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Using hip-hop as an empowerment tool for young adults : an exploratory study : a project based upon independent investigation

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study was developed to explore the role that hip-hop music plays

in the lives of young adults and empowerment. The researcher was interested in clinical

applications of hip-hop music to address high attrition rates of youth in traditional models

of therapy. Although there is much literature on the topic of hip-hop music, there is less

written about the role that hip-hop music plays in the development of an individual's

sense of self and empowerment. The latter was the focus of this study.

Twelve participants were interviewed in the Los Angeles area regarding their

experience of listening to and being fans of hip-hop music. All participants were over the

age of 18 and asked to reflect back on the role that hip-hop music had played at home,

with friends, and for them emotionally. They were then asked to discuss how they

currently use or could foresee using hip-hop music as an empowerment tool.

Major findings of the study include the use of hip-hop as a cathartic and

expressive medium, as a tool for anger management, as grounds for development of an

alter-ego, as a connection to peers in a youth culture and as a pedantic tool for learning

about the history of hip-hop as an empowerment tool for oppressed populations. Finally,

the study revealed the role that hip-hop music plays in empowering young adults around

matters of choice.

USING HIP-HOP AS AN EMPOWERMENT TOOL FOR YOUNG ADULTS:

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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CHAPER I

INTRODUCTION

"People treat Hip Hop like an isolated phenomenon. They don't treat it as a continuum, a history or legacy. And it really is. And like all mediums or movements, it came out of a need."

-Mos Def, rapper, actor, activist

The second half of the 20th century has witnessed groundbreaking action and development in bourgeoning social justice movements and hip-hop culture in America. Through artist's use of lyrics and words to critique oppression and inequality among disenfranchised groups, Hip-Hop has developed meaning. Hip-Hop has moved to the forefront in addressing equal rights and bringing attention to unequal practices between races, genders, and sexual identities. Today Hip-Hop is viewed as an art form and commercial endeavor across the U.S. and internationally. The term "hip-hop" encompasses the four original elements of graffiti: DJing, break dancing, and rapping, and also has created a hip-hop culture that has expanded to fashion, film and television, advertising, literature, and athletics. The sounds and lyrics of hip-hop have influenced human attitudes, behaviors and even actions towards one another. Social activism has inevitably influenced hip-hop culture as we know it today, and its power for political and social change has many genres. Still, there remains tremendous potential for hip-hop to grow as a constructive force for social change.

The phenomenon of rap music is frequently presented by media and government officials as a violent and nefarious art form. The negative reputation is the result of an unequal representation of the gangster rap genre in mainstream media, where many pacifistic and highly spiritual forms of the music are ignored (Nelson, 1998). In addition, major recording labels are responsible for channeling the flow of rap genres to listeners, choosing to present mostly commercialized gangster rap created by artists who have often never lived in a ghetto (Perry, 2004). Due to the heavy presence of gangster rap in American culture, the potentially positive role of rap music has been harder for members of the social services communities to understand.

Although there is much literature on hip-hop music and culture (Chang, 2005; Perry, 2004; Potter, 1995; Rose, 1994), there appears to be almost no literature available about the role of hip-hop music and empowerment, specifically youth and young adult empowerment. The lack of literature may reflect the lack of understanding of the benefits of hip-hop music in our culture. New therapies using hip-hop as an empowerment tool for youth seem to be appearing in mental health agencies in major cities like New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles, despite the lack of academic research and literature on the topic of youth empowerment surrounding hip-hop music.

There are many challenges facing today's youth. There also are staggering injustices and barriers to healthy development that impact young lives every day. Low-income black and Latino youth face the highest level of victimization in schools and communities; and hip-hop is particularly relevant to this demographic who may grow up with parents playing hip-hop music. Often their parents are of the hip-hop generation and

many identify with the rappers who themselves come from similar communities and face similar struggles.

The goal of this thesis is to examine how hip-hop influences social change and the ways in which hip-hop can reinforce negativity as well as be a frame for rehabilitation. Instead of fighting against hip-hop, many scholars and youth advocates suggest using it as a segue for formulating change. Don Elligan (2004) author of Rap Therapy: A Practical Guide for Communicating with Youth and Young Adults through Rap Music, reasoned:

> "interventions with youth must acknowledge the prevalence and influence of trauma, peer pressure, and drugs on the development of youth and young adults. Interestingly, these phenomena are also common themes discussed in music listened to by youth" (p. 11).

Three and a half decades of statistics show that these threats to young lives persist (Snyder and Sickmund, 2009); and that hip-hop provides a multitude of opportunities to generate creative and culturally relevant solutions to shaping the lives of youth.

In an effort to understand the functionality of hip-hop music among young adults, this qualitative study examined the various roles, both literal and figuratively, that hip-hop music played and continues to play in shaping the lives of the sample population used in this study.

Research for this study was conducted in Los Angeles California, the birthplace of west coast rap and hip-hop. Four different racial groups are represented in the study population: African American, Caucasian, Asian, and Latino. Further demographics are discussed in detail in Chapter III, along with procedures of how the study was conducted.

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Depending on the study's findings, implications for the use of hip-hop music in clinical social work practice are discussed in the final (discussion) chapter. These implications include an expansion of therapy modalities to include hip-hop and empowerment work in individual and group settings (teen clinics) with youth and young adults. The possible use of hip-hop as an empowerment tool would assist youth and young adults in feeling heard and met at their level, and therapists with rapport building, during the sometimes overwhelming feeling of initial and continuing therapy sessions. The inclusion of hip hop as an empowerment tool would also suggest that the social work field is open to understanding subcultures, particularly where they represent youth and young adults.

CHAPER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hip-Hop, which began as a countercultural movement by low-income urban youths, has over the past three decades become a leading force in popular culture and a multi-billion dollar-a-year industry supporting a select number of celebrity rappers, including many behind-the-scenes corporate executives (Watson, 2004). The mainstreaming of Hip-Hop has resulted in an increased accessibility to, and influence on young people. Unfortunately, this commercialization also has resulted in the manipulation of messages and images for profit. Popular songs and videos, particularly since the late 1990's, have relied on misogyny, materialism, and hyper-masculinity to gain radio play and sell albums (Perry, 2004). Hip-Hop has received considerable criticism because of these messages and their young target age group (Sullivan, 2003). However, numerous organizations and individuals are beginning to recognize the ways in which hip-hop's artistic nature and cultural relevancy also make it a viable tool for positive youth development endeavors in educational and rehabilitative environments (Clay 2007). This view explores hip-hop, primarily rap music, as an influential element of popular culture with the potential to impact destructive habits and foster positive change amongst today's young people.

Who listens to Rap/Hip-Hop?

Hip-Hop music was once a challenge to find, and a treasure to discover, in select record stores or at independent street shops. Today it is readily available through nationwide retailers and in digital music catalogs. Many American youth across racial groups report frequent exposure to Hip-Hop music (Sullivan, 2003). *The Black Youth Project* (Cohen, 2005) a study on African American youth, found that 58% of black youth and 45% of Hispanic youth said they listened to rap music every day, compared to 23% of white youth. Twenty-five percent of black youth also reported watching rap music videos and programming daily on television compared to 18% of Hispanic youth and 5% of white youth. Despite these relatively low percentages for white youth, 19% of them reported never listening to rap music; and according to the Simmons Lathan Media Group, 80% of hip-hop consumers are white (Cohen, 2005). Some rap music continues to target those who suffer the intertwined injustices of racism and poverty. Studies have found that a segment of black listeners enjoy this music as a reflection of their own lived experiences (Krohn & Suazo, 1995). White youth may be intrigued for different reasons. Sullivan's (2003) study of adolescent attitudes about rap by race concluded that many white rap fans listened as a risk-free way to experiment with an idea of black culture. She suggests that "(r)ap may allow white adolescents to satisfy their curiosities without ever having face-to-face contact or interpersonal relationships with any African Americans" (p.617). Bakari Kitwana (2005), author of "Why White Kids Love Hip-Hop," suggests numerous reasons for what he calls, "the rise of white youth obsession with hip-hop," including a desire to ally themselves with a political movement, insecurities about their own white culture, and a genuine love for the art form, which is increasingly marketed

towards them (p.36). While race may significantly impact young people's motivation for listening to rap, a review of the available literature concludes that exposure has important effects on youth of all races and on young women as well as young men. Rap music is pervasive in American society and accessible to youth of all ages; however, older listeners may be more impacted by some of the lyrics' messages (Connor & Mahiri, 2003; Barongan & Hall, 1995). Pamela D. Hall (1995) examined differences by age in recall and recognition of four different categories of rap defined for the purpose of her study –"political," "hip-hop," "mainstream," and "gangster." Her study concluded that mainstream rap was the easiest for all youth to understand, while gangster rap was better comprehended by the older group (ages 10-12) than the younger (ages 7-9). Mainstream rap is also the most accessible subgenre, frequently played on radio and shown on television, through music videos.

Hip-Hop's Impact on Youth Concepts of Violence and Aggression

Gangsta rap's popularization in the early 1990s caused the entire hip-hop music genre to come under fire by popular media, certain white politicians, and some older black activists (Sullivan, 2003). They focused on elements of misogyny, materialism, and glorification of violence, including violence directed at police and at White America (figured as an oppressive institution) (p. 612). Sickmund & Snyder (2006) explain that young people continue to be exposed to numerous forms of violence, and many critics still argue that hip-hop only contributes to this victimization, and the "most closely related factor was the presence of friends or family members in gangs"(p.22). A 2004

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survey estimated a total of 24,000 youth gangs with 760,000 members. Youth with close

connections to gangs were "at least 3 times more likely to report having engaged in

vandalism, a major theft, a serious assault, carrying a handgun, and selling drugs. They

also were about 3 times more likely to use hard drugs and to run away from home" (p.

72) (Sickmund & Snyder, 2006).

Protective buffers included involvement in school or work. Youth who lack these

connections are at a greater risk for engaging in gangs and other dangerous activities. In

the year 2000, half a million young people dropped out of school, with dropout rates for

Latino and black youth more than double those of their white and Asian peers (Sickmund

& Snyder, 2006).

With many youth already at-risk for victimization, some critics of violent rap

allege that its lyrical content is an additional assault. Such criticisms are often based on

the lyrical content of many rap albums. Charis E. Kubrin (2005) examined the lyrics to

over 400 songs from platinum selling rap albums released between 1992 and 2000,

identifying trends in lyrical content, and found that 65% referenced a willingness to fight

or use violence and 35% endorsed concepts of retaliation. Critics argue that, in addition

to reinforcing negative attitudes, youth may seek to emulate the violent behavior about

which these rappers rhyme (Hansen, 1995).

A correlation has been found between exposures to various forms of violent

media and an increase in youth and adult violent behavior (Gatto, Jackson & Johnson

1995). It is understandable then, that exposure to violent hip-hop would show this same

correlation. Johnson, Jackson, and Gatto's pioneering study divided a group of young

African American males into three groups, exposing one to violent rap music videos,

another to nonviolent rap music videos, and a third group to no music videos (controls). Researchers gave each group two vignettes, the first of which detailed the story of a man who discovered that his girlfriend had kissed another man and responded violently to her and then to the other man as well. The researchers assessed participant responses to this vignette and found that "subjects in the violent exposure conditions expressed greater acceptance of the use of violence" (p. 27). This group also exhibited higher probability to engage in violence and expressed a greater acceptance of the use of violence toward the woman in the vignette. Studies by Hansen (1995) have found similar correlations between exposure to violent music videos and youth aggression. These studies assessed participants' reactions directly or soon after exposure to the material, therefore it is unclear whether they implicate long-term negative effects.

Additional studies have determined that rap music may have a more deleterious effect on adolescent behavior than other musical genres, negatively impacting violent attitudes and behavior as well as other aspects of youth's lifestyles. Davies, DiClemente, Harrington, Peterson & Wingood (2007) interviewed and surveyed 522 African American adolescent females. They found that adolescents with greater exposure to sexual stereotypes in rap music videos were more likely to "engage in binge drinking, test positive for marijuana, have multiple sexual partners, and have a negative body image" (p. 1158). In another study using a test group of 1000+ majority non-white community college students in California, it was determined that adolescents who listened to rap music were more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol and to engage in aggressive behavior than were those who listened to other genres of music (Chen, 2006). It is unclear from these studies, however, if the music motivated these actions or if youth already engaging

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in this behavior were then attracted to the genre. Chen (2006) reflects that, in the latter

case, the content of such rap music may not cause but does reinforce youth's positive

attitudes towards this destructive behavior.

Other scholars have attempted to contextualize the violence in hip-hop and youth

involvement by considering the socio-historical factors that impact the genre and

affiliated urban black culture (Kubrin, 2005). This approach considers what Kubrin calls

"the street code," which is an alternative understanding of cultural rules developed by

young African-American males in low-income urban communities. It is a response to

popular media representations of power and to the experience of institutional and

community violence and stress. Kubrin explains:

> …[T]he the extreme, concentrated disadvantage and isolation of black inner-city
> communities coupled with the quantity and potency of drugs and availability of
> guns have created a situation unparalleled in American history…[G]iven the bleak
> conditions, black youth in disadvantaged communities have created a local social
> order complete with its own code and authenticity (p.363).

Kubrin (2005) suggests that code includes a respect for violence and being violent – most

often with a gun – to gain respect, build reputation and avenge wrongs committed against

one or one's friends or gang. It also includes an affinity for material wealth, sexual

promiscuity and dominance as behavior that builds social status. While this code is

certainly not descriptive of the behaviors or values of all inner-city black males, it

provides a useful framework for understanding some of the reasons and rationale for the

existence of gangsta rap and its black (as opposed to the also existent white) fan base.

Kubrin (2005) asserts that rap music's advocacy of the above values is more than

just a r*eflection* of the street code; to vocalize this code is to recognize, make sense of,

and validate an alternative social order and the lifestyle and people it represents. She writes,"The lyrics…provide sometimes graphically detailed instructions for how to interpret violent, degrading conduct and in doing so create possibilities for social identity in relation to violence" (p.365). The music becomes a medium for urban adolescents and young adults to articulate and sometimes embrace experiences with violence. In doing so, gangsta rap cannot be said to cause aggression; however, it may justify and reinforce it, affirming violent masculinities.

This contextualized understanding of gangsta rap provides a more nuanced perspective of its oft-lambasted weaknesses. In critiquing violent hip-hop, one must be careful to not further stigmatize or scapegoat urban black youth (Conner & Mahiri, 2003). A non-biased critique of gangsta rap and rap in general allows for the rappers' testimonies to be heard, and the issues they confront in their music to be taken seriously. As Richardson and Scott (2002) eloquently write, the "verbalizations of violence calls attention to structural and cultural injustices of the larger social system in America… Amidst the despair, gangsta rap breathes life into the inequities substantiated in statistical data and perpetrated against Black urban youth" (p. 188).

It is important to acknowledge and confront the avoidance tactic of scapegoating hip-hop, and place equal, if not greater, responsibility on America's institutional practices and a national culture of violence. Misogyny in the entertainment industry is often explained by the quick phrase, "sex sells," and glorification of violence can be similarly understood as existing on a supply and demand basis. Hip-Hop artists have capitalized on America's fascination with violence (perhaps black male violence especially).

Individuals and organizations that wish to see hip-hop become less violent must first confront this broader problem (Richardson & Scott, 2002 & Sullivan, 2005).

Hip-Hop's Effects on Youth Concepts of Gender and Sexuality

Hip-Hop has the potential to denounce violence, but often reinforces it. Similarly, it has the ability to empower women, but often perpetuates their degradation. Gender and sexuality politics are often the basis of criticism against hip-hop, due to the rampant misogyny in many songs and videos (Taylor & Taylor, 2004). When Kubrin (2005) coded 400 + rap songs to identify their elements of street code ideology, 22% reflected objectification of women. Although this is the lowest percentage of all street code elements analyzed, the figure still represents almost one in four rap songs, and it is arguable that with the increased focus on materialism in 21st century rap, the prevalence of women-as-commodity has only increased (Kubrin, 2005).

In a 2007 article in *Ebony* magazine titled "Sex, Violence, Disrespect: What Hip-Hop Has Done to Black Women", Dr. Johnetta Betsch Cole, president of Bennett College for Women and president Emerita of Spelman, two historically black colleges, admits that hip-hop is connected to patriarchal values of American culture but still holds it responsible for its rampant degradation of black women. Dr. Cole (2007) argues:

> The lyrics and the images [in hip-hop] – and attitudes that undergird them – are potentially extremely harmful to Black girls and women in a culture that is already negative about our humanity, our sexuality and our overall worth. They are harmful to Black boys and men because they encourage misogynistic attitudes and behaviors, and misogyny – woman hating – is not in the interest of men no less than women (p.94).

Cole (2007) theorizes that black men, oppressed by overarching American institutions, direct anger, hostility, and a need for control at black girls and women. Cole expresses

concern for the future of black relationships and black families, if the destructive gender discourse of "gangsta" rap and mainstream rap prevails. She recommends that black people initiate reform by "[finding] ways to counter the low self-esteem that plagues many young people to the point where they demean themselves with words and images that are as powerful as shackles, whips and nooses" (Cole, 2007, p. 96).

Other black female scholars express similar concern for the sexism in hip-hop transferring to unhealthy relationships between black men and women. Joan Morgan, a self-identified "hip-hop feminist" draws the comparison between hip-hop's degradation of women and an abusive relationship between a black man and woman, where hip-hop is the abuser of the black woman, who continues trying to love it/him, as a part of her community. Morgan (1995) explains that she remains involved in hip-hop partially because "it takes us straight to the battlefield" (p. 152) of understanding black men's sexism, as well as their anger and pain. Morgan (1995) asserts that "the seemingly impenetrable wall of sexism and machismo in rap music is really the mask worn both to hide and to express the pain…Hip-hop is the only forum in which young black men, no matter how surreptitiously, are allowed to express their pain at all" (p. 154). Morgan emphasizes that hip-hop, in its conflicted and abusive state creates an opportunity to articulate this hurt, gain an understanding of it, and then begin to heal. She adds that it is not only black men who need to reevaluate themselves and their role in oppressing women. Women, too, she declares, "need a space to lovingly address our failing self-esteem, the ways we sexualize and objectify ourselves, our confusion about sex and love, and the unhealthy, unloving, un-sisterly ways we treat each other" (p. 156).

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Emerson (2002) expresses this view as well, stating that young people's everyday lives and identity development are impacted by pop culture, negatively as well as positively. She asserts that "young Black women use popular culture to negotiate social existence and attempt to express independence, self-reliance, and agency" (p. 115). In a 1998 study of fifty-six rap and R&B music videos, Emerson analyzed the empowering, degrading, and ambivalent representations of black women. She concluded that the videos most frequently emphasized black women's bodies, represented black women as one dimensional, and often filmed the female performers alongside male "sponsors" whose assumed legitimacy validated the women. However, Emerson (2002) also notes a number of positive music video portrayals of women, which included celebration of blackness, representations of women as independent and vocal, and examples of collaboration, unity, and healthy familial relations between black woman and men. Emerson found a frequent "juxtaposition of sexuality, assertiveness, and independence in the videos" (p.130). This suggests that hip-hop artists are in fact multidimensional and do not need to isolate their minds or their bodies exclusively, but can express both simultaneously.

Hip-Hop music contains problematic and challenging messages in relation to gender, and while this raises concern by many, others have recognized the genre's potential as a medium through which to tackle difficult conversations. Music videos, for example, can serve as a valuable reference point to engage youth in discussion of race, gender, and sexual stereotypes. Stephens and Few (2007) researched young African American adolescents' ideas about African American women's sexuality through an examination of eight sexual images – "the Diva, Gold Digger, Freak, Dyke, Gangster

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Bitch, Sister Savior, Earth Mother, and Baby Mama" (p.260). Stephens and Few (2007) suggest that these terms are relevant within hip-hop linguistics and culture, and the images connote related ideologies about various identities. For this reason, the researchers utilized them to "[identify]", the meanings and values African American youth give to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, beauty, and interpersonal relationships in the context of sexuality" (p.254).

The study theorized that frequent exposure to hip-hop music and images of this nature directly impacted young African American's development and behaviors. The results varied by gender; both young boys and girls viewed lighter skin (portrayed more frequently and positively in music videos and mainstream media) to be more attractive (Stephens and Few, 2007). Girls did not acknowledge a personal preference for lighter skin, but commented that "boys and men often prefer it" (p.255). Similarly, some girls expressed an appreciation for non westernized hair styles such as those worn by artists in the "Earth Mother" category; however, they clarified that they would not adopt the style as their own because boys did not like it. Girls also assumed that the boys were sexually attracted to the "Freak" and "Diva" images and felt pressured to be like those characters if they wanted attention from boys (Stephens and Few, 2007).

In fact, the majority of boys interviewed by Stephens and Few (2007) found the Diva image the most attractive. They note that this image is "projected as having westernized features: long, straight hair, slim nose, slender body, and lighter skin. These features were all cited by the boys as attractive" (p. 256). Boys also responded positively to more curvaceous body types, and tended to fragment women's body parts, when discussing what they found attractive. Both of these findings reflect trends in hip-hop

media: hip-hop magazines glorify (as well as objectify) curvaceous bodies and many hip-hop videos film in ways which fragment these bodies (Stephens and Few, 2007).

While this study reveals some damaging influences of hip-hop media on young African-American youth's concepts of beauty, research also demonstrates that hip-hop can be a valuable tool to engage youth in important dialogue about body image and sexuality. As a culturally relevant medium, it allowed them to discuss difficult topics more accessibly.

Adolescent Identity Formation

Though this thesis and my research involves young adults 18-28, it is imperative to address adolescent identity formation theory and how it plays a crucial role in the development of the young adults psyche.

There is a wealth of literature available on adolescent identity development (Cole, Cole & Lightfoot, 2005; Cote 1996; Erickson, 1959; Kroger, 1996). However, this review of the literature will offer a limited survey of themes and also offer a view of the unique challenges of development that minority youth face. In addition, the review will briefly look at male versus female identity development. While no literature can be objective enough to encompass the very subjective experience of identity formation, the idea holds true throughout the literature surveyed that identity formation is a fluid process, dependant on several factors.

Erik Erikson (1959) establishes the traditional theory of identity formation as "a process located in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture, a process which establishes, in fact, the identity of those two identities" (p. 48). In his theory on identity formation, the self is aligned with culture and not independent of

its influence. Therefore, an adolescent receives messages from his/her external

environment that influence their perception of self.

Kroger (1996) explores the theory of adolescence that holds its uniqueness to be

the result of a second separation-individuation phase where an adolescent makes a shift

from family of origin ties to peer group ties characterized by "emotional states similar

merger…and constant frenetic activity to fill the sense of internal object loss… the

adolescent seeks solace from peers while relinquishing intrapsychic object ties" (.p. 55).

In this multidimensional analysis of identity analysis of identity, the sociologist

James E. Cote (1996) studies the various psychological and sociological theories of

adolescent identity formation. He writes about the challenge of developing a cohesive

identity in western cultures when roles and statuses are used less often to conceptualize

'self' then are behavior and presentation. He highlights the challenge when he says:

> Adolescence in Western cultures has been unprecedented in terms of how loosely
> it is structured and how much the individual is given the task of identity
> construction or the puzzle of identity discovery (p. 144).

Cote acknowledges the limitations of psychology (more versed in the sociological

discipline). Like Erikson (1959) he addresses identity formation as the process of

identity establishment taking place within an individual, but dependent on external

factors, "Although identity is seen to be subjectively constructed by each individual, this

is mainly in reference to external circumstances provided by day-to-day interactions,

cultural institutions, and social structures" (p. 132).

Cultural institutions that help to construct identity in the mass media have shown

repeatedly to hold influence over identity formation of youth. There are many theories

about why popular culture holds such gravity for adolescents in their search for selfhood. Through mass media, the archetypes of rap music (mostly male) have been familiarized and made iconic by youth, thus contributing to the development of thousands of youth identities. George (1998) cites music television's role in the proliferation of rap music, "by giving hip-hop music, dances, and gear a regularly scheduled national platform, the broadcast [of the show *Yo Mtv Raps*!] was integral to inculcating hip-hop's distinctly urban culture into the rest of the country" (p. 101). George goes on to explain how the media broadcast of hip-hop culture expanded the culture itself by giving youth a chance to latch on to new styles displayed by their favorite artists.

Though George (1998) addresses themes of male identity and rap music, Cote speaks specifically to western gender identity development and the tendency for males and females to seek roles that are socially defined for them. Cote suggests that females tend to be identified by their relationships in the private, personal sphere whereas males "would define themselves, and be defined, according to their relationships in the public sphere" (p. 155). Rap music groups and their corresponding broadcasts would provide one such example of a public sphere dominated by men. Rarely does the creation of rap music exist privately.

<div align="center">Hip-Hop's Effects on Positive Youth Identity Development</div>

There are studies that have examined ways in which hip-hop facilitates youth identity development and positive inspiration and affirmation. Sullivan (2003) determined that many black adolescents who listened to hip-hop were likely to consider the music "life affirming," "truthful" and able to "[teach] them something about life" (p. 615). Hip-hop culture and rap music are powerful mediums for resistance for

marginalized youths because they represent experiences that are often ignored by dominant culture (Sullivan, 2003).

Clay (2006) explains that youth of color in the post civil rights era are still experiencing racial injustice, and are able to use hip-hop as a tool for political protest and social justice activism. Clay's study (2006) observed and interviewed youth of color in two nonprofit organizations and identified two major ways in which they incorporated hip-hop into their lives: 1) They used it as an organizing tool for social justice campaigns and awareness raising work in their school communities and 2) They used hip-hop to develop and validate their own identities as activists of color. Adolescents named rappers as role models for their activism, recited lyrics to songs they had used to educate their peers on social injustice, and shared experiences of writing their own raps to express struggles they had undergone (Clay, 2006).

Clay (2006) concluded that youth could "subvert the commercialization and popularity of hip-hop music by using it to talk about…issues that affect their everyday lives" (p. 117). Similarly, Taylor and Taylor (2004) found that youth were drawn to the familiarity of rap lyrics' subject matter, and its "keeping it real" mantra. Hip-hop's narration of stories otherwise untold, and its rebellious nature assists youth's own desire to rebel from authority and an adult society that often marginalizes them (Taylor & Taylor, 2004).

Additionally hip-hop, as a representative and narrative media, functions as a catalyst for identity formation (Clay, 2006). Clay cited previous studies' findings that popular culture is "an important place for individuals to create meaning, identify and find community" (p. 105), adding that this is "particularly true of teenagers [of the] 'MTV

generation" (p. 106). This identity formation has become an integral part of the hip-hop social movement. Previous social movements have focused on single issues; however, the hip-hop social movement is multifaceted and includes "both individual and collective identity formation and transformation" (Clay, 2006; p.109). Richardson & Scott (2002) similarly conclude:

> The culture of hip-hop has become the nexus from which youth (particularly lower income Black youngsters) can create their values, define their selfhood, and express their heightened consciousness of violence and its implications against a social backdrop that has historically devalued their color and contributions (p. 185).

As a generation facing multiple complex challenges, including exposure to violence, pervasive sexism, racism, and poverty, alongside underfunded and inaccessible educational and rehabilitation opportunities, young people are in great need of stronger and more abundant support and guidance. It is imperative that educators and service providers examine new paths to meet the pressing needs of this demographic. Hip-Hop, a double-edged sword of positive and negative influence in young people's lives, must be further formulated into a constructive tool for social and political change and youth empowerment.

Conclusion

The existing literature on hip-hop youth culture and rap music is rich and varied. There are many different resources representing diverse opinions about the position of rap music in American youth culture. Amongst these resources there is discussion of hip-hop's importance to youth identity development. However, it appears that there is less literature documenting first person experience. As Sullivan (2003) discovered, "while

the culture at large, upheld by politicians discuss rap's corruption of youth, few people speak directly to rap fans asking them what they feel about rap and how important it is in their lives" (p.609). Sullivan identifies a gap that this study will begin by asking young adults to speak about their relationship to hip-hop, including the topic of empowerment. In addition, there is more literature available pertaining to the history of rap music and hip-hop culture than there is to the present sociological impact of its culture amongst youth. As a music genre that lends itself to spontaneity, hip-hop can be difficult to qualify academically. Therefore, the first person narrative becomes increasingly important.

Though limited literature exists on the implications of rap music for clinical social work practice, the results from the few studies identified are promising and suggest a trend toward more research on this topic. Chapter III describes the methodology used in this particular study which was designed to offer more research on the role of hip-hop as an empowerment tool and its implications for social work practice.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative, exploratory study investigated the use of hip-hop as a self empowerment tool for young adults. The study examined the assumptions that rap music and its umbrella of hip-hop culture play a role in self empowerment of young adults who both listen and value hip-hop music. The role of hip-hop music as a self empowerment tool is a poorly studied phenomenon, especially regarding literature on hip-hop as a positive, useful teaching tool. This study made an additional assumption that if a connection between hip-hop and empowerment were discovered (meaning that the relationship between youth and hip-hop was not purely recreational) then there would surface potential need for the use of hip-hop as an empowerment tool in social work settings that serve youth and young adults.

Overview Sample

Twelve young adults between the ages of 18 and 28 participated in this study. Two of the participants were Latino, four were African-American, five were Caucasian and one was Asian-American. All participants were interviewed in Los Angeles, California. One participant was visiting from San Francisco, another was visiting from Atlanta and the rest of the participants were living in California at the time of the interview. Participants were recruited in a snowball sample; the first recruit being a friend of the researcher who DJ's in Los Angeles at local bars and clubs and has been a

fan of hip-hop music for many years. In order to begin the sampling process, approval was sought from the Human Subjects Review Board at Smith College School for Social Work (Appendix A). Upon receipt of approval, the researcher began initial recruiting. While the research began with ambitious sampling numbers, the reality of scheduling and finding eager participants was challenging. Many different young people expressed interest in participating in the study but given the realities of disparate schedules and responsibilities, time constraints exceeded the will of the participants. However, through the process of recruiting, the researcher was able to witness just how micro communication works in the hip-hop community. One participant led to the next and a rich, albeit small sample was collected.

The criteria for the sample were (1) young adults between the ages of 18 and 28 and (2) individuals who actively listened to hip-hop in excess of four hours on a daily basis at the time of the interview. As these criteria can be met by many young adults, the researcher requested that the participants be true fans of hip-hop and feel that it has affected their life, in some way, shape, or form.

Data Collection

All interviews were audio taped and transcribed by the researcher. To protect participants, the researcher adhered to review board guidelines and developed an informed consent (Appendix C) that required signatures of participants before beginning to collect data. Confidentiality was honored throughout the data collection and actual names were not recorded for participants, only codes.

The first interview conducted was a test pilot, allowing for an examination of the efficacy of the chosen questions (Appendix B). As a result of the pilot interview, future questions became more open-ended to allow subjects more "wiggle" room for narrative explanations. Results proved more useful when subjects felt they could follow a question prompted by the researcher. Initial questions were open ended such as "who do you look up to in the hip-hop industry?" and if needed, follow up questions like "can you remember your first hip/cd? And Who turned you on to hip-hop music?" were employed. Interviews were conducted in public places away from people in a quiet place such as a coffee shop or food court or (at the request of the participant) a central meeting apartment or house. It seemed that location was influenced by the participant's time limits, availability of suitable audio recording environments and confidentiality limitations (e.g,; a public place where participants could be heard). Four of the interviews took place on weekdays usually after work hours, and the other eight took place during the weekend. Most of the interviews lasted approx. 45 minutes. In the event that an interview exceeded the hour limit suggested on the consent to participate form, the researcher made sure to receive agreement from the participant that the interview could continue.

Before each meeting (often by e-mail or telephone), participants were briefed on the nature of the project and its potential implication for social work practice. This preface conversation gave respondents a chance to realize their time was part of a bigger picture, usually resulting in heightened and increased interest in the research.

Data Analysis

All of the audio taped interviews were methodically transcribed by the researcher. Data analysis was geared toward extracting important pieces of the interviews and

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organizing certain themes. During the course of the interviews, the researcher used note-taking on a lap top to identify themes as they arose. The data (including notes) were then organized into content and theme. The data were coded manually using data reduction and conclusion drawing studies (Anastas, 1999). When a theme appeared more than once, it was manually noted in the column of the interview and then added to a given theme's results to draw a conclusion. For example, when the majority of participants noted their conflictual feelings regarding rap vs. hip hop, seeing hip-hop artist delivering more empowering messages than rap artist, a generalization was made of the results to formulate a theme.

Throughout the data analysis it was helpful to seek out data that went against the grain of the researcher's hypothesis and to maintain a journal of feelings and thought processes. This was done to maintain objectivity and to minimize researcher bias. In Chapter IV the findings from this particular study are described in greater detail.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Description of Participants

The participants in this study were young men (5) and women (6) ranging in age from 18 to 28. Five of the participants were Caucasian, four were African-American, two were Latino (Puerto-rican American and Mexican American), and one was Asian-American. Five of the participants were employed, five were students and two of the participants were unemployed. All participants stated that they actively listened to hip hop more than five hours per day on a regular basis and were willing to articulate how Hip-hop has affected their lives.

Study Findings

The findings of this study support the assumption that hip-hop can be used as an empowerment tool for young adults from specific population groups. The population in this study represented a diverse group young people from various walks of life who listen daily to hip-hop music. All of the participants reported that hip-hop music was a connecting force in their lives and that hip-hop brought them closer to their emotional identities, their communities and the world. To the extent that identification with a culture creates an identity, hip-hop provided all of the participants in this study with a strong sense of identity and empowerment. Furthermore for this study population, hip-hop culture appeared to establish a foundation to develop/or master formal operational thinking (Piaget, 1952), a hallmark of identity and sense of belongingness.

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For a variety of reasons, hip-hop pluralistically unites young people and gives them a shared interest while also recognizing diverse cultural backgrounds. Henderson and Gladding (1998) reported that the "creative arts are a positive force in transcending cultures and advancing growth…While differences in cultural background emerge in creative expression and interpretation, unity, harmony and positive interactions dominate the process" (p.183). Hip-Hop's therapeutic values cross barriers of race, age, and background, as long as the clients relate to the music (Kobin & Tyson, 2006).

This study identified four major findings from the data gathered from interviews with each participant. The first significant finding emerged when each participant was asked about their relationship with hip hop music. All participants remembered their introduction to hip hop and recalled positive memories about when and where they were when they first heard certain songs or learned particular dances. Each of the participants seemed to marvel with their recollection and enjoyment of the first sounds of hip-hop, and how they have since embellished the feelings, joy and sense of freedom in listening to hip-hop.

The second finding was participants' connection to hip hop on a local level and the importance of hip hop culture to them. The third major finding was consensus on negative messages in hip-hop. Although most participants spoke about hip-hop music in a positive light, a few participants spoke about their conflicting feelings of being a "hip-hop lover" yet not appreciating all aspects of the music specific to degradation of women, guns and violence. The final two findings from this study were that of empowerment and tangible aspects that participants found teachable to youth and young adults.

The researcher considered study participants to be experts in their own lived experiences. As such, the interview questions sought to bring forth the experiences of young adults in a nurturing and resourceful environment. To more fully explore the participant's experiences as a young adult who actively listens to hip hop on a regular basis and was willing to discuss how the music impacted their lives, each participant was asked sub questions and allowed to expound on their responses. Interestingly, each participant reported on aspects of their history, demographics and community, which seemed to influence their current stance and comfort levels.

These research findings are presented as follows: Relationship with hip- hop music; local connection in hip-hop culture; negative messages; and hip-hop as an empowerment tool/aspect of learning that is teachable to youth.

Relationship with Hip-Hop Music

In conducting this study, it was important to inquire about participant's relationship to hip hop and how and when they were first introduced to the music. Most participants related to the cathartic energy in listening to hip hop, and it showed in their responses. Most participants were able to remember the exact date and artist that first introduced them to hip hop. Their words were not only colored with imagery, but all of the participants' faces lit up when answering this particular question. One participant in particular, actually stood up during the interview and stated:

> Gosh, wow you asked a question I could go on forever about. I have been a fan of hip hop since 1979 when Rappers Delight came out. It was really Grandmaster Flash's 1983 "The Message and New York, NY" that solidified my love for hip-hop, and showed me the potential for meaningful, deep lyrics. Later I turned this appreciation into a career through journalism, deejaying, and trafficking in vintage vinyl records.

Another participant stated:

> My relationship to hip hop music began when I was in kindergarten. I remember it like it was yesterday. My mother had left me in the car because she had forgotten something in the house. That's when I heard "the fat boys are back and you know they will never be wack." I was amazed. What was this new music that was so cool and used these weird words like "wack." From then on I was hooked.

> Since then hip hop has been more like a brother to me. We were born around the same time and it has never left my life even through my punk rock and techno stages. It has been loyal and loving to me like a brother in that regard as well. Never Jealous when I get the need to listen to other genres of music. However long my hiatus might be from hip hop it always patiently awaits my return.

> Imani Perry (2004) also suggests that hip-hop has an emotional impact and that

the rhetoric of hip-hop suggests a psychological self. The findings of this study support

Perry's suggestion. The majority of participants gained a framework through hip-hop

music for expressing their emotions. Hip-hop in many ways serves as a release for good

and bad emotions, for understanding lifestyles, and for fictitiously developing a

"brotherhood" with someone perceived to experience what you feel.

Local Connection in Hip-Hop Culture

Each of the participants expressed how important hip-hop culture was to them in

their adolescence (and currently) because of the group aspect of the culture. Listening to

the music gave all of the participants a sense of belonging to a group outside of their

families and outside of mainstream culture. Whether the participation was through an

intimate cipher (freestyle circle) or street recognition (clothing, style, dance) the

experience of belonging was universal. Although similar themes appeared in the

narratives, each participant had a unique way of explaining the value of connection in

belonging to this culture. One participant reported,

When you meet someone who is into hip-hop, it's like meeting someone from your same town. Someone who likes this really unusual food or knows about that small place that has really good food. It's like a common bond. People can validate your experience if they have a similar one.

Many participants shared the sentiment regarding the communal bond of hip hop, espousing hip-hop as a "youth culture thing." Another participant said "where else could you have a conversation with someone and know what they were going to say before they said it because you were so connected in that moment?"

For some participants, hip-hop was used as a means to connect to young people outside of their racial or ethnic group. One participant who grew up in a "less than ideal neighborhood" spoke about the value of the connecting force in hip-hop as saving them from joining a gang:

Gang activity divide people, there were race wars. You were in a gang based on your race. But hip-hop wasn't like that. As you got more and more into hip-hop you would be able to connect with someone rather than disconnect across the board, racially.

Another participant described what the majority of participants felt about the peer groups they had discovered through hip-hop:

We are all coming from different walks of life, but we come together on it. I don't think we'd be friends if hip-hop hadn't brought us together. There's this guy who told me about his favorite hip-hop song of all times which happened to be mine as well. After that we ended up hanging out and we are good friends till this day. It connects me to other people in the world: make a connection to people through music, because that's what music did to you; it connected you.

The hip-hop community described by participants is one that gave them a sense of group membership both during their adolescence and beyond, when they left home and found new communities of young people interested in the same type of music and lifestyle. For many young adults, launching past school and into adulthood is a

tumultuous time. The participants interviewed seemed to use the connection to hip-hop

culture, whether deliberately or inadvertently, as a group of peers on which they could

depend on for support and encouragement. Many even used hip-hop to converse with

one another absent of their own words.

Negative Messages

Although the vast majority of responses to the question of what hip-hop does

were positive and spoke to ways in which hip-hop empowers, some of the participants

commented that not all that they learned from hip-hop was positive or empowering. One

participant spoke of the "self deprecating elements in hip-hop, in particular gangster rap,

such as smoking a lot of weed and drinking a lot of malt liquor and chasing girls and

stealing cars and all that stuff." This participant went on to intellectualize this aspect as a

part of American culture and admitted that those features appeared in hard walk as well.

This individual concluded: "Because I felt the positives of hip-hop music, it was hard for

me to put the hex on negative aspects."

Another participant stated:

> God I remember a time saving all of my money when I was younger to get a hip-hop album that was huge at the time…it was snoop dog's doggie style album, if you didn't know about the album you just weren't cool. I remember showing my mom when I got home and she went ballistic. She snatched the CD from me, broke it in half and threw it in the trash; I didn't talk to her for days. Now that I look back and have my own children, I see why she did it. As popular a CD as it was at the time, the lyrics weren't something that a 5th grader should have been listening to.

Two participants spoke about the lyrics sometimes taking them in the wrong direction:

> I remember being thirteen and thinking it was ok to call women outside of their names, you know, bitches and hoes. I realize now it was to be cool and sound like the other kids. But this is where I want to clarify the different between hip-hop and gangster rap. I think a lot of the negative messages I received were from

gangster rap not hip hop. Rap is something you do, but hip-hop is something you live.

There's positive and negative to everything in life, including music. I can't talk badly about hip-hop without defending my answer. So yes there was a time when rap music influenced me negatively, I was disrespectful to my parents, vandalizing property and just being an all around prick. I was listening to a lot of rap at the time. But I was young and impressionable and should not have been listening to gangster rap. Now hip-hop would have been fine and probably would have taught me some things. There's a big difference between the two.

Hip-hop as an Empowerment Tool:
Aspects of hip-hop that are teachable to youth

The main purpose of this study was to explore the role of hip-hop music as an empowerment tool for young adults. As the interviews were collected from young people from 18-28 to provide a retrospective sample, the interview template included the questions: "Do you find hip-hop empowering?" and sub-question "what aspects are teachable to youth?" The purpose of these questions was to gain insight into how hip-hop can be empowering and how it can be used for working with youth. All of the respondents in this study said that hip-hop music empowers them on a daily basis and half of the respondents said that they work with youth on some level; and all of these respondents have used hip-hop to connect with youth on some level. The findings suggest that hip-hop remains an influential instrument over the life span and can serve as a genre for communication. If most of the participants saw hip-hop as a useful tool in their work with youth, could this reveal how important hip-hop mentorship had been to them? The results suggest that hip-hop music can be used to empower and as an educational tool unmatched by any of the elements of a traditional curriculum. Half of the participants in this study who have worked with youth stated that they used hip-hop at some point to teach about self-esteem, bridging cultural barriers, building mastery,

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learning traditional curriculum in a non-traditional way and strengthening group

dynamics. Some participants even spoke of using hip-hop as a means to teach word

meanings and various aspects of history.

Although this study was most concerned with the implications of hip-hop in

therapy, other pedantic uses of hip-hop were discussed. One participant talked about the

value of sharing their hip-hop culture with recent immigrants from Puerto-Rico:

> I've worked with youth and used hip-hop as an empowerment and teaching tool.
> I notice hip-hop has given youth freedom to be themselves. We would rap back
> and fourth about the same thing in different languages. They speak Spanish and
> I'm speaking English, but we are rapping about being people of color. The kid
> who was raping in Spanish was rapping about being an immigrant in America,
> and so was I. Hip-hop is universal.

This particular participant found a structure in hip-hop for his conversations with youth;

whereas left to traditional means of language, they would have been limited in their

ability to make a connection. Another participant spoke to this connection as well:

> Fresh out of college I would participate in an ethnic studies conference. I taught a
> hip-hop and spoken word workshop to teach youth how very strong that tool is.
> You can be disenfranchised and not feel very connected with the world. They're
> cutting off so many programs…if they take away the library and sports, they still
> have their voice. I teach youth about the importance of spoken word and free
> styling…there's not a big balance in the mainstream of positive message rap and
> gangster rap.

When other participants were asked if they found hip-hop empowering they answered:

> I do find that hip-hop can be quite empowering for me. Hip-hop can reflect a
> sense of intensity, passion, and soul, which can give youth and young adults very
> empowering feelings. Hip-hop also can be an emotional release of joy and
> meaning.

> Yes I find hip-hop empowering because it builds confidence. Hip-hop has a kind
> of swagger that you could only carry with confidence and self-assurance. I think
> it's influential to kids' self esteem and self love.

Yes, I do find hip hop empowering. I can't tell you how many young minorities would be dead or in jail if it weren't for hip hop. It shows them that thoughts and words carry real power. It shows them that they can improve their situation through music and spoken word.

Yes, I find hip-hop music empowering in the sense that certain artists are bringing up issues of social justice and things that touch my heart and soul. I feel empowered by hip-hop voices speaking out against injustice, or just rapping about positive beauty and experiences. Hip-hop is also a vehicle for expression, poetry and creativity and builds a community of listeners and like-minded people.

The discussion chapter that follows focuses on the implications of the finding for

social work practice. The collected data from interviews is translated into concrete

clinical applications, adding professional relevance to the words and experience of the

twelve participants in this study.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This section begins with a discussion of the noteworthy findings of the study and
their relationship to the literature from the Chapter II. Next, this chapter explores
implications for social work practice based on the findings of the study, after which limits
of the study are identified. The chapter ends with suggestions for further research in the
area of hip-hop music and empowerment.

This study documented personal narratives of hip-hop music and empowerment
that may represent a much larger section of the young adult population than is found in
existing literature. While much literature explores themes of violence and the social
location of youth in our culture, the participants in this study had little to say about
violence in hip hop other than to dismiss it, saying that hip-hop is a misunderstood
movement and not the same as gangster rap. The participants more often identified
positive themes of pride and self-esteem and more surprisingly, fun in their hip-hop
participation. Each one of the participants made it clear that rap music is a central source
of strength for them by which to feel proud of who they are because of their love of a
subversive cultural movement that celebrates diversity.

While some of the literature identifies hip-hop as an aspect of empowerment for
young adults and youth, many participants were willing to site hip-hop as the *essence* or
foundation of their identities. One participant even appointed the term "life-saver" to the

role that hip-hop music has played in their life. This study provides something that the literature fails to do. It provides narratives and gives voice to individuals engaged in hip-hop, and allows them to speak their voice rather than that of a practitioner or a researcher.

The literature makes note of newly emerging hip-hop therapy models. Though some of the literature available documents studies conducted with young adults to test the efficiency of hip-hop therapy, participants in this study discussed their personal ideas for hip-hop therapy models based on their own personal relationships with hip-hop and some of their direct community involvement with youth. From these first-person narratives, possibilities of hip-hop music as a native, pre-existing therapy arise.

A lot of the literature available on youth empowerment and hip-hop keeps the two subjects separate. However, this study found many connections between empowerment and hip-hop. The majority of participants identified hip-hop music as a forum to express themselves. As such, they felt their psychological and social identities were impacted by the music. In addition to a managing affect, the participants in the study used hip-hop music to gain mastery over adolescent development (and afterwards), to gain a voice in institutions like school, to locate themselves geographically and to communicate with their peers.

There also appears to be very little discussion of the psychological impact of the creation of hip-hop music in the literature. In contrast, the participants in this study reveal a strong sense of a psychological self in hip-hop to which Rose (1994), Perry (2004) and Elligan (2004) allude, but do not explore. In sum, the findings of the study show that a very unique component of hip-hop culture is the vulnerability allowances

offered in listening to and creating this form of music amongst peers and the extent to which the psychological/emotional self is included in the music.

Finally, while the literature review discusses themes of subversion in hip-hop culture and points to the theme of the outlaw, the participants in this study talked about hip-hop music as a connecting force more often than a disconnecting one. As they were going through the American school system, many participants used hip-hop music as a tool for empowerment and learning about the histories of their people so as better to locate themselves within a broader political and worldly context. Rather than being a subversive move, this motion to self-educate appeared in line with a rather mainstream post-modern, protestant effort to understand the self in relation to the world.

In this study, the literature review provides a taste for what might be discovered but the results of the study are more colorful, broad and relevant than the literature could predict.

The study offers directions for future study especially around themes of self – esteem and mastery in hip-hop culture, the communicative properties or hip-hop music and the ever evolving social- location of hip-hop practitioners. For this study, only implications for the use of hip-hop music in clinical settings will be discussed.

Implications for Practice

In their discussion of social science and social policy in urban settings, Shirley Heath and Milbre McLaughlin (1993) identify the lack of appropriate and sensitive practices aimed at supporting youth, especially urban youth:

> Policymakers have not heard young people in their contexts and have not
> recognized the many signs, frustrations, and fears that young people believe

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signal society's disregard for them and their families, that foster and support low self-esteem and that erode personal dignity (p. 215).

In the clinical social work profession, advances in knowledge often mean better delivery of care, increased understanding of specific populations and more client-sensitive interventions. The findings of this study on the role of hip-hop music and empowerment involving young adults and youth suggest ways to advance all aforementioned areas of clinical social work practice. Among the implications for practice are: an increased understanding of young adult populations in the therapeutic context, an appreciation of the built-in therapeutic framework of hip-hop culture and performance, and the need for social workers to build alliances with possible mentors in the hip-hop community. Hip-hop, when used properly, also can be used as an opening to therapy by allowing youth to open up, express, and share themselves and their strengthens. Once communication is established, intervention is easier to begin for the clinical social worker.

Understanding the population in context

One of the questions asked of the participants in the interview was "Do you find hip-hop empowering?" The question was asked to specifically locate the uses of hip-hop music as therapy amongst its practitioners. This was done intentionally to gather research about the "native" therapy already available in the practice of performance and freestyle, both alone and in groups.

When clinicians better understand how clients form their identity and self empower within a subjective reality, they are better able to intervene using native therapy techniques. The term native therapy, as defined by the researcher, describes a method of treatment that is both alternative to mainstream practices of therapy and one that is

centered in the client or client population. The participants of this study revealed a native therapy within hip-hop that could be further channeled with the support of mental health practitioners. The use of this native therapy would be especially important in the case of at-risk or suicidal young adults. Social workers who remain aware of this native therapy have a better chance of speeding up the process of therapeutic alliance in treatment.

Using Hip-Hop Music as a Tool

If social workers were to better understand the tools that young adults who are fans of hip-hop music used to feel better or to express themselves, these tools could be further supported within an individual or group therapy context. Imagine a group of youth and young adults expressing their feelings on a particular subject through music and then sharing their reactions to what the other group members have said. This model is already being employed in several areas around the country (as mentioned in the literature review). If social workers could use hip-hop as a tool much like they do with art or writing, they may have more of a chance to counteract high attrition rates of young adults and youth of color in counseling programs. Life stories, histories, pain and self expression can be voiced through hip-hop music in non-threatening, supportive fashions.

The use of mentors

The participants in this study mentioned several ways in which their love of and identification with hip-hop culture made them accessible as role-models. The use of mentors with whom youth can identify bridges a communication gap that is often created by traditional methods of youth outreach. Clinical social workers can either learn from their communication methods or they can outsource and train with mentors to meet with youth. Perhaps more funding should be put fourth by academia to furnish scholarships

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for young adults, particularly urban youth looking to extend their native knowledge bases to their communities using the vehicle of social work. In addition to opening the door for social workers to use hip hop as empowerment, the practice of door-opening creates a more open lenses to view other therapeutic tools.

Limits of the Study

The sample size for this study was small, only including nine participants gathered in one area; three participants from another area; and one participant had grown up beyond the immediate Los Angeles area. Though the sample was a diverse ethnic portrait, it was not a significantly large sample, which would be needed for a more conclusive, thorough study. Equally important was the fact that most of the participants in this study had college degrees, or were on their way to doing so. As such, they had reached a level of maturity that may be different from a younger population group. Also this study population was heavily engaged in working with youth and brought their own histories and experiences of hip-hop to their work in a meaningful way. A larger study of more fans of hip-hop using this as a mode of empowerment and release for youth and young adults is needed. Such a study should include a more educationally diverse population. Despite these limitations however, this study yielded significant results in viewing the strengths of hip-hop and the multiplicity of its applications.

Suggestions for Further research

Reflecting on the limits of this study, further research may be conducted by broadening the sample size to include a larger number of men and woman in various age groups and across racial and social lines. In addition to studying the role of hip-hop music and empowerment in the United States, more research could be collected abroad.

Almost every major city in the world has a hip-hop culture. Study of the many uses of hip-hop may yield interesting results. These results could further help us to understand the role that hip-hop music plays in youth empowerment and the possible ways that it could be employed in social work settings.

Further research also should include methods of gathering information that go beyond the individual interview, such as methods that observe group settings where hip-hop is performed. Hip-hop and rap therapy groups are new to the social work field and beg for research conducted by participant observers.

Conclusion

This study has a dual relevancy. On the one hand, the findings stand on their own as a unique narrative of the hip-hop world as seen by some of its practitioners and fans. On the other hand, the narratives reach beyond the individual contexts in which they were gathered and imply suggestions for clinical social work practice. Though the individuals were asked about their personal experience and relationship to hip-hop music, they were all eager to suggest ways of using hip-hop as a tool with young adults and peers. The participants themselves encouraged the further movement of the study. The strength of a study such as this one lies in its ability to expand what we know about the surface value of a topic by exploring the possible implications that it has for more improved and sensitive clinical social work practices.

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Appendix A

Human Subjects Review Board Approval Letter

April 15, 2010

Jihan Sims

Dear Jihan,

Your revised materials have been reviewed and they are all in order. You did a very good job of simplifying the process which will be helpful as you recruit. You have also shortened and simplified the Consent and done a very good job with it. We are glad to give final approval to your interesting study.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project. One of my field students has a teenage client who writes and performs hip-hop and it is enormously important in his life and gives him a lot of self-assurance and attention. He is very good at it but also expresses so much about his life and his feelings in his hip-hop. It is fascinating.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee
CC: Dr. Narviar Barker, Research Advisor

RESEARCH QUESTIONS GUIDE

1. Please tell me a little bit about your relationship to hip-hop music

Follow up: Do you listen to rap music? (how often?) How much time do you spend listening? What are the circumstances in which you do this?

2. Do you find hip hop empowering?

Follow up: If yes, what about hip hop makes it empowering? What aspects of the empowerment do you find teachable to youth and young adults.

If no: what about hip hop is not empowering?

3. Do you admire anyone in the hip-hop world in particular? How so?

Follow up: When did you start listening to hip-hop? Who turned you on to it? Can you remember your first hip-hop tape/cd? Who do you respect in the hip hop community, why?

4. Has hip-hop opened any doors for you? If so, which and how?

Follow up: has your love/knowledge of hip hop allowed to you experience things you would have otherwise not experienced had it not been for the music?

5. What, if anything have you learned from hip hop music and culture

Follow up: What does hip-hop mean to you? What does it mean to people in your life? What messages are available to you in hip-hop music that you didn't learn in school? That you didn't learn home? Do any of the lyrics reflect your life experience? The experiences of your community?

6. What memories (positive and negative) do you have of hip-hop and your adolescence?

Follow up: Do you associate hip-hop music with any aspects of your personality? Identity? If you could change one thing about your life what would it be? If you could describe one thing you are proud of, what would it be?

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Dear Participant,

My name is Jihan Sims and I am a graduate student at the Smith College School for Social Work. I am writing a master's thesis on the use of hip-hop as an empowerment tool for young adults. My research involves doing interviews for research with people who listen to hip hop to explore the role that hip-hop has played their lives.

I would like to ask you some questions in an interview that will last no more than an hour. I require that you be between the ages of 18 and 28, listen to hop-hop on a regular basis, and interested in discussing ways hip-hop has influenced your life. I will audio tape our interview for the purpose of my research.

This is a very low-risk study with minimal possible negative consequence of participating. Some of the questions might involve you talking about your feelings. If you feel stressed or disturbed by a question and feel you need to discuss it more with a professional, I have attached a list of resources in your area that can help you cope with difficult feelings. You might benefit from participating in this study by having the opportunity to reflect upon ways in which hip hop has influenced your life.

I will guarantee that all information that you share with me will be kept confidential. Presentations and publications will be prepared in such a way that participants will not be identified. My research advisor will have access to the data only after your identifying information has been removed. Any identifying information will be deleted in the transcription.

Anyone transcribing tapes or analyzing data will sign a confidentiality agreement. All data will be stored in a locked cabinet, and any electronic data will be stored in a password-protected file. As required by federal regulations, all data and tapes will be kept secure for three years, after which they will be destroyed. If I am still using your data for research purposes, I will continue to keep all data in a secure place to ensure confidentiality. I will destroy them when they are no longer needed.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time during the data collection process and you may refuse to answer any question without penalty. In the event of a withdrawal, all materials pertaining to you will be immediately destroyed. You can contact me at anytime via phone at (909) 489-0589, or via email at jsims@smith.edu. Feel free to call with questions or if you wish you withdraw at any point of the study. Should you have any concerns about your rights or about any aspect of the study, please call me at the phone number above, or contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at (413) 585-7974. Please keep a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Thank you for your interest and participation in this research project,

YOUR SIGNIATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Participant's Signature:_____ **Date:**_____

Investigator's Signature:_____ **Date:**_____

APPENDIX D

REFERRALS

Mental Health Resources

For Mental Health Services in the Los Angeles County area, see the resources below or e- mail me at jsims@smith.edu for a more extensive list

Emergency Mental Health Support:

Didi Hirsch Mental Health Ctr.
-Offers crisis counseling free within 3 months of the event
-MedicCal required for other services
(310) 390-8896

Exodus Mental Health Urgent Care
-Offers free emergency help for psychiatric medications
(310) 253-9494

Individual Counseling

Airport Marina Counseling Ctr.
-Offers individual counseling
-Sliding scale, bi-lingual interns
(310) 670-1410
789 La Tijera Blvd.
Westchester, CA 90045

California Graduate Institute
-Offers individual counseling
-sliding scale, bi-lingual staff and interns
(310) 208-3120
1145 Gayley #323
Westwood CA 90024