United States (New York, Utah and across southern California), Canada (British Columbia, Ontario and Newfoundland), England (London and Manchester), and Sweden (Umea and Lulea) adopted militant positions regarding physical purity – claiming ‘absolute purity’ to be the hallmark or true subcultural uniqueness of Straightedge. An even smaller number of extremist Straightedgers began to utilize violence against non-believers as a means of illustrating commitment to their ‘morally superior’ ascetic lifestyle.

With the slow movement of Straightedge through Western nations, then, the ‘Straightedge figuration’ (Atkinson, 2003a) has grown and splintered into a series of factions (Wood, 1999). As a result, Straightedge asceticism is not enacted universally as a singular regimen, but rather engaged on a continuum. On one end of the Straightedge ascetic spectrum, some participate in the lifestyle ‘recreationally’, adopting the principle of self-restraint, but neither politically nor interactively becoming involved with many other enthusiasts. They believe in a plurality of Straightedge lifestyles and do not castigate those unconvinced by ascetic philosophies more generally.

In the middle of the spectrum are the majority of Canadian Straightedge enthusiasts, whose asceticism organizes most daily rituals, social interaction choices and leisure pursuits (e.g. going to local Straightedge concerts, spending
time online with other Straightedgers and promulgating the lifestyle). On the
other end are a small number of ‘Hate-Edgers’ or ‘Hardcore’ practitioners who
aggressively incorporate Straightedge into everyday life. Hardliners are uncom-
promising in regard to asceticism – occasionally wielding violence against
targeted non-believers. They are the hyper-political faction of the figuration,
accepting only ultra-pure Straightedge ways of life as the ‘truth’. These enthusi-
asts internalize the common Straightedge mottos ‘Down for Life’ and ‘True Till
Death’ – sayings that represent an ‘eternal’ and uncompromising belief in
Straightedge asceticism – to the extreme (Atkinson, 2003a).

Differences between the signifying practices of Straightedge enthusiasts and
those in other youth figurations are not, then, inconsequential for understanding
the social politics of asceticism (Atkinson, 2003b). Much of the subculture
literature in North America and the United Kingdom points to the dissenting, fatal-
istic and present-centred mentalities youth groups adopt (Brake, 1995). Subcultures (youth or otherwise) typically share political orientations of resis-
tance to traditional social constructions of gender or race, structural constraints
over social power chances created by class position and educational disparity, or
cultural conditions such as fragmentation or globalization, but rarely coalesce
around secular ascetic practices. Very few case studies document how secular
youth groups embrace rather than aggressively reject ‘dominant’ cultural norms
regarding the consumption of drugs and alcohol, the avoidance of physical risk,
or sexual restraint (see Wilson, 2002). Even fewer (outside the literature on
environmental or religious social movements) document how asceticism and self-
protection are employed as resistance strategies among socially labelled youth ‘in
crisis’ or ‘at risk’ (Acland, 1995).

In this article, Straightedge asceticism is analysed as a conceptually novel form
of youth resistance that practitioners understand as a collective ‘calling’ (Weber,
1958). The sense of Straightedge calling emerges out of, and is mediated by,
a learned cultural habitus contoured by anxiety, suffering, uncertainty and over-
exposure to cultural practices of self-indulgence. It is a habitus formed in cultural
environments replete with ‘risk’. In this context, practitioners of Straightedge
strive to protect themselves through self-discipline and corporeal control, and
encourage others to recognize the tacit ideological contradictions and self-destruc-
tive outcomes associated with so-called mainstream body practice in Canada. The
main questions structuring the analysis of Straightedge in this article are:

- How is Straightedge understood by participants as a secular ascetic practice?
- Is there a common habitus among practitioners that contours their Straight-
edge beliefs?
- How is Straightedge ‘done’ as a vocation that is practised across social settings?
Principally, Straightedge teaches us that youth subcultures may adopt asceticism as a collective solution to diffuse consumption pressures. Straightedge, while being labelled alternative or resistant by both insiders and outsiders in this way, is still a rather traditional or conservative approach to corporeality. However, the emerging popularity of Straightedge asceticism as socially ‘resistant’ may point to how self-indulgence and risk-taking are perceived as normative by pockets of youth in Canada, and how traditional body practice is constructed as ‘alternative’. From this perspective, the emergence of Straightedge in Canada is a novel trajectory in what Norbert Elias (1994) called long-term ‘civilizing processes’, in that even youth resistance may be structured by an impetus to perform self-control.

Asceticism, Bodies and Civilizing Processes

The sociological literature on lifestyles of bodily resistance such as Straightedge is a collection of empirically oriented and theoretically diverse research. Sociologists, for instance, have located and theorized how corporeal practices ranging from ritual piercing (Pitts, 1998) to the cultivation of cyborg bodies (Balsamo, 1996; Wolmark, 1999) are undertaken in the process of representing cultural discord. From a review of studies on lifestyles of corporeal resistance, a consistent theoretical theme is uncovered – resistant bodily practices tend to be produced by structural relationships of exploitation/inequality and are designed to confront dominant social structures, relationships and ideologies in dramatic and highly disruptive manners. They are, as Hebdige (1979) might concur, forms of distinct cultural noise in situated contexts of social interaction. Despite McRobbie’s (1994), Muggleton’s (2000) and Wilson’s (1999) suggestions that resistance in the postmodern era may take on more mundane, everyday, and less spectacular forms of expression, few study corporeal resistance as that which is muted or private – like ascetic resistance.

Weber’s (1958) landmark analysis of Protestantism as a foundational influence on Western capitalist practices includes one of the most theoretically lucid expositions of ascetic lifestyles. Through his theoretical deciphering of Calvinism, he outlines how religious asceticism in this faith is practised as a means of illustrating total acceptance of the will of God; in particular, the notion of predestination. Importantly, while the Calvinist cannot ‘buy’ his or her way into the chosen kingdom through ascetic performance, one may adopt ‘inner-worldly’ discipline to illustrate submission to God. Inner-worldly asceticism is consciously undertaken as part of a divine ‘calling’ by the Calvinist and is emblematic of a strict commitment to renouncing, among other things, physical temptation. Protestant asceticism organizes a daily regimen and exemplifies what may be accomplished...
through divinely inspired self-mastery. Perhaps most importantly for the Calvinist, successfully following the ‘ascetic way’ helps to alleviate the psychological stress involved in not knowing whether one is among God’s elect (Weber, 1958).

Building on Weber’s work, Harpham’s (1987) analysis of religious asceticism as a form of social resistance underlines how ascetics within Western nations generally disavow dominant norms regarding body consumption. Through an understanding of the world mediated by religious doctrine, practitioners of asceticism both condemn the apparent laxity of prevailing moral/civil codes dictating appropriate body performance, and encourage others to engage religiously grounded techniques of ethical body performance (Harpham, 1987). Indeed, ascetics often justify their life/body choices as morally superior to dominant cultural practices. According to Harpham, asceticism involves reflexive self-work in everyday life and a conscious attempt to proselytize others to the ascetic way. Part of the cultural logic of ascetic ways of life is, then, to set a community example for others to emulate.

Not all ascetic groups, however, initiate proselytizing campaigns. Contemporary research on ascetic groups in North America uncovers esoteric communities unconcerned with promulgating ascetic orientations. In a study of the Mi’kmaq tradition of netukulimk, Barsh (2002) documents how Native Canadian groups have long upheld a ‘take only what you need’ philosophy in regard to material consumption. In recognizing their spiritual, ethical and biological role in environmental management, the Mi’kmaq, akin to the group of anarcho-environmentalists Shepherd (2002) describes, cooperatively participate in an asceticism buttressed by moral sentiment and biological awareness. The Mi’kmaq show only marginal interest in disseminating their ecological orientations to outsiders. Iorio’s (1999) analysis of Mennonite communities similarly draws attention to how esoteric religious orders practising asceticism distance themselves from outsiders. Mennonite communities are mainly divorced from contact with cultural others as a method of insulating the group from ‘contaminating’ social influences, thereby reducing potential sources of risk and temptation posed by alternative cultural ways (Iorio, 1999).

Other research efforts challenge the notion that ascetic cultures have religious bases. Through an explication of the sheer physical pleasure of asceticism, Coveney and Bunton (2003) emphasize how specific ascetic practices of self-restraint and personal betterment are loosely similar to the ancient Greek practice of askesis. Askesis involves controlling carnal body pleasures and libidinal instincts in the hope of deriving physical exhilaration, consciousness expansion and corporeal ecstasy from the process. Thus, askesis is designed to liberate the body through personal containment, denial and experimentation. Interpreting
askesis from such an ‘individualistic’ perspective, Coveney and Bunton (2003) question the actual social/moral merit of asceticism. In citing examples of body practice in North America such as excessive dieting and weight loss, they contend that askesis/asceticism is often structured by a pathological and myopic conquering of the body’s physiological needs according to irrational cultural imperatives. While asceticism may empower the self on a temporary basis, it may have long-term deleterious effects on proper body functioning.

Winkler and Cole (1994) similarly argue that the pursuit of asceticism may prove self-destructive for unskilled practitioners. Their collection of essays on contemporary ascetic pleasure illustrates how North American practices of self-restraint and corporeal control resonate with dominant Western cultural images of ‘perfect’ bodies. Winkler and Cole (1994) attend to contemporary secular asceticism, and the degree to which common expressions of Western asceticism are underpinned by a cult of individualism (see Putnam, 2001). As Lupton (1996) argues, emaciating the body as self-discipline in the pursuit of slenderness places an individual at risk of body failure – even to the point of death. The ascetic philosophy morphs from self-protection and the avoidance of risk to the conscious degradation of the body’s integrity to achieve irrational (i.e. as they are largely unattainable) cultural ideals.

Through my fieldwork on Straightedge, I learned that practitioners see little value in dominant uses of esoteric-religious or popular cultural asceticism as practised by some North Americans. Straightedgers generally reject religious meta-narratives regarding worldly experience, do not view their pro-normative behaviours as sectarian or unusual, and eschew the idea that self-restraint is self-harm. Underpinning many of their narratives is a sense that Straightedge is morally superior to prevailing life choices in North America. From this orienting perspective of superiority, many Straightedge enthusiasts strive to recalibrate our understandings of asceticism as both non-religious and personally/socially advantageous. The Straightedge enthusiast James (19) expressed:

It’s not a religious way of life. You shouldn’t be Straightedge ‘cause of blind faith or ‘cause how you behave gets you into some kind of heaven in the afterlife. You do Straightedge because it helps you right now, it saves your skin. I’m not worried about what happens to my body after I die, I care about living a long life in a healthy body. That’s what I worry about.

Straightedgers like James express an intense passion for bettering their own lives, purifying their bodies and perfecting their abilities for self-control. As risk theorists might predict (Beck, 1999; Lupton, 1999; Rhodes, 1997), Straightedgers respond to social environments of great doubt and anxiety with self-reflexive bodywork. They also communicate the wish to enlighten others through ascetic acts, a desire to invigorate social spaces by encouraging ethical discipline, and a
hope that cultural preferences will shift from immoral consumerism to that of disciplined body practice.

To theoretically decode Straightedge asceticism as a lifestyle of embodied self-restraint, Weber’s (1968) watershed analysis of inner-worldly asceticism as a social calling needs to be coupled with Elias’s (1991, 1994, 1996) understanding of the civilizing process and its relationship to ongoing habitus formation. Elias’s outline of the civilizing process is relatively straightforward. Over the course of history, Western nations became increasingly ‘dense’ in terms of their respective social divisions of labour and corresponding interdependencies shared by people therein. These demographic shifts occurred and were arguably facilitated within emerging nations headed by central ruling authorities that ‘owned’ the legitimate means of violence and economic taxation. Elias (1994) describes these structural and social transformations as unintended ‘sociogenic’ changes. As history unfolded in these relatively ‘pacified’ and deeply interdependent social spaces, people became more attuned to the needs and thoughts of others. As heightened emotional control and impression management became practised over time, collective psychologies were affected such that self-restraint crystallized as an established cultural norm. The embedding of an impetus toward self-restraint in the collective cultural psyche is described by Elias (1994) as a central ‘psychogenic’ change.

Through his study of sociogenesis and psychogenesis in the civilizing process, Elias described civilized personality structures as ‘socially learned second natures’ or *habituses*, and suggested that through ongoing socialization processes individuals learn seemingly taken-for-granted ways (i.e. habits) of experiencing, utilizing and interpreting their bodies. Elias’s (1994, 1996) exposition on the habitus formation process outlines how one’s conceptions of corporeality are incorporated into everyday physical habits such as wearing clothing, eating behaviours, sexual displays, the expression of emotion and body modification:

> The make-up, the social habitus of individuals, forms as it were, the soil from which grow the personal characteristics through which an individual differs from other members of his society. In this way something grows out of the common language which the individual shares with others and which is certainly a component of his social habitus – a more or less individual style, what might be called an unmistakable individual handwriting that grows out of the social script. (1991: 63)

As argued in this article, Straightedge asceticism is culturally fertilized within specific social contexts replete with habituses marked by risk processes (i.e. as spurred on by contemporary sociogenic change). What becomes considered as rational ascetic action for Straightedgers is homologically tied together as a system of restrained life conduct – in both Weber’s and Elias’s terms, as a vocation of social distinction and moral superiority.
Method

I first met Straightedgers during a long-term ethnographic venture on the tattooing figuration in Canada, conducted principally in the city of Calgary, Alberta. Upon completion of the study, in which I met 31 Straightedge enthusiasts with tattoos, I decided to explore the cultural significance of Straightedge with greater focus as a separate ethnographic study. In drawing upon contacts I established with tattooed Straightedgers, I interviewed and ‘hung around’ with a collection of 23 of them in Calgary. By May 2001, I moved to St John’s, wondering if I, as an ‘older’ male who is clearly not Straightedge, could secure entrée to their hangouts in a city I barely knew.

I lived in St John’s for only three months before I met Jane, a 25-year-old clothing retailer taking undergraduate courses at the university, and her self-employed artist boyfriend Darren. By the late autumn of 2001, I spent time with a group of four Straightedge enthusiasts in St John’s; two members of the group were my initial sponsors Darren and Kate, while the other two were aspiring Straightedge musicians seeking to form a local band – named Quinn and Chris. Over the next five months, I interacted with the group at local coffee shops, their homes, music concerts and through a variety of leisure activities. Through the aid of these four sponsors I encountered 59 Straightedge practitioners in the city of St John’s.

With a population of fewer than 100,000 and a shrinking youth community, the number of Straightedgers in St John’s is astonishing. Even in large urban areas in Canada, the Straightedge population is modest at best, so the presence of Straightedgers in the area immediately surprised me. Most Straightedgers I encountered were between the ages of 16 and 25 (a mean of 21), male (88 percent), working class (86 percent), and of Anglo-Saxon heritage (96 percent). Their levels of education varied, with some still in high school (18 percent), in university (30 percent) or completely out of the educational system (52 percent). A very small number were self-proclaimed militant Straightedgers but did not identify with Hate-edgers. They knew one another well and utilized several ‘all ages’ hangouts around town as their weekend clubhouses. As the research progressed, I devoted more time to interacting with a core group of them at local hangouts and solicited respondents for interviews.

In two years of field research, I interviewed 42 Straightedgers in St John’s. Data from these interviews were compared with the limited interview data I collected from the 23 respondents in Calgary. By contrast to the sample in St John’s, the group from Calgary were younger (mean age of 19), all male, predominantly middle class (78 percent), from diverse ethnic backgrounds, and all except two were still in the educational system.
In all interviews, I practised a style of ‘active interviewing’ (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997) with the enthusiasts in order to examine the social meaning of Straightedge. In an active interview, attention is given to how researchers might use specific rhetorical techniques including semi-directed (i.e. open-ended) questioning to tap into a range of individuals’ narrative resources – or simply, their different ways of perceiving and describing personal experiences based on the statuses and associated roles they possess (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997). As an active solicitation technique, I highlighted my own lack of involvement in the Straightedge lifestyle. While potentially counter-intuitive as a field strategy, I used my ‘insider but outsider’ status within the group as a means of encouraging participation and narrative exploration in the interviews.

Interviews were conducted in a variety of settings such as my office at the university, a coffee shop, a local park or a restaurant. In all but a few instances, I used a tape-recorder during the interviews and field notes were taken both during and after the interviews. Notes were then (within several hours, or at maximum, one day) transcribed onto computer files and filled in considerably as I conceptually analysed the texts. Interviewees were given an explanation of informed consent prior to and after each interview. Interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to four hours. All of the participants were interviewed once and (with the exception of five) were shown transcripts of the interview sessions at a later date so that they might review their own narratives.

Prior to each interview, I reviewed a schedule of approximately 25 questions I wished to explore with participants about the form and content of Straightedge asceticism. I started the interviews with a basic statement: ‘Tell me about Straightedge as you know it.’ I wanted the respondents to begin their narratives where they wished – from starting points they found to be sensible. But as a ‘bad cop’ technique of narrative elicitation (see Hathaway and Atkinson, 2003), I also challenged the basis of Straightedge lifestyles as an attempt to reproduce a social situation practitioners encounter in everyday life. Since most of the time I had spent in the field with Straightedgers could only be described as cordial and accommodating, I sought to alter the contextual feel of our interaction and explore other ways practitioners talk about asceticism. By engaging ‘confrontational’ interactive techniques with respondents I wanted our conversations to probe motivations for being Straightedge, emotional accounts of its performance, and elements of practitioners’ social biographies.

**Straightedge Asceticism**

Straightedge asceticism is based on a series of simple tenets: avoiding drugs, sex and physical risk while promoting morality, discipline and self-awareness.
Straightedge is predicated upon rather Spartan corporeal practice involving intense restraint. It is predicated on the rudimentary idea that self-protection is uncomplicated; avoid what will harm you physically and reject any cultural influences, practices and commodities that place bodies in jeopardy. Indulgence is for those who place importance on upholding middle-class ideologies of conspicuous consumption, and not for anyone seeking to achieve harmony in body and self. Brian (19) describes:

> How much booze is enough to convince you that you’re killing yourself? No one from Molson comes to help you out when you’re dying from alcohol poisoning. … But they advertise in every corner of the world, and beer is really becoming a part of our culture. My friends drink because they think they have to [to conform]. It’s a pretty fucked up society we live in when having the right beer is more important than seeing your life clear and treating your body well. You decide for yourself, will I buy everything that is going to poison me to live up to ideal, or do I walk away from that crap and live clean?

But unlike what Brian suggests, the task of staying Straightedge is complicated and taxing. It is a personal test of will one engages on a daily basis. Weber’s seminal analysis of the Protestant ethic in Western figurations drew attention to the ways in which myriad social tests underpin action, especially ascetic action. As Elias (1983, 1994, 1996) confirms, much of social life revolves around the public performance of ritual tests in the pursuit of distinction (vis-a-vis the display of self-restrained behaviour). And, of course, many tests are principally waged or represented through corporeal performance. The ability to ‘pass’ these tests on a daily basis is what grounds some Straightedgers’ sense of moral superiority; being able to ‘walk the edge’ and not succumb to weakness is a mark of modern, civilized distinction for them. It is also a biting critique of how what constitutes mainstream body performance in Canada (especially in youth cultures) is largely based on physical risk-taking and avarice.

But if the Straightedge calling does not arrive from religious or spiritual faith (as in the case of other ascetic lifestyles), how are the origins of the calling explained? If we cannot ascribe a sense of metaphysical calling to the practice of Straightedge, from where inside does the impetus to ‘do’ asceticism spring? For figurational sociologists, these are essentially questions of habitus (see Elias, 1983, 1996). The calling to Straightedge and its daily practice is derivative of an internalized cultural habitus. One does not require religious instruction to ‘hear’ the calling, as other socialization processes have prepared individuals to understand their predilections for Straightedge asceticism as taken-for-granted, innate or simply natural. Consider the words of Evan (age 19), ‘Most of us think that if you weren’t Straightedge all your life, you never were. It’s not something you have to become, it’s something you are … you’re born with the Edge.’
Perhaps one of the most neglected concepts in Canadian youth research is that of habitus. Sociologists interested in the politics and practices of subcultural life in Canada often fail to interrogate how members enter subcultures in the first place. Despite the volumes devoted to youth pathways into deviance (see Tanner, 2001), and research on the career contingencies involved in becoming a member of an alternative group (see Prus and Grills, 2003), we know relatively little about how youth are socially and psychologically ‘prepared’ to be in subcultures. While biographical information about subculture participants may be provided in extant research as a descriptive tool or as a causal predictor, rarely are subjects’ socially learned personality structures (read habituses) prior to subculture involvement critically inspected. While cultural studies research has championed how a working-class, present-centred fatalism motivates subcultural membership (Hall and Jefferson, 1976; Willis, 1978), and feminist research how female marginalization precipitates women’s subcultural resistance (Garrison, 2000), few have studied how broader cultural habituses condition youth for subcultural membership.

A main theoretical-empirical claim made in this article is that a specific cultural habitus in Newfoundland prepares selected youth to participate in Straightedge. The habitus orients youth toward understanding the ascetic lifestyle as a social calling. In the face of massive social and personal risk, and accompanying anxiety, selected youth in St John’s understand Straightedge asceticism as a means of protecting themselves and morally educating several generations of local youth ‘in trouble’. Even more specially, Straightedge derives meaning in St John’s because of the cultural contradictions posed in this environment. On the one hand, St John’s, Newfoundland is part of a prominent G8 nation, one currently experiencing a 20-year boom in its economy. Canadians in turn have become accustomed to an incredibly high standard of living and this is apparent in cultural emphases on consumption and resource use (Suzuki, 2002). Yet St John’s, and the rest of the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, continues to experience regional disparity in the form of economic neglect and decay. Although Newfoundland youth realize they are members of an affluent nation, they do not participate in the prosperity at a local level. The resulting bifurcation of consciousness has a series of consequences.

First, let us begin by considering from where most practitioners of Straightedge emerge in Newfoundland and Labrador. Overwhelmingly, Newfoundland Straightedgers have both rural and working-class backgrounds. Unlike fellow ascetics in other cities like Toronto and Calgary, Straightedgers in St John’s typically emerge from contexts of pervasive economic suffering. Since the first (1992)
and second (2002) cod moratoriums in the province, that have ostensibly annihilated the fishing industry, towns and villages have ‘closed’ in the province (see Mason, 2002). While some Newfoundlanders emigrate to other Canadian provinces, many families find their way to the ‘urban’ capital city of St John’s. Aaron (21) states:

We left [the town] two years ago when it just wasn’t good for us to stay no more. St John’s is small for Mainlanders, but it’s a huge city from a movie to a guy like me. . . . And when you’re my age, and the place where people drink is the best place to be [George Street], you feel out of place right away, you know. At least back home I didn’t have to put up with dat all the time.

In a culture steeped in the traditions of community pride, family heritage and tight clan boundaries, the diaspora experienced by moving even within the province has dramatically altered the feel of life for youth in Newfoundland (see Sinclair and Palmer, 1997). By leaving their places of birth and their cultural networks, youth from ‘around the bay’ (i.e. anywhere in Newfoundland outside of St John’s) often experience lingering alienation and cultural confusion in St John’s.

In St John’s, the economic and cultural situations are only moderately better than in rural outports of the province. The unemployment rate in the city is nearly twice the national average at 17 percent, and the median income in 2004 for all persons above the age of 15 is only $19,442. Emigration rates in the city (and throughout the province) continue to climb (an 8 percent loss of the total population in Newfoundland and Labrador since 1996), fertility rates are the lowest in the country, and divorce rates have sharply risen in the past few years to nearly 30 percent – the highest in the province’s history. Despite the incredible resilience of the city and province in attracting new economic development and investment from oil companies, tourism industries and the public sector, generations of young Newfoundlanders are faced with grim economic and social prospects.

Second, the cultural character in Newfoundland has suffered from the fragmented nature of the economy. Given the lack of permanence and ‘Truth’ young Newfoundlanders encounter in a country promising economic prosperity for all, it is understandable that some would decode this contradiction and respond through subcultural critique. Even though the trappings of middle-class culture encroach on the city – new cinema multiplexes, bistro’s, Starbucks, Land Rover dealerships and cigar bars – most youth simply do not have access to, or an interest in, these ‘Mainlander’ cultural forms. Some feel oversaturated by such commercial influences and over-socialized by outsiders telling them to consume more, and not to worry about the future. Jim (25) said to me:

How the hell can I hang around here [St John’s] and spend all the time when I got nothing. . . . I need my community back, I wants to go home but that ain’t gonna happen. I feel pressure
to have the right shirt or drink the right beer in St John’s, and when you don’t, you feel like you out of touch. I don’t needs that shit anyway, ’cause it fucks with your mind. It ain’t my culture, it don’t reflect me.

For many of the youth I interviewed, being in a context in which conspicuous consumption is important (if nothing else, just to stimulate the local economy) is ultimately alienating.

Youth who have matured in St John’s have witnessed firsthand the economic and social fragmentation of the last two decades. They feel a suffocating lack of efficacy and argue that the structure of the community is pathological. Phil (24) suggests:

Here, I have almost no chance to get a good job, and so the feeling is go out and get piss drunk and screw girls. Since you aren’t going nowhere you might as well feel good. You get screwed all right, screwed for life.

One of the most common themes in interviews with Straightedgers in St John’s is their perception of a lack of access to structured avenues of success. In short, they are bombarded with encouragement to ‘stick around’, work hard, and prosper and consume, yet the institutional means are simply unavailable. Rather than responding to the strain resulting from the recognition of this contradiction with a deviant adaptation as Merton (1938), Cloward and Ohlin (1986) or Agnew (1992) might predict, Straightedgers seek out more personally and socially beneficial solutions. ‘There’s more than one way to stand up and be counted. My difference is shouting, at the top of me lungs, this [a lifestyle of consumption] don’t make no sense’ (Lenny, 23).

Third, the notion that one should ‘stand up and be counted’ reflects an enduring sense of cultural duty, responsibility and purpose common in Newfoundland history and culture (Byron, 2003; Ommer, 2002). In the face of seemingly insurmountable economic and political odds, Straightedge youth in St John’s respond by holding firm to a tradition of persistence valorized within Newfoundland. Couple this with a strong work ethic in the Newfoundland working class (see Ommer, 2002), and it is easy to grasp why Straightedgers in St John’s understand perseverance to be a test of personal will and cultural resilience.

Fourth, and in some ways most consequentially, 82 percent of the Straightedge practitioners I interviewed have personal histories peppered by acts of violence, sexual disease, alcoholism or physical and/or sexual abuse. While the vast majority of them have not experienced these processes firsthand, they have been privy to the trials of family members or friends. Alan’s (19) narrative included the following:
OK, how 'bout this. . . . When I was 12 years old I saw my best buddy's mom and dad duke it out. My sister got pregnant at 14, and my buddy from school has got like eight STDs since we were 16. Half my old friends get shit-faced three or four times a week at least, and smoke a couple of packs a day. Little girls from my high school knew how to shoot heroin or take E [ecstasy]. . . . You’re either blind or a moron not to want to avoid it. I don’t want to be dead before I’m 25.

For Straightedgers like Alan, asceticism is a natural choice in cultural contexts of ‘depressed excess’. Rather than respond to the strain via forms of self-numbing indulgence, these youth pursue self-protective lifestyles. They realize that defiling the body through risk processes is merely a ‘magical resolution’ (Cohen, 1955; Hebdige, 1979) to their collective material and status problems. Such a response contrasts sharply with youth responses to disenfranchisement and anxiety found in subcultures like Rap, Hip-hop, Grunge and Skater, wherein magical resolutions to status problems often involve retreatism and self-indulgence. According to Alan, one cannot alter the structure of the economy or turn the political tides, but one can protect oneself from, rather than wallow in, physical risk-taking. In de Certeau’s (1984) terminology, they revert to protecting ‘what they have’ and can ultimately control, their bodies.

In sum, then, when exploring the social biographies of Straightedge practitioners in St John’s, narrative similarities emerge. The youth grew up in increasingly ‘stressed’ communities wherein economic uncertainty, cultural disruption and physical/health risk were widespread. Mixed with these socializing influences were generational lessons about the resolve and doggedness of Newfoundlanders. The desire to do something, the search for personal agency, and the rejection of culturally and individually polluting influences from the outside are at the forefront of Straightedge mentalities in St John’s. They describe these interests as their ‘calling’ to the lifestyle and as the foundation of their belief systems. Carl (20) believes the lifestyle is something one does not need to search for, but rather he views it as a calling he has always felt; in other terms, it is his destiny to be an ascetic:

A [Straightedge] friend, who grew up about 500 kilometres from me, told me one time that he always felt different. He found power from being himself and not just getting gunned [drunk] because all the ‘right kids’ were doing it. Talk to anyone in the city who’s ‘down’, and they’ll tell you the same thing . . . we’ve all felt that way. It’s true what some people say, ‘if you’re not Straightedge now, you never were’.

For Carl and others, heeding the call and seeking one’s ‘true’ destiny as an ascetic is empowering. It reflects, in many ways, a sense of spirituality that underpins most ascetic lifestyles, in that practitioners envision their lifestyles of physical purity as divinely inspired and morally uplifting. To successfully protect oneself
from destructive influences and seek physical purity is a cultural vocation performed on a daily basis. Group members coalesce around and relish their collective abilities to ‘walk the Edge’ as ascetics in Newfoundland.

The Straightedge Vocation
The Straightedge ascetic is not simply about self-improvement and personal empowerment. For some youth practitioners in St John’s the lifestyle is not silent social commentary. Their mission is to lead in the youth community by example; to attempt what Shepherd (2002) describes as a ‘moral regeneration’ of the world. Importantly, although others might not be ‘chosen’ or experience the ‘innate’ Straightedge calling (as it is perceived), outsiders may be encouraged to ‘consider how they live dead-end lifestyles . . . how gobbling chemicals, fucking and eating fast food means nothing’ (Matthew, 25). Therefore, Straightedge is practised as a vocation along two lines; in the one instance it is a quest of self-protection and salvation, and on the other it is a journey to rekindle morality in a cultural space plagued by collective frustration, anxiety and avarice. As documented by Lupton (1999), these types of subculture/social movements arise as deeply rationalized responses to risk cultures. The Straightedge lifestyle is novel in this context, however, as practitioners are seeking to highlight perceived cultural problems of immorality through their asceticism; not hyper-individualistic bodywork in this case, but bodywork given to be read and emulated by others.

Elias (1994) and other figurational sociologists might have predicted the ascetic response among youth to adversity and anxiety in St John’s. The push toward self-restraint and discipline, even through the articulation of social resistance, is part and parcel of civilizing processes in Canada, wherein groups seek status distinction through tightly regimented corporeal performance (Atkinson, 2003b). Given the economically disempowering conditions in the city and the hedonistic/nihilistic response among other youth groups, the Straightedge ascetic becomes predicated on the use of ‘mannered’ behaviour to engage a lifestyle of moral/physical superiority. It is reflective of a habitus characterized by an impetus to maintain personal control and efficacy in contexts of relative deprivation.

To work the Straightedge calling as a civilized form of moral regeneration in depressed social contexts requires action in a range of ‘spheres’. Since, as Beck (1999) argues, risk permeates all spheres of social life, it is understandable why some groups develop entire lifestyles of risk management. In Weber’s (1968) terms, there are several social spheres wherein a vocation is practised, including: the aesthetic, the erotic, the economic, the intellectual and the political. For a Straightedge practitioner in St John’s, each is consequential in promoting ascetic lifestyles and inscribing morality into everyday physical behaviours.
The youth subculture literature is replete with analyses of how youth signify in-group membership and ideological positioning through physical style (Wilson, 2002). In the pursuit of social distinction, subcultures often find it advantageous to demarcate members from the mainstream. To perform one's calling in everyday life involves 'doing' identity in the aesthetic sphere. Among Straightedgers, outwardly identifying practitioners' bodies as esoterically different would make tactical sense in their pursuit of moral distinction. However, unlike other forms of youth lifestyle subculture or movement, there is no uniform or singular Straightedge style. Curiously enough, practitioners of the ascetic see little merit in fashioning elaborate costumes to distance themselves from others:

"Part of the lifestyle is about not buying into the needs and goods we are told to buy. If we develop a unique style, then people might be tempted to buy into that only; to steal our clothing from us and forget the message. Straightedge isn't about making up a fashion people can mass produce and make money off of, right? I look like other kids, I wear t-shirts, [baseball hats and jeans all the time because I don't want people my age to think I'm weird. It's easy to ignore someone if they look like a freak. It's my message people should hear and it shouldn't be drowned out by fashion. . . . There are some group tags we have like 'XXX' or 'sXe' that I wear on my clothes or get tattooed with, but the tags can't get in the way."

(Dan, 24)

Dan's comments suggest that while the group shares several intersubjectively defined logos and tags, these do not facilitate the type of distinction their vocation stresses. Instead, Straightedge is worked through alternative and more 'civilized' social manners. For them, it is a socially superior position that articulates their desire to drop out of supposed 'mainstream' cultures of consumption and branding.

Of more consequence than commodities to Straightedge enthusiasts in the aesthetic sphere is the actual physical shape and performance of Straightedge bodies. Many Straightedgers prefer slim, fit and fat-free physical forms. Overweight bodies, cigarette-stained fingers, sallow faces and genitalia scarred by sexual disease are not aesthetically pleasing as they connote moral laxity and a paucity of self-care. Roger (18) proclaims:

"The end of an 'eat, drink and be merry' philosophy is ugly. Canadians eat like pigs and no one seems to mind how all the popular foods and drinks slowly kill bodies. A fat, hooked on beer body is gross, and when I see one all I think is that the guy or girl is a fucking lazy degenerate. . . . Never mind the fact that we look like hell as a total group of people, and not even natural anymore. . . . Have some self-respect, 'cause you have only one body in life and the harder you treat it the weaker it is."
Roger’s words smack of a Straightedge preference for outwardly disciplined bodies as markers of personal strength and integrity. These starkly disciplined bodies are juxtaposed against the expression of sheer physical *jouissance* in appropriate settings like music clubs. All-age music clubs are hubs in local Straightedge communities, wherein practitioners collectively advocate ‘un-restrained’ physical performance like slam-dancing as a vehicle for releasing emotional impulses. A Straightedge concert – a key place for members to coalesce in any city – commonly includes extremely physical and pseudo-aggressive styles of dance:

Slamming allows me to get rid of a lot of frustration. The pure rush of hitting other people in a small space, but not hating the people I’m dancing with, makes it a wicked experience. The music is pumping and the people are all jacked up with incredible energy. Sometimes my head feels like it’s gonna explode, I get so excited. . . . But there’s rules, right, like don’t go and try to hurt anyone like a dickhead. Even in the chaos of the [mosh] pit, keep the Edge and stay in control. It’s our fight club – I can get right nasty with other Straightedge kids and no one walks away with a stupid fucking grudge or something.

In these contexts, pogo dancing, windmilling and other forms of ‘contact’ dancing provide what Elias and Dunning (1986) describe as a ‘mimetic’ social experience. Mimetic social behaviours are generally those replicating, in physically and emotionally controlled contexts, ‘risky’ social behaviours. Maguire describes mimesis in the following way:

That is, they [mimetic activities] provide, a ‘make-believe’ setting which allows emotions to flow easily, and which elicits excitement of some kind in imitating that produced by ‘real life situations,’ yet without their dangers or risks. ‘Mimetic’ activities, locally constructed or globally generated, thus allow, within certain limits, for socially permitted self-centredness. Excitement is elicited by the creation of tensions: this can involve the imaginary or controlled ‘real’ danger, mimetic fear and/or pleasure, sadness, and/or joy. (Maguire, 1993: 71)

Aggressive forms of physical interaction simulate the unbridled release of desire that is deeply taboo in other Straightedge vocational spheres, thus providing a temporary ‘decontrolling of emotional controls’ (Maguire, 1993) rigorously upheld by practitioners. Their ability to control emotionality and bodily impulse connotes a sense of social superiority among them, and starkly juxtaposes their behaviours against those groups who embrace and rationalize ‘real’ risk in the pursuit of sensual pleasure (see Vitellone, 2003).

Of far less mimetic value is the strict regimen of abstinence many Straightedge enthusiasts in St John’s practice in the *erotic sphere*. While disagreements in the community abound as to what is ruled out by ‘pure’ abstinence (i.e. kissing, oral sex, and intercourse before marriage or after), Straightedgers generally concur that undisciplined sexual practice runs counter to the ascetic emphasis on
responsibility and risk awareness. However, leading in the youth community in St John’s by not succumbing to physical temptation is a defining component of the Straightedge vocation:

I find it tons tougher to not have sex than drink or smoke dope. I don’t grab a bottle of vodka and get turned on. But when I hug my girlfriend or kiss a bit, I mean, I want to have sex with her. But if I do, then I’m no better than any other guy who lets their dick call the shots. My self-will is more important, my ability to hold onto a set of principles making my whole life better and safer. . . . [W]e still have fun together and love each other, but don’t risk disease or pregnancy to prove it. . . . Kids should wait ‘til they’re older and more mature to enter into a sex relationship . . . and that’s what I hope other kids get from what I do. (Carl, 20)

For Carl, as in the case of other Straightedge ascetics, the community example is more important than his immediate physical needs or impulses. The body’s natural desires are significantly ‘pushed behind the scenes of social life’ (Elias, 1994) as an integral part of the vocation. This is required, according to many Straightedgers in St John’s, because Canadian youth are not sufficiently receiving this message via other institutional discourses and ideologies. Dan (24) argued:

In school they teach little kids how to be sexually active, not how to say no. Every movie or TV show is about sex from the start. The ‘learning’ channels on cable show sex shows all day. Magazines, videos and even my textbooks are full of sex. We have a culture that talks a good talk about safe sex, but the safest kind of sex is no sex until you’re ready. I don’t see nobody selling that message. . . . My thinking is that we promote sexual weakness and free experimentation.

While Straightedge ascetics do not deny the sexual component to humanity, they prefer to devote waking energies to discipline and self-respect in this vocational sphere. For them, the sacrifice of open sexuality is socially beneficial if decoded by audiences as a sweeping moral lesson. In Hebdige’s (1979) terms, their abstinence is ‘given’ to be read by others as a conscious gesture of moral regeneration in youth culture.

The Straightedge ascetic is also given to be read in the economic sphere as Straightedge performance includes a strong anti-consumerism stance. Youth in St John’s, for example, emphasize a ‘do-it-yourself’ philosophy of material and cultural production common in other punk rock and anti-mainstream subcultures (Leblanc, 1999). As they link mass consumption and status achievement through wealth with gluttony and moral degeneracy (again, reflective of their habitus), Straightedgers advocate a ‘less is more’ position on consumption, including emphases on ‘green’ or organic products, generically named rather than corporately branded products and the local sharing of goods:

Maybe being in Newfoundland, out here in this island, makes you realize how precious natural resources are. As people, we must come to grips with it, and it’s nuts Newfoundlanders don’t see this more, how scarce natural resources have been. . . . I do my part by growing organic
food and avoiding a lot of stuff I can do without – like new Gap jeans, or new shoes every
week, or a new ball hat. What you put in your head is the measure of your character, not what
you put on your head. (Ryan, 25)

Dissimilar to other youth figurations like Hip-hoppers (Martinez, 1997) who
utilize symbols of conspicuous consumption as a method of alleviating status
frustration as economically under-privileged or disenfranchised individuals,
Straightedgers deny any social merit in consuming more than you need in the
search for cultural distinction. Pete (22) claims:

I watched a young guy at a restaurant last week order a $30 steak. What the Christ did he need
a $30 steak for? What, so he can brag about how good it tastes? I’ve eaten steak, and can’t tell
the difference between a $2 and $20 steak. Bragging about the quality of animal you killed and
ate is not worth very much in life. Spending hard-earned money on expensive meat just to brag
about it is fucked. . . . I don’t have to kill animals, destroy the world and buy expensive food
I don’t need just to feel important.

As Pete’s narrative implies, the Straightedge economic position also places
importance on the protection of animal rights and related environmental
concerns. Here, their ascetic position not only includes the moral and physical
protection of people, it extends the ascetic boundaries to the broader environ-
ment. In this way, Straightedge asceticism resembles in form and content the type
of anarcho-environmentalism Shepherd (2002) outlines, and the Mi’kMaq
netukulimk in Barsh’s (2002) analysis. The protectionist mentality also makes
sense given their cultural habitus and surrounding ‘risky’ socio-economic
conditions.

The Straightedge vocation, with its emphasis on self/environment protection
and integrity includes a push toward enlightenment through the intellectual
sphere. By confronting the contradictions they feel are inherent in dominant
cultural logics, Straightedge ascetics encourage others to be more ‘self-aware’ of
the causes and consequences of consumption. Their rationale is hinged upon the
idea that if individuals are self-aware, they will try to stimulate greater ‘social
awareness’. Consequently, enhanced social awareness will lead to the exposure of
cultural pathologies proposed as normative; thus people will be motivated to
engage social resistance though education and lobbying. Jason (24) tells us:

For me, education is not the same thing as socialization. When a kid grows up, he learns how
to operate in society and how to make his way over the social obstacles he encounters.
Education is about learning why we do the idiotic things we do, and how we call them our
‘culture’. I never really learned anything until I questioned why people drink so much or why
they do drugs – it’s because of culture, it’s because we try to be these kinds of people who don’t
get along and feel bad while doing it. . . . The minute I got unplugged from the mainstream and
did what makes me strong, I felt like I was truly an individual. . . . I try to teach people this
every day, I think it’s my responsibility to share my insights. Why not, why wouldn’t I?
For Jason, and ascetics in other cultural groups (Shepherd, 2002), it is through the confrontation of dominant, contemporary cultural logics (e.g. hedonism, consumption, risk-taking) and the rejection of their power that enlightenment occurs. With such enlightenment comes a great social mandate to proselytize and educate – this is part of the reason why one interprets the ascetic way as a calling. Some Straightedgers envision themselves as morally gifted and enlightened teachers responsible for pointing out the pathologies in dominant body/social norms, and suggesting more ‘civilized’ alternatives. Unlike esoteric groups of ascetics like those described by Iorio (1999), Straightedgers see little merit in concealing their revelations about the self and the social.

The role of social education is unquestionably a distinguishing characteristic of Straightedge enthusiasts in Atlantic Canada. Straightedge in other parts of Canada tends to be more esoteric and privately (even individually) meaningful, perhaps in reflection of the heavily upper middle-class composition of the group in these locations (see Atkinson, 2004). By contrast, Straightedge in Newfoundland is tied to the local politics of working-class youth activism, consciousness-raising and political resistance. In some respects, Straightedge is a political youth party with no voting rights in government, a lifestyle of persuasion led not by casting ballots but by practising a policy platform in everyday life. In the end, Straightedgers use the body as a billboard of protest as this is the most basic, and for some the only, locus of control in their lives:

I wear my politics on my sleeve. What you see is what you get. There ain’t no hidden messages in my speech, I tells it like it is. Someone has to stand up and try to save the kids around the city, ‘cause no one on the hill [Confederation building] is up for it. There ain’t no membership fees in my club, and my people spends time talking about the truth, my son, not hiding it. (Jim, 25)

Jim and others believe the self-experience of Straightedge is but one of the many saving graces of the lifestyle. Although Straightedge can be personally empowering in a number of ways, it will not become a ‘truly’ successful lifestyle until others recognize the politics embedded in ascetic ways of living. Until such time, Straightedge will be simply ‘noise’ in cultures of risk.

Discussion

Straightedge is a novel case example of asceticism in Canada, especially among youth cultures increasingly labelled as ‘at risk’ (Beck, 1999; Lupton, 1999). Whereas researchers in the social sciences meticulously document how youth ‘go bad’ in the face of daunting social-structural conditions and cultural pathologies, this empirical study suggests how certain youth consciously choose an ‘alternative’ subculture vocation grounded in individual and collective protection via
Puritanical lifestyles. Straightedgers homogenize the mainstream as consumption-oriented, hedonistic and de-civilized (read unrestrained). Such a categorization establishes their asceticism as morally superior and culturally different. Straightedge is an emergent youth movement in Canada, perceived by practitioners as a calling of considerable social consequence. Indeed, the turn to asceticism among youth groups like Straightedge may suggest that the types of ‘civilizing processes’ Elias (1994) outlined are now emerging in Canadian subcultural life-worlds as a critique of (perceived) mainstream cultures of excess and risk. Figurational sociology, and the concept of the civilizing process has, unfortunately, been vastly under-utilized by youth, resistance and risk theorists. Elias’s (1994) construction of the civilizing process sheds considerable light on why asceticism and philosophies of self-restraint in ‘risky’ or ‘de-pacified’ social spaces can emerge among youth figurations.

The Straightedge ascetic is also a culturally novel brand of social commentary because it underlines rather than undermines traditionally conservative norms in Canada proscribing corporeal conformity through self-protection. Straightedgers’ social resistance through asceticism is less an expression of explicit cultural deviance via radical bodywork as it is an embrace of ‘civilized’ norms historically embedded in Western cultural habituses – which Straightedgers perceive to have waned significantly over time. Their asceticism calls attention to the perceived bifurcation between contemporary discourses of restraint promoted in a vast array of social settings and through a range of institutional ideologies (i.e. educational, medical, spiritual, and political-legal), and everyday cultural practices of self-indulgent consumption.

Yet Straightedge criticism of the perceived contradiction between body ideologies and practices may be viewed as somewhat hyperbolic since practitioners promote corporeal purity, self-defence, health and risk minimization far beyond the norm. Studies of anorexia among young girls (Lupton, 1996), ‘bigorexia’ within bodybuilding subcultures (Pope et al., 2000) and cosmetic surgery among ‘ageing’ segments of the population (Davis, 2003) similarly illustrate how people may embrace Western cultural ideals about the body in hyper-real ways (Baudrillard, 1983). Ideal body images are internalized to such an extent that people excessively pursue exaggerated shapes as normative bodies. What separates more mainstream examples of body modification from Straightedge, however, is the degree to which social education and moral instruction underpins Straightedge bodywork.

The burgeoning literature on the sociology of the body reveals few empirical examples of how groups use ascetic body practice as social resistance. Sociologists of the body have noted that individuals may strategically modify bodies as
individualistic and flamboyant forms of resistance to mainstream cultural attitudes – especially, dominant gender codes and roles, ethnic stereotypes and regimented class ideologies – through subversive processes such as tattooing, piercing, branding, scarification, dieting and radical cosmetic surgery (see Gimlin, 2002). While such performances of resistance against cultural ideologies through radical bodywork are well documented in research on corporeality, rarely is asceticism linked to these forms of cultural resistance.

Further, rarely do empirical case studies of subcultural body work evidence how youth attempt to ‘re-civilize’ cultural norms and values by returning to ‘traditional’ or ascetic lifestyles. Their nostalgia for the so-called ‘conservative’ past is, however, predicted by risk theorists (Beck, 1999), as is their rather one-dimensional construction of the contemporary, hedonistic mainstream. By inspecting the habitus-formation process among groups like Straightedgers, youth subculture researchers might pay heightened attention to how risk contexts ‘prepare’ youth psychologically to engage resistance as a return to the perceived traditional. While the turn to excess among youth subcultures as a collective response to risk is well documented in the sociological literature (Wilson, 2002), as is the development of so-called ‘slacker’ lifestyles, not all youth groups in contexts of doubt and anxiety develop fatalistic ideologies. Straightedge is not simply a blind response to cultural conditions, it is instead reflective of how practitioners collectively understand and develop solutions to conditions of risk based on their collective social-environmental experiences. It is precisely, then, the intermingling of sociogenic and psychogenic processes in which youth resistance like Straightedge is situated and understood.

Related to the above, we may explore how youth subcultures promulgate a ‘regeneration’ of moral cultural practice; that is, as resistance is performed publicly through the body as a collective ‘habitus-reformation’ process. Despite Melucci’s (1996) and Gitlin’s (1993) criticisms that new social movements rarely include a collective desire to alter a range of social practices or norms, Straightedge is, at least for some practitioners, designed to remove personal risk from all social spheres via intense self-restraint. According to Johnston and Lio (1998) and Hunt and Benford (2004), new social movements like Straightedge represent how figurations of actors use identity politics work to stimulate social change across institutional locations. Common in most of the new social movement literature is a relative discounting of the efficacy or interest of youth groups to reform collective habitus in these ways (see Castells, 1996; Diani, 2004).

In the end, though, one must question whether the Straightedge lifestyle actually achieves anything in the context of St John’s, or any other urban space. Even though the ascetic practice can save the individual from the perils of drugs,
alcoholism and varied diseases, it is difficult to believe that Straightedge will have a long-term economic or political impact in the city; that is, Straightedge may have little to no effect on the social structures, institutional networks and cultural frameworks the practitioners critique. Their asceticism, then, may be merely a ‘magical resolution’ (Cohen, 1955) for enthusiasts over the long term. Strict corporeal regimentation may liberate enthusiasts from selected physical risks, empower the self, simulate the mind and invigorate the senses, but it may not alter social stratification, combat economic instability and cure cultural fragmentation in the province, as perhaps intended by Straightedgers.

Regardless of the broader socio-cultural impact of Straightedge in St John’s and elsewhere in Canada, we should remain attentive to how the meaning of Straightedge is framed by practitioners as a civilized vocation that emerges from a perceived calling. Careful theoretical scrutiny of how the lifestyle germinates as a calling/vocation within specific socio-cultural contexts, characterized by specific habituses, is required. The Straightedge youth of St John’s teach us how youth subcultural membership and lifestyles may be dialogical with civilizing processes in Canada, and how, despite myriad empirical claims suggesting otherwise, self-restraint and discipline are inscribed on the bodies of the ‘youth of today’.

Notes

1. The Canadian Straightedge youth movement is by no means homogeneous, but is not nearly as ideologically splintered as in other countries. Considerable regional differences exist in Canada, with individuals practising strictly the principles of asceticism in economically depressed areas, while others more recreationally adopt Straightedge in heavily populated urban areas.

2. In my research on Straightedge in Canada, data gathered suggest that most practitioners falling into the middle range live in Ontario and in the western provinces. They tend to advocate Straightedge, but do not seek widespread social recognition of the lifestyle. Importantly, though, as more Straightedgers venture online, pockets of them from across the country are exchanging political ideals and experiences (see Atkinson, 2004).

3. Widely publicized cases of violence between Straightedgers and non-practitioners in the United States (Utah, Ohio and California) have created a problem for Straightedgers in Canada. Some factions of the group in the province of Ontario have received critical attention from the police of late, and have been labelled in some contexts as a ‘gang’ – despite the lack of an ultra-militant or violent hardcore scene in Canada.

4. Participants were provided with transcripts of their interviews so that they would be able to review how their statement had been recorded. Equally, they were asked if any portions of the text should be deleted in order to protect their anonymity. In no case did a participant ask for text to be removed from a narrative.

5. Although most associated with the works of Marcel Mauss (1973) or Pierre Bourdieu (1984), Elias’s 1939 edition of the Civilizing Process contains a detailed exposition of the concept. The notion of habitus is prominent in his later works, most notably The Germans (1996).
References


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