‘Revolusi diri’ (self-revolution): personal choice, collective identity and subcultural change in the Bandung straight edge scene

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Abstract:
‘Straight edge’ is a subcultural identity and lifestyle of strict abstinence associated with some styles of hardcore punk music; it is prominent in the DIY (Do-It-Yourself) hardcore scene in Bandung, Indonesia. In this paper, I use the Bandung straight edge discourses of ‘revolusi diri’ (‘self-revolution’) and ‘personal choice’ to critically examine some influential individualising trends in subcultural theory; specifically, Widdicombe and Wooffitt’s (1995) model of the positional and discursive construction of subcultural authenticity and Muggleton’s (2000) model of subcultural identities as fragmented, fluid and ‘postmodern’ style.

In addressing these theoretical perspectives, I investigate the role of straight edge as a code of practice, a subcultural identity, and a set of discursive techniques centred on abstinence, transformation, and authenticity. While there is ample evidence for the dynamism of subcultural identity, and thus for the importance of discursive strategies of identity management, I find that straight edge identity is negotiated collectively, even when it is articulated in terms of self-transformation and ‘personal choice’. Even the most personalised and dynamic aspects of straight edge identity reflect a collective process of identity construction and representation, and a collective response to subcultural change.

Straight edge (or sXe) is a code of behaviour, lifestyle, and identity of strict abstinence associated with some styles of hardcore punk music. Specifically, straight edgers are expected to refrain from drinking alcohol, taking drugs, smoking, engaging in casual sex, and often from eating meat. While straight edge developed in the hardcore punk scenes in
eastern North America, it has spread to various extents through hardcore punk scenes around the world. While there are several studies addressing straight edge as a youth subculture in North America (Haenfler 2004; Irwin 1999; Wood 1999, 2003), less attention has been paid to its global spread. In researching the ‘Do-It-Yourself’ (DIY) hardcore community in Bandung, Indonesia, I found straight edge to be a significant aspect of their subcultural identities and practices.

In this paper I am looking at some of the ways in which people in the Bandung DIY community talk about straight edge as a personal lifestyle choice and as a collective identity, in relation to the concept of subcultural authenticity and processes of identity transition. Straight edge is presented by participants as a ‘revolusi diri,’ a self-revolution, a redemptive force on both a personal and a collective level. However, I also observed a tendency towards downplaying the relevance of straight edge as a community norm, while still emphasising its strength as a potentially redemptive or transformative force for individuals and the scene. I interpret this as a way of managing their identities in the context of micro-historical subcultural change.

My interpretation of Bandung straight edge has broader implications for subcultural theory, which is marked by an over-emphasis on the individualistic and fluid aspects of subcultural identity. For example, in their study based on close discursive and conversation analysis, Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995) emphasise subculturalists’ individual constructions of identity, and suggest that punk has no unified meaning, only individual and positional meanings. More recently, Muggleton (2000) relies on the narratives of subculturalists to argue for the ‘postmodern’, fragmented and fluid nature of subcultural style. This is also the position adopted by Wood (2003) with regard to straight edge. Wood sees in straight edge essentially idiosyncratic identities in a state of constant flux. According to Wood, straight edge identities are highly personalised and dynamic in terms of their relationships to subcultural styles and scenes, and in the differing interpretations and applications of the code itself. However, I argue that even the more personalised and dynamic aspects of straight edge identity reflect a collective process of identity construction and representation, and particularly a collective response to subcultural change, even though it is articulated in terms of ‘personal choice’ and self-transformation.
Research site and methods

This paper draws on my fieldwork researching the underground music scene in Bandung, the capital of West Java, Indonesia. From March 2004 to February 2005 I carried out participant observation research into this music scene, with a particular emphasis on the anti-commercial DIY hardcore punk community, which is loosely organised around the Kolektif Balai Kota (‘City Hall Collective’, known as BalKot). BalKot is primarily concerned with the production and performance of hardcore punk on a self-sustaining and non-profit basis (‘Do-It-Yourself hardcore’). While straight edge was once a relatively prominent trend in the Bandung underground scene, by 2004 it had become most closely associated with the rather marginalised DIY community.

My major research method was participant observation, focusing on BalKot and the DIY community. I attended the weekly BalKot organising meetings, social events, musical performances, and other community activities. While BalKot became my primary focus, I also engaged with the wider underground music scene in which the community remains embedded. I supplemented to the primary method of participant observation by conducting semi-structured interviews with twenty-two participants from the DIY community and ten from the wider underground scene. Interviewees were selected non-randomly through snowball sampling.

The BalKot collective regularly attracts between twenty and thirty participants, overwhelmingly well-educated young men in their early twenties. Most are Muslim and of the locally-dominant Sundanese ethnic group, though with varying degrees of commitment to these identities. Roughly two-thirds explicitly identify as straight edge, while several more adopt some straight edge practices without claiming the label. However, my BalKot research participants all stressed that being straight edge is not a defining characteristic of the group or a condition of entry; they usually talk about it as a ‘personal choice’.

Drug free youth

Straight edge as a subculture is distinctive in that, as well as being closely associated with particular styles of hardcore punk music and a casual ‘clean-cut’ fashion, it is also a specific code of behaviour. According to straight edgers, this code was formulated by the
Washington DC hardcore band Minor Threat in the early 1980s. As expressed in their song ‘Out of Step’, the ‘rules’ of straight edge are: ‘don’t smoke, don’t drink, don’t fuck’. In other words, straight edgers should abstain from tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs, and also from engaging in casual sex. It is also common to add meat and other animal products to the list of abstentions, and more rarely to include caffeine and over-the-counter medicines.

While these straight edge practices are open to individual interpretation and application, they are also negotiated at a community or scene level. In Bandung, most straight edgers are vegetarians and support animal rights activism, but few are strict vegans. Vegetarianism is closely but ‘unofficially’ associated with straight edge, and many non-straight edgers in the DIY hardcore community are also vegetarian. Complete abstention from caffeine or medicines is very rare, but tends to be seen as a positive step. The dominant interpretation of the ‘sex rule’ is ‘no sex outside of a committed relationship’; strict celibacy is rarely advocated though frequently practised (more by default than by choice).

At the centre of the code is the straight edge identity as ‘drug free youth’, rejecting the hedonism and particularly the use of self-destructive substances (‘zat-zat merusak diri’), which they associate with both underground and mainstream youth culture, in favour of an emphasis on clean-living and self-control. Straight edgers represent this as displaying respect for yourself and your social and natural environment. While there are many debates over specific interpretations and applications of the straight edge ‘rules’, there are also some fairly clear boundaries of straight edge behaviour.

Adopting straight edge practices and identity is known as ‘claiming the edge’ (or ‘mengklaim diri straight edge’ in Indonesian), and is seen as a public act. Claiming the edge is an act of commitment, and straight edgers are expected to remain ‘true till death’. Straight edgers often display their commitment by ‘Xing up’, marking an X on the backs of their hands. The X also appears more generally as a straight edge symbol: in band names, pen names, email addresses, artwork and merchandise.

Someone who drinks alcohol, smokes, or takes illegal drugs has violated the straight edge code, and forfeited the straight edge identity. In straight edge parlance, they have ‘lost the
edge’, and it is not easy to successfully adopt it again. Straight edge is thus an active identity of abstinence in the face of temptation, an example of what Mullaney (2001) calls identities based on ‘not-doings’. It is a public and collective identity based on a shared code of behaviour, though one that is represented and applied as a personal decision and commitment. Straight edge can also be regarded as a manifestation of what Krogstad (1989: 15) calls the shift ‘from external provocation to internal moralism’ in punk.

Revolusi diri

As a whole package, the straight edge lifestyle is represented as ‘clean’ or ‘positive living’, and as ‘making a change’ for your body, mind and environment. Straight edgers present their lifestyle in opposition to ‘drunk punk’, a label used within the Bandung underground scene to refer to the extremes of hedonistic, aggressive, and ‘self-destructive’ street punk behaviour. ‘Drunk punk’ incorporates fighting, stealing, abusive language, and ‘sleaziness’ as well as public drunkenness. Straight edgers interpret their lifestyle as ‘a counter-culture within the counter-culture’, an attempt to strip away the negative and self-destructive image of punk and replace it with an emphasis on significant personal, social and environmental change.

This also has a personalised dimension; straight edge is represented as a deep personal transformation, a revolusi diri (‘self-revolution’), as the DIY straight edge band xManusia Buatanx put it:

‘Revolusi Diri’ by xManusia Buatanx (my translation)
Take a look at your own head and neck
Take a look at your own face and nose
Take a look at your own eyes and ears
Take a look at your own mouth and tongue
Take a look at your own hands and feet
Take a look at your own skin and fingers
Take a look at your own heart and breath
Take a look at your own your brain and mind
SELF REVOLUTION!
Explanation: change yourself before changing others!

However, this personal redemption is seen as having wider importance as a positive force for change. On a symbolic level, straight edge is presented as a force for redemption for
the individual, for the scene as a whole, and even for the social and natural environment more widely. Yet this redemption is overwhelmingly a collective and somewhat abstract or symbolic representation of the meaning of straight edge. Individual narratives of personal redemption are actually quite rare, although they do exist and are recognised as an ‘authentic’ path to straight edge. Much more common in Bandung are narratives of recognition; that is, straight edgers describe their own claiming of the edge as merely accepting the label, and claim that at a deeper level they have ‘always been’ straight edge.

This fits quite well with Widdicombe and Wooffitt’s study; they found that subcultural authenticity was attributed to those who could claim to really ‘be’ punk rather than simply ‘doing’ punk (Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1990, 1995: 140-154). In interviews, articles and songs about straight edge, straight edge is seen to come from, or at least to be located in, one’s ‘inner self’, within one’s own heart or soul (‘dalam hati saya’ or ‘dalam jiwa saya sendiri’). However, I am wary of identifying this as an entirely individualising discourse; it is also a claim that there are certain kinds of people who share an essential quality of ‘straight edge-ness’ (‘ke-sXe-an’), and that straight edge has the power to effect a significant and deep transformation.

**Personal choice and subcultural change**

Commitment ‘till death’ and ‘making a change’ for yourself and your environment dominate the public, shared discourse of straight edge as expressed in song lyrics, slogans, and often in discussions about straight edge in a general sense. However, in practice and in personalised accounts it is somewhat more complex. The environmental and social benefits of straight edge are still asserted, but when asked about why they are straight edge, or the role of straight edge in the scene, most straight edgers pull back from a hardline position and from the narrative of redemption. They talk about it as a ‘personal choice’, as Straightx88 does here:

> Straight edge is a personal choice, right. An issue of personal choice, which is agreeing with the criteria, the particular criteria that are in straight edge itself. But, straight edge can’t be forced on other people, y’know. Ahh we can, like, we have the straight edge point of view but we mustn’t force our point of view on other people, y’know. So straight edge is a- a personal choice in my opinion. In my own opinion, it’s a personal choice- yeah, a
positive personal choice, y’know, for ourselves. (Straightx88, interview).

Above all, the straight edgers at BalKot emphasise the mutual respect and tolerance between the straight edge and non-straight edge members of the DIY community:

It’s a personal choice, I feel. Personal choice. And you can’t- for example people claim that only they are really straight edge, it’s like this and this and this and this. But it’s just a personal choice [‘pilihan pribadi’]. If they want to do straight edge, yeah it’s entirely up to them. If not- yeah we respect that too, y’know. If they want to be vegetarian while we aren’t, yeah no problem. There is respect. (Setan88, interview)

In part, the narratives and rhetoric used by Bandung straight edgers correspond with the acts of discursive negotiation described by Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1990, 1995). These discursive acts, often centred around authenticity, are important in managing straight edge identities, although I would not go as far as Widdicombe and Wooffitt in claiming that subcultural identities are constructed through the individual uses of such discursive techniques in and of themselves. Rather, these individual acts draw on a collective discourse of straight edge authenticity and identity.

Personal choice is a shared discourse in global straight edge, and even a set phrase. It is striking that nearly all of the straight edgers in the Bandung DIY community used the same discursive technique, and indeed used the English words ‘personal choice’ more frequently than the Indonesian equivalent (‘pilihan pribadi’). Straight edgers in Bandung deploy the phrase to emphasise the inclusive nature of the DIY community, to contrast straight edge with conservative ‘moral crusades’, and to contrast local straight edgers with intolerant ‘hardline’ tendencies in global straight edge. That is, after emphasising the personal importance of straight edge for them, and its potential as a positive force for change in the scene or society at large, Bandung straight edgers invoke the language of personal choice to clarify that they are not hardline, that their community is not exclusive, and that in the end to be straight edge or not is a personal decision.

I interpret the straight edge language of personal choice as a discursive technique for managing straight edge identity at a collective as well as a personal level. The symbolic aspects of collective identity should not be dismissed simply because they are contradicted by individual narratives; I see this as a weakness in the interview-based
methods of Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995) and Muggleton (2000). With a fairly exclusive focus on the detailed discourse analysis of individual narratives, they unsurprisingly come to the conclusion that subcultural identity, or in Muggleton’s case identity and style, is essentially individualised and fluid. However, there is remarkable consistency in the discourses, practices, and identities of Bandung straight edgers. They emphasise their individuality as well as, not to the exclusion of, their concern for collective solidarity.

Yet even if straight edgers’ claims that their identity is essentially a personal choice are not accepted uncritically, the discourse of ‘personal choice’ is clearly both dominant and meaningful in Bandung straight edge. I interpret this as a way of managing their identities in the context of subcultural change. An important factor here is that there is no autonomous or exclusive straight edge scene or community in Bandung. While straight edge as a shared identity and code of behaviour is still prominent in the DIY community and at BalKot, there is also a tendency towards downplaying its relevance for the community as a whole.

The Balai Kota collective is mostly, but not exclusively, straight edge. Significantly, it was founded in 2002 out of the ashes of a former, specifically straight edge collective (Sadar181). The founders of BalKot, and many of its leading members, have moved from a community based on and around straight edge to a community based on DIY principles, but still dominated by straight edgers. So, in an effort to establish the collective as a non-exclusive DIY group, many BalKot participants make an effort to dissociate the collective and the community from straight edge as such. At the same time, they seek to maintain it as a vital part of their own identity, and indeed still participate in straight edge as a collective identity. They need to manage the transition of the community as well as their own personal transition from straight edge to DIY as a primary identity. Finally, ‘personal choice’ enables Bandung straight edgers to position themselves in hardcore punk globally, where separatist and intolerant ‘hardline’ straight edge is opposed to strands that take a more tolerant and personalised approach, and are embedded in broader DIY scenes and networks.
While it is deployed as a strategy of identity maintenance and reconciliation, the language of ‘personal choice’ may ultimately contribute to the dissolution of straight edge as a distinct identity in the Bandung scene. Even the members of xManusia Buatanx, who openly promote straight edge within the scene and use the slogan ‘making straight edge a threat again!’, deny being essentially or exclusively a ‘straight edge band’. ‘Making straight edge a threat again’ is taken to mean emphasising its anti-consumerist qualities and its affinity with the Do-It-Yourself ethos of autonomy. The shift to a DIY identity is a rather conscious and deliberate one, and to a large extent ‘making straight edge a threat again’ entails its subordination to DIY, facilitated by the language of personal choice. There are already people involved in the DIY community who follow some or all of the straight edge practices but do not adopt the label or identity. For those straight edgers who see the essential ‘threat’ of straight edge as its potential for resisting commercialisation, this may not be considered a ‘failure’ so much as an evolution.

**Conclusion: subcultural dynamism and collective identity**

While Bandung straight edgers maintain that straight edge is a ‘personal choice’, there are significant collective aspects to the ways in which they adopt, interpret, and reinterpret their straight edge identity. This directly challenges Wood’s (2003) argument that straight edge identity is essentially fluid and individualistic. It also raises questions with the more general tendency in recent subcultural theory to emphasise the individual over the collective aspects of subcultural identity, as exemplified by the work of Muggleton (2000) and to a lesser extent by Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1990, 1995). Rather, my research in the Bandung scene supports Haenfler’s (2004) more nuanced description of straight edgers as accepting individual differences in dedication and interpretation while also holding to a core of shared fundamental values. Straight edgers construct both individualised and collective meanings for straight edge, and engage in both personal and political resistance. While the rules of straight edge are certainly flexible, and identities subject to change, there is also a deep and abiding concern for boundaries and definitions, a concern with authenticity. There is a concern for enforcing the rules, even if they are self-imposed, along with a sense of shared responsibility and collective identity.
Indeed, there is a basic contradiction in many subcultures, particularly those with participants who position themselves as ‘underground’ or ‘resistant’ as straight edgers do. These subcultures, of which punk is probably the most prominent, are presented as both ‘thinking for yourself’ and as a collective force for change. Straight edge clearly falls into this category; it is a personal choice and a revolusi diri, but with a fairly rigid code of behaviour and a wealth of shared subcultural symbols, and indeed commodities. Individualism and collectivism co-exist, albeit in some tension; this may, as Duncombe (1997: 60-65) argues, be an inherent instability in underground culture.

So, I would argue that straight edge in Bandung is not a free-floating identity marker, but rather is subject to very specific pressures because of subcultural and community change. I am not sure we should necessarily prioritise the individual narratives over the collective symbolic expressions. Even very personalised narratives reflect shared aspects of identity, and sometimes collective intent as well. Of course, collective identities also have significance and meaning on a personal level. Subcultural theory has suffered from a tendency to construct a false opposition between subcultures as static collectivities and the subcultural (or ‘post-subcultural’) as dynamic individual identities. Yet despite, or perhaps even because of, the rapid pace of subcultural change, I find a historical (or micro-historical) approach to be useful; subcultures can be seen as dynamic cultures as much as individual identities.

References


