IN SEARCH OF THE REAL, ENAMORED WITH THE AUTHENTIC: A STUDY OF IDEOLOGY AND PRACTICE IN PUNK SUBCULTURE

by

PHILIP GEORGE LEWIN

(Under the Direction of James Dowd)

ABSTRACT

Three problems plague most prior research on the “authenticity” of subcultural identities: scholars have assumed the objectivity of authenticity, overemphasized style as objective marker of it, and neglected to consider how subcultural concern with it links up to broader societal milieus. This project informs these problems through an ethnographic investigation of punk subculture. It finds that the meaning of authenticity for punks lies in a value system that resembles Romantic aesthetics, that punks convey authenticity by invoking a consistent narrative structure to account for their identities, and that punks achieve ontological security with respect to their identities by attending concerts that serve as integrating rituals. In conclusion, I reconceptualize punk as a subculture of authenticity at its core rather than one in which it merely serves as a status for which participants vie, discussing how larger cultural currents orient the subcultural participation of many individuals.

INDEX WORDS: punk, authenticity, subculture, identity, postmodernity
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PHILIP GEORGE LEWIN

B.A., University of Georgia, 2005

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2008
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PHILIP GEORGE LEWIN

Major Professor: James Dowd
Committee: David Smilde
Dawn Robinson

Electronic Version Approved:
Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
August 2008
DEDICATION

For Brian and Sam, who I’ll always remember as a couple of young punks.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A number of people have helped me with this project, and I am deeply indebted to all of them. Thanks first and foremost to Patrick Williams, under whose guidance this project began and under whose continued encouragement it has blossomed. Without your feedback and prodding, this paper would have stagnated and been forgotten. Similarly, a big thanks goes out to Jim Dowd for agreeing to chair this thesis, for his patience with my efforts and for the valuable feedback that he has provided. Thanks also to David Smilde and Dawn Robinson for sitting on my committee and for offering helpful advice during meetings.

I would also like to thank everyone who attended my talk “Reconceptualizing Punk through Ideology and Authenticity” at the 2007 meeting of the American Sociological Association in New York, during which I presented preliminary findings from this project. Similarly, thanks to all who attended the January 25, 2008 session of the Georgia Workshop on Culture, Power and History, where I presented a more refined version of the work that follows. A number of people extended useful comments and criticisms at both conferences, all of which have contributed to and improved this thesis. Last but certainly not least, thanks to everyone who took the time to participate in this study. I am grateful in particular to those who helped me to locate other participants and to listen to me as I cumbersomely worked through and clarified my thoughts. More than anyone else, of course, I could not have completed this without your assistance.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

The following project explores a discourse that has come to motivate and organize a great deal of human behavior in the contemporary epoch—the search for authenticity. Whether in relation to food (Lu and Fine 1995), tourism (MacCannel 1973), art (Fine 2003), ethnicity (Grana 1989), or identity (Gergen 1991), a quest for the authentic seems omnipresent, manifesting itself seemingly everywhere in contemporary culture. It seduces individuals of all kinds (in particular, the post-materialist middle classes) with the promise of the “really real” (Geertz 1973), serving as a life-boat to keep them afloat in the turbulent sea of ambiguous signs that has come to characterize their lived reality—or their lack thereof. While scholars have increasingly come to appreciate the importance that authenticity holds for many in modern life, however, very little empirical work has considered how and why infatuation with it emerged, how it influences behavior and worldviews, or how it is negotiated, constructed and subjectively experienced.

Over the following pages, I inform these questions through an ethnographic study of punk subculture. While a wealth of prior work explores how participants in various subcultures distinguish among “authentic” and “inauthentic” members (e.g. Becker 1963; Williams and Copes 2005, Williams 2006; Smith-Lahrman 1997), I approach the study of authenticity from a different angle. In my view, in order to advance our understandings of both authenticity and subculture, we need to initiate a new conversation that asks fundamentally different types of questions. Rather than focusing on how punks view and attempt to achieve authenticity, I
explore why authenticity matters to them and what larger function it serves in their lives. That is to say, as opposed to simply taking their concern with authenticity for granted, I attempt to connect it to the broader cultural conditions that have nurtured it. I accomplish this by abandoning a longstanding tradition that has prioritized the study of material culture over non-material culture in subcultural research. By focusing attention on the belief systems that punks espouse and the personal narratives that they offer to account for their identities, I move beyond a mere emic description of authenticity and instead attempt to theoretically explain it.

In her study of a rave scene, Sarah Thornton (1995) adumbrates this project by revealing how authenticity—or the ability to define it, at least—functions as “subcultural capital,” enabling participants to gain and maintain status among peers. While recognizing the merits of her particular contribution, I suggest that “authenticity” serves as something more than a vehicle to social status for young people. Analyzing data collected from interviews and participant observation, I find that the quest for authenticity predates subcultural participation and is deeply implicated in two processes: a morally oriented quest oriented toward self-discovery inspired by Romantic aesthetics and an effort to stabilize reality in the postmodern condition. While these forces act on society as a whole, I contend that particular conditions impel individuals to respond to them in different ways. For those who enter punk subculture, I find that these conditions involve a perceived ability to naturally think more critically than others, social estrangement from peer groups and exposure to and strong identification with punk music. I also explore the processes through which ritual interactions constitute participant identities as subjectively real and true, justifying the self-concepts that they have chosen for themselves in a milieu that extends infinite possibilities.
The outcome, I hope, is a work that offers a fresh perspective on subculture and that more brightly illuminates the meaning and pretext of society’s recent heralding of authenticity as a cultural ideal. Thus, while Hebdige (1979) contends that subcultures represent mere noise as opposed to sound, I will argue in this work that they in fact constitute something more profound, as widespread cultural goals and an ambiguous yet codified ideological system organizes participation in them—at least in the case of punk. I will further argue that scholars should no longer uncritically equate subcultures with class or generation-based resistance. While striving to avoid relying on concepts and language that are overly-functionalist, I will nonetheless maintain that punk is not inherently or necessarily subversive, that it is not individually or socially “dysfunctional,” and that it actually serves to reproduce many “dominant” cultural tendencies, albeit in heightened if not distorted forms.
CHAPTER TWO

A REVIEW OF THE SUBCULTURES LITERATURE

An extensive literature in the sociology of culture considers why young people enter into subcultures as well as what it means to participate in them. Over the past seventy years, two theoretical traditions have dominated this debate: functionalism and neo-marxism. The functionalist perspective emerged primarily among sociologists at the University of Chicago who were attempting to explain deviant behavior during the early 20th century. Frith (1983) succinctly captures their overarching position, asserting that deviance is “determined by cultural norms, and not a symptom of psychological deficiency” (p.40). Drawing from the structural functionalism of Talcott Parsons, early sociologists who developed this lens challenged the prevailing psychological notion that an “inherent criminal personality” accounted for delinquency. Grounding their thought in an array of rich empirical work conducted throughout Chicago, they instead suggested that deviance resulted from the cultural strain that individuals experience, which is particularly prevalent among urban youth. Merton (1938) defined strain as an inability to meet cultural goals. Emphasizing the salience of financial success in American society, he posited that economically disenfranchised individuals experience strain more frequently and more severely than affluent persons, which accounts for their increased likelihood to perform deviant acts.

Further elaborating his argument, Merton (1957) contended that adaptation strategies emerged among impoverished individuals in order to overcome their means-goal discrepancies. He noted four potential adaptations: 1) innovation occurs when individuals accept cultural goals
but reject the accepted means for achieving them; 2) ritualism occurs when individuals reject cultural goals but continue to accept the means for achieving them; 3) retreatism occurs when individuals reject both the cultural goals and the accepted means for achieving them; and 4) rebellion occurs when individuals reject cultural goals and the means for achieving them but supplant both with alternative goals and means. Drawing from him, scholars working within the functionalist tradition of subculture studies assert that youth subcultures represent rebellion adaptations to anomic social conditions.

Best representing this perspective through his study of delinquent gang members, Cohen (1955) found that working class boys, frustrated over their inability to compete in the status system of middle-class institutions, rejected prevailing cultural means and goals, supplanting both with ones that could more readily be achieved. Formulating a more general theory of subculture, he suggested that they emerge when a number of young people with a collective problem coalesce, because the subculture more effectively handles such problems than conventional institutions. The subculture provides an environment through which they can achieve status, with the development of group norms and boundaries supporting their efforts to reject the dominant culture that hitherto assaulted them (Baron 1989). Matza and Sykes (1961) fleshed out this conceptualization with the intent of further mitigating the pejorative connotations typically assigned to subcultural participation, arguing that while subcultures offer nonconformist routes to pleasure and excitement, they are not necessarily anti-social and do not challenge or disrupt society in ways that others had previously believed. Overall, the Chicago perspective conceptualized subculture as a means of understanding deviance within socially situated contexts.
Subsequent work has criticized particular aspects of the Chicago School’s theoretical explanation. First, many critics contend that the perspective artificially imposes a divide between subculture and dominant culture, given that, in reality, continuities exist between both worlds. Empirical investigations of subcultural ideologies have revealed that mainstream cultural goals are rarely fully rejected, oftentimes remaining quite important to participants. While subculturists often modify them, dominant and subcultural objectives are not wholly incompatible. Second, Fine and Kleinman (1979) suggest that upon developing a subcultural identity, participants do not actually leave dominant culture; rather, they regularly and fluidly move between each social milieu. To participants, subcultures are but one of many social networks to which they belong, most of which consist of weak ties. And third, functionalist sociologists tend to overemphasize the importance of financial success as a cultural goal, neglecting to consider alternate sources of anomie that young people face. In investigating the status systems of secondary schools, for example, researchers have found that popularity is generally predicated upon athletic achievement, physical attractiveness and social success, none of which are necessarily tied to social class (Coleman 1966; Schofield 1981; Merten 1997). Hence, in short, scholars have critiqued functionalist explanations of subculture for falsely reifying the divide between subculture and dominant culture and for viewing cultural values in an overly narrow way.

Heavily influenced by the work of American functionalists and 1960s Gramscianism, scholars at the Center for Contemporary Culture Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham developed a neo-marxian tradition of subcultural research during the 1970s. The publication of Resistance through Rituals (Hall and Jefferson 1976) shifted the focus of subculture studies away from an investigation of how young people coped with local social
problems to a macro perspective on class, in which youth subcultures were conceptualized as spectacular indicators of ongoing class struggles in British society. For the CCCS, subcultures indicated a series of collective reactions to structural changes taking place in post-war Britain, which symbolized perpetuating class division (Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004). As such, CCCS researchers viewed subcultures as class-bound vehicles through which young people “struggle[d] over cultural space” (Brake 1985: 4). Positing them as a phenomenon of the working class, they theorized that through subcultural participation, children of working class parents overcame in a “magical” way the structural contradiction of residing in a system of cultural values that did not reflect the circumstances of their lives or their material interests.

Drawing from Gramsci, Birmingham scholars theorized that subcultures were centered around a hegemonic struggle involving the attainment of space for the development and expression of alternative ideas to bourgeois ideology and the challenging of taken-for-granted authority (Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004). Subcultures became positive reference groups through which participants worked to formulate counter-ideologies. They accomplished this by engaging in symbolic acts of resistance, which manifested primarily in style. Style, they contended, reflected the ideological values of members, though the homology between the two was oftentimes ambiguous. Moreover, as a mechanism of social organization, their writings suggested that style cultivated group solidarity by fostering internal homogeneity and external differentiation, oftentimes striving to reconvene working class communities that were dissolving in the wake of post-war economic expansion, which enabled lower class citizens to take part in the previously unaffordable conspicuous consumption activities of middle-class culture.

In a bittersweet assessment, the CCCS concluded that subcultural participation functioned only as a magical solution for escaping the material trappings of social class. While
subversive styles offered an unsettling critique of extant social relations, they lacked the capacity to upend the institutions which maintained an unequal distribution of power and privilege throughout society. In other words, symbolic resistance could not alter the class-based order of society and did not disabuse the concrete problems of working-class youth unemployment, a future of alienating labor, educational disadvantage, and so forth (Clark et. al 1976). Perhaps more problematically to those in subcultures, styles proved readily susceptible to appropriation by a powerful “culture industry.” By standardizing style it in order to achieve efficiency and mass-production, the culture industry weakened subcultures as local sites of resistance (Clark 1976a). Inevitably, the ideological origins of style were thought to be lost in the process of commodity production, exchange, and creative appropriation.

Muggleton (2000) explains this process in depth. As commercialization of style occurs, participants come to understand subcultures through media representations. Since the media visualizes styles as opposed to contextualizing them, fashion becomes correlated with identity. Culture producers appropriate elements from unrelated subcultures, as well as dominant culture, and combine them in order to create new avenues for consumption, which precludes their meanings from stabilizing. Pastiche transforms into the primary means for achieving stylistic innovation, as subcultures feed off of one another stylistically. This blurs cultural boundaries and meanings and also bars participants from developing new ideologies, given that the technique relies solely on replication. Moreover, the culture industry removes the symbolisms once contained within styles in order to render them more amenable to consumption. The overall process defuses them—acceptable elements are maintained, while contentious one are eschewed (Clarke 1976a; Hebdige 1979). In the end, identity ceases to entail stylistic prescripts. At the point when mass media leaves participants with only images of style because their ideological
origins are lost, identity devolves simply into fashion. Subcultural innovations are generalized to represent a holistic youth culture, which destroys resistance, social-consciousness of status, and the subcultures’ former potentials for emancipation.

While the CCCS’ approach has dominated much of the extant literature on subculture studies, scholars have levied a variety of cogent critiques against it. First, McRobbie and Garber (1975) criticized CCCS researchers for failing to account for girls’ involvement in youth subcultures. While empirical evidence has revealed that most subcultures tend to be male dominated, there has certainly been no dearth of female participation in them. Rather, since CCCS scholars conceptualize subcultures as magical solutions to the structural economic problems of working class men, women are presumed to occupy only a peripheral role in them (Baron 1989). Further, critics charge scholars in the tradition of equating youth consumerism with working-class resistance in an unqualified manner (Bennet and Khan-Harris 2004). Many have found the contention that young people make use of consumer goods for the express intent of resisting dominant ideology hard to believe. This component of CCCS theory also relies on the essentialist notion that subcultural participants comprise exclusively—or at least predominantly—working class youth. Field studies demonstrate, on the other hand, that subcultural participants come from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, and that consumption activities are directed toward the project of developing unique identities and having fun as much as, if not more so, than at resistance.

What undergirds all of these criticisms is a problematic with respect to CCCS methodology. Birmingham scholars relied primarily on semiotic analysis to explore the meaning of youth subcultures, concentrating on the symbolic aspects of subcultural consumption in lieu of the actual meanings that young people attached to their own behaviors (Miles 2000).
Accordingly, studies rooted in this paradigm have failed to consider local variations in youth responses to music and style, assuming the uniformity of subcultural meaning. Emphasizing spectacular behaviors and images conducive to semiotic assessment, they also neglected to consider the everyday, mundane aspects of subcultural participation. Thus, while offering many contributions to our understanding of subculture, the CCCS locked the study of subculture within the parameters of a rather narrow discourse (Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004).

In more recent decades, scholars have advanced subculture studies through the application of a microsociological perspective, which views subculture as “a set of understandings, behaviors and artifacts used by particular groups and diffused through interlocking group networks” (Fine and Kleinman 1979, p.18). Resultant work has problematized the assumed divide between subculture and dominant culture, deemphasizing the Birmingham’s concentration on class and resistance. Largely abandoning the application of semiotic analysis, many scholars have brought sociology and qualitative methods back into the study of subculture, investigating how young people construct identities, draw boundaries and negotiate subcultural meaning within local settings. The ensuing empirical findings have problematized the “heroic” terms in which CCCS work has cast subcultural participants and have also oftentimes failed to identify coherent political projects within them.

Muggleton (2000) groups these works under the heading “post-subculture” studies. While the paradigm is loosely bounded, those working within in it tend to believe that the concept of subculture has become outmoded due to the culture industry’s total subversion of style as a meaningful form of resistance. In the introduction to his anthology on post-subculture studies, Muggleton writes “…the potential for style itself to resist appears largely lost, with any ‘intrinsically’ subversive quality to subcultures exposed as an illusion” (p. 5). Hence, moving
away from the CCCS conceptualization of subcultures as a realist entities rooted in class-relationships, scholars in this tradition take a position more closely aligned with Fine and Kleinman’s symbolic interactionism, viewing them as socially constructed phenomena that participants and media negotiate through interaction—an approach that is stringently anti-essentialist relative to CCCS theorizing.

Sarah Thornton’s (1995) ethnographic work perhaps best represents the analytic methods and theoretical orientation of those who subscribe to post-subculture studies. In her well-regarded study of clubbing culture, she appropriates Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital to illuminate the fluid and dynamic nature in which subcultural boundaries are drawn and in which perceptions of authenticity are sown. Her analysis elides a discussion of class-based subversion and does not center on the autonomy of the culture’s sign system. She instead reveals how individuals of varying status within the scene negotiate the meaning of their signs, finding—contrary to CCCS romanticism—that material inequities were internally reproduced within the scene at hand. While such work clearly disabuses many of the criticisms levied against Birmingham scholarship, Muggleton, charges many post-subculture scholars of inverting the mistakes of CCCS scholars by under-politicizing subcultures and viewing them as hedonistic, individualistic and politically disengaged. He suggests, to the contrary, that participants do more than merely vie for status within vacuous, arbitrary groups.
CHAPTER THREE

A REVIEW OF THE AUTHENTICITY LITERATURE

Current empirical studies of subculture, many of which fall within the parameters of post-subculture studies, have identified identity and authenticity as key analytic dimensions of subcultural research. A wealth of work (e.g. Williams and Copes 2005, Williams 2006; Andes 1998; Widdicombe 1998) approached through this lens reveals that subculturalists strive to construct “authentic” identities. My conception of authenticity entails a metaphysical concern with “being” versus “doing” in relation to one’s self concept, manifesting in the strategic utilization of argot, style of dress and behavior. Three general problems, however, have confounded prior attempts to develop a dynamic conceptualization of authenticity and to understand the processes through which subculturalists attempt to subjectively achieve and experience it. First, many researchers assume the objectivity of authenticity, uncritically assigning typological qualities to both those who are deemed authentic and inauthentic. While this problem reflects an increasingly common tendency among scholars to prioritize essentialist explanations of societal phenomena over constructivist ones, its origin rests with CCCS writings concerning mass media incorporation of subcultural style.

Hebdige (1979) argues that subcultures are authentic only at their moments of conception, positing that during those moments, which are inherently ephemeral, they express forbidden content (such as consciousness of class and difference) through forbidden forms (such as transgressions of sartorial and behavioral codes). However, mass-media soon situates subcultural resistance within a dominant framework of meaning, bringing it back into referential
context. It then transforms its signs into mass-produced objects, labeling and redefining the deviant practices that participants initially carried out. This compromises the power and “authenticity” of subcultures, stripping them of the otherness which they so ardently vie to provoke. In short, Hebdige contends that mass-media “domesticates” subcultures, rendering them more quotidian, less spectacular and ultimately less threatening. He and other CCCS scholars thus tie authenticity to radical resistance, which stylistic co-option renders impossible. Subcultures, then, invariably become inauthentic after mass-media incorporation pollutes them with conservative political ideology (Muggleton 2000).

Although scholars working within the post-subculture paradigm take a constructivist position toward authenticity, they routinely attribute typological qualities to the groups that they study, charging themselves with the task of categorically defining that which constitutes the authentic within them. In this work, while I retain an emphasis on processes of negotiation, I accord less importance to their outcomes. Drawing from the larger corpus of microsociology, I take a more nuanced approach toward the study of authenticity, arguing that it never possesses concrete properties. This is to say that I view authenticity as an emic rather than an etic concept—a concept that people use in their everyday lives, which influences their behavior in definite ways, but that possesses no concrete existence or attributes. I therefore suggest that individuals cannot objectively possess or achieve authenticity and distance myself from prior social science attempts to distinguish between “authentic” and “inauthentic” subcultures and “authentic” and “inauthentic” subcultural participants. Rather, like the conceptualization of authenticity that Peterson (1997) develops in his exploration of country music, I view it as a socially constructed concept negotiated through interaction—a claim made by those involved in subculture that is either legitimated or denied by relevant others.
By assigning concrete properties to those considered authentic, we risk privileging and reifying dominant conceptions of the authentic while marginalizing the voices of those on the so-called periphery of subculture. Furthermore, given that subcultures are generally not highly institutionalized, single parties and groups cannot impose their own aesthetic standards onto them. Rather, conceptions of authenticity emerge through the interplay of different actors within historical circumstances. As with country music, the meaning of authenticity for subcultural participants varies over time, across space and among different members. By assuming that it constitutes something which participants merely have or do not have, which both CCCS and post-subcultures studies tend to do, we obscure the processes of negotiation in which subculturalists partake when constructing authenticity, and we ignore the reasons for why authenticity concerns them in the first place. More generally, such realist orientations misplace concreteness by assuming that “authenticity” constitutes a palpable phenomenon that can be located and objectively codified. I, on the other hand, will treat it as a subjective conception.

Second, many researchers have attempted to understand subculture through an exploration of style, and, as a natural result, their work has tended to frame authenticity exclusively in terms of style. This tradition harbors an unambiguous origin. Since the CCCS viewed style as a sign of something else, they employed semiotic analysis in order to interpret it. Its scholarship subsequently built up a tradition that has over-emphasized the study of material culture to the detriment of non-material culture. Indeed, subcultural style, so salient and intriguing to the sociological eye, has become the most commonly analyzed dimension of subculture studies—scholars have framed, interpreted, and defined subcultures through it, choosing to gauge concepts such as commitment and authenticity vis-à-vis stylistic conformity (e.g., Fox 1987).
Given that elements of subcultural style are routinely co-opted and consequently distorted by the profit-driven culture industry, style is rapidly becoming marginalized as a resource from which subculturalists can draw in the quest for “authenticity.” Moreover, many empirical studies have explored how participants regularly claim to be real while charging that others merely speak or dress in certain ways in order to appear cool or to fit in with the group (Widdicombe and Woofitt 1990; Baron 1989). Hence, it appears that actively working to evoke images through style displays with the perceived intent of representing a social category is repudiated in lieu of allowing such categories to reflect a pre-existent self. Given these findings, further inquiry into the ideology representing a personal dimension of authenticity, which refers to how individuals attempt to frame their subcultural participation as part of a larger life project that is independent of external influence (Williams 2005), is in order. In short, at this point in time, reason exists to prioritize the study non-material aspects of subculture over their sartorial dimensions.

Third, and lastly, no attempt has been made to understand or place the quest for authenticity among subcultural participants within the larger social context of late modernity/postmodernity. Authenticity reflects a more general modernist preoccupation with self realization that Taylor (1992) describes in his work *The Culture of Authenticity*. During the middle of the 18th century, the sensibility, rationality and pretension of Enlightenment ideals began to increasingly incense young intellectuals, writers, musicians and artists (Boyle 2004). While Enlightenment thinkers emphasized deductive reason and a strict adherence to method, an emerging class of Romantics began to extol the virtues of intuition, imagination and feeling. Rousseau exemplifies this position in his glorification of the “noble savage” who is in touch with his natural instincts. Reacting against Rationalists like Descartes, Romantic thinkers rejected the
prevailing credo “I think, therefore I am,” replacing it with a position more akin to “I feel, therefore I am.” Boyle (2004) argues that this mentality has provoked a widespread contemporary belief that individuals should live life on the edge by recognizing societal rules and living outside of them—a theme that many advertisers capitalize on when marketing consumer products. Taylor, treating the argument more thoroughly, contends that the ideal of authenticity has facilitated the belief that human beings are innately imbued with moral codes that must be explored and clarified in order to actualize their potentialities. Proposing that we live in a “culture of authenticity,” he suggests that we have come to construe humans as beings with inner depths. Thus, being in touch with oneself has taken on independent moral significance and has come to supplant prior efforts to attain connectedness with God.

As foreshadowed above, this system of beliefs owes much to Rousseau, who influentially advocated that individuals should follow their inner-voices and resist the pressures and callings of society in order to recover intimate moral contact with themselves. Rousseau also largely founded the notion of “self-determining freedom,” which suggests that individuals become free only when they autonomously decide their own concerns rather than allowing themselves to be shaped by external influences. Extending this line of argument, Herder posited that all people possess original ways of being human, and that failing to locate or actualize those unique modes of existence banishes them to conditions of inhumaness and incompleteness. Viewing the self as an instrument, according to this philosophical stance, such as when individuals subvert themselves to higher, transcendental powers, is believed to confound discovery and actualization of the inner voice, defeating one’s life purpose and undermining the attainment of moral purity. Notably, this metaphysical orientation has been thoroughly critiqued and denigrated as a malaise of modernity (see, for example, Lasch 1979; Bell 1976), with theorists contending that centering
concern on the self narrows individuals’ lives by making them poorer in meaning and less concerned with others and society, pejoratively labeling it as a “culture of narcissism” and the “me-generation.” Nonetheless, though, much evidence suggests that a profound concern with self-realization was ushered in with the modern era that values self-exploration and individuality over profuse social engagement and conformity.

Perhaps offerings a more sociological take on this phenomenon rooted in a lens of identity rather than “authenticity,” Ralph Turner (1976) has argued that the types of actions and feelings that people in advanced industrial societies recognize as emanations of their “real selves” are shifting. Turner posits that peoples’ self-conceptions tended to be anchored in institutional frameworks prior to the advent of post-industrial society. Under this locus of self, people tied their self-concepts to the social roles that they occupied, implicitly operating under the assumption that the self was something to be attained, created and achieved. It is thus projected into the future and revealed when individuals adhere to high standards and goals despite the pull of primal temptations.

However, Turner speculates that nascent forces are shifting society away from an institutional emphasis of self to one that is anchored in deeply felt impulses, suggesting that people are now more likely to experience personal reality in the enactment and expression of instincts as opposed to the social roles that they have adopted or assumed. Under the impulse locus, people discover rather than create their real selves through intense introspection. The true self is revealed when individuals abandon their inhibitions and predicate their actions on desire rather than on rightness or propriety, irrespective of the social consequences that doing so entails.

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1 Turner suggests that the demarcation between feelings and actions that represent the real self and those that do possesses three components. First, it relies on a discrimination between the real and unreal in experience; second, it relies on a discrimination between attributions to the person and attribution to the situation; and third, the notion of a real self incorporates the sense of a realm that is distinctly personal and sacred.
The real self thus exists in the present rather than in the future, as individuals resist external social pressures in order to avert succumbing to a league of rules and regulations that they perceive as paltry. To put it another way, while those who harbor an institutional locus of self experience societal rules and regulations as values that facilitate self-actualization by providing moral standards and teleological ends by which to adhere and pursue, the experience of self-as-impulse transforms the institutional order into a set of norms that arbitrarily constrains one’s ability to engage in genuine expression.

While not drawing any definite conclusions with respect to why such a shift is occurring, Turner cites changes in cultural definitions of reality, changes in the terms of integration within mass societies, and the advent of new and unprecedented opportunities for gratifying impulses as potential catalysts. He also notes that many institutional frameworks that once provided salient opportunities for self-definition are becoming ever more unstable and unpredictable. His argument hence proceeds that the growing time-span and increasing ambiguity between action and rewards within such systems make institutional loci of self seem and feel less real than loci of self anchored in impulses. Thus, what Taylor and Boyle describe as a morally oriented quest for authenticity inspired by the intellectual pronouncements of Romantic thinkers can also be viewed as a change in how individuals experience their personal realities and anchor their self-conceptions—a change grounded in concrete social and material transformations in advanced industrial societies as opposed to changing philosophical and ideational currents. Extrapolating from Turner’s analysis, then, one might argue that the drive for authenticity is not necessarily a recent development but one that has existed throughout the ages. According to Turner’s theorizing, however, it now finds expression in self-realization rather than self-creation.
Paradoxically converging with this emerging ideal of self-realization, however, contemporary social theory has become increasingly concerned with the instability of the self as well as culture more broadly. Allan (1998) contends that the accoutrements of advanced capitalism—globalization, mass-media, advertising, commodification, information technology, and new forms of transportation—have fragmented reality. Postmodernity, in other words, has left individuals floundering in a sea of commodified cultural images produced by the mass media. Gergen (1991), in particular, argues that the subject has become saturated with images that are incoherent and unrelated. New technologies, which increase the frequency and transform the nature of social encounters, inundate individuals with knowledge about different groups, different people, different values, and different modes of expression. In this vein, Giddens argues that advanced capitalism has bred the development of a “radical reflexivity” among individuals, in which “nothing is permanent and things are only true until further notice” (Kidder 2006).

The general population, he posits, has internalized a sense of doubt with respect to knowledge, viewing it as transitory and unstable. As a result, we direct an unnatural reflexivity toward our self-concepts, increasing our self-monitoring in a culture that is socially saturated and filled with constant change and doubt. The ability to maintain a coherent self-narrative is thus complicated, and the individual comes to doubt the objectified self. Bauman (1991) further explains this problem, asserting that as the world has deinstitutionalized, with ascribed statuses no longer producing strong or constant effects on our self-concepts. This catalyzes people to engage in projects of self-constitution that have no reference point for evaluation or monitoring, causing them to experience great uncertainty with respect to their identities.
In *The Meaning of Culture*, Allan (1998), rooting his position in the work of Heidegger and Giddens, asserts that people have a basic need for “ontological security” and for imposing “facticity” upon their experienced world. In this way, we can view postmodernity as posing a “problem” for individuals with respect to both reality construction and identity formation. David Boyle (2004) speaks to the scope of this problem within contemporary society, noting how people—especially the post-materialist middle-classes—have become afraid that their grip on reality is slipping away from them, due to the sense that it is up for sale, rapidly being commodified, packaged and sold back to them in an artificial form. Like Allan, he argues that we live in a world where nothing is quite what it seems, which has generated a desire for reality and stability. This weighs especially heavily on individuals given that—due to influence of Romantic thinkers—authenticity has ascended as a cultural objective. In the very moment that people are expected to find themselves, the ability to do so as well as the capacity to feel a sense of certainty in so doing have become monumentally difficult.

In sum, while Taylor connects our concern for authenticity to the residue of Romantic thought, and while Turner implies that it reflects a transformation in the way that people experience their self-concepts, Boyle and Allan claim that we have come to celebrate authenticity in order to balance the extreme dislocation of our lives in the postmodern condition, where time and space are no longer grounded. The doubt that we have internalized, which has led to radical reflexivity and a de-centering of the self, has begotten an obsession within us with respect to distinguishing between the real and the fake. Boyle gives several examples of questions that consume us in our everyday lives: Is Jerry Springer staged? Is a person really beautiful if he underwent cosmetic surgery? Does climbing Mount Everest really count if one was assisted with an oxygen supply? It is within this context that I approach the study of
authenticity in relation to punks. As opposed to investigating subculture in a vacuum, I recognize the relevance and importance of authenticity within the broader societal milieu, which, as noted above, enables me to pursue an alternative conversation in order to advance our understanding of both phenomena.
CHAPTER FOUR
A BRIEF HISTORY OF PUNK SUBCULTURE

In this section I offer a brief genealogy of punk subculture in order to contextualize and familiarize readers with the ethnographic findings that follow. While both the academy and commercial press give a relatively consistent narrative of punk’s birth and maturation, the CCCS’ theoretical perspective—especially the work of Hebdige—clearly influences both accounts. Given the criticisms levied against the semiotic methods of analysis on which he relied, it is important to note that the “objectivity” of these narratives is somewhat in question. Keeping this in mind, scholars generally date the subculture’s genesis to the years 1976-1977. Preceding this time, many people had begun to feel that rock music had become indulgent and pretentious, losing site of its unwieldy and radical roots. Following the lead of The Sex Pistols and The Ramones, who were early progenitors of the genre, scores of punk bands formed in order to address these concerns—most of them located in urban areas throughout the U.S. and Great Britain. These early punk bands celebrated their amateurism. In an effort to reconstitute rock music as a populist cultural medium, they supplanted technical virtuosity and pomposity with passion, energy and caustic lyrics. Viewing existing recording and performing norms as similarly pretentious, punk bands emphasized a do-it-yourself (DIY) ethic with respect to both cultural production and everyday living (Moore 2007). Embracing DIY, they recorded their own albums, booked their own tours and created their own zines.

The musical form described above became a convenient conduit that young people used to give expression to feelings of alienation, angst and fatalism that were resulting from the
changing social, political and economic conditions of the United States and Great Britain during the 1970s (Gaines 1991). The subculture quickly became known as an outlet for expressing discontent vis-à-vis social injustice. Punks decried capitalistic inequality, deindustrialization, government corruption, and a cultural current that was drifting more and more to the right (O’Hara 1999). Punks also expressed frustration with local problems: to countermand feeling of powerlessness that arose from their positions within educational and familial institutions, they challenged the idea that other people had the right to determine how they should live and the values to which they should adhere. Thus, most participants came to reject conventions that limited self-expression, developing a style that emphasized the profane. Punk style abided by eccentric, obscene standards that took a crude and oftentimes vile form, seeking to deliberately offend mainstream conventions and sensibilities. Typical sartorial manifestations included public vulgarity, mohawks, studded leather jacks, and self-destructive acts like drug-use. In performing these activities, punks claimed to cast rage against the system in a creative way, reject conformity, question prevailing modes of thought, and disavow multiple forms of authority.
CHAPTER FIVE
DATA AND METHODOLOGY

I conducted initial research for this project during the fall of 2004 but collected the lion’s share of my data from fall 2007 to spring 2008. I engaged in ethnographic field research, observing and analyzing the behavior of a local group of self-identified punks. Having a personal history of subcultural participation, I knew several subjects before beginning research. As field work intensified, however, I made contact with several other participants with whom I was previously not acquainted. Much of my participant observation consisted of attending punk concerts. Given the convergence of my research and personal interests, I attended many of these during the tenure of my research. I also took part in mundane social outings in order to address the empirical gaps for which CCCS work is commonly critiqued (Clarke 1997). Social outings took a number of forms; I attended parties with participants, hung out at informal gatherings with them and also participated in a few local political projects in which some were engaged. Given my past relations with participants, I was treated as an insider at both concerts and in informal outings. I feel that this strengthened my data, as it allowed me to well-integrate myself into the subculture as a sociologist. Additionally, given my implicit understanding of the subculture’s meaning system, I believe that I was often able to feel what participants experienced, which heightened my understanding of what was going on (Kidder 2006). After most outings, I wrote self-reflexive field notes. While not formally incorporating auto-ethnography as an analytic strategy, throughout the research I did attempt to examine my own experiences and reactions to
particular events in order elucidate research questions. This mostly took the form of bracketing field notes with personal experiences and interactions at concerts and social outings.

While making use of participant observation, most of my data and analysis come from in-depth, semi-structured interviews \((n=20)\). I completed four interviews during 2004, which came from personal acquaintances. I completed the remaining 16 during the fall of 2007 and spring of 2008. In an effort to diversify my sample, I did not rely on those within my network for the second batch of interviews. Rather, I contacted members of local punk bands, individuals discussing punk related topics on a local internet forum, and individuals that I met at concerts and at informal outings. I also made heavy use of snowball sampling. Interviews lasted from 45 minutes to two hours and covered a range of topics, which included: the experiences of participants before becoming punk; how they became involved with the subculture; what values and beliefs they associated with punk; what personal meaning it held for them; what role they believed style—especially music—to possess for punk; how they distinguished insiders from outsiders; what the experience of going to concerts was like; the meaning and outcomes of acts of resistance that they had engaged in; and a series of questions with respect to their overall social and political views. Given the means through which I recruited some informants, not all of them necessarily recognized me as an insider. Nonetheless, I have no reason to suspect that they withheld information or candidness during interviews. Some participants had also externally crafted journal entries that considered their punk identities and their subcultural experiences. These subjects offered to contribute them to my stock of data for content analysis. I used these entries primarily to analyze the experience of attending concerts, which most them concerned.
Overall, sampling was based on convenience and the theoretic necessities of the project. While subjects did not represent the subculture as a whole and are not randomly derived, all were insiders who held valuable, meaningful knowledge. Given my interest in exploring ideology, the data are robust, since members of the particular group with which I interacted oftentimes did not heed stylistic elements of punk and regularly repudiated and distanced themselves from them, which uniquely informed my inquiries. Participants were diverse in social background and ideology. 14 of the interviewees were male, and 6 were female. While I experienced some difficulty in recruiting female participants given the demographic of the local scene, I made a concerted effort to do so in order account for the experiences of women within punk—an effort that CCCS scholarship, as noted, did not accomplish.

I employed an emergent strategy of analytic coding in order to analyze the data. Using interview transcripts, field notes, and the personal journal entries, I actively searched for patterns and themes that cut across all of the data garnered from subjects (Charmez 1994). I used continual and repeated abstraction in an attempt to truly understand “what was going on.” My analysis also utilizes triangulation (Massey & Walford 1999), making use of multiple forms of data as well as different methodological strategies. In coding my data, I relied on both phenomenology and grounded theory strategies in order arrive at conclusions.
CHAPTER SIX

THE NARRATIVE OF BECOMING PUNK

A narrative is a group of statements that provides temporal and moral ordering for a set of events (Ewick and Silbey 1995). In this section of the paper, drawing from interview data, I explore the rather ubiquitous narrative of becoming punk. The narratives that punks provide to account for their identities possess sociological significance, given that individuals typically explain their actions to themselves through stories. Ewick and Silbey go so far as to suggest that one’s self-concept can be understood as an unfolding narrative. Moreover, stories describe the world as it lived and understood by the storyteller. Telling stories is also strategic. People relate particular stories in order to advance their goals and interests. Studying the narrative of becoming punk thus offers insight into how subcultural participants view themselves, how they place themselves within larger social contexts, how they elicit perceptions of authenticity among others and within themselves, and how they have come to embrace particular value systems.

The narrative that emerged from my research is comprised of four major parts: having felt different from others and having possessed an ability to think more critically than them; having been marginalized by peer groups; having strongly identified with punk music; and having gained the ability to engage in a project of self-exploration through active subcultural participation. In their stories, interviewees maintained that they did not “become” punk. That is to say, they denied having made conscious choices at particular moments in their lives to identify with and participate in the subculture. Rather, they asserted that they had always possessed the essences of their punk identities within themselves, reporting that their inner beings became
manifested through participation in the subculture. Given this belief, informants emphasized the extent to which they felt different from their peers during adolescence. In relating how she became punk, Kathleen, a 26 year old graduate student, for instance, said “I don’t know how it happened; I just always had this desire to be different…just to kind of break the status quo.” Reminiscing on her life before becoming an active participant in the subculture in more depth, Eve, as 24 year old college graduate who works in a library, told the following story:

...even when I was a kid I felt sort of punk without knowing it. I just was different… I didn’t have any friends until meeting one dude who was kind of like me…who was just kind of a badass, just without the nerdy aspect…

...Can you speak some more as to how exactly you felt different from other people?

...I don’t know, I just always felt like I was sort of set apart from [other people] somehow…I knew a lot more than the people my age, and I had been through some really real life shit, and I felt like everybody else just kind of lived this stupid, candy-coated existence.

While participants emphasized feeling different from their peers to varying degrees, the claim appeared in all of their interviews. When probed about why they felt different, subjects claimed to have possessed different values, interests and backgrounds than their peers, who they portrayed as superficial, unaware and conformist. As a result, they claimed that they did not fit into their school and community environments during adolescence. Offering a story that was quite similar to Eve’s, Glenn, a 24 year old graduate student, said:

I think in the end, I was just different from [the people in my high school]. No matter how hard I would’ve tried to fit in with people who were popular and people who played sports all the time, I think at the most I would’ve just been a poser and never would’ve been accepted by those people. I could have maybe been a shell, and I could have shown up at those kinds of social events and stuff, but I never would have been accepted the way they accepted people who they really considered themselves. So in the end, I think it was really better to find my own identity through something like punk than just to try really hard and fail—and be miserable.
Two additional stories speak to some of the other reasons interviewees gave for not fitting in with their peers. Charlie, a 23 year old former army enlistee who works in a restaurant and is thoroughly involved in the local DIY community, claims that it resulted from the culture shock that he experienced upon moving to a new place. He describes possessing different values than his high school peers and also claims that he lacked the means needed in order to materially fit in with them.

I grew up in Maine in a mill town...[but]...My dad got a job in Georgia, so we moved to [an affluent, suburban county] for high school, and that’s where the real seeds of anger were sown. It was a total cultural vacuum. And that’s where I started developing ideas that I didn’t associate with punk, but I was already relating to it without even really knowing. I was just kind of a woodsy, outdoors kid my whole life and then to go into the suburbs and everything is named after trees but there are no trees; it would get me fired up, and it kind of came out in irresponsible ways as a kid... I was just pissed and that was pretty much led up to [becoming punk].

**When probed about his high school experiences, he goes on to relate:**

High school was rough. Nobody was rich where I grew up, and then I moved to [the southeastern suburb] where status came into play. It wasn’t even a part of my mind until I went there, and so I didn’t fit in there. There was a lot of hostility toward me, and I reacted with a lot more hostility back then, and it seemed like it was constant friction the whole time I was there. It was a rough time.

Greg, a 26 year old college graduate, librarian and social activist, describes feeling aloof from his peers as well, but for different reasons.

I was raised to believe that it was fundamentally wrong to discriminate against people because of their race, because of where they’re from, because of their sexual orientation...very literal things my parents told me, which I’m not sure that most kids growing up in the 80s were taught...

**The liberal upbringing that you had compared to others—did that ever cause any tension between you and other people growing up?**

Yeah, yeah—definitely. I think there’s an assumption that some people have...if you appear to be a middle class, white man, then they will also assume that you’re a misogynist, they’ll also assume that you’re a racist, they’ll assume that you’re homophobic. That’s just an assumption that a lot of people have, you know, I’ve always kind of refuted that. But always, from being little up until today, guys have come up and
dropped racist bullshit on me. I remember one time in middle school, this guy who I thought was cool…came over to me and just whispered this extremely racist thing in my ear, and I was like ‘that’s not cool; that’s not okay’…there was this constant assumption when I was growing up that you can’t be overtly misogynistic or racist, but if it’s between white guys, well it’s okay. And I think some of the best punk music addresses that directly.

Compared to his peers, Greg claimed to have possessed an alternate reference point on ethics. This, he says, caused him to feel different from others and to reject their system of values.

Further into their interviews, both Glenn and Greg claimed this sense of difference motivated them to explore alternate sources of identity and interaction through the subculture.

Rather than expressing an outright rejection of peer culture, many participants also claimed that their peers simply rejected them, which undermined their abilities to develop identities and senses of self-worth within it. Cooper, a 23 year old college graduate and restaurant manager, claimed to have suffered from constant ridicule, “never fitting in.” His narrative speaks to the way in which his high school peers ostracized him, which, he contends, left him feeling powerless and unhappy.

I had that world of suffering; I always got picked on, I never fit in…and I remember this vividly. I was in like seventh grade, on the school bus, and I remember Jennifer Smith making fun of me because the only radio station I listened to was [an oldies station], which is what my mom always had [on]. I had no real identity. I was just out there and a total loser. Nothing made me different except that I was so different. I remember those things; I always do. I was completely disempowered at that point in my life. Punk gave me a tool to change that, a way out, a brighter future…so I embraced it.

Lorie, a 27 year old college graduate, restaurant worker and musician, gives a very similar narrative:

I went to middle school and the first year and a half of high school in Tennessee, and then the rest in Georgia. I was a band geek in Tennessee, but I had lots of friends. I guess my biggest problem then was boys. Boys didn't look at me like that, and all my female friends were already dating and having sex. Moving to Georgia was pretty awful. The school was bigger and richer and no one really cared to have anything to do with me. I skipped class a lot and walked around with a huge chip on my shoulder. I had absolutely zero self esteem. When I finally did get a boyfriend, he pushed me around, and I let
him...I was never into fashion, make-up, or anything considered girly. My female friends would force me down and put make-up on me at slumber parties. They would tell me how much ‘prettier’ I would be if only I would do such-and-such. I liked metal and ska and some punk. Anything that became popular, I no longer liked. I didn't want to like the same things that other people liked.

And finally, Brian, a 24 year old college graduate, social activist and service worker, gives yet another story relating the pangs of social alienation during high school:

My life [before punk] was pretty miserable actually. I was just sort of a punching bag at school, and I didn’t really have any friends, except for this one kid who was homeschooled, so he didn’t have any friends either. My entire life was basically sort of trying to think of ways to avoid going to school—to avoid ridicule—and going to church…and playing computer games with that one kid….I definitely remember the 6th grade as being one of the worst years of my life, and that was one of the last years before I became involved—or interested, I should say, because there’s a limited extent to which a 12 or 13 year old can be involved, I guess, at least in my case, with punk.

Like Cooper and Lorie, Brian claimed that his schoolmates ridiculed and rejected him.

However, further into his interview he also claimed to have lacked an interest in the culture of his peers, who he thought had prematurely embraced the sterile world of adults. Like many interviewees, Brian indicated that his identification as a punk began with a process of both rejecting and being rejected by his peers. Like other informants, as I will convey further into the paper, entering into punk subculture provided him with social acceptance as well as real and symbolic space through which to develop a positive self-concept.

In addition to feeling uncomfortable during adolescence, subjects also claimed to have taken issue with the authority that they were subjected to at school, home and work.

Interviewees insisted that these institutions constrained their capacities for self-expression and ideological freedom in significant ways, governing their time and space and striving to condition their values. Blake, a 22 year old college student, offered the following commentary about his high school experience:
I always felt like an outsider—mostly in high school. I hated it; I hated 95% percent of the people there, I didn’t like a lot of teachers, I hated how it structured and controlled my life, I hated having to get up early every morning…it was just oppressive. Most of all though, I think it involved the other kids and how I viewed them. I lived in a very affluent area where parents bought their children 25 thousand dollar cars upon turning 16, everyone dressed fashionably, with outfits costing hundreds of dollars…Everyone was rich, and everyone acted rich—pretentious, bombastic, judgmental, unaccepting, elitist, and so forth. I wasn’t rich. My parents were divorced, my household, the vast majority of the time, was dysfunctional, and I wasn’t even from there originally….I was different, and people treated me accordingly.

While speaking to his struggle against others, which he grounded in his relative impoverishment, dysfunctional household and foreignness, Blake’s narrative also expressed outrage over the way that the educational system regulated his everyday life—a regulation that he construed as “oppressive.” Other interviewees also expressed great disdain for the socialization that it and other institutions attempted to impart during adolescence, referring to an ostensibly inherent inability to mindlessly internalize values and obey authority in their narratives. In contrast to their peers, who, in their view, acquiesced to this process without much reservation or resistance, subjects described possessing a questioning, inquisitive attitude—a disinclination to accept what others offered as truth and a desire to discover it for themselves. They claimed to have felt that they had always held this mentality, which primed them for immersion into punk subculture.

Henry, a 22 year old male who works full time, attends community college and plays in a local punk band, described this sentiment when reflecting on his experiences in middle and high school, before getting into punk rock.

You said you had “that attitude” before you got involved with punk; can you elaborate on that a little bit?

Yeah…I would have teachers say “you can’t do this,” and I’d say “why—why can’t I do this?”…basically any rules that didn’t seem to apply to the safety of others or yourself…There were certain teachers who had power struggles. They’d been teachers forever, and I guess they figured that [school] was their stomping ground, so they would sort of use their pull to maybe make things a whole lot more difficult for people, so I really wouldn’t like that. I’d make a point to kind of mess them up a little bit…
So you kind of questioned figures of authority as opposed to just obeying what you were told to do?

Right. Anything with a rule—every rule has a reason behind it, but some reasons aren’t good reasons, and I just wanted to distinguish between which ones were the good reasons and which ones were the bad reasons, because then I can decide which ones to follow, or which ones not to follow or at least try not to follow…It wasn’t really a whole rebel thing, like “no one’s going to tell me what to do,” you know, someone has to tell you what to do eventually…but it made me feel like I was my own person instead of being sculpted into something by other people, because the things they told me not to do, if I found out there was actually a good reason behind it…I might eventually follow that rule…I felt free, and I felt like as long as I know what’s right and I learn that myself, I don’t really need someone telling me that this is the way you should do things…you should know that it’s right yourself, not just because you were told it was.

Henry’s story described a protagonist who desired to come to his own conclusions as opposed to allowing a system of beliefs to be imposed onto him. He claimed to have reacted against the authority of teachers not because of an anti-social impulse, but because by questioning the motives of their rules, he was able to develop the ability to distinguish between those that were arbitrary and those that were moral. This, he stated, enabled him to formulate a personal code of ethics by which to adhere later in his life. In a similar way, Trevor, a 21 year old high school graduate who holds down a fulltime job and also plays in a local punk band, offered the following commentary with respect to his educational experiences:

I guess I started out not really knowing what I wanted to do; I was inquisitive, always very inquisitive. I asked a lot of questions in school…teachers were always pissed at me…I think it’s a big stereotype that punks want to be political just because that’s what they think it is…I’m sure there are some kids who are following it for the trend, but I think that the kids who are political and that really care about that kind of stuff, it’s because they started out being inquisitive, and they want to not just take things the way they were presented; they want to ask more questions, dig deeper, and punk just fits in with that…

So there’s not really, then, a set of political ideas that are kind of inherently a part of punk? It’s more just a reflection of an attitude of…

…yeah, I think it’s just wanting to ask questions. Usually, there are a lot of times where it comes to the same conclusion, but you don’t have to come to that conclusion. That’s
why I like punk, because you can come to any conclusion you want. That’s what punk is…yeah, it’s individualism…[Resisting authority] is kind of like just figuring out who you are and what it is your morals are. Instead of somebody else telling you what your morals should be, this is how you should feel about things, you kind of push it a little bit, and you push it until you feel uncomfortable and then you back off.

In his commentary, Trevor viewed himself as having been inquisitive in a way that others were not during middle school and high school. Much like Henry, he claimed to resist figures of authority in order to “figure out who he was.” He asserted that he was able to construct his own ethical system by “pushing” rules and limits. Trevor believed that discovering that which was pious from that which was impious through personal experience—by suffering feelings of guilt—was more meaningful than simply taking another’s word for it. Both Henry and Trevor’s stories thus prioritize the value of emotions over rationality. They also suggest that knowledge—and truth more generally—are arrived at through a dialectical process of creation and negation—not passive reception.

Furthermore, Blake, Henry and Trevor’s professed views toward teacher authority are consistent with Turner’s (1976) contention that the loci of self-conceptions are shifting from institutional frameworks to impulses. They and other respondents disdained institutional regulations within the school—as well as within other systems—as stifling and arbitrary norms unworthy of their deference rather than respecting them as meaningful values. However, this observation begs the question of why many if not most students continue to respect teacher authority and elect not to regularly challenge the school’s legitimacy as an institution. Given the alienation that interviewees described experiencing, it is possible that their low hierarchal positions within the school and other social systems rendered their antipathy toward such institutional frameworks particularly acute. In other words, respondents may have possessed a strong need or desire to anchor their self concepts within emotions and impulses, since creating a
positive self-concept within available institutions proved particularly difficult and unlikely. This reasoning follows from Turner’s logic, as he contends that the real self is revealed when one fully controls his or her behavior and faculties and achieves perfection when grounding it within institutional frameworks—conditions that, given respondent stories, did not at all seem possible.

Given their disgust with the repressiveness of education, familial and work institutions, and unable to cultivate a meaningful identity or explore their alternative ideas in the normative cultures of their schools and communities, informants claimed that they began to seek outlets for socialization and self-expression elsewhere. Their commentary suggested that they sought three things in so doing: social acceptance, similar others who could empathize with their unique experiences, and a social forum that indulged and facilitated their alternative modes of thinking. It is at this point in their narratives that interviewees claimed to have discovered punk music. While several informants stated that older siblings first exposed them to the genre, many others claimed that it occurred haphazardly—Trevor, for example, said that he first heard punk music on a snowboarding video game that he played, initially referring to it as “snowboarding music.” The overwhelming majority of interviewees claimed that they developed an immediate and emphatic interest in punk, asserting that its energy and sincerity gripped them, and that they could strongly identify with both its tonal qualities and lyrical content. Many also claimed that it opened up new areas of critical thought, according validation to the qualms with the normative culture of their peer and educational environments that they claimed to hold. Ian, a 24 year college graduate, high school math teacher, and player in a local punk band, described this feeling in depth:

…the one band that I heard who absolutely just drew me in for sure was Minor Threat. When I heard those recordings and I heard about the Straight Edge philosophy, I was like ‘Oh, that’s it for me.’ I loved the idea of the rebellion to the rebellion. It’s like we don’t have to do all these things; you can still be a strong person. I mean, we’re still going to be just as loud, we’re still going to be just as strong, as passionate, but we’re not going to do any of these things that society holds up high—you know, that just got me…it was all about the energy and the passion, and just…all about, you know, being yourself and fuck the rest. You’re your own independent person; if you’re going to take on the world, do it in the clearest state of mind—go for it, anyone can do it. You just have to be willing to fight for it….

I never saw the point in smoking or drinking or, you know, promiscuous sex, or any of that stuff that a lot of my friends had gotten into during the high school years…it never seemed like something I would do. And I always felt like that made me not only an outcast in the whole high school culture or high school setting but also made me an outcast with my friends, because whenever we’d hang out, they’d be drinking and smoking, and I’d just be there…but then I heard that, and…you know, it was perfect…It was pretty much what I was looking for, because you know, during high school and middle-school you’re always like ‘what I am doing; am I doing this right; am I going in the right direct?’ And then I heard that, and I was like ‘fuck yeah I am; fuck em’ all; I am going in the right direction’…I was looking for some—it may seem silly—but I was looking for some sort of sign…And then they came around, and they told me, ‘no; you
Ian’s narrative illuminates the profound effect that many interviewees claimed punk music had carried on them. Subjects routinely asserted that punk’s energy, passion and lyrical emphasis lent a helping hand to the problems that they faced. In Ian’s case, he claimed that hearing Minor Threat brought about an “epiphany” by providing him with the fortitude that he needed in order to be his own person and live according to his own beliefs in a social milieu that opposed them.

Blake, an interviewee cited above, made a connection between punk and his participation on the high school debate team, which he highly valued at the time because of social justice themes that it addressed:

As I listened to punk more, I came to really identify with it. The fury and angst and intensity appealed to me because it was pretty much how I felt every single day when I walked into school. The lyrics attested to that too once I actually deciphered them. And Bad Religion, the first punk that I really came to love and appreciate, took it a degree further, because they sang about wordily affairs, rectifying global injustices, reacting against totalitarian governments, and lots of other topics that I researched, debated about, and believed in for debate team. My appreciation for punk music really began to develop there…

Similarly, Henry, in another poignant story, claimed that punk appealed to him over other forms of music because of its sincerity, energy and—perhaps most importantly—because it seemed like something that he would and could create himself:

…let me think of the first time I heard punk rock…I guess maybe listening to like Green Day and Offspring at first, just because that was readily available, I didn’t know it was punk rock at the time, and I guess whatever they’ve gone on to do may or may not be called that anymore, and so listening to those guys, I didn’t have the internet, so I didn’t have just any music—you know, let’s check this band out—but eventually I started being able to get money, and I would go down to the used record stores and they would have punk rock compilations and all these bands I’d never heard of, and I would just say, ‘well…let’s see what we have here.’…There was no one in my high school that listened to that stuff, and I started really getting into the music because the songs were great. It was like something you and your buddy could hang out and write in like 20 minutes…and it felt like you could of known these people…it was just songs that you could just tell that they wrote because they were feeling something and they wrote it… so
I started identifying with that kind of music, because the ideals behind it were just so
great, and they weren’t simple, but it felt like it was to me, I could’ve written that song,
and it was good. You’d hear songs about…oh, you know, I’m going to go hang out with
my friends and we’re going to go steal mail (laughs), you didn’t hear about that on the
radio or nothing, so I started getting into that a whole lot.

In short, participants claimed that they could identify with punk music, that its passion
profundely galvanized them, that it struck them as more real and more sincere than other genres,
and that it became a vicarious social support system, becoming more corporeal as they
transitioned into actual participation within the subculture.

After finding punk music, interviewees claimed that they developed an emphatic interest
in the broader subculture, which, as mentioned above, led them to actively participate in it. At
this point in their stories, interviewees stated that they began to socialize with other punks, adopt
certain aspects of punk style and regularly attend punk concerts. Informants stressed that they
had found a meaningful niche for themselves within their respective punk communities. All
claimed that, within them, they felt accepted, also stating that the subculture allowed them to
explore and act upon inchoate ideas within their possession. As many of the passages quoted
above adumbrate, this new found acceptance helped to sooth the pangs of alienation from which
they claimed to have hitherto suffered. Elaborating on why he began to identify as punk, Tom,
for example, extended the following commentary:

…you get into punk because you can identity with the community…a community that
will understand and that’s had similar experiences. It wasn’t like my father being a drug-
user or an alcoholic drove me to be straight-edge, it was acceptance. You know, it wasn’t
necessarily the compelling sound of punk that got me into it, it was just kind of like an
idea of acceptance. It was like I can come here and be a part of the community-- that’s
what I viewed punk as for most of my life…looking back on it, it seemed to me that—it
was just this really supportive unit of individuals…you just kind of romanticize it…it was
hell man, in high school.

Tom’s story speaks to how camaraderie and contact with empathetic others became uniquely
possible through subcultural participation. In another summation, Charlie gives an excellent
account of how participation in the subculture enabled him explore different ideas, indulge his curious nature, and further his personal project of ideological clarification.

I joined the army when I was 17, and I was always going to hardcore shows and punk shows the entire time, and it was always a music thing for me…I was always back and forth on my ideology from here to here until I went to Baltimore…I was going there for what they call AIT, which is school and training for what your job will be in the military, and I really wanted to see a show, and I was really unhappy with the decision I’d made, and I went to this place called the copy cat, which was a sixth floor squat that had power and water, and there was a show going on there, and people were just coming up to me because I was a new face, and they were just being real nice to me. And they were like “what are you doing here,” and I was like ‘I joined the army,’ and they were like ‘oh man, you fucked up.’ And they gave me a bunch of really cool…actually, the first book…I got a free book from my friend Scott, which was Hegemony or Survival, which is a Noam Chompsky book…I felt like a total freak, and I felt bad for being there just from being in the army, and they were all just trying to help, and I think right around then… I was like… ‘oh I know…this is the first time I feel comfortable in my own skin.’ And it was the first point where I felt like I was in the right frame of mind, where people were just letting me do what I wanted to do, you know.

Is that what kind of drew out that feeling of belonging [in punk], that you felt embraced?

Well I just felt…it wasn’t…yeah embraced…and it was such an ambiguous community, the punk scene there, as any punk scene, had so many different facets…but it just seemed like everybody was there because…there was some unified thing that I still haven’t figured out…because…there are so many different ideas in punk rock…but there’s like…everybody is rejecting the same thing, you know what I mean? And I was really…I was given room to grow as a person; I didn’t feel like it was indoctrination or anything at all. I just felt like it was… ‘do you know anything about this war; do you know anything about like…anything.’ It was really…yeah, I would say I felt embraced.

Charlie claimed that punk appealed to him because it enabled him to “grow as a person.” He had many questions about the world and was striving to develop a coherent world view. Punk, he said, served as a forum in which he could interact with others, ask questions and explore ideas in a non-hostile environment in which the pursuit of knowledge and meaning was actively encouraged. Perhaps most saliently, he suggested that it gave him an opportunity to resolve his struggle with respect to his choice to join the army, which he eventually abandoned.
While all of the punks that I interviewed claimed to have garnered something profound from their involvement in punk communities, most described undergoing a process of gradual withdrawal from active subcultural participation as they grew older. In doing so, informants claimed that they continued to maintain their commitment to punk ideals, but that they largely relinquished their concern with style, concerts and the larger communities that were organized around them. When probed about this, subjects tended to explain their decisions in one of two ways. First, many informants claimed that they no longer needed the subculture as a support system, asserting that they had become comfortable and confident with their senses of self, and that they had found answers to many of the questions that they had asked upon entering into punk. In short, they claimed to have transcended their need to belong to a social category.

Dickey, a 23 year old college graduate and computer engineer, said the following while speaking to why he no longer maintained a strong affiliation with the subculture:

In general, the group of people that I grew up with has also grown; they've grown into the group of people that they want to be as well. So it’s a little bit different, I mean nobody really stays in that same...that same mind set except the most, like—to me, I consider it weak to be part of...to so closely identify yourself with a social group at this age. You know, anytime after- past age 18—why would you ever want to call yourself anything except who you are? You know, you should no longer be able to fit into a classification. The people that do—they’re just fucking posers.

Tom, mirroring Dickie’s feeling said:

I’ve definitely become less interested in normative punk, and I keep stressing this idea of normative punk, because it’s like anytime when people say punk to me, it means so many things...sometimes I get called out and people say Tom, you’re not a punk anymore, well, if punk means porch sitting and drinking 40s and staying up until three in the morning listening to Blatts, yeah, I guess I’m not punk anymore. But that to me is no longer punk. It still is for some people, and I totally celebrate them, and if they want to go to the bar, that’s awesome. If they want to blast loud music at three in the morning, that’s awesome. But I’m just at a point in my life where I feel like doing Food Not Bombs today is more punk than going to that show that I missed Thursday night, because I had to wake up at 8am and go to work. You know, I’m not less punk because I didn’t say fuck the man, I’m going to stay up until three at night and party and see this awesome
And I would’ve had a great time, but I guess I’m just more focused on me, myself and I, personal stuff. I’d rather do that than be in the scene, the normative punk scene…

And finally, offering a similar but somewhat nuanced version of this explanation, Cooper, one of my initial interviewees who I had known since high school, related the following:

When I was a punk, I began to identify myself as a punk in terms of you, Sam, and Taylor. I mean, Taylor and I met at a show, and unless one of you three were at a show, I wouldn’t be there…soon, the people I never even went to shows with or listened to music with or talked with recognized me as punk; it was an intuitive thing. I soon established my own identity, and when I felt comfortable with that identity, all I needed left was to make sure I had no regrets about it. So I went to shows with you and Sam, and I had some of the best and most memorable experiences of my life, and I won’t forget either of you for that. Every time I listen to bands now I think of the times we had at shows. I don’t really feel the need to go anymore, because not only do I not feel I have anything to prove, but I don’t think I will ever top those nights when we stood in shitty clubs in the heat and clove-cigarette smoke and just existed. I am satisfied with my accomplishments, and while more shows would be icing, if I never go again, I would still be as happy.

In his story, Cooper described a feeling of having developed a sense of comfort with his self-concept self that was not initially present. He claimed that he at first participated in the subculture in order to define himself. Having come to that definition, he asserts that he no longer needs to utilize accoutrements of punk such as concert going; he is “satisfied.”

Interviewees also cited a second reason for largely abandoning active subcultural participation as they grew older. Brian explained this reason in depth.

…I think at some point I found [punk’s] collection of symbols and aesthetics to be stifling…I guess what I found to be stifling is that these various analyses don’t really develop beyond a lyrical level—they sort of get stuck…my reason for falling out of favor with punk as a community experience is that these critical analyses are welcomed but don’t really go beyond an introductory level …these aesthetic and politicized symbols serve as currency for social interaction, and I think a side effect of that is that they become sort of crystallized, and that pattern can have the effect of discouraging people from taking their analysis further or…these symbols, whether they be bicycles or dumpster diving or tofu², all have a political analysis at their origin, but what I found to

² Dumpster-diving, tofu and bicycles serve as salient aspects of style display within punk subculture. Dumpster-diving and bicycle-riding reflect the subculture’s rejection of mindless consumption and embrace of a do-it-yourself ethic. The former also protests against corporate control of food supply, while the latter attempts to promote environmental sustainability. Brian’s reference to tofu refers to the high concentration of vegetarianism
occur was that the symbol itself sort of becomes a fetish, and the repetition and circulation of these symbols would sort of take the place of developing analysis. You’d find yourself in a situation where people would sort of not know what to say to each other, so people will start talking about bicycles and tofu and dumpster diving over and over, and what I feel happens is that something like dumpster diving itself becomes fetishized, and people will start pretending that something tastes better because it comes from a dumpster, or people will start glorifying this one little aspect of something that emerged from a broader critique of capitalism. But now the dumpster has replaced the critique of capitalism, so people will just assume dumpster diving as a sufficient stand-in for a critique of capitalism—like a fetish. And so, you’ll start hearing, ‘yeah, we’re dumpster diving; let’s go dumpster dive,’ but you’ll stop hearing discussions about capitalism. Or you’ll hear sort of a vague overture to how people are fighting capitalism by dumpster diving, even though that’s not really a sufficient way to fight capitalism.

Brian claimed to have moved into the subculture in order to explore alternative sets of ideas and beliefs, which later developed into a strong critique of society. He claimed that as he grew older—with his investment in the subculture deepening—his critique became more involved and elaborate. Eventually, he asserted that the cultural aesthetics of punk began to stifle the advancement of his ideas, claiming that he needed to filter them through constraining cultural forms, which limited the complexity that they could develop. Brian claimed that he felt pressured to channel his political beliefs into song lyrics, fan zines and other style displays. He also noted that, for him, such style displays had become fetishized. For example, he thought that many of punk’s normative accoutrements, such as riding bicycles and dumpster diving, had turned into empty sartorial displays, divorced from the original social and political critiques that gave birth to them. He felt that many in the subculture had come to value such acts in and of themselves, not fully understanding the ideology that they were supposed to represent and advance. Ultimately, his commentary suggests that the dilemma undermined his ability to

and veganism within punk. Punk’s association with animal rights dates to the emergence of the Straight-Edge movement within the subculture, which promoted a clean, somewhat ascetic lifestyle, during the early 1980s. Vegetarianism and veganism have since proliferated more generally throughout the subculture more as part of a belief in living a cruelty and exploitation-free existence.
advance both himself and society, claiming that the subculture limited political resistance to innocuous stylistic displays.

The “becoming punk” narrative that emerged from interview data gives an account of how participants understand their identities and lives within the subculture. As such, it gives insight into the subjective experience of participating in a subculture, which the semiotic techniques of CCCS scholars—and the prioritization of style by scholars more generally—have historically silenced and flattened. How accountable these narratives are to the actual events that moved participants into subcultural participation is questionable but also largely irrelevant to the goal of investigating how subjects have constructed and justified their self-concepts. Ewick and Silbey suggest that narration involves a selective appropriation of past events and characters, which relates them in an overarching way generally involving contestation or struggle. While informants offered different reasons and circumstances to account for the identities, the undergirding structure of their narratives remained remarkably consistent. Subjects described an innate feeling of difference that resulted in a painful struggle involving social alienation and ridicule. In their stories, informants resolved this struggle through entry into punk subculture, which provided them with social support and a capacity to nurture and better understand their otherness.

David Kinney (1993; p.22), in his study of socially ostracized high school “nerds,” found that such a supportive peer groups are “the primary social arena in which adolescents develop a healthy sense of identity as they experiment with various social roles and make decisions about their present and future lives.” Like many scholars of adolescent development, he found that young people who experienced poor self-concepts, a lack of social interaction and peer stereotyping suffered from low self esteem and negative self-evaluations. Gaining access to a
group of similar, supportive others, however, lessened their concerns with popularity, offered an alternative frame of reference in which to construct their identities, and generated positive self-feelings that resulted in a transformation into more competent social actors. The narrative that punks extended described quite a similar process. After developing social competence, which arose through the cultivation of a meaningful identity and an at least semi-coherent worldview, most interviewees described falling action and a denouement—exit from active subcultural participation. Subjects, in short, asserted that they no longer needed to claim insider status to a social category in order to invoke positive affect.

As whole, the narrative that emerged is very consistent with Linda Andes’ (1998) ethnographic work on punks, which posits that subcultural participation unfolds over a three stage career. Andes assert that her informants underwent a developmental process while cultivating their identities, passing through three stages, each marked by a change in their reference groups. As with my findings, the punks in her study claimed to have felt different prior to becoming punk. Entering into the first stage of development, which she calls “rebellion,” they engaged in subversive acts directed toward normal others such as schoolmates and parents, defining themselves in opposition to them—much like Henry and Trevor. Next, in a stage that she labels “affiliation,” participants claimed to develop an affiliation with other punks, subsequently making them their primary reference group. Eventually, however, those in her study came to define punk as a system of values and beliefs, becoming concerned with expressing an ideological commitment to the subculture—not a stylistic or participatory one. Ending active participation, Andes argues that they became their own reference groups, acting out their identities by making personal commitments to self-expression and anti-authoritarianism. She referred to this final stage as “transcendence.”
However, while the narrative that emerged from my data doubtlessly supports Andes’ ethnographic work, it is important to note that her “career” model of punk offers a mostly emic account of subcultural participation. A more etic account emerges when one considers how participation within the subculture unfolds from a life course perspective. There seems to be little coincidence that social disengagement from punk tended to occur precisely at the time when adolescence gave way to young adulthood for most subjects within the study. More specifically, many respondents began to distance themselves from punk when they exited old institutional frameworks and entered into new ones of their own choosing—in particular, work and family. Entering into these new institutions, it seems, occludes active participation within punk subculture and encourages it in other areas in two ways.

First, taking on stringent obligations, commitments and social expectations limits the time and resources that subjects possess for cultivating identities and important roles within their respective scenes. As a result, continuing to thoroughly partake in the subculture simply becomes infeasible. Second, and perhaps more importantly, progressing through the life course may very well transform the loci in which participants anchor their self conceptions. Given the discrepancies between the values of subjects and those of their institutional environments during adolescence, developing positive self concepts by rooting their identities within them proves to be tremendously difficult. As they grow older, however, subjects enter into new, more voluntary institutions in which they enjoy greater efficacy and can exercise more control over their outcomes within them. Consequently, anchoring their self-concepts within institutional frameworks likely becomes more viable and more desirable.

While I do not suggest that subjects fundamentally invert their loci of self upon growing older, I do surmise that they perhaps bring them into a better balance between institution and
impulse, as opposed to grounding them almost exclusively in the latter. Drawing from Turner’s work, then, a more robust explanation for why punks tend to withdraw from active subcultural participation proposes that they begin to experience their personal realities in a way that encourages making institutional commitments in lieu of pursuing the gratification of inner urges that participation in punk’s social world facilitates. Thus, as opposed to assuming that subcultural participants proceed through an empty fad during adolescence as some post-subculture studies scholars would suggest, or that they eventually relinquish their alternative values and identities and reenter dominant culture as some functionalist scholars would suggest, I posit that individuals retain their punk identities as they grow older but subjectively experience them in a different way—that their “true selves” manifest in variable ways over the life course.

The stories that interviewees told also illustrated punks’ concern with authenticity. In fact, their narratives can be understood as vehicles through which they attempt to convey authenticity both to themselves and others. Williams’ (2005) ethnographic work on straightedge youth—a derivative of punk subculture oriented around leading a drug-free, relatively ascetic lifestyle—revealed that the idea of an authentic identity generally possess two dimensions—social and personal. The social dimension of authenticity refers to how individuals make claims for insider status within a social category, while the personal dimension refers to how individuals attempt to frame their subcultural participation as part of a larger life project that is independent of external influence. Establishing the personal dimension, he observed, involved articulating a personal commitment to straightedge values that predated exposure to the subculture; identifying as straightedge in response to peers, on the other hand, was spurned as artificial. A concern with this second dimension was quite evident in the narratives that my subjects related. Interviewees emphatically insisted that they felt different from others and that they possessed alternative ideas,
in some form at least, prior to participation in punk subculture. In so doing, they articulated a sense of personal authenticity—the notion that they were acting out their genuine selves rather than performing roles. An excerpt from Dickie’s narrative reiterates this point:

[Punk] music was reflective of how I felt about a lot of different things…and when you see it for the first time, you kind of fit into it…you found this music that reflects a part of you that hadn’t really been seen before; so it was already there, it’s just that this was the particular avenue that it was shown in…there were plenty of ideas in me that existed before I’d ever heard any punk music…

In the following section, I discuss my findings with respect to punk ideology. It will become evident that participant narratives also attempt to convey social authenticity by invoking the subculture’s ideational idioms, which emphasize resistance to societal conventions and authority, a commitment to self-realization, and homology between beliefs and behavior. In this way, as Ewick and Silbey suggested, storytelling is strategic, directed toward advancing the interests and goals of those who tell them.
CHAPTER SEVEN  
DEVELOPING AUTHENTIC SELFHOOD THROUGH IDEOLOGICAL COMMITMENT  

This section attempts to inform two problems in the extant literature on punk. First, due to the influence of CCCS scholarship, which used semiotic methodological techniques to analyze subcultural style, very few empirical studies have attempted to examine the meanings that participants in subculture attach to their own behaviors. This is certainly true of punk. Many researchers have interpreted punk style in order to make claims about its subcultural ideology, but, to my knowledge, none of them have made extended attempts to explore its belief system in a way that gives agency to subjects. As a result, what punks think and believe has, for the most part, remained in the dark. Second, most studies of punk focus on style, neglecting to consider how participants construct and subjectively experience authenticity by making ideological commitments. Emphasizing style in lieu of ideology is problematic because it motivates researchers, perhaps inadvertently, to rely on etic accounts of behavior in order to inform their understandings of the concept. We thus know little about how those within the subculture actually distinguish between “real” and “fake” members, how they come to understand their own behavior as “real” or why a concern with authenticity exists to begin with.  

An example of these shortcomings can be found in Fox’s (1987) classic piece “Real Punks and Pretenders.” Making little attempt to understand the world of her research subjects, she writes off punk ideology as “ambiguous at best” (p.352) and defines commitment in relation to how “hardcore” participants look and live—how many tattoos they wear and how many drugs
they do, in essence. Imposing a hierarchy onto a local scene, she labels those who do not as saliently distinguish themselves from others through style as “softcore” and “preppy.” In so doing, she offers an account of commitment that accords to her criteria for authenticity, not that of her subjects. Had Fox extended credence to the testimony of “softcore” and “preppy” punks, she very well may have found that they defined authenticity differently than “hardcore punks;” they may have even viewed so-called hardcore punks as less committed than themselves. Fox’s study also misplaces concreteness by treating authenticity as a tangible entity. As noted in chapter three, it does not, in my view, serve as a useful etic or sociological concept. In order to avoid these problems, I engaged informants in in-depth discussions with respect to how they viewed and defined punk. Suspending my own judgments about their ostensible commitment, I considered their commentary without regard for the extent to which they had adopted normative accoutrements of the subculture. I thus draw from emic data in order to explore the ideology that punks espouse and the strategies that they employ in order to distinguish between “authentic” and “inauthentic” members.

Three facets of ideological commitment, all of which were linked to an ideal of authentic selfhood, emerged from my interview data. I labeled the first value that informants showed concern with “rejection.” While other empirical pieces (Fox 1987; Baron 1989) have found that punks value resistance and largely reject the common sense world of dominant culture, the nature of their resistance has remained poorly understood. Fox, for example, casts punk resistance as a component of style, claiming that most participants within it lack “consciousness,” suggesting that their resistance is rooted in a vague “anti-establishment, anarchist sentiment” (p.352). My interviewees, to the contrary, offered very analytical responses with respect to the nature of their societal resistance. Expressing great unease toward
the idea of socialization, they claimed to reject consumption in the broadest sense of the word, with respect not just to commodities but also to knowledge and identity. For example, when asked what punk meant to him, Blake, a 21 year old college student quoted in the previous section, gave the following testimony:

Punk… involves heeding a questioning, skeptical, attitude, resisting social pressures and norms, rejecting undue and sometimes even just authority…Essentially [it] involves living the life that I want to live without regard for how others perceive and judge me…

For Blake, punk entails a rejection of societal pressure that is oriented around the goal of “living the life that he wants to live.” He implies that a great tension exists between the pressures of societal integration and the pull of one’s inner callings. The belief in this tension will become further apparent as I draw from more interview data in which informants discuss the meaning of punk.

Elaborating in greater detail, Cooper asserted that punks reject an “ideology of acceptance.” Per his commentary, this ideology refers to a system of societal indoctrination that individuals become enmeshed in over the course of their lives, which constrains the potentialities of the self and perpetuates existing systems of power. The “system” that Cooper indicts can be thought of as the collective efforts of agents of socialization in society—schools, media, family, religion, government, and so forth. Informants contend that these agents maintain the positions of those in power at the expense of all others, compelling people to forsake their inner essences in order to achieve fractional and illusory gains relating to social approval. Agents of socialization do so by inhibiting people from exploring their inner ideas and maximizing their life experiences, working instead to promote a strict system of conformity that renders deviance harshly punishable. Punks believe that this system, having as its goal the establishment of a sanitized culture that suits privileged others, undermines one’s aesthetic potential in terms of
self-expression. Hardly narcissistic, they assigned moral significance to both the notions of self-expression and societal constraint. In his own words, the very articulate Cooper explained this belief in depth:

Punk rock is not a type of music, punk rock is an idea. Oversimplifying it as a style of clothing, a set of chords, or even as an attitude erodes the idea. The idea behind punk rock is that social change comes from within. Many people view punks as non-conformists and rebellious, but that too is an oversimplification. Punk rock seeks to break down an ideology of acceptance.

What do you mean by an ideology of acceptance?

...As human beings, we’re socialized into thinking that the truth we seek lies somewhere hidden within pre-established paradigms...things you start learning as early as a child that never go away...Punk seeks to...to change individual mindsets as a precursor to the types of ideas that bring about change, not because they are forced upon the population, but because the population believes that they individually established the ethic...there doesn’t [even] have to be a quest to change anything. Punks get this bad rap that they talk the talk but never do anything constructive about it. What punks are doing is breaking the socializing link; the socialization stops with them. Even if they don’t write their senators or start grassroots movements, what punk is, and I think this is something so unique that I can find no other examples of this...punk is the process by which mankind attempts to deconstruct the flawed paradigms which handicap civilization. Punk itself will never change the world, but the impact of punk is that freedom of will that gets sparked in the post-punk generation. And yes, absolutely that begins with the individual... it is the unending process that is key...

Explaining how punks are dedicated to breaking down an “ideology of acceptance,” Cooper emphasizes the importance of resisting socialization, which handicaps civilization. He asserts that punk, as a movement, is oriented around the goal of ending socialization—of deconstructing the norms, beliefs and values that we have internalized in order to more purely experience life, which will enable us to achieve happiness and fulfillment.

Given their rejection of social conditioning, many interviewees also described possessing an “I don’t give a fuck” attitude. When probed with respect to what exactly they meant by this, informants spoke of their concern with self-realization and with undoing societal influence in order to lead meaningful lives. This breaks with the way in which most empirical work on punks
(e.g. Fox 1987; Baron 1989; Gaines 1998; Moore 2004) has framed their ambivalence toward dominant culture. Many researchers suggest that such an attitude reflects the discontentment of young people who were raised in a mass-mediated, consumer-driven environment. The idea of “not giving a fuck” is construed as a blasé attitude resulting from the boredom and purposelessness of suburban youth who have been socialized to be consumers and spectators. In other words, the sentiment is explained away as a product of postmodernism. However, when asked to clarify their own statements and behaviors, respondents gave a rather different explanation of the attitude. Tom, the 24 year old musician quoted in the previous chapter, had the following to say about this mentality:

… you mentioned this idea of not giving a fuck, and a lot of people have said that in those words, what exactly do you mean by that and what is appealing about [that attitude]?

When you say I don’t give a fuck, it’s kind of like the existential crisis is getting put on the table of like…like how am I suppose to go about life, making a living, supporting a family, having a career, getting educated whatever that means these days, it’s like having all of that thrust in your face and looking at it and saying, I don’t know what to do with this, I can’t do anything with this, I’m not equipped emotionally—I don’t think any of us are equipped emotionally to deal with that kind of a situation—and I think kind of the correct response is that you really have to burn it all down and start from square one and figure out what life means to you. When I say that that guy doesn’t give a fuck, I think that guy went out of his way and burned all of those bridges and said I don’t give a fuck, I’m doing everything by my own rules…it means you’ve got to make your own way, you don’t give a fuck what the rest of the world gives a fuck about…it’s like you have all these people telling you that you have to care about these things, you have to focus on these things, you’ve got to have a career in mind, just that you have to do all these things, and after a while you have a little register of them, like a little surplus of them in your brain, and you’ve got to unpack them, you have to unpack them really slow, but as you pull out each one you’re left with the response of just I don’t give a fuck…here it is, you’re 24 Tom, you’ve got to have a steady career with health insurance and full benefits, and I don’t give a fuck about that…All of these things that people would say would provide a fulfilling life, I just didn’t see how it could be fulfilling, so I was like I don’t give a fuck about these things, because I’m going to find what fulfills me.

Tom, in this passage, does not exhibit a blasé attitude or a nihilistic orientation toward the world. Rather, he claims that he “he does not give a fuck” about the value system of normative culture,
because he sees little meaning in it. As opposed to succumbing to feelings of purposelessness and meaninglessness, he demonstrates a commitment to finding fulfillment in life on his own terms—an outlook that is patently modernist.

Blake, Cooper and Tom’s commentary assumes that a bitter antagonism rages on between one’s inner callings and the external social pressures that curtail them—a struggle akin to Freud’s distinction between id and super-ego. This belief reveals that punks tend to anchor their self-conceptions in impulses as opposed to the institutions in which they are enveloped. The belief that one should do as he or she pleases irrespective of social consequences, which is celebrated in the aforementioned credo “I don’t give a fuck,” suggests that emotions and actions that are motivated by instincts rather than duties or expectations feel more real and meaningful to participants. As Turner (1976) relates in his scholarship on the nature of the real self, those who work according to a self-as-impulse modus operandi stress a disregard for duties and inhibitions in order to experience or achieve what Taylor (1991) and Boyle (2004) refer to as authenticity. As the above respondent testimony evidences, this is because they view societal rules and regulations as arbitrary and unrewarding. To put it another way, as referenced in chapter three, they perceive rules as stifling norms rather than as enabling values. Hence, while those with an institutional self-locus attempt to cultivate and experience the “real self” by conforming to standards and adhering to them even if they are contrary to what wants to and enjoys doing, those with an impulsive self-locus do the opposite by allowing a compass of intuition to guide their behavior.

In line with the ideal of rejection, interviewees also described a humanist imperative of punk that involved overcoming various forms of inequality and inequity such as racism and poverty. Cooper’s commentary with respect to the civil rights movement adumbrates this
dimension of the tenant. The social justice concerns of punks can be unified under an umbrella theme of anti-authoritarianism. Interestingly, my findings suggest that such beliefs do not stem from a normatively conceptualized commitment to social justice. Rather, study participants seemed to prioritize their concern with self-expression over their commitment to fighting injustice. In fact, their commitment to self-expression as a moral ideal seemed to motivate their concerns with social justice. In other words, interviewees expressed a desire to topple hierarchies and power structures because they felt that such phenomena undermined their abilities to achieve self-realization, not necessarily because they were committed to justice and equality as cultural ideals.

While they certainly viewed both as important—and prejudice and exploitation as repugnant—they seemed to possess a larger concern with ending the damning process of socialization that Cooper described. For example, later in his interview, while discussing civil rights, he anecdotally referenced the Brown v. Board supreme court decision, construing its real accomplishment as the extent to which it changed peoples’ mindsets, not its concrete outcomes in relation to racial disparity. Humanism thus serves as a vehicle for achieving self-realization—for undoing societal influence and forging one’s own meaning in life. This is not to say, of course, that a belief in the dignity and worth of all human beings did not motivate informants’ rejection of inequality and inequity to some extent. But it does suggest that rejection, which I have identified as the first facet of punk ideology, primarily involves recognizing that a hegemonic process of socialization occurs in society. Punks view this process as oppressive and stifling, and they actively strive to overcome it.

Lastly on this point, contrary to accounts such as Fox’s, punks do not seem to take on an attitude that inherently and automatically rejects all forms of authority and establishment. While
they regularly exhibit disdain for both, their position is better described as opposition to the idea of mindlessly internalizing and obeying the rules and beliefs that established institutions and authority figures promote. In the previous section, the commentary that Trevor and Henry offered with respect to their experiences in school evidences this sentiment. Both acknowledge that particular aspects of education are important. As opposed to rejecting education, hierarchy and authority outright, they simply express reluctance with respect to the idea of allowing the school as an institution to sculpt them into particular types of people who hold particular beliefs.

Holly, a 23 year old high school graduate and service worker, also relates this idea:

…I made really good grades all through school, but it never seemed to matter to me. It’s not like it was something that was important to me.

Why not?

I don’t know…it just doesn’t seem like a necessity. Education is important, but educating yourself individually and reading and researching on your own kind of draws me in a lot more than trying to appease this one specific direction that you’re being taught and this one mindset that you have to be stuck with, as opposed to learning on your own and finding out your own opinions on life.

Taking a very similar view, Bobby, a 21 year old high school graduate who plays in a local punk band and works a manual labor job, said:

… I think [punk] is just wanting to ask questions. Usually, there’s a lot of times where it comes to the same conclusion, but you don’t have to come to that conclusion. That’s why I like punk, because you can come to any conclusion you want. That’s what punk is…yeah, it’s individualism.

Eve, finally, suggests that while punk often involves resistance to agents that strive to impose ideology and culture onto people, it does not translate into an inherent rejection of established institutions altogether. Rather, to her, punk means making a commitment to freeing herself of external influence so that she may formulate her own viewpoints:
…it took me, a couple years and a couple bad mistakes to realize that being punk doesn’t have to mean fuck this—you know, fuck fill in the blank. It doesn’t have to mean just rejecting everything outright just because it may seem conformist to someone else.

...following from there then, what has it come to mean for you as you’ve clarified your thoughts on it?

It basically means...well, it definitely means that instead of just sort of giving that knee jerk reaction of rejection toward things to really actively think about them and to create my own viewpoint, because, I don’t know, as far as, for example, Christianity goes, still pretty much everyone I’m friends with are not Christian, and they don’t see why I am. But, I still am, I’ve managed to sort of incorporate that into my life and keep my belief system without...I don’t know...without it interfering with my ability to think. Like, I don’t use it to just cloud over, you know, the problems I have or that I see in the world. And I also don’t think that there’s anything inherently wrong with, you know, like academia for example. I mean…it’s not…it’s stupid that I ever thought that...

Invoking her struggle to reconcile her punk identity with her Christian faith and her desire to pursue an academic career, Eve claims that she came to realize that she does not have to wholly reject conventional institutions and systems of meaning in order to be punk. One may still value and participate within them, but, as a punk, she makes a commitment to doing so on her own terms, choosing to embrace Christianity because of a personal volition, not because of social pressure, and deciding on academia as a career because it feels right to her, not because others define it as worthwhile or secure. Others outside of the subculture, she implies, render such choices for the wrong reasons, succumbing to societal pressure instead of allowing their hearts to guide them. Eve’s commentary, as well as Holly and Bob’s, is again indicative of an impulsive locus of self, suggesting that while impulse reigns supreme with respect to how punks anchor their self-conceptions, institutional frameworks remain relevant when participants view the rules and regulations within them as values. Specifically, it seems that institutional norms are subjectively transformed into values by the emotions that acts of resistance and rejection inspire.

Following from their commitment to rejecting societal influence and socialization, informants also exhibited a dedication to leading lifestyles that were accountable to their
perceived genuine selves—a value that I have deemed “reflexivity.” Reflexivity was by far the most recurring and broad theme uncovered during research. Subjects commit to it by enacting their subjectively realized belief systems through praxis in everyday life. Drawing a sharp distinction between “being” and “doing,” punks expressed great disdain for persons who, in their views, engaged in artificial performance in order to earn social approval. To put it another way, informants took the view that all actions should follow from intrinsic and not instrumental motivations (or, to use Turner’s terms, impulsive rather than institutional motivations). While insisting that they could distinguish between people who were being themselves and those who were merely performing roles for instrumental purposes, though, how exactly they did so remained somewhat elusive. Although informants could not identify concrete qualities that people in the former grouping carried, they did contend that authentic individuals possessed a nonchalant, self-assured attitude—a claim that mirrors the way in which jazz musicians distinguished between hip and square individuals in ethnographic work done by Becker (1963). In his study, to be hip meant to possess a mysterious attitude that could not be acquired through education and to disdain conventional norms, where to be square implied the opposite (Thornton 1997). When asked how he distinguished between authentic and inauthentic punks, Dickie, for example, said the following:

…you can just tell, you can tell when people just don't care from when they're trying, and I think that people who are trying to be something need to stop trying and just be whoever they are. And the people who are just being who they are- maybe it’s a confidence thing in the way you show yourself to people. Like, I definitely don't think I'm trying to do anything with my haircut right now [a mohawk], and every single person that I talk to who sees it is just like ‘oh.’ You know, they're not like ‘oh wow! That’s crazy—absurd!’ You know, they're kind of just like ‘yeah.’ You know, like, it’s new for me, but then they're like ‘yeah, it looks right.’ You know, it fits me.

Dickie’s commentary mirrors the mysterious qualities that professional jazz musicians attribute to one another. Elsewhere in his interview, he castigated individuals who adorned
themselves in normative punk style, while, at the time of his interview, he wore his own hair in a mohawk. He emphasized, however, that he was not posing or posturing—that his hairstyle, unlike those of some others, reflected his real, internalized self. His friends and others in the subculture, he claimed, could readily recognize this. My own observations, however, revealed little to nothing in terms of concrete attitudinal or behavioral qualities that distinguished so-called “authentic” punks from “inauthentic” ones. Rather, participants seemed to attribute a certain coolness to their own behavior and the behavior of their friends while writing off that of outsiders as contrived in an uncritical way that did not possess consistency or logic. In other words, over the course of my research, nothing palpable differentiated Dickie’s demeanor or stylistic presentation with respect to, for example, his mohawk, from those that he tended to ridicule.

Dickie’s commentary nonetheless provides insight into punk sentiments vis-à-vis style. All subjects expressed in some form or other that it should objectify self image. This is accomplished in two ways. The first is through positive, inner-speculation, which involves utilizing a style that reflects one’s unique, genuine self. The second aspect is negative, disidentification, which visibly manifests disdain for those things against which punks collectively rebel. Given their concern with reflexivity, informants expressed extreme distaste for people who employed styles that were judged to be inconsistent with their self-concepts. To continue to use Dickie as an example, during a punk show he encountered two teenagers who, in his view, were deploying images in order to appear punk, while lacking, to him, ideological authenticity. He reacted very negatively, boldly condemning them. His reaction was precipitated by disgust for their perceived attempts to project images of subcultural membership that he suspected did not reflect their genuine selves. The teenagers, he said, symbolized the
culture of high school that he fervently abhorred, because their trendy clothing represented materialism and superficiality. I documented this altercation in my field notes:

…the young women again turn around and try to say something to Dickie [they had summoned his attention several times before for no particular reason, probably because he was standing in close proximity to them]. Before they finish their thoughts, Dickie removes one of his earplugs and asks how old they are. They inform him that they’re 16 and ask why he wants to know. Before answering, he inquires if they have high school the next day. They nod. “Because I think you’re fucking retarded,” he then replies. He proceeds to bluntly castigate them without any sort of restraint whatsoever. He tells them that they need to “shut the fuck up” and move to the back of the venue because “no one gives a fuck that they’re there,” that they remind him of the girls from his high school, and that they “act like a bunch of fucking 12 year olds.” Looking crushed, they bow their heads as he lambastes them, not seeming to know how to reply. Finally, as Dickie’s assault draws to a close, the pink-haired woman retorts to the effect that she hopes he gets hurt in the pit. Dickie looks stunned and appalled. He pauses for a moment, before saying “yeah….you know, me too,” putting his earplug back in….After this, I noticed that the women moved farther to the right of us, taking refuge with the Hispanic guy from earlier. The three of them began to mock Dickie. I could only discern random comments, but the gist of the conversation involved how Dickie thought himself to be “hardcore punk rock,” which they seemed to have interpreted negatively—to mean seriousness, rigidity, sternness, and maybe mean-spiritedness. The Hispanic guy stood up straight, looking at Dickie saying “I’m punk rock” in a mocking manner. Fortunately, Dickie only appeared to catch this out of the corner of his eye, but he nonetheless comprehended that they were mocking him. Dickie proceeded to stare at the guy, displaying a disbelieving and angry look of intimidation. The guy turns around to avoid eye contact, upon realizing that he has evoked Dickie’s attention. Dickie continues to stare at him, even though he has turned away— the disgusted look remains, not wavering. Several moments later, he looks back and sees that Dickie’s eyes are locked on him like a guided missile. He looks frightened and turns away, not turning around again. Dickie continues to look at him for another minute or two, nonetheless. Finally, realizing that he has won the psychological battle, he redirects his gaze to the stage…

A few days later, I asked Dickie in an interview why he had reacted against the young women in the way that he did—as well as some other people at the show with whom he had also apparently taken issue. He replied:

I just decided they sucked—snap judgment. Like, I heard them talking, saw their crappy, cosmetic haircuts and wanted to kick their asses. I mean, it’s the same idea set—punks aren't clean, they don't fucking style their hair the way they did. They’re fucking filthy and dirty. They wanted to be something they weren't. They clearly came from, like, [an affluent suburb], and they went to some store in Little Five Points to buy their clothes to look punk, spent hundreds of dollars on clothing and hair products, and they think they're punks, which is complete bullshit. You know, that's not true at all—they’re just consumers, which to me is the worst classification. Yeah…they’re just a product of
consumer society...even when I send in the hawk, the second where it becomes anything where I have to style it, I'll just shave it off—send in the space monkey afterwards. There is no point...there's no point in having to wake up and style your hair. What the fuck—it’s fucking weird.

Two things are notable about this transpiration and Dickie’s subsequent explanation of it. First, Dickie wrote the teenagers at the show off as inauthentic because he thought that they “were trying to be something that they weren’t.” To him, punk did not reflect their true persons. Rather, he felt that they were relying on stylistic accoutrements in order to fit into a social category. In a word, he suspected that they had assumed—not created—their punk identities in order to look cool. Second, while I did not have an opportunity to speak with the two young women that he ridiculed, their responses suggested a similar dedication to reflexivity. After Dickie told them off, both women, as well as their friends, mocked him for attempting to cast himself as a “hardcore punk.” In other words, they also accused Dickie of acting—of attempting to create a particular perception of himself that did not accord to who they thought he really was. This particular incident thus underscores the point that authenticity possesses no specific properties. It is not something that some people have or do not have. Rather, participants construct and negotiate it with respect to an ideological system that esteems rejection, reflexivity and self-discovery.

A last note with respect to style is also in order. In explaining what drew them into punk music as opposed to other genres, almost all interviewees referenced the human qualities of punk music and punk shows. This relates directly to the ideal of reflexivity, which emphasizes sincerity and reality over artifice and performance. Henry, Bobby, Ian, and Charlie all spoke at length about the appeal of attending local shows that featured local bands, denigrating commercial touring bands for a variety of reasons. They asserted that such music seemed overly produced and affected, making it difficult to empathize and identify with. Not being able to
envisage themselves playing it, they dismissed commercial music as instrumentally driven and inauthentic. This too coincides with an impulsive locus of self, as Turner (1976) contends that, with respect to performance, such individuals find technical perfection repelling and instead admire music and art that showcase the human frailties of performers. Those who root their self-conceptions in institutions, on the other hand, experience and express their “real selves” through infallibility. Similarly, informants expressed disdain for the way in which popular bands aggrandized and constructed themselves as super-human. Charlie, in particular, said that he was routinely offended when people would treat him like a rock star after he played shows with his local band. It was important for subjects, to the contrary, to be able to relate to the musicians to whom they listened as people.

This held true for shows as well. Big rock concerts, interviewees argued, were impersonal. Charlie said that he played most of his shows and watched most shows with his friends, which made relating to the music far easier, as he knew from personal experience about what was being sung. Recalling an early Rolling Stones concert that he attended with his father, Ian claimed that between the sheer volume of attendees present and the physical distance between him and the band, he felt faceless and alienated. When going to punk shows, however, he claimed that he could see the band members up close—along with all of their imperfections and human qualities—and he also knew that they could see him. He said that this made the experience more real and powerful for him. This sentiment held especially true for participants who regularly took part in local DIY shows. Describing the experience of attending them, Tom said the following:

Going to a DIY show, you’re a participant from moment one—the moment you walk through that door, you’re expected to respond to all the stimuli. You can’t expect to be a passive observer at a punk show—the band’s not going to let you. They’re going to drive you into the pit or make you dance…you go to a show and you find yourself singing...
along really loudly, because that’s the same song that she played on your front porch last night. She wasn’t performing then when she did that—but she wasn’t performing then, is she really performing now? And then you start thinking about it, and all they’re really doing is sharing these beautiful songs that we pen together or that share some significance within this small cluster of friends. And that’s kind of what DIY and punk has come to mean for me. It’s like you actively participate and everyone there wants to participate, and that’s what makes it different than going to a bar show. Going to a house show, you’ve got to want to be there, because that house doesn’t have heat, the kitchen’s probably dirty, the bathroom’s probably won’t flush, and your beer is going to get stolen, and when you don’t put that five dollars in for a donation because you’re broke, someone’s going to give you a hard time for it, but you don’t care about—you’re okay with it, because this is the form of artistic expression we’ve constructed, and this is how we’re living it and this is how we interact with it.

Tom emphasizes the active nature of DIY punk shows relative to big concerts. As opposed to being a passive observer—taking part in mere consumption—punk shows mandate participation, forcing people to take part in the construction of the overall experience. DIY cultural production also allows punks to constitute their experiences as real. Tom asserted that because he personally knows the people who perform at such shows, he suffers no doubts about their motives, claiming that they truly express themselves and do not artificially perform. Similarly, he claimed to know that other attendees are also real, given the austerity of the premises on which DIY shows are held. Such commentary indicates the extent to which punks feel as though they possess only a tenuous grip on what is real versus what is false or simply up for sale, and how DIY ethics allow them to overcome those feelings to a large extent.

To continue on this line, given their valuation of being as opposed to doing, punks in the study emphatically rejected the idea of “assumed identities,” which, essentially, take the form of commodities. They are unoriginal, constructed by others and are thus not personally reflective. Informants instead asserted that one’s sense of self should emerge organically through a process of active, personal creation. When asked how he distinguished insiders from outsiders in the local DIY scene, Charlie, for instance, classified posers as:
…people who just aren’t initiating any new ideas, aren’t trying to create—you can see it. If there’s a lot of worship, if they treat these bands that are coming through like rock stars, it’s like you’re absolutely missing the point of this; this is the exact thing we’re rejecting.

Charlie contends that real punks can be distinguished from unreal ones by virtue of the extent to which they create versus consume. He defines those who attempt to develop new ideas and build up the community as authentic, while those who merely consume and fetishize its products—like his band—miss the point and goal of the subculture in his view.

Other empirical work on punk has attributed this sentiment, which typically manifests in an acute rejection of consumerism and materialism, to a project of political resistance grounded in an anti-capitalist sentiment. Moore (2007) argues that the DIY ethos enables a public sphere among young people to develop, in which they organize themselves and express dissenting viewpoints about critical social issues. While several interviewees expressed disfavor with capitalism as an economic system and certainly used the subculture to cultivate symbolic space in which to challenge dominant ideology, my findings suggest that the ideas of rejection and reflexivity are much more grounded in a commitment to authenticity as a cultural ideal and to cultivation and enactment a self-concept rooted in impulse than to political dissent. In discussing the value and meaning of DIY as a cultural ethos, informants tended to argue that it enabled them to separate the real from the inauthentic and create their own identities as opposed to purchasing ones that were manufactured in mass culture, which did not feel “true” to them. They also suggested that it facilitated their abilities to live by their ideals as opposed to participating in a lifestyle that was inconsistent with their ideologies. While many also extolled DIY as a means through which to subvert consumer capitalism, doing so was clearly secondary to self-expression and authenticity more broadly.
Sarah, a 23 year old writer and barista with some college credit, for example, contended that the DIY ethos contributed to her project of self-realization. She claimed that the DIY community enabled people to define themselves in an ideal way without having to rely on conventional outlets for validation, given that barriers oftentimes preclude people from constructing desirable identities. Identifying as a writer and living with several artists, she noted that it was very difficult for most people to successfully make a living as either. In American society, this is problematic given that we generally define ourselves, in large part, through our jobs, the overall lifestyle choices that we make and the larger institutions of which we are a part (Rubin 1994; Turner 1976). DIY, however, enables people to bypass societal validation when attempting to construct favorable self-concepts. If one lacks the connections or talent required in order to publish a book, taking part in a DIY community serves as a coping mechanism by allowing participants to anchor their self-conceptions in alternate institutions or in an alternate locus altogether. Sarah, for example, managed a monthly zine that featured her poetry and writings. Given its popularity both within and outside of the local community, she claimed that publishing her work allowed her to feel like a real writer—not just a barista. An innovative adaption to the social problem of self-definition in a world of bounded opportunities, the DIY ethos thus allows individuals to bypass the outlets that people conventionally take vis-à-vis formulating self-concepts.

Bourdieu (1993) discusses this idea in his theory of “fields of cultural production.” A field refers to a network of social relationships organized around a particular practice that is largely autonomous from the larger social structure. Two types of logic govern cultural production—“heteronomous,” whereby commercial sales and honors conferred by established authorities confer legitimacy, and “autonomous,” whereby legitimacy is conferred by an inner
circle of fellow artists, writers or critics who recognize eminence. He claims that the two fields
or logics are in constant competition with one another. For Sarah and others, DIY communities
establish an autonomous field of cultural production, which “enable[s] people to become
participants and performers rather than just consumers and spectators, regardless of ability,
experience, or commercial viability, allowing people with few communication outlets to speak
their minds…” (Moore 2007; p.448).

Overall, the tenant of reflexivity emphasizes that individuals develop and abide by their
own belief and value systems. While subjects expressed feelings of repugnance and frustration
for a variety of issues related to inequality and social injustice, as previously noted, they seemed
to hold the greatest disdain for an abysmal ignorance and apathy that they felt to be bleeding
through society. My findings suggest that punks tend to believe that individuals in mainstream
culture take almost all norms, values and beliefs into which they are socialized for granted—
never questioning their purpose or validity. When asked why the DIY ethos appealed to him, for
example, Glenn related the following thoughts:

…as Americans we’re just fed so much crap, whether it be from our families, or our
church, or our schools, and from the media, of course—good God. It’s not very often,
even for the youth now, that they really question why it is we live this way, why are we
in the position we’re in on a global scale, so I think that that’s really important for people
to question the methods we use around the world, things like that, and I think for a lot of
kids, when they get into punk that’s when they really start questioning those things and
really challenging themselves—challenging their beliefs…I mean going out of your way
to read a book by Howard Zinn, or going out of your way to read Noam Chompsky or
something, and maybe read an alternative history or an alternative view of religion that
we’re not necessarily force-fed by school or by religion or something like that. And
definitely once you get into punk that stuff start’s to happen, you get around people who
challenge your beliefs and who challenge you to look into things further….

While feeling that the implication of such a susceptibility to group-think and
mindlessness is dangerous, it seems that punks view the squandering of human potential ensuing
from such passivity as far more—if not at least equally—unsettling. As such, almost all subjects
suggested that punk ideology takes no inherent form. Rather, it merely involves staking out an informed individuality. Many did note, however, that punks are typically aligned with leftist beliefs. Nonetheless, subcultural participants are recognized as authentic when they draw their own conclusions about life and adhere to them—not when they adopt prefabricated viewpoints. What those conclusions are does not seem to matter, so long people “do their own thing,” which the following passage, drawn from Henry’s interview, evidences.

…it’s kind of an oxymoron, to be punk rock and play by the rules, there aren’t any rules! ...you do things on your own terms… there are some punk rockers in bands and they’re republicans—they’re doing their own thing, you know. You know, you may not agree with them on whatever level it is, but they’re doing their own thing and they’re not following a guideline—that kind of stuff. I know punk rockers that are Christians, you know, there’s no rules to that sort of stuff…You do your own things on your own terms because of your own set of beliefs. And that is what punk rock is to me…

Supporting this view, Ian expressed the following thoughts when discussing what punk meant to him and whether or not it entailed any specific set of beliefs:

What does it mean to be punk? I know it sounds cliché, but it really does just mean being yourself and not conforming to what people would expect from you—but instead what you would expect from yourself. Like, my parents always expected me to be a doctor or something like that, and it wasn’t my thing. Even though they always tell you to strive for your best and stuff like that—I did go for my best. But it wasn’t something that I wanted. What I wanted, what I really, really wanted, was to be a teacher and to go with that. And even though everybody tells you, you know, teachers don’t get paid a lot, they don’t do much, it’s not really a profession that’s looked up upon, I was like, ‘well, fuck it;’ it’s what I want to do, that’s where I think I’m going to find myself, and that’s what I did.

**Does it matter at all what that thing you want to do is?**

No. As long as you’re true to yourself, as long as you feel good doing it, you should just keep on doing it. I mean of course there’s always the moral issue with that as well—with illicit drugs or crime or all that stuff—but really punk is the idea that you do what you want to do. I would add onto that, just because of the straight edge in me, do what you want to do for the betterment of the world. I mean, I would add that onto it, but really in the sense of punk and ideas of why it began and stuff, it’s just ‘I’m going to do what I want to do,’ and that’s it.
Both Henry and Ian contend that punk involves no specific set of beliefs, values or practices. Instead, punk ideology simply holds that individuals should stay true to themselves, living their lives accordingly. Interviewees also claimed that reflexivity, when subjectively achieved, carries a sense of efficacy. Blake referred to his immersion into punk as “self-realization,” and Cooper reported that upon discovering punk he felt empowered, finally connecting his self to a culture that reflected it. Trevor defined a punk as someone who “holds true no matter what,” and thereafter discussed the meaning that heeding such a mentality had generated in his life. Kathleen, lastly, said that “I guess I felt kind of empowered by being someone who was kind of different, because everybody was kind of generic and boring.” Empowerment is derived from the liberation that rejection of dominant social conditioning entails. Striving to understand one’s genuine self and demanding accountability to it, rather than conforming to society’s prescriptions, brings meaning and understanding into the lives of punks. This reflects the shift that Turner (1976) believes to be diffusing through post-industrial societies, whereby internal attitudes, feelings and desires replace much of the meaning and positive affect that holding particular positions within social systems once generated.

A final facet of ideological commitment that emerged in my research is deemed “self-actualization.” This prong of ideology involves a moral commitment to self-discovery and is closely related to both the ideals of resistance and reflexivity. In fact, while I have inserted excerpts of interviewee commentary in particular places throughout the paper in order to emphasize particular points, these ideological values very much blur together. Each, more or less, can be found in all of the testimony that I have proffered. Punks pursue and subjectively achieve self actualization through positive inner-speculation and negative disidentification. The
end goal is to develop a self-concept outside of societal influence. Cooper, in the following passage, explains this dimension of punk ideology:

…Ideas of truth are really important. Punks always search for truth, but they have yet to find that truth in these power relationships….the truth punks seek is the truth derived from within…a truth that creates real change. It is what we as [individuals] learn through experience…[punk] is a utopia that can be open to all, a heaven of sorts that anyone can attain if they simply participate in the process, the process has no boundaries, it is only the everlasting quest to find truth, objective truth in the self, even if that truth contradicts the truth of another.

Again in line with Turner’s (1976) portrait of an impulsive locus of self, Cooper and other respondents believed that one should discover his or her true self through deep introspection rather than attain or achieve it through the fulfillment of social roles. Like resistance and reflexivity, the self-actualization tenant thus suggests that punks have constructed and negotiated an ideological system that accords with the way in which they experience their personal realities. For them, some feelings and actions appear to feel more real and meaningful than others: impulse more so than obligation, internal more so than external, and so on.

The subculture’s ideological tenants also mirror the conceptual portrait of the authentic ideal that Taylor (1991) discusses in The Ethics of Authenticity. Tracing the origin of that ideal and considering how it has been represented in society, he contends that authenticity involves: creation and construction, originality, and opposition to the rules of society. That I could essentially substitute my terms—resistance, reflexivity and self-actualization—for Taylor’s vernacular clearly evinces the extent to which punk ideology reflects the ethos of authenticity present within the larger social milieu. As discussed in chapter three, it seems that

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3 Taylor’s work on authenticity discusses the origins of individualism and the drive for authentic selfhood in many contemporary societies. Much of his work is devoted to critiquing and reconsidering the notion that individualism undermines traditional values, social commitments and community bonds. At heart of his argument is the notion that since self-concepts are dialogically formed, the attainment of “authenticity” requires profuse social engagement as opposed to a radical drive inward. In his view, the cultural ideal of authenticity originated with intellectual work of Romantic philosophers like Rousseau and Herder.
authenticity’s emergence as a cultural ideal, as argued by Taylor (1991), owes itself at least in part to the diffusion of Romantic aesthetics. In my view, the increasing tendency among social actors to anchor their self-conceptions in deeply felt impulses rather than in institutional frameworks—a tendency that seems to hold for both subcultural participants as well as those who primarily participate in “conventional” culture—reflects the ideal’s salience. However, if we think of self-conceptions as residing on a continuum possessing both an impulsive and an institutional pole, it seems that the punks in my study anchored their identities far closer to the former than those who are more firmly enmeshed in “conventional” culture, causing them to perhaps reiterate the cultural ideal of authenticity in a distorted and heightened form.

That punk ideology does not necessarily concern itself with social justice, rather rejecting authoritarianism due to its interference with the quest for self-expression and self-realization, reflects the culture of authenticity about which Taylor writes in other ways as well. Taylor contends that philosophies of moral subjectivism and liberal neutrality characterize our current cultural orientations. These terms mean that people believe that they should not interfere with the attempts of others to live life as they see fit and that social institutions should remain neutral on questions of what constitutes “the good life.” This is consistent with an increasingly common metaphysical orientation in society that views reality as variable and solipsistic rather than constant and shared through institutional frameworks. In another vein, then, the ideal of authenticity that circulated through Romantic philosophies and then proliferated throughout society appears to have influenced punk ideology, as participants were reluctant to take a firm moral or ethical stance on any concrete ideological position. Instead of doing so, punks, as noted above, contend that one is authentic and moral so long as he or she follows rules of his or her own making. These parallels and my findings with respect to ideology in general support the
proposition developed in my “becoming punk” chapter, which suggests that the subculture perhaps represents an innovation rather than a rebellion adaption to social problems.

In highlighting the continuities between punk culture and “conventional” culture, however, I do not intend to imply an epidemiological model of the subculture. In other words, I do not wish to suggest that Romantic intellectuals transmitted “authenticity” as a concept or value to lower-order social actors who subsequently internalized it. Doing so would possess little internal validity, given that other philosophical currents emphasizing progress and rationality moved through society simultaneously with Romantic ones, driving, for example, the industrial revolution. Rather, I theorize that the ideal of authenticity emerged and continues to emerge in common between intellectuals and the myriads of others in post-industrial societies. I see it as being shared by both “dominant” and “subcultural” actors, manifesting in variable ways, and finding expression in multiple conduits for different people. Contrary to its coexistence with other ideational paradigms, though, per the evidence presented in chapter three, I do believe that it continues to develop great salience within advanced industrial societies—especially among the post-materialist middle-classes.

While precisely why authenticity has become important to so many people remains beyond the scope of this research, much room does exist to speculate. Given my review of relevant literature, I posit that changes in the nature of social integration in mass societies—due in great part to the shift from production to consumption oriented economies—has diminished the interdependencies among people and the pool of shared experience from which they may draw to collectively construct reality, destabilizing their senses of what is real and thus prodding them to search elsewhere for truth and meaning (Turner 1976). I also suspect that developments in late modernity/postmodernity have exacerbated this fragmentation of reality by socially
saturating people, inundating them with infinite possibilities for forging identities (Gergen 1991), and commodifying essentially everything existing, leading to the “radical reflexivity” discussed in my review of the authenticity literature (Allan 1998). Such developments, it seems, have profoundly altered the way in which people experience their personal realities, encouraging them to prioritize the value of emotions and impulses over cognations and institutions. “Authenticity,” then, perhaps emerged as a desirable—or perhaps even necessary—cultural value working to stabilize reality and re-center individual self-conceptions. In later chapters, I will elaborate on why it appears to be exceptionally desirable—or, again, perhaps even necessary—for those who decided to participate in punk subculture.

A final point with respect to punk ideology deserves addressing. Having given a sketch of the construction of authenticity that emerged from study respondents, a question remains with respect to whether or not people who participate in other groups define and attempt to subjectively achieve authenticity differently than do punks. The question yields two answers. First, I suggest that Taylor’s ideal of authenticity, grounded in a devotion to creation and construction, originality, and opposition to the rules of society, has become increasingly important to people of all walks of life in advanced industrial societies, manifesting in self-conceptions that are rooted in impulses rather than institutions. In other words, my view is that most people—regardless of their group affiliations—would define authenticity in way that more less accords with how punks view it.

The second part of the answer, however, is that while unique activities, values and ends orient participation in other subcultures and social worlds, punk is all about authenticity. The subculture’s ideological system, embodied in the tenants of rejection, reflexivity and self-actualization, suggests that punks more or less exclusively pursue authenticity as an end. In
other words, while those in other subcultures insist that participants demonstrate “authentic” commitments to their respective styles and ideologies, punk lacks a unique set of activities or ends to which to authentically commit. For example, Williams (2006), found that participants in collective card and miniature game subculture viewed authentic players as those played for the love of the game rather those who played to win, which, to participants, signified a genuine interest in those activities. However, for punks, authenticity simply involves making a commitment to the broader cultural ideal in as conceptualized by Taylor. Punk thus represents a subculture of authenticity at its core—a group of people who have come together to share in a project of self-realization. Of note, however, is that this offers a very emic account of how those within the subculture construct authenticity. There are certainly stylistic accouterments that past researchers have discussed—such as particular bands, political causes, clothing styles, and so forth—that help to establish one as authentic in contrast to others (See, for example, Fox 1987 or Baron 1989). However, in the minds of participants, authenticity simply involves being oneself regardless of the consequences, in the broadest sense of the idea.
CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCERTS AS VALIDATING RITUALS

The previous two sections have revealed how punk subculture is oriented around the goal of achieving authentic selfhood. Having internalized the values that Taylor expounds in The Culture of Authenticity, punks seem to believe that they are imbued with inner beings that become manifested through subcultural participation. Rather than constituting selfhood, punk reflects latent, inchoate self-concepts and serves as a vehicle through which to further explore and develop them. I have so far unveiled two ways in which it does this. First, it creates a supportive arena that provides social acceptance and that encourages critical thought and introspection. Doing so validates alternative ideas that individuals grapple with before entering into subcultural participation. Holly, for example, conveyed thinking that she was “crazy” before becoming punk, because she could not find normative outlets or support for feelings and beliefs that she harbored:

…I thought for a while that I was going crazy, because I was thinking about certain aspects of life and community that I wanted for myself that no one else thought was important, or my family didn’t understand, and I thought I was crazy. I thought no one else sees it this way; I must be thinking the wrong way. But then I met other people who had kind of the same viewpoints as me, and we’d have legitimate discussions, so I didn’t feel so isolated anymore.

In the quoted passage, Holly described how the punk community supported her efforts to separate herself from the common sense world of conventional society in order to uncover her true nature—providing a crucial function of validation. Second, many punk communities establish autonomous fields of cultural production that accord legitimacy to particular identities and cultural artifacts based on peer approval as opposed to commercial success or institutional
sanctioning. For example, if a person genuinely believes that she is a writer, she can realize that aspect of her identity by creating and distributing zines in a DIY community. Similarly, if a different person genuinely believes that she is a musician, she can validate that aspect of herself by performing at house shows and internalizing the approbation that other community members confer. Punk thus supports the project of achieving authentic selfhood both ideationally and socially.

However, while the cultural practices and belief systems that emerge from punk subculture support the quest for authentic selfhood, they alone cannot indemnify participants from the radical reflexivity about which Giddens (1991) writes or the social saturation about which Gergen (1991) repines in relation to the set of symbols that one chooses to represent his or her identity. Giddens contends that the self was deeply embedded in the social milieu prior to modernity. In late modernity, however, he suggests the individual largely stands alone—being “free.” He claims that there are multiple possibilities but few institutional guides to define progress or rightness with respect to one’s life choices or sense of self (Allan 2006). Although he suggests that we live in a postmodern condition whereas Giddens maintains that we have not yet left modernity, Kenneth Gergen extends quite similar arguments. Gergen claims that small communities oriented around face to face interaction have largely vanished in contemporary society. In their stead, new communication technologies have come to inundate us with an unprecedented amount of social inputs. As mechanical communities dissolve while information technology inexorably advances, he claims that people become spatially disconnected in a way that they have never been before while simultaneously being pulled closer together in a vast virtual world. As the number of relationships and value systems to which we are exposed increases as a result, our ability to maintain a small set of roles and identities is compromised,
leading to “multiphrenia.” In other words, Gergen suggests that our social worlds are becoming more heterogeneous, which is causing them to lose their objectivity. This, he argues, causes individuals to adopt more values but feel less certain about them, pressuring them to abandon the modernist quest for universal truth and instead embrace a shallow sort of relativism. This line of thought is in many ways akin to Turner’s (1976) argument with respect to a shift in people’s self-loci due to turbulence that is creeping into long-standing social institutions.

Given these arguments, in this section of the paper I discuss how punks achieve ontological security with respect to the identities and values that they have chosen for themselves. As foreshadowed in the introduction, the quest for authenticity proves incredibly taxing given that individuals in the modern world can choose from an essential infinitude of roles, identities and values to represent themselves. Furthermore, having internalized a debilitating doubt toward almost everything existing, Allan (1998), like Giddens, claims that we have directed a reflexivity toward our senses of self. Living in a culture that is filled with constant change and doubt and made complicated due to social saturation, much like Gergen, he argues that the individual has come to doubt the objectified self.

Individuals who identify as punk—or with any other group for this matter—in other words, must constantly question whether or not the set of symbols that they have selected as an identity truly represents themselves. Given that multiple alternatives exist, which are generally as viable and achievable as the identities that people have tentatively elected for themselves, and that symbols and styles are inexorably marketed to individuals for consumption, one’s sense of self feels constantly suspect in the wake of other options. Instability within social institutions from work to family renders the ability of people to develop sense of certainty with respect to their self conceptions further problematic. Turner (1976) notes that social roles and identities
begin to feel less real when surrendering to them ceases to carry definite rewards or to offer new gratifications. He also argues that important rites of passage within them have become largely pro-forma, proving to be of little moment and failing to unlock new privileges or guarded information—occurrences that once injected great meaning into the institutional roles and identities of those at hand. As such, Allan claims that people are motivated to dampen reflexivity by creating a sense of directly experienced reality.

Critiquing extant postmodern scholarship, he argues that much of it overemphasizes the role of cognitive reason in reality construction. Instead, he posits that reality construction is primarily predicated on affect-meaning. To put this another way, he suggests that reality is ultimately emotional and must be felt in order to be “really real” (Geertz 1973). For Allan, the locus of affect-meaning is collective gatherings, which act as exceptionally powerful stimulants that overcome the self via collective effervescence, also charging cultural symbols with meaning. He goes on to contend that it is through rituals that individuals dampen reflexivity. In so doing, culture is stabilized, and individuals no longer need to question which symbols are the right symbols for themselves. Reality, in other words, is rescued from doubt (Kidder 2006). In the remainder of this section, I analyze the ritualistic nature of punk concerts. Drawing from my field notes, I first attempt to illuminate the experience of attending a punk concert. I then reveal and discuss how these shows rank high on the criteria that Collins uses to assess successful rituals and argue that they function to constitute punk identities as objectified truths as opposed to tenuous uncertainties. By the chapter’s end, drawing again from Turner’s (1976) social-psychological work on the self, I contend that punk concerts generate heightened emotional states that cultivate fertile ground for subcultural participants to implant their self-conceptions,
serving as an alternative to anchoring them in unstable, unpredictable institutions in which they generally occupy only marginal statuses.

The Experience of Going to a Punk Show: Excerpts from Field Notes

Finally, the lights dim, and the overture for Bad Religion’s new CD begins playing. The crowd begins cheering wildly as the five band members slowly and nonchalantly take the stage. Greg, the singer, wears black pants and a button down dollar shirt. He has short, dark hair and glasses. Brookes, the drummer, wears a gray t-shirt and moves immediately behind his drum kit. Jay, the bass player, wears green pants and a black t-shirt. Brian, a guitarist, wears green shorts and a red-shirt, sporting a shaved head. The other guitarist wears a grey t-shirt and jeans and has medium length blonde hair. All the band members are in their late 30s to early 40s and look very calm and collected. None, save for perhaps the guitarists, look particularly punk at all, although they possess an ineffable quality that somehow distinguishes them from others.

Preceding our arrival, I joked with everyone, saying that the show would be crazy and that it would kick our asses. After Rise Against, I did not particularly expect this, though. The crowd was good, but it was tame compared to a lot of shows that I attend. Anyhow, the overture draws to a close, and anticipation reigns. The crowd seems poised, waiting for the band to assault their instruments and hurl us into a world of chaos. Moments later, they get their wish. Chaos erupts en masse. As I anticipated, they start with “Sinister Rouge.” Before I can think about this and revel in my augury, however, I’m hurled to the front of the crowd. What feels like thousands of other bodies crush me—suffocatingly—against the infinitely dense wall of those behind the stage. I underestimated the crowd—everyone has lost their minds. I can’t really see anything or take notice of my surroundings; all effort is focused on breathing and dislodging myself from the mass of people in which I’m stuck. I struggle in futility for a brief moment.
Movement, at this point, is simply impossible. Bodies crash into us every second, eradicating our senses of orientation. Suddenly the temperature has increased ten fold. “I need to get out of here” is the only thought that I can muster.

Finally I manage to disentangle myself from the medley of bodies that had coalesced and move backward—into the pit. Unlike Rise Against, it now comprises a slew of bodies that twirls around at the speed of light in uncontrollable fervor. I can’t even get into it. I can’t even think. I just need to move someplace. I manage to move to the front right somewhat, where I have minimal space and breathing room. My efforts required the duration of the entire song. Without hesitation, they launch into the second song off of their new record. Now that I at least possess minimal agency over my bodily movements, I attempt to immerse myself in the music. I try anyway. It’s still difficult at this point, as I have not achieved that acme of the experience during which I lose myself and simply become one with the crowd and music. I finally catch a clearer glimpse of the pit and my other proximate surroundings—no sign of Tonto, Dickie, or Jack, who minutes ago resided by my side.

The pit is crazy. I didn’t seem to notice any of the people who are now in it as we stood in the crowd. I have no idea where they came from, but they look older, harder, and more real, possessing an austerity and intensity that is difficult to describe. The crowd appears united and benevolent, though. People fall down every few seconds. Before the possibility of trampling them even arises, though, several people have rushed over to pick them up. And as soon as they regain two feet on the ground, they return to slam dancing. Most everyone dances in traditional punk fashion, but they execute it with a fervor that doesn’t even compare to what occurred during Rise Against. The fear of getting hit in the face strikes again, but I dismiss it, preparing myself for the show. I start doing my thing. At this point, though, it’s still hard to really do it.
In order to accomplish this, one must respond to those around him with force and sustain forceful composure himself. None of it involves malice, but if I fail to brace myself, I’ll fall and get hurled across the pit. This seems to come naturally when I’m incredibly into a show, but this one just started, and they haven’t played anything that would bring out such behavior in me yet. So my dancing, consequently, is genuine but somewhat meek. To put it another way, I get thrown around.

They finish the song and without pause begin another. Within moments my legs become entangled with those of two others, and we fall forward onto my knees, almost onto my face. Somehow, all of our legs have rendered themselves into a slipknot that we cannot undo. A few more people fall on top of me, while others unintentionally trample us. Though most likely on the ground for mere moments, it feels like minutes. I reach out with my arm, unable to pull myself up on my own. Finally, two people drag me up and out, and then I start again. I already feel hot and tired. Participating in this constitutes no easy task. I push to the front to try and catch some air, but it’s useless. The pit compacts me against all of the others. I finally see Tonto here. He grins and then pushes me back into the pit. I almost fall again, landing in the middle of it. Someone steps on my shoe, and it falls off. All that comes to mind is “shit.” I don’t think I’ll get it back. It requires several moments of pushing through people to retrieve it. This comprises half of the battle only. The real task involves putting it back on.

Several people stomp on my foot as I make my way out of the pit, furiously searching for a refuge in which to reattach my only means of protection against impending broken toes. A couple of people discern my dilemma and pull me in, pushing everyone else away. They hold my arms as I put my shoe back on. Still, people crash into us incessantly, making the task difficult and lengthy. Finally, I succeed, and relief ensues. This is what I love about these
shows—camaraderie—be it as simple as helping someone to put on a shoe or picking up a fallen comrade. Ironically, individuality, which punk seems to found itself upon, is temporarily suspended, as we strive for collectivism. The individual loses significance, and we work to ensure the whole’s robustness and vivaciousness. The pit and its proximate regions resemble some sort of super organism that moves and reacts to a common, sublimated force—the band. It dictates the nature of movement, and everyone tends to injured parts of the unit.

The band launches into another song, again, without breaking, as the third ends. At last, I see both Dickie and Arnold. Arnold emerges from the sea of bodies beside me. We grin at each other. He waves his fist in the air and somehow manages to disappear as rapidly as his presence incarnated. I see Dickie in the pit to my left. He carries an obscure presence there, as he always seems to do. He stands in the middle, not really participating. Everyone in the pit manages to elude him. Perhaps one needs to view this with his or her own eyes, but it makes for a quaint observation. I can offer a hokey, ridiculous parallel—when Kurt Russell walks across the battlefield in “Tombstone,” managing to miraculously evade all of the bullets fired at him. He looks tired. Although he does not fully participate in the intense dancing swallowing up all of the space around him, he moves with the flow, taking the general direction of the pit in his movements. As the song begins to draw to a close, the pit finally abates somewhat. Everyone must need to reenergize. I exploit the opportunity and move into the open space to catch my breath. I encounter Dickie. He looks at me, his eyes revealing both exhaustion and excitement. He gives me five. This will happen several more times throughout the night. It symbolizes a lot of things, I think: acknowledgment of our position and participation in this vortex-like force, acknowledgment of our survival, and acknowledgment of the effervescent feeling catalyzed by the corporal presence of one of our favorite bands.
I see Tonto shortly before the song ends as well. He stands on the fringe of the pit and approaches us as the song winds down. Bad Religion decides to give us a moment to catch our breath. They inquire how we are and such, but I don’t think any of us really listen. Tonto tells me he’s “fucking tired.” To say the very least, I am too, and the band has only played for a few minutes. The interlude lasts only moments, but it allows me to reenergize and collect myself. After this, I feel ready for some reason. For the rest of the show I feel at one with the crowd—becoming a part of it. It no longer resists and regurgitates me, and I feel like a legitimate participant. This ensues as they start playing again, launching into “Modern Man,” one of my favorite songs. Apparently, everyone else relishes it as well. It seems to last only for seconds. My body, lacking franchise and control, is thrown into the crowd. My mental orientation wanes as well, and objective thought gradually loses salience and possibility. I feel more like I’m just experiencing now—analyzing becomes difficult.

The rest of the show is a blur. I remember several notable events that happened, but my recollection of their order is unreliable and nebulous. In general, the energy and maniacal dancing created a sense of danger and urgency, and the unrestrained, jarring bodily contact created a cathartic experience, allowing release. In the end, I think the situation’s element of danger and ardor cultivated a sense of survival, which massively bolstered our feelings of solidarity with one another. The sheer force, unanimity, and collective direction of the crowd’s focus inspired awe, moreover. As my writing reveals, relative to the group, I and my friends became impotent, with the pit governing our bodily movements and emotions.

The band played for over an hour, utilizing an encore of several songs. After the first set, the crowd crazily screamed for them to return. I, exhausted at that point, and having heard “Fuck Armageddon...This is Hell,” one of my favorite songs, almost didn’t want them to come back
out. They did, however, playing several more crowd pleasers. Tonto and Dickie seemed to slightly share this sentiment. Tonto, both before the encore and after, told me that he felt as though he had “gotten his ass kicked.” I felt similarly. The band, finally, left to a thunderous applause. I felt tired, hot, and beat up but alive and amazing. I felt at one with this group of people who I had never met before, and I also felt as though I had actualized some of my principles, beliefs, feelings, and emotions by participating in the experience. The group affirmed and supported our behavior. After another favorite song, “Generator,” for example, a couple of guys patted me on the back—random people who I’d danced with in the pit. Subtle measures of approbation and praise like that carried a long way, extending a sense of respect and approval, it seemed.

Everyone appeared palpably happy after the show, and everyone, though saying little, agreed on its awesomeness. As we walked back to the car, even Dickie, who almost universally takes some sort of issue with shows that he attends, remarks that he had fun. He also adds that he is tired and beat up and will most likely call in sick to work the next day. Fortunately, I get to drive back to Athens and study for a test. Though much was riding on that test, I almost completely forgot about it during the show. When it did advance to awareness, I simply recognized that my presence at the show superseded its importance—strange...how we prioritize. Maybe I was just caught up in the moment.

The Significance of Concerts

In line with the cultural goal of authenticity, the interactive nature of punk concerts, during which participants exchange emotional energies with one another in order to develop effervescent feelings, furthers punks’ self-development projects by dampening the reflexivity that they direct toward their self-concepts and allowing them to anchor their self-conceptionss
within deeply felt impulses and emotions. During concerts, new subcultural participants worked to facilitate and explore emergent understanding of self while more seasoned participants reaffirmed existing ones. Going to shows conferred and reaffirmed feelings of self-worth and identity among punks, constituting them as real. In the following passage, Cooper describes how concerts allowed him to engage in self-expression and test the validity of his new found punk self.

Shows were very important to me, experiencing bands was something I needed to prove to myself that I was a punk. There was no pride here; I had to categorically decide for myself if I was real and if that is what I wanted to be, and the only way I could do that was to see if I could experience the same intensity of feeling that I felt others could feel...in reality, I determined I was a punk, because I lived it. I bled at Face to Face, I froze at NOFX, I screamed at Bad Religion—I was there man, I identified and I participated and I experienced...[it was how] I expressed my identity.”

By regularly attending concerts, Cooper engaged in a process of self-discovery. Upon realizing that punk reflected aspects of what he perceived as his pre-existent persona, he made attempts to cathetically affirm his identity. The intense emotions that he experienced during shows subjectively confirmed authentic selfhood and constituted his identity as real. In other words, after proceeding through the physical and emotional experiences of shows, he no longer had to consider whether or not he was really a punk or whether or not punk truly reflected his inner essence—he knew because he felt it. Had the experiences failed to register with him, he likely would have sought out a different avenue for understanding his inner being. As Allan noted, for Cooper, reality construction was predicated on affect-meaning, not cognitive transmission. In a similar way, Ian affectively cemented his sense of self and subjectively cultivated authenticity by struggling to be “first person” to receive the energy that was released during shows.

*Can you speak a little bit to the experience of going to a show—what it’s like and what you get out of it?*

Oh man. If it’s a band that you know, you always have to be the one right up front. That’s a must. Awww…you will do anything to get up front...That way, when they
come on the small stage…awww…and they’re singing, you can feel the spit on your face. And you see the sweat, all of it. You want to be there, you want to try to grab that energy that they’re letting loose. You want to try to be there to be the first one to grab it. And…you’ve got your hands in the air, you’re singing songs that you don’t even know the words to, but you’re there. I mean, the guy next to you, you start pushing each other around, moshing a little bit there, but you’re still right up front. It’s like taking…the band is letting loose all this energy, and being the first one up front, you’re the first one who gets it, and that’s…that’s where you want to be. That’s where I always push to be…You want to be the one there to get it, and you don’t want to miss a thing.

So…that’s the best place to be. It’s the greatest feeling in the world being there. Especially when it’s one of your favorite bands, and you know all of the words, and you’re singing along, you’re grabbing the poor guy next to you—who knows what his name is—but you’re hugging, and he’s signing along with you, you know…it’s great, it really is, that’s just one of the greatest feelings in the world.

Doing so, which Ian indicated required knocking over young adolescents and struggling to make it to the front of the crowd during other points in his interview, proved his commitment to his own feelings and ideas, supporting his self-concept. Like Cooper, he developed a sense of certainty about his identity because enacting what it meant to be punk through the ritual of shows was “the greatest feeling in the world.” Both Ian and Cooper’s commentary accords with Turner’s theorizing on the nature of self conceptions, which suggests that rituals have become largely devoid of meaning within institutional contexts, but that more spontaneous, impulsive ones—such as rock concerts—are replacing them for the purpose of generating heightened emotional states in which people directly experience the subjective reality of their selves.

Randall Collins (2004) theorizes that rituals are patterned sequences of behavior that bring four elements together: common focus of attention, common emotional mood, high ecological concentration, and a fast interaction pace. As those elements increase in intensity, so do the effects of interaction rituals. These effects comprise: group solidarity, group symbols, feelings of morality, individual emotional energy, and individual cultural capital (Allan 2006). Punk concerts measure high on Collins’ indicators for ritual intensity. By attending them, participants increase their stocks of emotional energy and cultural capital, which Ian’s
commentary above directly references. These effects enable participants to subsequently partake in more regular and involved social interactions, as Collins posits that the likelihood of an individual seeking out interaction is tied to those stores. This works to directly mitigate the social alienation that many participants feel prior to fully involving themselves in the subculture and hence supports the positive, functional role of subculture proposed by Matza and Sykes (1961).

Perhaps more importantly, Collins also suggests that we develop the senses of truth that we associate with ideas, statements, and belief systems through interaction chain rituals (Allan 2006). That is, we define particular things as true or real after having collectively imbued them with certain levels of sacredness. This occurs largely because rituals produce a momentarily shared reality among participants. By attending punk concerts, which involve interaction rituals that produce high levels of collective emotion, participants personally validate the “authenticity” of their identities as a consequence. The very articulate Cooper, in another passage, evidences this process through a journal article that he offered to me for content analysis.

We lived in a world that few others could experience, could ever understand. Yet in twenty years I could remember no other time in my life when I had felt so alive, so real. Yes, this was real. It wasn't the anesthetic that seemed to satiate the already deadened nervous system of our society. It was the ultimate embodiment of actuality. It was, in short, life...and it was ours...[leaving the concert] is not such a great word to describe the situation. Maybe I should distinguish that by saying that we simply became mortal again. I could think of very few times in my life when I was ever as sore, when I was ever as exhausted, as when I left that mosh pit. As we walked away, there was no doubt who we were. One look into the eyes of any of us made it brutally clear that the band played for Sam, Phil and I only. They played knowing we would be there. Perhaps they even waited for us...the next few minutes were a blur...

Cooper described how the ritualistic experience of participating in a concert actualized his and his friends’ identities. The emotional and physical intensity of the show consecrated their senses of self as real by imbuing them with the awe-inspiring, effervescent qualities—qualities that they
could not generally derive, it seems, from participating in normative social roles. The heightened emotional response that the show generated made his identity feel real and true in a way that the mundane events of everyday life could not and did not do.

In commenting on concert going during interviews, Ian and Henry’s answers also support this position:

\textit{Interviewer: So being that first person up there, that was meaningful and significant to you?}

Ian: Yeah, oh yeah; I had to be…That’s probably the only time I was really hardcore about anything…when I first saw NOFX play, it was at a Warped Tour venue, but those were really the best times to catch some of my favorite bands…and…I stayed up front for like three hours through like six different bands, a couple of whom I knew, a couple who I didn’t, but I didn’t care. You know, I was leached onto there, because I wanted to be right there for them. And…it was just fantastic. Once you’re done, you feel great. Because you’re like…awww…I was there, and it was awesome. I got all of that…

Henry: …some people get older and more jaded, so they just want to stand in the back, maybe they get the same thing from doing that, I don’t know. I know that whenever I’ve gone to any punk rock shows, whenever I’ve stood in the back, it could be a band I really like, let’s say I just wasn’t in the mood to get in the pit or to get up close…I don’t leave feeling short-changed, the band might’ve put on a good show, and that’s good, but there’s not a lot that I can really recall later on in time…maybe I’ll remember when they played this song or that one, and that’s cool, but you’ll always remember…‘aww man! Remember that one guy came up, and he like elbowed me in the face!’ ‘Yeah! It really hurt, but it was cool because afterwards he picked me up and was spinning me around and it was awesome!’ So it’s just all sorts of unique experiences with people of all different backgrounds, and I mean, you know, punk rock was what they were into, but growing up with just all the different things that they’ve done, and you don’t know them at all, but they’re like you’re best friends for an hour…

Very much paralleling Cooper’s feelings, for both Ian and Henry, the feeling of “presence” that occurred during shows constituted their self-understandings as real. The intensity of their experiences remained after shows ended, becoming deified in their memories. Henry, specifically, speaks to the necessity of actively participating in the environment in order to beget such feelings of truth and reality. The unique memories and experiences that accompany
thorough participation indelibly imprint themselves into one’s understanding of self, hence cementing identity concepts. More generally, punk concerts tie one’s identity to the physical—to tactile sensation. Speaking of them, Eve discusses this in the following passage:

One of the greatest things to me about it, like…the last punk show I went to, the next day I could feel it. I don’t know…I was pretty banged up, and my muscles were sore, and my ears were ringing…it’s just such an opportunity to just let out…just like any frustrations or anything you have—just go crazy in a mass of sweaty people going crazy too. And there’s something about it that just creates this kinship, like a lot of times somebody will just sort grab you by the shoulders and just start singing along with you or something, and it’s not the same as going to some sort of mopey, indie rock show, where everybody just stands around like statues and does a head nod and foot tap and listens to some pretty plain or sappy music or something, and I mean, shows like that have their place to. And I definitely go to them occasionally, but I definitely love punk shows because, I don’t know, I like to jump around and sort of thrash myself about and listen to something that is just so full of raw emotion, and I think…it’s really…it’s like one of the last music styles that’s not afraid to do that. You know, everything else seems so inhibited—like holding back—but punk isn’t to me…like it’s not so rehearsed. It’s just…just do it, you know, and however it goes is however it goes. It’s not built to be perfect musically or lyrically or anything…it’s just…it’s a visceral experience…

This also comes out in the ethnographic data that I cited to begin the section. The incredible physicality and intensity of the concert that I attended—to use Allan’s terms—led to a palpable dampening of reflexivity. As is apparent from my field notes and informant testimony, punk concerts create a common focus of attention, a common emotional mood, high ecological concentration, and a fast interaction pace.

William McNeil (1995) also discusses the role that exceptionally physical interactions carry with respect to infusing the self-concepts of persons with meaning and cementing them as real. He makes arguments that are very similar to those of both Collins and Allan but couches them in different terms. In Keeping Together in Time, he analyzes the function that drilling and dance play in military outfits as well as small communities. His underlying thesis suggests that muscular bonding, which arises through dance and drill, has been integral for the overall development of humanity by forging deep emotional bonds that create cohesion in society,
stabilizing and strengthening small communities and making collective work, which often involves dull, repetitive tasks, easier and more pleasurable by injecting it with emotional excitement and rhythmic coordination. He claims that drilling creates a pervasive sense of well-being and a strange sense of personal enlargement. Reflecting on his own experiences in the army, he describes how its collective rituals made him and fellow soldiers “swell out” and become “bigger than life.” Much like Allan, he asserts that this was something felt, not talked about.

It seems that punk concerts share many of the same qualities that military drill procedures and indigenous dance rituals possess. Like the groups that McNeil analyzes, the rhythmic coordination and carnal stimulation that occur during punk shows leave individuals feeling euphoric and larger than life. As Charlie will note in a passage below, this is highly functional for the subculture, as it galvanizes participants for what he described as their core tasks: self-discovery and political resistance. McNeil also notes that dance historians have found that “boundary loss” occurs during dance, which denotes a blurring of self-awareness and the heightening of a feeling of oneness with all who share in the dance. This brings about an ecstatic state in which awareness of others fades and excitement concentrates within the self. My field notes evidence how I fell into such a state during that particular concert that I wrote about, as I related that “my mental orientation wane[d] as well; objective thought gradually los[t] salience and possibility. I fe[lt] more like I [was] just experiencing [then]—analyzing [became] difficult.”

Moreover, McNeil claims that physical dance is exceptionally important for poor and distressed people, as the ecstatic behavior that ensues from it allows them to temporarily escape from the difficulties and disappointments of daily life. Given the narratives that punks provide to
account for their identities, which emphasized social alienation and peer ridicule, his finding perhaps obviates and explains the centrality that music and shows carry in the subculture, reflecting a need to anchor the self in impulse rather than in institution. McNeil also directly speaks to the problem of social saturation that Gergen raised. Coming to the same conclusion as Allan, he illuminates how rituals like punk concerts can overcome the problem:

“...the historic-process of choosing between competing identities and loyalties will continue indefinitely into the future, affecting every human life. This is and always has been the principal moral problem humans confront. To what, and with whom do we belong? Dance, drill, and other rhythmic muscular exercises have always played a part in answering these questions. They will continue to do so as long as the gestural, muscular level of communication continues to bind human beings together into emotionally vibrant groups that give meaning and purpose to human experience” (p.156-7).

My data thus suggest that developing a sense of personal authenticity requires that individuals emotionally and spiritually experience their identities as real by taking part in the ritualistic dimensions of subculture.

In a different vein, interactions within mosh pits also transferred energy and capital among participants, which generated effervescent feelings. This occurred through slam dancing and mingling within the crowd but mostly resulted during direct physical interactions, in which participants offered one another subtle emotional cues of affirmation or disapproval. A field note excerpt—part of which is recapitulated from above—illuminates this phenomenon:

After another favorite song, 'Generator,' for example, a couple of people patted me on the back—random people who I'd interacted with in the pit. Subtle measures of approbation and praise carry a long way, conferring respect and approval upon me...Throughout the show, I, through both intention and inadvertence, harshly collided with others. However, and this held true in every case from what I remember, my collider and I would nod at each other after hitting one another. This, I think, acknowledged respect as well as the nature of the interaction—friendly and collectively driven.

Such cues validate the integrity of one’s perceived self-concept. To elaborate, like Allan but drawing from empirical data, Summers-Effler (2002) has found that emotional contagions appear
to be non-cognitive and physically based. Information about our emotions, she writes, is available through minute facial expressions and body language. Similarly, Hatfield et. al (1994) found that such emotional information, which usually remains below the surface of conscious awareness, is the basis for emotional contagion. It thus seems that punks achieve social authenticity and perform boundary work by making use of non-verbal, affective cues that transmit emotional energies. Such cues signify either legitimation or rejection and appear to be pivotal for developing senses of self through interaction.

Given the fledgling senses of self that subjects hold before subcultural participation, these non-verbal, under-the-surface cues—and the experience of concert going more generally—seem to be crucial for personally defining and confirming one’s self-concept. This is because regardless of the search for self-realization in which punks appear to be engaged, the identities that people assume must still balance distinctiveness and connection. For Collins, effervescent, emotionally-laden rituals intensify both personal meanings and social bonds. Hence, in addition to constituting self-concepts as true by proving punks with a conduit to a direct, physical-based sense of reality, the social interactions that occur within them help to connect them to other people on whom their identities are largely contingent—also working to strengthen the identities that they have adopted for themselves.

My data suggest that participants take other specific strategies in order to bolster their self-concepts as well. Subjects described two means through which they explored and essentially tested their identities to determine if they were authentic or real. These strategies concerned the way that they occupied physical space and danced with one another. First, as adumbrated by prior interview excerpts, participants strove to take an active role at shows. They went about this by situating themselves close to the band and by participating in the physical
nature of the ritual. This tended to involve singing along, dancing, crowd surfing, helping others around them who fell or lost personal artifacts, and just generally interacting with others who were present. The following excerpts from my field notes illuminate the importance of engaging in this type of involvement:

I never feel like I am part of the show unless I'm up front, where the action occurs. It is strange, I suppose; the pit/front area constitutes an entirely different world. There, people dance, mosh, scream, move around, etc., whereas people throughout the rest of the venue sort of idly stand around. I have always wondered why they do this. How can you enjoy the show unless you somewhat express or release [excitement]? Punk shows wield so much energy—it almost seems to mandate liveliness. It seems like you miss the entire experience of the show when standing in an inactive portion of the crowd. You hear the music, but the experience is something entirely different...the crowd makes or breaks the show. The nature of it essentially determines how and if you can express yourself.

My notes reveal how the nature of punk concerts can be expressly interactive for many people. Most of those who attend do not passively receive music by bands that control the nature of the experience. Rather, punk shows exist as a dialectic, with interaction among attendees and the band mutually constituting the experience. In fact, surrendering oneself passively to the music becomes nearly impossible, as again demonstrated by my observations:

Generally, and especially at a chaotic, energetic show, I become immersed in the collective experience of the crowd, only sporadically, for brief moments, actually looking at the band. Others constantly slam into you and alter your orientation, precluding undisturbed observation of the band. The activity of the crowd also usually proves more interesting than watching the band.

The second strategy involves taking part in the mosh pits that develop at concerts. Their climates are incredibly draining physically and are also potentially dangerous. My field notes reveal their natures:

The nature of the pit, for the very most part, precludes individual movement. One may develop an individual style of dance, but the person, holistically speaking, is still subject to the collective will of those present. The pit moves in a vortex with which one must abide in order to avoid complete physical exhaustion or injury. Furthermore, rowdiness and lack of bodily agency create a climate of potential danger and urgency…
Consequently, when a concert concludes, a shared sentiment of survival tends to exist, because all of those present collectively experienced a very intense phenomenon, comparable to a football team after a tough game or a platoon of soldiers after a bloody battle. This creates a unique conduit for empathy, which draws participants closer together and breeds intense solidarity. Furthermore, given this context, the chaotic nature provides unique conditions through which punks can engage in acts of camaraderie, which serve to strengthen group bonds and identity. During the concert described above, I, as well as others, frequently fell down, were pushed around, and lost shoes while dancing. In nearly every instance during which a participant’s safety was compromised, several others rushed to assist him or her. When someone fell, three people picked him or her up; when someone’s shoe fell off, people cleared space to allow for its reattachment. My field notes from a different concert demonstrate this as well:

The crowd members continued to act civilly and responsibly toward all. All of those who fell were picked up. At one point, someone lost a hat, but another person picked it up, holding it in the air for minutes before someone retrieved it. I lost my shoe three more times. Each time, several people urgently rushed to my aid, helping me fasten it. The energy and ardor never relented. In fact, it seemed to grow stronger with every song.

Several interviewees confirmed the importance of such manifestations of group camaraderie as well. These sorts of benevolent behaviors amongst strangers do not lend themselves to everyday occurrence. The pit, hence, provides for situations in which members, in order to sustain the concert’s effervescent experience, must interact with one another in a meaningful way. This creates meaningful interaction that builds solidarity that would not take place in the realm of routine experience.

Shows also provided punks with the fortitude needed to sustain their self-realization projects when not participating in ritual. Charlie suggested that the intense emotional
experiences associated with listening to punk music and going to shows reaffirmed and validated his personal goals, saying the following:

…I kind of separate punk into two different ideas: the music side and the ideological side. And the music side is kind of the party to keep us together and keep us motivated for the nitty gritty of the political side. I feel like it’s just there to remind everybody that we can still have fun even if we’re getting tased or searched every five minutes because we look weird or for whatever other reason…for having a show…[for] just trying to build as much as we can ideologically and physically…trying to just constantly fight the alienation that’s consumerism and to actually [be ourselves].

To Charlie, going to concerts provided motivation for continuing the process of self-discovery and for enacting his political ideals by replenishing his store of emotional energy. The intense emotional experiences and empathy that listening to punk music brought about also reaffirmed and validated his goals by firmly anchoring his self-concept. Gary, when interviewed, offered parallel comments:

…definitely in my formative political years [punk music] had a galvanizing effect. Going home and putting on a Crass record was pretty powerful, and it kind of got me through my day to day existence, confirming that these ideas I was playing with and kind of taking baby steps towards implementing in my life were valid.

For Gary, punk music served as a support mechanism that both confirmed his ideas as worthy and also signified that he was not alone in holding them. The visceral response that punk music and punk shows (which he discussed elsewhere in his interview) incited charged his ideological beliefs with meaning. As with Cooper, he could feel their legitimacy as opposed to simply agreeing with them on a cognitive or rational level.

Brian also spoke to the way in which punk music charged his beliefs with meaning, and how it elicited an emotional response that made them feel right and true. While discussing why punk music appealed to him, he claimed that it provided a soundtrack to a set of ideas that would have otherwise lacked strong appeal. This soundtrack, which manifests in the fast, energetic and catchy delivery of punk music, evokes a visceral response in listeners. Merely reading about his
nascent beliefs and ideas would not have proved as exciting. He suggested that the music emotionally registered with him, whereas ideas delivered through other mediums—such as books or teachers—resonated only on surface, mental level, which was not as powerful. His commentary coincides with Turner’s (1976) research, which suggests that people no longer necessarily experience as real what they are taught is real because information overload, technological advancement and social upheaval propel the world into a near constant state of flux. Given this turbulence, people put more stock into what they can feel rather than what they can reason, as experiences that bring about effusions of feelings and heightened emotional states carry greater power and meaning. Within this context, according to respondents, participants are drawn into punk because it cathetically stands for something relative to the lukewarm offerings that other sources of knowledge and identity distribute during adolescence. Henry and Trevor related similar thoughts while discussing their school experiences. As noted in the “becoming punk” chapter, they resisted the imposition of knowledge by their respective schools and instead placed a priority on felt reality.

Overall, my observations and interview data suggest that concerts serve a far greater function than maintaining subcultural cohesion and group meaning. While the ritualistic nature of punk concerts does appear to accomplish that task by strengthening social bonds among subcultural participants, it also appears to greatly facilitate the search for authentic selfhood (to use Taylor’s terms) or the real self (to use Turner’s terms). This is because shows offer members of the subculture an opportunity to engage in self-expression through acts like singing along and dancing. More importantly, though, they provide a forum in which to explore, affirm and more deeply anchor inchoate self-concepts. In this way, concert goers use the opportunity for “testing” their identities. Participants attempt to determine whether or not their subcultural
memberships fit with their inner depths by seeking out cathetic experiences, and they also constitute their self-concepts as real and meaningful by grounding them in social, physical and emotions experiences of extraordinary intensity. Additionally, by attending shows, as Collins theorizes, punks refill their stores of emotional energy. This allows them to overcome the socially estranged conditions from which they suffer and seek out others for further interaction. By contributing an emotional dimension to emerging beliefs and ideas, punk music and shows also functioned as support systems for punks’ personal projects by affirming their validity.

These findings are consistent with Kidder’s (2006) study of bicycle messenger subculture. Interviewing members about and personally participating in “alley cats,” which were dangerous, physically exacting bike races that served as rituals for members, he argued that the intense focus on the event that participants maintained—as well as the reception of its extraordinary felt reality—dampened reflexivity among them, providing messengers with a feeling of internal harmony and meaning. As with messengers, what it meant to be a punk—and to be oneself more generally—was displayed and enacted through the ritualistic experience of attending shows. During them, actions were reduced to instinct, which mobilized a context that seemed objectively real (2006).
CHAPTER NINE

DISCUSSION

Whether as efforts to contest class positions or as adaptations to cultural strain, scholars have long associated youth subcultures with rebellion. Heavily influenced by classic pieces approached through both functionalist and neo-Marxian paradigms, researchers have continued to work under the assumption that an impassable gulf divides subculture from “dominant culture,” despite evidence suggesting that actors in such different milieus share norms, values and beliefs. Even as Fine and Kleinman (1979) called on such researchers to reconsider the assumed divide by revealing that many subculturists never actually leave “dominant culture” but instead move fluidly amid multiple social worlds, the majority of subsequent work has continued to suggest that subcultures evolve practices and value systems that are distinguishable—if not in outright opposition to—those of the dominant culture. This perhaps holds nowhere more true than in punk. Moore (2007), for example, published an article only a few months ago that construed punk’s mode of cultural production as resistance. As evidenced throughout the previous sections, there is certainly no dearth of other work that makes such claims. My empirical findings, however, do not support this argument—at minimum, anyway, they suggest that punk ideology and practice cannot be reduced solely to resistance. Having probed interviewees about their ideological beliefs, I found that the punks in my sample did not adhere to or promote a specific set of politics. While none of my informants held conservative beliefs, they did, however, reject the idea that leftist ideology was intrinsic to the subculture. In fact, with respect to politics, they simply said that individuals should look within themselves in order
to determine where they lie on the political spectrum. They often implied that engaging in such a process would lead to leftist beliefs and value, given their insistence on the “flawed process of socialization” that Cooper spoke about, but they did not at all feel that it was inevitable. Hence, while challenges to hegemony are regularly levied, punk does not seem to be predicated on a narrow project of ideological resistance.

Apart from their refusal to attribute a specific set of politics to punk, what is perhaps more interesting about the commentary that subjects provided was that it did not tend to emphasize political resistance at all. Rather, it underscored the importance of authenticity—not as just punks, but as human beings more generally—by achieving more intimate contact with their “true selves.” This concern is not unique to punk subculture. Fine (2003), for example, writes, “the desire for authenticity now occupies a central position in contemporary culture” (p.153). As scholars like Taylor, Boyle, Lasch, and Bell have noted, a devotion to self-discovery has become embedded in the value system of society at large. Turner, too, posits that as the nature of felt reality has shifted for citizens of post-industrial societies, they have come to increasingly spurn their institutional roles in order to locate and actualize the true selves that they believe to be locked within their hitherto unexplored and unindulged impulses. Taylor goes so far as to contend that we live in a “culture of authenticity” which extols creation and construction, originality, and opposition to rules of society. These beliefs mirror the value system that punks heed, which involves rejection, reflexivity and self-discovery. Also, as noted in chapter six, while punks experience their personal realities in a way that prioritizes impulses over institutions more so than those outside of the subculture, the locus of their identities nonetheless reflects a broader societal shift in how people constitute and play out their self-
conceptions—a shift that, according to Turner (1976), popular culture and contemporary values orientations strongly evidence.

Thus, just as punks seek to reconnect to the real by bypassing market relations and establishing an autonomous field of cultural productions, the greater lot of the Western world increasingly desires to experience things for itself as well. Boyle (2004) suggests that this is because humans live in a world that tells them that the future of food is artificial, that the future of books, newspapers, medicine is virtual, and that they will soon deal entirely through computers screens, not through people. While punks insist that most people are socially unconscious, tepid conformists, he, to the contrary, argues that globalization has spawned a desire for anything but conformity and convention. While acknowledging that the majority of people in the Western world continue to orient their lives around consumption, Boyle nonetheless suggests that somewhat of a revolution has occurred whereby consumers have launched a rejection of the fake, the virtual, the spun, and the mass produced. Instead, he claims that they growingly long for something that they can touch and put their fingers on—just like punks.

Analyzing the marketing and advertising campaigns of major corporations, he contends that the executives responsible for initiating these strategies have discovered the contemporary infatuation with authenticity about which Taylor and others have written, using it in an ironic way to sell their products. By linking products to notions of liberation, rebellion and the unruliness of youth, culture producers have been able to survive in a milieu that disdains mass-production. Similarly, just as punks emphasize felt reality over cognitive transmission, he posits that what is marketed as cool and authentic seems to prioritize emotion and sentiment over
reason and sensibility, which, he claims, explains the undercurrent of violence and revolt in many of the cultural products and expressions that achieve commercial success.

Fine (2003) found similar preferences while studying how people consume art. Authenticity in art, he posited, was linked to an absence of cognitive understanding, which created an unmediated experience. In other words, for collectors, authentic art was sincere, original, innocent, genuine, and unaffected, distinct from strategic and pragmatic self-presentation. Like punks who valued house shows and local music in lieu of commercial offerings, he found that people appreciated self-taught art in contrast to commercial and academic products, suggesting that their emotional reactions to the pieces validated the art’s power. Pillsbury (1990), similarly, in studying foreign cuisine, found that many diners sought authentic food, attempting to genuinely experience foreignness in a way that had not been diluted by commodification, globalization and so forth. Again, for him, authenticity implied a lack of mediation. Hence, unlike Adorno (1982), who asserted that cultural consumption had been reduced to mere commodity fetishism, Fine and Pillsbury found that people consumed art and food for the powerful emotional images that they elicited, which arose from the perception of sincerity and candor that they possessed, which seems to be distinct from its thrill value that Adorno wrote about vis-à-vis emotions. It thus appears that the same drive which pushes people to consume punk music—a search for something real and genuine grounded in the cathetic as opposed to the cognitive and galvanized by a self-concept that emphasizes impulses rather than institutions—also motivates people to seek out self-taught art and foreign cuisine. People who are situated in the dominant cultural milieu assume that such art and such food lack the instrumentality and pretense of commercial and academic art as well as fast food, and they seem to feel more real to them.
Overall, Boyle, implies that phenomena like punk will become ever more common, as more and more people come to reject conceptions of progress that have held sway since modernity, believing them to entail a fake, second rate world\(^5\). Instead, he argues that people will increasingly demand real human contact, real experience and real connection. In the vein of Allan and Gergen, Boyle suggests that this is a response to cultural conditions of postmodernity, which have ushered in widespread understandings of reality that suggest that it is socially constructed and that people cannot really communicate with or understand one another. In conjunction with social saturation, such ideas have generated the ever disdained blasé attitude. The drive for authenticity, in contrast, challenges the notion that nothing is true and that everything is relative. It puts humanity first, rejecting the idea that they are controllable cogs.

Given the continuity between the value system of punks and that of broader society, two questions emerge. First, why, for some individuals, does the cultural drive for authenticity manifest in subcultural participation? And second, if punk subculture serves as a vehicle for experiencing authentic selfhood—and if the drive for authentic selfhood is ubiquitous—why do not all individuals become punk? To answer these questions, it is useful to draw from a classic study of subculture. In *Learning to Labor*, Paul Willis (1977) described the development of a counter-culture within a British school. Successfully merging functionalist theory and neo-marxian theory in a way that is all too rare, he found that working class children drew on their class values in order to erect an alternative status system to salvage their dignity, given poor academic performances.

\(^5\) Despite the urge among many people to seek a more direct experience of reality and to pursue the “authentic,” it is also important to note that simulation and simulacra remain popular. For example, Las Vegas and amusement parks constructed around phantasmal themes continue to flourish. However, much recent research in areas that range from food to art to tourism, as noted, strongly suggests that there is a growing appreciation of and desire for unmediated experiences. More generally, people are perhaps beginning to turn within themselves rather than seeking that which, perceptually, is on the outside.
Willis, like others both before and after him, found that the school in question evaluated students based on their intellectual talents—not on their practical abilities. Working class kids who lacked the former quality ultimately inverted this system in their later high school years. Becoming “Lads,” they expressed outrage against authority, initiating a campaign of “guerilla warfare” against the school in an effort to win symbolic and physical space from the institution and its rules. The Lads evolved an informal system of culture that disdained theoretical knowledge and obedience, emphasizing shrewdness, practical ability and other activities—such as drinking, smoking and sexual prowess—that their working class fathers esteemed. In characteristic fashion, Willis casted this behavior as a “magical solution” to a social problem, as the Lads’ opposition to the school’s institutional culture ultimately compromised their academic success and reproduced their subordinate class positions.

Writing of Willis’ work after publication, however, Hargreaves (1982) cautioned scholars who studied oppositional cultures to be careful when drawing parallels between the values of working class youth and those pupils who express deviant values in schools. He asserted that we should not assume that working class values are strongly ingrained into children who automatically import them into schools. Rather, he advocated that researchers heed a “process view” of oppositional culture, which posits that particular processes activate working class values, causing kids to adopt them in schools. Hargreaves went on to argue that children activate working class values as a resource through which to maintain their dignity when failing in school. Most relevant for my discussion, however, is a question that Hargreaves raises when elaborating this view: what happens to students whose dignity is assaulted, but who lack working class values as a resource to draw on in order to preserve self-esteem?
I posit that the answer to this question rests within the value system of punk subculture. As noted in the “becoming punk” chapter, informants in my study claimed—almost ubiquitously—to feel intrinsically different and alienated from their mainstream peers. This suggests that they were unable to achieve status in the conventional popularity systems of their schools. Their narratives also hint that achieving status through conventional institutional systems remains difficult. However, save for perhaps two participants, none of my informants belonged to the sorts of working class communities to which the Lads in Willis’ study staked membership. As a result, they could not and cannot draw on a set of working class values in order to construct an alternative status system.

A lack of alternate values precluded subjects from utilizing a rebellion adaptation to the cultural strain that the experienced. In terms of cultural resources, they were forced to latch on to what the “dominant culture” had made available to them, which, I argue, were the ideals of authenticity. In other words, it seems that the punks in my study reiterated the institutionalized values of society in a distorted and heightened form in order to achieve social status and meaningful self-concepts. Unlike the Lads, punks placed great emphasis on theoretical knowledge and learning, and, in line with the culture of authenticity, they extolled individualism, creativity and enlightenment. There was thus no major inversion of cultural values or objectives. As opposed to a rebellion adaptation to anomic conditions, my data thus suggest that punk is more accurately described as an “innovation” solution to the strain experienced by young people in school or in society at large.

As opposed to relying on the means of their peers to achieve authentic selfhood, the punks in my study utilized strategies that were not commonly accepted or socially sanctioned. They established autonomous fields of cultural production, took part in the ritualistic nature of
punk shows and made use of the subculture’s stylistic and ideological accoutrements—activities that indulge their impulses. Hence, unlike Moore (2007), who construes the DIY ethos as resistance to capitalism (a cultural value, in essence), I posit that it constitutes a rejection of consumption and acquisition as a means to experiencing and enacting one’s “real self.” Given that economic problems were not the only causes for maladjustment or a lack of status among subjects, as moral and ideological disparities often accounted for why they could not fit in as well, their heightened concern with authenticity as a cultural ideal makes further sense. This is also consistent with the findings in Miller’s (1958) study of gang delinquency. He concluded that under-achieving young people joined subcultures in order to develop an alternate source of self-esteem and identity. However, unlike Cohen and others working from the functionalist camp, he concluded that those within the subculture at hand reproduced the values of the parent culture in a distorted, heightened form—they did not replace them.

While punks in my study may not have necessarily harbored a heightened concern with authenticity prior to entering into the subculture, they seem to have developed one in order to maintain their levels of self-esteem and overall senses of self. They did so, it seems, because the inability to achieve status or derive tangible rewards from participating in institutions—particularly educational ones—made their institutional roles and identities feel less relevant and less real to them relative to their unscathed peers, encouraging them to anchor their self-conceptions in an alternate locus—impulses (Turner 1976). To put this another way, since low institutional status precluded study participants from anchoring their self-concepts within them, participants were galvanized to ground them in deeply felt impulses—a social process articulated through the cultural ideal of authentic selfhood that punk ideology promotes and embodies.
Two additional arguments support my interpretation of punk as an innovation adaptation to cultural strain. First, as discussed above, a wealth of recent literature suggests that contemporary society has become infatuated with authenticity. Second, in *The Comprehensive School*, Hargreaves (1982) addresses how the institutional environments of schools have dramatically changed since the 19th century. As opposed to attempting to socialize children to participate in mainstream society and adopt a common identity, he argues that they have become very individualistic, emphasizing the humanistic development and enlightenment of individuals, fostering what he calls a "culture of individualism." In essence, he describes how school curriculums and pedagogies reflect the culture of authenticity about which Taylor writes. This manifests in individualized curriculums that attempt to design unique programs for every child, the abandonment of corporate vocabularies from schools, and the disappearance of enduring class units, with students now divided into year groups instead. Hargreaves claims that these developments have eroded a sense of belonging to the school and have eradicated the institutional pride that students once received from it. In other words, instead of asking what kind of society we want, we ask what kind of individuals we want to enter society. Hargreaves’ findings thus suggest that individualism and authenticity are readily available to disaffected young people as cultural resources on which to develop a sense of self.
CHAPTER TEN

CONCLUSION

My findings, utilizing empirical analysis, provide insight into the ideological aspects of punk and allow for a reconceptualization of the subculture. As opposed to other scholars who have reified dominant ideas about authenticity, I contend that punk, for many people, possesses meaningful ideology, comprising more than mere style. My findings, driven by an ethnographic approach, expand our knowledge of subculturalists and address frequently cited problems and gaps within the extant literature—especially the Birmingham tradition, which over-privileged the spectacular aspects of subculture, neglected to look at the mundane elements of young peoples’ lives, and relied on semiotic methods that denied agency to subcultural participants. However, my work also substantiates portions of their analysis with empirical evidence, namely that punks do, in fact, seek to objectify self-image through style and that they engage in resistance, though the nature of that resistance seems to be quite different than hitherto conceived.

I offer other unique contributions to existing literature as well. Most contemporary research has moved beyond the study of ideology, primarily as a reaction to the critiques levied against the Birmingham tradition with respect to their interest in ideology over empiricism. By using ethnographic methods to study the meanings that young people attach to their behaviors, I am able to reclaim the exploration of ideology within subculture, which has largely been abandoned. I also reveal subcultures as critical sites for forming meaningful identities, cultivating social bonds and developing supportive communities, which departs from conceptualizations that trivialize them as structural reactions to cultural contradictions or as
empty, postmodern fads. As discussed throughout the paper, such meaningful communities and sites for interaction are pivotal in a socially saturated world that fails to provide many with direction, purpose, meaning, and empathetic, worthwhile interpersonal relationships. The physical rituals that punk offers, furthermore, successfully work to dampen the reflexivity from which young people struggling to define themselves suffer. Punk rituals allow such individuals to transform their loci of self from institutions to impulses by providing access to heightened emotional states and by generating salient opportunities to gratify deeply felt urges. To those not integrated into the subculture, such outings likely appear illogical and ridiculous, featuring strange people dressed in absurd attire who listen to cacophonous music while engaging in ostensibly violent dance and movement. However, to participants, concerts mobilize a context that seems objectively real, which offers a feeling of meaning and internal harmony to participants (Kidder 2006).

In relation to extant theory, it appears that the functionalist perspective as it currently stands cannot fully account for why young people enter into subcultures. This is because it does not consider the drive for authentic selfhood or the shift in how people anchor their self-conceptions that Taylor and Turner contend to permeate culture in post-materialist societies. The functionalist paradigm also lacks explanatory power because it continues to falsely presume extreme cleavage between dominant and subcultural values. In contrast, my research lends support for the contention that a strong drive for achieving authentic selfhood—approached through a process of self-discovery rather than self-creation—prevails in modern times. Due to the profound social changes that I discussed in chapter three, people in advanced industrial societies are increasingly beginning to pursue and experience their “real selves” through the kinds of impulsive behavior that Taylor’s ideal of authenticity encourages and demands. I
suggest that this drive, which exists as part of a larger need to develop a meaningful and positive self-concept, when coupled with other circumstances, pushes individuals into subcultural participation. This occurs when the value orientations of young people do not accord with those of their prevailing social environments, when they are to some extent socially alienated from their peers, and when they become exposed in particular ways to subcultural ideology and style (especially music). This cultural form seems to uniquely resonate with such individuals, allowing them to anchor their self-conceptions in inner urges rather than in tumultuous institutions in which they generally lack status, opening up the subculture as a conduit through which to better recognize and pursue the “real self.”

While the classic functionalist literature defines subcultures as “rebellion” adaptations to social problems, my research finds that they are more akin to “innovation” responses, which occur when individuals internalize society’s cultural goals but reject the legitimate means for achieving them. Those in my study were profoundly concerned with becoming individuals, but they could not—or chose not—to follow typical pathways for achieving that ideal. As opposed to attempting to satisfy the ideal of authentic selfhood by cultivating important statuses and fulfilling duties within established institutional frameworks, punks did so by nurturing their inner desires, which manifested in making commitments to the subculture’s ideology and by establishing innovative forms of cultural production.

In relation to neo-marxian theory, my research confirms that punks do indeed contest dominant ideological codes, entering into subculture as a means of facilitating a project of social resistance. However, resistance alone did not account for why subjects identified as punk. Moreover, their resistance was not immediately related to goals of recreating waning working
class communities\(^6\) or upending existing class relations. Rather, punks challenged dominant ideology in order to subjectively achieve authenticity. By resisting and undoing society’s influence on them, punks claimed to develop their inner essences—behavior that supports Turner’s contention that those who cannot recognize their real selves by pursuing institutionalized goals, who constitute a rapidly growing demographic, are coming to do so by engaging in acts of volition. Similarly, while punks used the subculture as a forum for exploring alternate ideas, their exploration was not directly tied to class-based subversion. Instead, they questioned hegemonic values in order to further the process of locating their inner selves and clarifying their worldviews. While social justice is important for many of them, punks prioritize the pursuit of personal truth over it. Hence, while resistance reflects subcultural participation, it does constitute or account for it.

Most importantly, however, my work moves beyond an analysis of how subculturalists construct authentic identities, instead exploring how the broader cultural goal for authentic selfhood, catalyzed in many ways by the growing inability of people to implant their self-conceptions in institutional frameworks, orients subcultural participation. I find that what has ensued from the culture industry’s appropriation of punk style is an attempt by some young punks to come together in order to share in a project of self-realization in which authenticity (as punk and as a human-being) is developed through commitment to three ideological tenants: rejection, self-actualization and reflexivity. I find that punk identity is subjectively constituted by the integrity of one’s search for and practice of their inner essence. Thus, I link punk subculture up to a broader societal trend in a way that prior studies have neglected to do. This

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\(^6\) To the credit of neo-marxian theory, however, I should note that most study participants, while certainly not affluent relative to many of their peers, for the most part did not come from the working class communities about which CCCS scholars researched. As a result, one should not expect that they would be interested in reconstituting waning working class communities.
accords with theoretical scholarship advanced by microsociologists such as Fine and Kleinman, who have problematized the subculture/dominant culture divide assumed by both the functionalist and neo-Marxian traditions. While their scholarship suggests that individuals fluidly move between different social milieus rather than remaining entrenched in solitary ones, my findings highlight the cultural continuities that exist among these ostensibly disparate worlds. Specifically, I show that punk subculture reproduces culturally dominant tendencies in a heightened and distorted form. My work also modifies much of the postmodern theorizing on subculture. Unlike post-subculture studies scholars, I find that punk countermands much of the reflexivity, saturation and uncertainty of the postmodern condition. It is not, as they would likely suggest, a symptom of it.
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APPENDIX A: TABLE OF PARTICIPANTS

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<th>Name</th>
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APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1) Tell me about yourself when you were younger, before you got involved with punk rock.
   a. What role did religion play in your life while growing up? Did you embrace it or take issue with it?
   b. What about family life? Was it relatively facile or more tumultuous?
   c. What were your experiences in middle and high school like?
   d. In general, do you feel that anything distinguished you from your peers, or were you more or less on the same page with them?

2) Tell me about how your first found out about punk.
   a. When and how did you first begin to identify as punk?
   b. Did the people, music, ideology, fashion resonate with you in a way that other music, etc. did not? Why do you think that this was so?
   c. In general, why do you think you were drawn into punk as opposed to a different group of people or activities?
   d. How has punk affected your life overall? In other words, could you speak to how your life or sense of self would be different if you had not gotten involved in punk?

3) Now that you are a little bit older, does punk still mean the same thing that it used to for you?
   a. How has your involvement with punk changed as you’ve grown older?
   b. Do other obligations—such as work, family, etc.—ever interfere with your commitment to punk? If so, how, and how do you deal with it?

4) What does being punk mean to you?
   a. What sorts of ideas and beliefs do you associate with punk?
   b. Is there a tension between individuality and conformity in punk? If so, tell me about it.
   c. Do you consider punk to be a social movement in certain ways? In other words, can people who come together as punks affect the world in a positive or transformative way?
   d. How have radio, major record labels, and other forms of mass-culture affected punk?

5) What are your views on the style/fashion that is associated with punk?
   a. Are music and shows an integral part of the culture?
   b. What special qualities do the music and shows possess that draw you to them. In other words, what is the experience of going to a punk show like? What do you derive from it?

6) Do you think that there are different levels of commitment to punk, or that people participate in different degrees? If so, tell me about it.
   a. Do you feel like people with less of a commitment detract from the community in any way? If so, how?
7) Many of the people I talk with associate resistance of some sort with punk—generally against structures of domination. If relevant for you, tell me about some instances in which you have resisted figures of power or authority
   a. What exactly were you resisting?
   b. Why did you resist them?
   c. How did you resistance make you feel?
   d. What was the outcome of your resistance?
8) Are there any major things/problems that you view as being with the world today? While you could probably express a laundry list of problems, do you think that there are any general undercurrents that we should be attentive to—that you feel account for much of what undermines harmony/happiness in the world?
9) If there are any thoughts or comments that you would like to add that I’ve not specifically addressed—issues that you feel are important with respect to punk—please feel free to address them here.