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Tawnee Sae-Saue
Hip-Hop as Healer: Black
Males' Experience of Hip-
Hop Culture

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study was developed to explore the experiences that Black men have of hip-hop and its potential healing function. Ten Black men were interviewed in the Los Angeles and Bay Area regarding their experiences as either practitioners or followers of hip-hop. Participants were asked to reflect on the role that hip-hop has played in their lives, hip-hop's effect on their racial identities and its impact on their emotions. All subjects described themselves as having a relationship with hip-hop that was, and continues to be, transformative. Participants described hip-hop as a chosen kinship and described the culture as having a profound impact on their personal and racial identities. Although participants experienced hip-hop as providing a positive emotional space, some felt that their relationship to the culture was complex, challenging them to reconcile the many positive aspects of hip-hop with its negative attributes. Implications for social work and further research are also discussed.

**HIP-HOP AS HEALER: BLACK MALES' EXPERIENCE OF HIP-HOP
CULTURE**

A project based upon independent investigation
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2012

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis could not have been accomplished without the assistance of many people whose contributions are gratefully acknowledged.

Many thanks and love to all of the participants who dedicated their time to explore their involvement with hip-hop and who candidly spoke about their experiences. Perhaps unknown to them, their love for the music has helped sustain me throughout the completion of this project. It is with gratitude that I thank you for supporting and challenging the current scope and lens of social work practice.

This work is also dedicated to my Mom for the countless years of support, and whose backing throughout this challenging and rigorous process has afforded me the opportunity to exist and fight for equality within and outside of the structures of academic institutions.

To my Grandpa “Smoke Cloud”, the Piro Manso Tiwa, and to all my relations- I hope that this project in its completion is in small part, a reflection of the possibility for the advancement and recognition of all indigenous people.

To my advisor Beth Kita whose countless hours of dedication and review and continual support have allowed me to finally complete this project, Dr. Corbin for her patience and support through the initial phases of research, to my self-professed mentor Eric Hamako for demanding me to be more critical and for always offering a “mixed” perspective, Bridget Conway and Tiffany Paschal who have spent numerous hours encouraging me to continue.

To the woman who has inspired the title of this thesis, Ms. Erykah Badu, the one and only Nasir Ben Olu Dara Jones, Dead Prez for inspiring me to get through “They Schools”, Mos Def, Common, Talib Kweli, Run DMC, Gifted Unlimited Rhymes Universal and DJ Premier, KRS-1 for suggesting listeners play his music while writing their thesis, Outkast, Pharcyde, Dre and Snoop, Public Enemy, Salt n Peppa, JJ Fad, The Roots, Digable Planets, A Tribe Called Quest, Busta Rhymes, Immortal Technique, RZA, GZA, and Ghostface Killah!

Lastly, this is dedicated with love to all my friends and family, to the youth, and of course, to Oakland...

It’s still bigger than hip-hop!

Peace

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

"Hip-Hop is bigger than religion. Hip-Hop is bigger than my n. Hip-Hop is bigger than the government. This one is the healer, Hip-Hop." -Erykah Badu*

As a producer of hip-hop, lyricist Erykah Badu suggests that hip-hop is of strong importance to those within the community, perhaps serving as its own therapeutic modality. If hip-hop is a space where Black males negotiate their experience of oppression, which is rooted in their histories, and informs their identity, (Adams & Fuller, 2006; Rose, 1994), social work practitioners must understand its significance to those within this community. Understanding the role of hip-hop in the lives of Black men may help social workers to better recognize and value this among their clients. The importance of hip-hop, its application and lifestyle, is of significance and is worthy of recognition within social work practice.

When attempting to understand the relevance of hip-hop to Black males today, it is important to reflect on the historical context in which hip-hop emerged. Beginning in the Bronx, New York, among African-American and Latino youth in the late 1970's and as a cultural form; [hip hop] provides a space to negotiate the experience of marginalization, brutality, and oppression within the cultural contexts of African American and Caribbean history, identity, and community (Adams & Fuller, 2006; Rose, 1994). Hip-hop has varied and vast meanings to its followers and producers, including demarcations of radio and mainstream hip-hop vs. local, underground, and conscious hip-hop. For purposes of this work, I will refer to rap (the art of speaking rhythmically and poetically) and hip hop interchangeably, and define hip-hop in its

broadest terms: a subculture esp. of inner-city youths who are devotees of rap music (Merriam-Webster, n. d.).

Although there is ample literature written on hip-hop, specifically within education, there appears to be limited research between social work practice and the applications, understanding, and insertion of hip-hop culture in treatment. Emerging culturally competent practitioners should be required to think critically and become innovative with clinical research in order to seek culturally responsive intervention in order to ensure that they are relevant to the concerns of oppressed populations (Ladson-Billings & Donner, 2005).

Travis and Deepak (2011) suggest that hip-hop can be used as a conduit to enhanced cultural competence and practice skills through the individual and community empowerment framework; a tool for direct practice that allows social workers to understand the competing messages within hip-hop culture and how they may impact youth. As hip-hop is often seen through a stereotypic lens, language and imagery seen within popular culture frequently depict its producers and followers as violent and misogynistic (Taylor & Taylor, 2004). Travis & Deepak (2011) suggest that cultural competence can be enhanced through greater self-awareness of potential biases against hip-hop, but also through knowledge building regarding youth culture, high-risk environments, and ethnic minority cultures.

The complexity found within the creative expressions of hip-hop and its connection and meaning to the individual is not often acknowledged nor understood. This study's focus on the hip-hop community can better inform our understanding of this genre. I am interested in understanding the intersections of hip-hop and healing as experienced by Black males who actively listen to and engage in hip-hop culture, including the four pillars of hip-hop: dance (breaking), writing (lyrics/emceeing), art (graffiti), and music (DJing). The proposed qualitative

methods study aims to explore the following question: *Does the experience of hip-hop contribute to healing for Black males involved in the hip-hop culture, and if so, how?*

Asking this question requires establishing a working definition of “healing.” One qualitative study examining the meaning of healing consisted of in-depth, open ended, semi-structured interviews of seven medical doctors. Their perceptions regarding the definition and mechanisms of healing were subjected to grounded theory content analysis. The results found that healing was associated with themes of wholeness, narrative, and spirituality. Healing is an intensely personal, subjective experience involving a reconciliation of the meaning an individual ascribes to distressing events with his perception of wholeness as a person (Egnew, 2005). Egnew (2005) concludes that healing may be operationally defined as the personal experience of the transcendence of suffering. Through this lens, my research study seeks to examine, if and how, hip-hop has enhanced participant ability to transcend suffering, and as a healer, has offered a forum for recognizing, minimizing, and relieving suffering experienced by Black males involved with the genre.

This study relied on participant descriptions of their involvement with hip-hop and its influence on their relationships and emotional states in order to better understand their healing processes. An enhanced understanding of the hip-hop culture allowed me to explore the experience of the individual and how theoretical frameworks such as the individual and empowerment framework (Travis & Deepak, 2011), can emerge from the everyday lives of the hip-hop generation (Ladson-Billings et al., 2005). The following literature review will consider scholarly works on the relationship between hip-hop and social work practice.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

While there is ample literature on the topic of hip-hop culture and on social work practice with urban populations, little has been written about the intersection of the two. Several areas of scholarly literature were reviewed in an effort to contextualize the study question: Does the experience of hip-hop contribute to healing for Black males involved in the hip-hop culture, and if so, how? Specifically, studies were reviewed that focused on: Social work values and hip-hop; Hip-hop and identity formation (racial development models); and hip-hop variations (in perceptions and racial differences in preference). In this chapter, I will describe and critique such studies.

Social Work Values and Hip-Hop

“Look, I'm dying to be different, down to die to make a difference. Music for the movement, with a message, uplifting-went from set trippin' to trips around the world. Opportunities are oysters, you might find a pearl. You can't be scared to take that chance', 'cause if you rather knock twice then you're late for the dance. You gotta move with urgency, assert with certainty. Ask me if I'm set to serve, I say, certainly” –Murs

According to the National Association of Social Work (NASW), the mission of clinical work is rooted in a set of core values that have been embraced historically throughout the profession. These values are stated by NASW to reflect the unique purpose and perspective of social work, and are to be implemented within the complexity of the human experience (NASW, 1999). Values of service, social justice, dignity, worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence can also be found within the lyrical content and artistic expressions of hip-hop culture. Several Emcees' have taken a role parallel to social workers, and

serve their communities, much like those who serve others within clinical practice. Many lyrics highlight the importance of unification amongst communities and encourage youth to stop Black-on-Black violence. One such example is KRS-One's "Stop the Violence" in which Black-on-Black crimes are held up to ridicule (Cummings & Roy, 2002). Songs and titles such as Run-DMC's "Proud to Black" create social consciousness and help to create positive racial identity formation through political and historical reference. Other lyrics inspire collective organizing.

Emcee and political activist, Tupac Shakur has created works that have political commentary and speak to his, and the larger Black male experience in America. His lyrics often critique dominant culture, question the oppressive conditions of institutional racism, and call for social change. In "Panther Power", Tupac writes:

Fathers of our country never cared for me, they kept my answer shackled up in slavery.
And Uncle Sam never did a damn thing for me, except lie about the facts in my history.
So now I'm sitting here mad 'cause I'm unemployed, but the government's glad cause
they enjoyed, when my people are down so they can screw us around. Time to change the
government now, Panther Power!

These lyrics suggest that the Black community has struggled against oppressive social structures in America. They also imply that Tupac equates himself with a revolutionary from the Black Panther movement to demonstrate his strong commitment to social justice through political change. Tupac's lyrics also suggest that hip-hop can be used as a political tool. This is evidenced by the work of Clay (2006) who observed and interviewed youth of color in two nonprofit organizations within the San Francisco Bay Area to explore ways in which youth in the post-civil rights era could incorporate hip-hop in their activism and assist in their political consciousness. In her observations, Clay (2006) found that youth of color employed hip-hop as a

tool for mobilizing peers to resist structural oppression through social justice campaigns in their schools and communities. She found that they also utilized hip-hop to develop and validate their own notions of themselves and their identities as activists of color. Through 18 months of observation, Clay (2006) found that hip-hop as a representative and narrative media, functions as a catalyst for identity formation. And, as youth of color in the post-civil rights era are still experiencing racial injustice, she found that through activism, they use hip-hop as a tool for political protest in an effort to promote social justice (Clay, 2006). Clay (2006) suggests that positive racial awareness can be achieved through hip-hop and this is supported as we will see in the following section on identity formation.

Hip-Hop and Racial Identity Formation

“A pressure couldn't escape us through the ages. We changed the basis of derogatory phrases. And I say it's quite amazing. The use, the ghetto terms, we developed our own language”- Nas

Hip-hop has affected youth around the world, developed initially as a cultural phenomenon in the form of political and artistic expression (Alridge & Stewart, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Donner 2005; West 2004). Alridge & Stewart (2005), state that hip-hop is reflective of social, economic, political, and cultural realities and conditions of youth, speaking to them in a language and manner they understand. The language of urban youth provides a rich field for exploration. As a sub-culture that is distinctly African centered, it is grounded in the historical experiences of a people who have been oppressed by their social and political realities, and marginalized by their economic and familial conditions (Cummings & Roy, 2002). As author Dimitriadis (2004) suggested, “young people are now using hip-hop texts to construct and validate notions of self and community; understand themselves and the world around them; and link shared notions of what it means to be Black and marginalized in the USA and around the

world” (p. 2). As a result of both its longevity and relevance, hip-hop cannot be dismissed as merely a passing fad or as a youth movement that will soon run its course (Alridge & Stewart, 2005). Hip-hop is not only a “cultural phenomenon but a political, economic, and intellectual one, deserving of scholarly study, similar to previous African American artistic and cultural movements such as the Blues, Jazz, the New Negro Renaissance, and the Civil Rights, Black Power, and Black Arts Movements” (Alridge & Stewart, 2005, p.190).

Since the late 70’s, hip-hop culture has communicated a particular experience of what it means to be young, Black, and (often) male (Clay, 2006). According to Kobin and Tyson (2004), there are two racial development models which explain the process involved in an individual's gradual awareness of their race and its effects. “The Nigrescence Model developed by Cross (as cited by Kobin & Tyson, 2006, p. 349) identifies five stages in African-American racial development: (a) pre-encounter, (b) encounter, (c) immersion-emersion, (d) internalization and (e) internalization-commitment.” The second is the Racial Cultural Identity Development (RCID) model which is meant to be applicable to all races. RCID “parallels the Cross model with its own five stages: (a) conformity, (b) dissonance and appreciating, (c) resistance and immersion, (d) introspection and (e) integrative awareness”(Sue & Sue, 2002, as cited by Kobin & Tyson, 2006, p.349). Kobin & Tyson (2006) find both models begin with minority desire to assimilate into dominant culture, evolve into resentment of the dominant race and end in integrated awareness of one's own race in the context of society. While each model defines stages differently, it is possible to compare corresponding stages to identify similar concepts (Kobin & Tyson, 2006). As Kobin and Tyson (2006) suggest, within these stages, a person may experience certain attitudes towards oneself and dominant group culture that correspond to views expressed in genres of rap. As hip-hop continues to be a site where Black males negotiate and

express their experience of oppression, rooted in their histories and communities (Adams & Fuller, 2006; Cummings & Roy, 2002; Rose, 1994), these models can inform the understanding of hip-hop's impact on their identity development.

Kobin and Tyson (2006) find that artists convey their views on culturocentrism (revering one's own culture as at the center of everything) and dominant culture through lyrics and find that generally, people identify with lyrics or a certain type of rap because of similarities in experiences and values. Kobin and Tyson (2006), suggest that it may be possible to place the artist in one of the developmental stages or in a particular genre. By analyzing lyrics from a client's preferred style of rap music, Kobin and Tyson (2006), suggest that therapists can potentially acquire insight into a client's phase of racial development and gain important information about the different perspectives, values and beliefs of some clients.

Black male participant narratives may be linked to identity formation in order to give social workers insight to hip-hop's influence on their racial identification, connectivity to others, and their emotional processes. The RCID model as well as the latter stages of the Nigrescence Model may lead to a better understanding of the socio-emotional processes of Black men involved in hip-hop culture. Through this particular lens, social work practitioners may be better equipped to not only understand hip-hop's role in Black identification, but this may also assist in developing culturally relevant interventions and models of therapy.

Empirical Studies of Hip-Hop Among Adolescents

Perceptions. There have been several studies that have examined adolescent perceptions of rap music, as treatment and intervention (DeCarlo & Hockman, 2003; Tyson 2002, 2006), while another study examined racial differences in perceptions of the genre (Sullivan, 2003). Several qualitative studies viewed adolescent perceptions of usefulness of traditional group therapy using

rap music (DeCarlo & Hockman, 2003; Tyson 2002, 2006) as a channel to support pro-social skills development compared to those not involved in hip-hop therapy treatment (Tyson, 2002). Adolescent groups tested included: at-risk and delinquent youth, violent offenders, status offenders, and control conditions of high school students with no criminal history, or those not participating in specific hip-hop therapy (HHT) treatment (Tyson, 2002). Findings were in favor of the rap therapy as a tool for advancing pro-social behavior (DeCarlo & Hockman, 2003; Tyson 2002, 2006).

Further studies applied the Rap-music Attitude and Perception (RAP) Scale, a 1-page, 24-item measure of a person's thoughts and feelings surrounding the effects and content of rap music. The RAP scale was designed as an instrument for youth programs and practitioners to interpret attitudes and perceptions of rap music in their work with young people, their families, and communities. Results found that multiple group methods and structural equation modeling analyses confirmed the three-factor model (empowerment, violent-misogynistic, and artistic-esthetic) of the RAP (Tyson, 2002). Findings within these studies concluded that the RAP has sound psychometric properties, and its utility as a research and assessment tool for scholars and practitioners is promising (DeCarlo & Hockman, 2003; Tyson 2002, 2006).

Racial differences in hip-hop preference. A qualitative study examined the attitudes of rap music amongst Black and White adolescents using a survey with a sample size of 51-21 Blacks, 17, whites, 7 Latinos, and 6 who marked other categories (Sullivan, 2003). This study examined racial differences in preferences for and interpretations of rap music. Survey results indicate that racial differences in the popularity of rap music are limited but found many Black adolescents to connect more to the genre, citing rap to be an affirmation of their experiences (Sullivan, 2003).

Research results in this study suggest that Black youth have a stronger commitment to the genre as they view it as life affirming (Sullivan, 2003).

Although both racial groups in this study appear to have favorable opinions of rap, their commitment to it and its significance in their lives varies by race. As this study used a survey for data collection, further research is needed in order to understand and explore these variations. As many White respondents in this study indicated that rap had affected their opinions about racism, however it failed to identify how rap had affected their opinions of African Americans (Sullivan, 2003). Also, as mainstream rap music is largely utilized and controlled by White corporations, control of production may affect the type of music that White consumers are listening to which may affirm racial stereotypes and racist ideology rather than dismantling it (Sullivan, 2003). Further research is needed to explore why and how racial differences in consumption affect perceptions and experience of rap and hip-hop music.

Conclusion

The literature suggests that hip-hop is a space where Black males negotiate their sense of self and identity (Adams & Fuller, 2006; Clay, 2006; Rose, 1994), yet this is under researched. The few studies that have been conducted on hip-hop and social work did not capture the first person experience of the engagement or creation of hip-hop and the concerns of everyday lived practice of the hip-hop generation, which the present study seeks to do. I believe it is important to listen to the voices of this population and propose further exploration of the experience of hip-hop among Black males. Utilizing qualitative methods has allowed me to gather the richness of the hip-hop experience not attained through surveys and written responses and enabled me to make use of participants' affective responses as well as verbalized ones.

As a music genre that lends itself to spontaneous creative expression, it may be difficult to understand hip-hop for those not involved with the culture directly. Within therapeutic realms it is important to understand a person's narrative and, again, this may be challenging for clinicians unfamiliar with the culture. In order to make meaning of participants' everyday realities, their narratives, should, in some way, be tied to social and political praxis in research and curricula agendas (Ladson-Billings et al., 2005). The present study seeks to understand the relationship of Black males with hip-hop culture, and its influence on their ability to transcend suffering through its mediums. The following chapter will discuss the methodology used in this qualitative study, designed to explore the Black male experience of hip-hop as a cultural phenomenon.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

Research Purpose and Question

This qualitative study sought to document and describe the experience of hip-hop and its relevance to Black males in order to inform culturally sensitive clinical practice. The specific research question being investigated aims to explore both *if* and *how*, the experience of hip-hop contributes to healing for Black males involved in hip-hop culture. In an effort to fulfill this aim, Black males who actively listen to hip-hop and engage in its cultural practice regularly were interviewed. Areas of inquiry include participant descriptions of their involvement with hip-hop, documentation of specific examples of its effect on their emotional and identity development, and its influence on connectivity with their peers, family, and community.

Qualitative methods can be used to facilitate the articulation of Black males' experience of hip-hop and reveal pertinent information to clinical practitioners who seek to address the mental health needs of these individuals, or those who wish to better understand the influence of hip-hop on its enthusiasts. Through the collection of narratives, I hoped to draw a connection not only to the healing properties of hip-hop as an art form, but also to its relevance to Black males. As hip-hop is historically grounded in political and creative expression, hip-hop may serve as a space where profound emotion can be both expressed and elicited. I aim to explore the experience of hip-hop among Black males in an attempt to find sites of healing. This will allow me to better understand its importance and perhaps inform a more culturally relevant and responsive practice.

Sample

I submitted a Human Subjects Review application as per Smith College School for Social Work requirements which included the risks and benefits of participation and the ways in which I would protect the confidentiality of participants. Once approval from the Human Subjects Review Board (Appendix A) was granted, the recruitment process began. This qualitative methods study used convenience and snowball sampling. The present study did not aim to be reflective of all Black men, but rather explored the experience and meaning that hip-hop had in the lives of the participants. The researcher sought a sample size of 12-15 self-identified Black men who were 18 years or older, in an effort to understand their experience of hip-hop and its contribution to healing, meaning, if and how, hip-hop has enhanced participant ability to transcend suffering.

As the literature on this topic is limited, this qualitative study documented and described the experience of hip-hop and its relevance to Black males in order to inform culturally sensitive practice by considering the psychosocial effects, needs, and impacts on those who create and follow the genre. Hip-hop originated as a cultural art form that emerged from the oppression felt by Black youth. Although literature suggests there are few racial differences in the perceptions of rap music amongst Black and white listeners, (Sullivan, 2003) it appears to reveal personal significance for Black youth, speaking directly to their lived experience. Because most innovators of hip-hop are Black and 70 percent of consumers of hip-hop culture are White, (Chuck D, 2001; Henderson, 1996; Wahl, 1999) I found it important to listen to the voices of the Black male population. Also, as literature is limited in terms of gender in hip-hop, I focused on Black males as they are the largest producers and innovators of this genre (Chuck D, 2001; Henderson, 1996; Wahl, 1999).

The sample population began within two hip-hop hubs, Los Angeles and Oakland, California and inclusive of Black males who actively engaged in hip-hop culture, either listening to, or directly engaging in the art form, specific to the four pillars of hip-hop: Breaking, DJing, Emceeing, or Graffiti. The inclusion criteria for the sample: 18 years of age or older, self-identified Black males, who actively listened to or engage in hip-hop culture (i.e. four pillars) for a minimum of 10 hours per week. The exclusion criteria were those who are minors, did not identify as Black males, did not actively participate or engage in hip-hop culture a minimum of 10 hours per week, and those who were not conversant in English (the language used for conducting interviews).

Sampling limitations. I planned to complete 12 to 15 interviews, but time constraints limited me to completing 10. Several people expressed interest in participating in the study but given the realities of disparate geographic locations and time schedules, consent forms were not returned in a timely manner and scheduling constraints began to exceed the time limitations of data collection.

Due to the purpose of a qualitative study which seeks to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon versus generalization, the present study did not aim to be reflective of the sample universe or representative of a universal Black male experience of hip-hop. Rather, the study sample was homogeneous in nature and explored the experience and meaning that hip-hop has had in the lives of Black male participants. This study has undoubtedly omitted voices of women, or other racial and ethnic persons who participate or engage in the art form. As I have focused on adult voices due to the benefit of accessibility using a convenience sampling strategy, the voices of Black youth have also been omitted.

Participant demographics. Ten adults between the ages of 28 and 32 participated in this study. Three participants interviewed reside in Los Angeles, California and the remaining seven interviewees reside in the Bay Area, including Berkeley, Oakland, and San Francisco. While all participants reported being active listeners and fans of hip-hop, half of the participants in this study were practitioners, including 3 Emcees, 1 DJ, and 1 producer. Most (8) participants reported that their initial involvement in the culture began early in life, ranging from the ages of 3-6 years old. Two participants began their engagement later in childhood, at ages 10 and 13. Hours of engagement varied for each participant, although most practitioners reported significantly higher levels of involvement (ranging from 20-100 hours per week). All participants in this study identified as Black men, who actively engaged in hip-hop as a cultural art form and were willing to discuss their individual experiences.

Ethics and Safeguards

Confidentiality of participant information was limited due to the nature of this study, and was clearly stated in the consent form (Appendix B) and reviewed verbally by the researcher at the start of each interview. Participants were told of steps taken to safeguard identifying information, limited to the removal of names from all data. Every participant was given a code number (1-10), and all identifiable information (i.e. names) has been removed from transcriptions. Presentation of material will be prepared so that participants may not be identified. Direct quotes will be attributed to a pseudonym or fictitious name given by the researcher to the participant.

Consent forms were separated from completed instruments or audiotapes. For purposes of the MSW thesis, research advisors will have access to data only after identifying information is removed. I listened to the audiotapes and reviewed materials privately. Transcribed interviews

included participant responses in their entirety and I noted and coded pertinent information. Data will be stored in a securely locked file cabinet for three years as stipulated by federal guidelines and will then be destroyed or maintained securely.

Data Collection

The convenience sampling strategy was executed through a network of Black males within Los Angeles and Oakland, California. The research began by my contacting known members of the hip-hop community by phone, informing them of the proposed study and requesting their email addresses. I then emailed people in my network, requesting the names and email addresses of possible participants. I also sent a recruitment letter and flier, informing them of the study and requesting they pass on information to others. Contacting possible participants by email offered a formal recruitment process while giving participants space to accept or decline involvement without feeling the need to answer to the researcher directly. Interested applicants were screened via email and asked their age, racial identification, and hours of engagement in hip-hop culture. If the participant met the aforementioned requirements, the researcher continued the recruitment process and scheduled an interview at an agreed upon safe, convenient, and quiet (i.e. café or local library) location. In person interviews were the preferred method of data collection, however, due to feasibility of travel and scheduling conflicts, phone interviews were used as an alternative, using audio recording as the source of documentation. In the case of telephone interviews, a signed copy of the consent letter was collected before conducting the research.

Participants were asked to partake in a 60 minute interview and describe their experience of hip-hop music and culture. Data such as age and geographic location, as well as the age they were when they began to participate in the creation or engage in the music, the type of

participation or engagement in hip-hop, how many hours they are involved with the genre a week, and the nature of their involvement was collected at the time of the interview was also collected (Appendix C).

The interviews, guided by a set of questions (Appendix C), were intended to document the nature of participation the interviewees had within the hip-hop community and culture, their experience of the music and its impact on identity development, relationships, dreams, and life goals. The questions also attempted to document the feelings associated when participants created or listened to the art form, and the importance of the music in their daily lives. Further, the interview questions sought to understand more fully, the nature of hip-hop's contribution to their own healing and therapeutic processes by asking clarifying questions that allowed participants to expound and illustrate their responses.

Data Analysis

Data was recorded through the use of audiotapes, notes, and observations of the interview. Content analysis gathered includes demographic data, quantifying participant information such as age, time of involvement in hip-hop culture, and nature of participation (i.e. four pillars). Qualitative data has been transcribed and analyzed manually for thematic content, identifying common themes expressed through examples and coding them accordingly. For the purpose of this exploratory study, the analysis attempts to summarize the most relevant responses to each question by grouping them thematically.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

Introduction

This study explored the contributions that hip-hop has made to the healing processes of Black men. To that end, I asked 10 participants the following questions:

- Describe your first and favorite experience of hip-hop.
- What does hip-hop mean to you?
- Does hip-hop play a role in your interactions with peers, family, life goals, and dreams, if so, how?
- Has creating (DJing, Breaking, Emceeing, Graffiti) or listening to hip-hop been helpful to you during a difficult experience(s)? If so, please describe.
- Is there anything about hip-hop that has meaning to you as a Black man?
- Does hip-hop have a positive emotional impact on you? If so, how?
- Please offer the names of your favorite hip-hop artists and describe why you appreciate them.
- What is your favorite hip-hop verse and why?

Participants responded to these questions with an enlivened affect that revealed a considerable degree of care, thoughtfulness, and love for the music. Many participants referred to their experience with a gentle fondness, and spoke about hip-hop in a way that is similar to the manner in which people speak of a personal relationship. Participant narratives revealed several overarching themes that divulge the positive emotional impact that the culture has had in their lives. My analysis of the participants' responses to these questions generated four major themes, each with several subthemes: Hip-hop as conduit (to knowledge, political consciousness, youth mentorship, and emotional processes); hip-hop as connection (to self, others, racial identification, spirituality, history, and resilience); hip-hop as healing (racially and

therapeutically); and hip-hop as a complex relationship. In this chapter, I describe and discuss each of these themes.

Hip-Hop as Conduit

“To me hip-hop is life because it’s everything that I do, the way that I feel. I love to be able to analyze my day, analyze the history of the Haitian revolution, or analyze just the way the world is looking and the way the world is feeling, through rhyme.”-participant 10

All participants described hip-hop as a conduit through which they made contact with others, themselves and the world around them. Many of the participants portrayed hip-hop as a channel that conveyed certain messages that piqued their interest and introduced them to other ways of knowing. Hip-hop exposed most participants to new schools of thought and helped some to develop their political consciousness. The participant’s quote above suggests that he analyzes and reviews daily experience, history, and current world events through hip-hop. This participant (participant 10) as well as others also conveyed deep admiration and love for the music. They expressed how they developed cultural knowledge, of both religious and philosophical practices, while also being confronted by and assisted with their own internal and emotional processes, through their involvement with hip-hop. The feeling of respect and love that they described having was observable in all participant interviews. More than half of participants have shaped their professional construction as educators through hip-hop and most mentioned it assisted them in self-reflexivity. The theme of hip-hop as a conduit to knowledge, political consciousness, youth mentorship and emotional processes will be discussed here.

Conduit to knowledge. Participants talked about hip-hop functioning as a conduit between them and an otherwise inaccessible world of knowledge, self-discovery, and reflection on social processes. The experience of listening to, identifying with and connecting to hip-hop seemed to help participants transcend their own individual, temporal, and regional limitations. They

described being transported into new worlds of knowledge, experience, and feelings. Several participants expressed learning of new cultures through lyrics, just as readers do through books. Many participants were unfamiliar with certain topics discussed in songs, and their inquiry resulted in further investigation of lyrical content. Participant 8 described his experience of an otherwise unknown group of people mentioned in a song as similar to his experience reading a novel. He stated, “it was like I was reading a book and I didn’t know the vocabulary, you know, I had to look the word up in the dictionary. That literally would happen...” Other participants described artists as storytellers and albums as literature. This was evidenced by participant 7 who described a meaningful artist and his conceptualization of an album. He states,

Deltron 3030- it’s the Octavia Butler of hip-hop albums, hip-hop in the context of the year 3030 when a corporation owns the world and you have this one superhero trying to take on this corporation... He’s talking about all contemporary things but in the context of a time period we could never really conceptualize, which is what writers do, fiction writers do, science fiction writers do.

This participant discussed the journey that was described by a few other participants: lyricists and albums as creatively transporting the listener through an unknown period of time or linking them to knowledge through narration of stories. In fact, several participants described their favorite Emcee’s as storytellers, when asked about his favorite Emcee participant 5 said,

Nas, because he’s so detailed. He’s very much like a novelist, really like an author. He can really describe scenes and make you feel like you were there. I’ve always really liked Nas for that.

Almost all of the participants described Nas as one of their favorite Emcee’s due to his stylistic gift of storytelling coupled with his longevity in the hip-hop world. In fact, when asked

about their favorite verse, two participants talked about the same Nas verse from the song “One Love,” which details a conversation between Nas and a school aged child with such precise imagery it was actually depicted as a scene in a movie. Several participants spoke about Emcee’s detailed lyrics, which piqued participant interest in learning and functioned as a conduit to political consciousness.

Conduit to political consciousness. Participants discussed hip-hop as a vehicle for inquiry and expansion of knowledge while serving as a catalyst for the exploration and exposure to various cultures and histories, ultimately aiding in the construction of political stances, which helped to shape their worldviews. For instance, when discussing a personal introduction into larger scopes of interest two participants (1 and 7) discussed Ras Kass’s, “Nature of the Threat,” a seven minute song that guides the listener through a lyrical journey of human history, discussing multiple religious perspectives, revealing two narratives that expose human conflict. Participant 1 described it as a conversation between God and the Devil. The song critiques religion, race relations, colonialism, and ultimately the creation of western civilization. Participant 1 felt that it sparked his interest in philosophy and religion and spoke to ways the song initiated his own independent research on these topics. Participant 7 stated:

[Hip-hop is] a political tool, I kind of immersed myself in artists that had more of a political stance in their music and I would kind of compare what they were saying to my readings, or they would say/ drop a particular authors name, I would go and read the book ...“Nature of the Threat” was a song that I used to further investigate notions of identity, Black history, imperialism, colonialism, racism, African history, western philosophy, so he had a 6-7 min. song trying to discuss two versions of human beings and how it relates

to these different pivotal moments in history so that was a song that I would kind of use to shape my world view.

This participant and a few others felt that some lyrics embody a historical analysis and were used as a “political tool.” Some felt these types of lyrics offered an example of lyrical and literary prose which they converted into a quest for knowledge, social critique, and historical exploration. As one participant said, “Hip-hop, it makes me think. It makes me question. It makes me explore...” This type of intrigue and analysis was described by some participants, to have trickled into their work with youth.

Conduit to youth mentorship. All participants described informative components of hip-hop in the realm of exposure to other genres of music, cultures, and histories, while some translated their relationship with the culture into their professions, assisting urban youth in their own formation of social awareness and healing processes. Hip-hop practitioner 7 stated,

In terms of my construction as a teacher and educator I definitely utilize it as a talking point and a reference point to discuss larger ideas and how we can use something as micro as hip-hop to discuss larger social processes.

Perhaps as a result of their knowledge-driven experiences, more than half of the participants discussed their relationship between hip-hop and youth, offering examples in which hip-hop has intersected with their profession as educators and how they utilized it as a tool in their teachings and leading of young people. These participants felt that hip-hop was not merely for entertainment as seen in popular culture, but could be used to help educate others, as it did for them. This is evidenced by participant 10, who said,

Hip-hop is not necessarily for entertainment, it's for education, if you ask me. Hip-hop is really like what slave songs were. Or, that's how I approach it and those are my favorite artists, and people like that, who speak to that.

This participant's use of hip hop as an educative tool was echoed by other participants, who also affirmed its role in fostering much needed emotional strengths among youth. Participant 3 who described himself as an Emcee and Culture Bearer, stated,

Specifically, working with youth, using hip-hop as a tool to kind of fight apathy you get from coming up in situations where there's nowhere to go play basketball, there's no afterschool programs to go do music, there's no theater, there's no art, there's nothing but the streets. And what's on the streets. And what exists in the streets. And, coming up in those situations, you have to guard yourself...having that kind of mentality; it kind of blocks you out, makes you numb and apathetic just to your situation. In my work with youth, and again, going back to what I experience personally- it's a way to kind of cut through the apathy and just talk about what is going on with you...you can insert the why. Why is this all going on? So then, you can build a critical awareness inside of hip-hop.

This participant, as well as several others, suggest that critical awareness can be built within hip-hop to combat "apathy" among youth. The majority of participants spoke to ways that hip-hop has served as a conduit to youth by utilizing it as a tool to initiate analytical processes about individual experiences, histories, and other larger societal practices. Participants also spoke to the ways hip-hop functioned as a space to better understand themselves. Several participants described how they built their capacities for self-awareness through hip-hop and talked about it as a model for labeling emotions and identifying emotional processes.

Conduit to emotional processes. Participants felt that hip-hop aided in the recognition and identification of their own emotional states. Several spoke about how hip-hop assisted them in acknowledging and understanding the emotional turmoil that they felt. They spoke about ways hip-hop led to feelings of being understood, resulting in acceptance of emotional discomfort.

Hip-hop's role in emotional processes is evidenced by participant 6, who stated,

I can be so caught up in my mind a lot that I don't always identify with what's going on, just kind of stayed removed from situations and some things you want to identify with, sometimes there are feelings you need to feel and yeah, I turn to hip-hop. There's a lot of good songs that got me to think about things in a different way or got me to latch onto a certain feeling, to understand how to process a situation, and so forth, you know, just put you in the mind state of accepting and understanding.

As this participant stated, hip hop became a conduit through which individuals could access their own feeling states. His statement that "sometimes there are feelings that you need to feel" for which he could "turn to hip hop" suggests that the relationship that he had with the music was extended beyond its entertainment value. This is echoed by one participant who spoke about the affirming feeling he got when lyrics helped him to acknowledge his emotions; he said,

It feels good to hear somebody else saying exactly what you're thinking and even articulating emotions that you didn't even know that you really had or just hadn't put in words yet. That's a very affirming and a very comforting thing.

For this participant as well as for others, hip-hop was something upon which they could rely and turn to in times of turmoil, joy, etc., similar to how one might rely upon a trusted relationship. That hip-hop helped them with otherwise inaccessible emotional events suggested

that it played an essential role in their personal development. Several participants also spoke about how lyrical trajectories have offered a reframe to understanding their own emotions.

Participant 1 said,

I mean hip-hop is therapy. I mean, there's countless, it's probably once a week, if not once a day, to where I'm going through something and I'll hear lyrics and it definitely gives me a whole new perspective on it, or gives me something to think about.

Three participants detailed their experience of listening to the music and talked about how hip-hop served as an example for verbal expression and presented a model to voice their emotional experiences through their writing. This is evidenced by participant 3, who said,

I mean in the form of rhyme writing and processing different trials and tribulations I've gone through. I had released an album in 2010, (title and track name)...and in writing that track and in the process of writing that song, I thought about some things that I hadn't thought about in a long time, and hadn't really taken the time to digest and feel the impact it had on me, growing up. I talked about my group breaking up and really got the chance to articulate how that made me feel, and how that affected me emotionally.

The process of writing assisted this participant in emotional understanding by providing a forum to express difficult emotions which also assisted in self-reflexivity. This suggests that hip-hop has served as a forum to link and connect thought to emotions. Many participants continued to discuss the importance of hip-hop to them, and described the deep connection they felt to the music and the culture.

Hip-Hop as Connection

“Growing up listening to hip-hop, there's a lot of growing that happened- within the community and within yourself 'cause you're growing up with these artists, and true not everything they speak is relevant in your life. But, a lot of the struggle that they talk about...you know people that

have gone through it. And that may be yourself and your family as well. So, that connection was really important because I felt that I was a part of that.”-participant 9

Participant narratives revealed that hip-hop was a means of connection, a relationship that has linked them to their sense of self and to others through association. The participant quote above suggests that hip-hop is central to his identity; many others have echoed similar sentiments in regards to the feeling derived from the statement, “I was a part of that.” In this way, several participants talked about hip-hop with great respect, as a mode by which this deep sense of connection was internalized and belonging was felt. Multiple participants described this connection as a relationship and discussed hip-hop in a personal context; it’s meaning signifying that of a companion and family member. Participant 6 said, “I identify with it because we’re like the same age, it’s like a brother or sister, it’s close to me.” Participant 2 finds that “...it reminds me more of a good time in my life, so it’s kind of like sitting with an old friend.” This connection to hip-hop has bonded participants to the culture, described as the bloodline and emotional bonding of kin. As expressed in this section hip-hop as connection is further discussed as connection to self, others, racial identification, spirituality, history, and resilience.

Connection to self. Hip-hop was, and continues to be, for many participants, the soundtrack to their lives. A soundtrack which has informed their identities, shaped their relationships, cemented their sense of self, and elaborated their emotional experiences. In other words, the connection that they felt was a global one, not just to a part of themselves, but to their full and true selves. The majority of participants discussed hip-hop as the culture they grew up in which influenced their language and lifestyle, some felt that they had no choice but to participate in the culture and described instances in which the music found them. This is evidenced by one practitioner, participant 4, who said,

I've never had a choice. It wasn't ever something that I consciously said, "I want to go do this"! It was something that was more....more, with the respect to DJing it was a realization that I came to, that I have no choice ...for me hip-hop is something that, I've just grown up *in* hip-hop and *as* hip-hop. There's nothing else. I have no choice.

As this participant reveals there was something gravitational within the context and culture, the sense of growing up "in hip-hop and as hip-hop" is something that has been echoed by several participants who found themselves in and through the music. The feeling of being found within this framework and culture of hip-hop is described by one participant who said, "I didn't go in there looking for that album, almost like it found me." Other participant narratives revealed ways hip-hop helped them to find and develop their sense of self by giving appropriate models to identify with. Participant 10 said that hip-hop served as a space to negotiate his sense of identity as he found himself through the music, he states,

...it was like I was finding myself, I was figuring out who I was and I was finding myself in the music, 'cause I couldn't really find myself in school...I didn't have to be N.W.A. like, I could be other people... I didn't have to be a gangster or a killer even if the places that people live almost called for that, so it was a good feeling.

This participant felt hip-hop offered another alternative or model for Black identity, which didn't revolve around emulating people or artists who grew up and lived within his own community in Los Angeles. Independent of stereotypic models of aggressive Black men, hip-hop offered some participants examples of masculinity and artistry they felt comfortable with. When speaking about one of his favorite Emcee's participant 8 stated,

Being a Black man, you know, sometimes that's defined only as one way, like, "If you're Black...you do this". There's a certain box that you're put in and I don't think you can,

you can't do that with anyone, and you certainly can't do that with Mos Def's music and his talents because they go beyond music. And I think that's fresh as a Black man to see another Black man with all those characteristics is enlightening I guess in a way, and it just makes you think about your own versatility.

This participant speaks to the ways in which hip-hop can model other ways of being that are outside the normative stereotypes of Black men. This served for some as a platform to negotiate their own identity development, with recognition of appropriate models, the connection to hip-hop assisted some participants with a link to themselves as well as to others.

Connection to others. Hip-hop was often referred to by participants as being the connection by which to relate to other people, through the music. Some felt the connection through performance in relationship with the audience and many others as a bonding felt through the love of hip-hop. Participant 3 describes this feeling of connecting to others when he states,

It feels really good to be in a room full of people and to have them react honestly to what you're saying and what you're doing, and that's not always a positive reaction, but to have that connection with people, that feels really good. It's a great talking piece, it's a great way to relate with folks. I'm in the process of getting my album mixed, and the mix engineer, he brought up Wu-Tang a couple of times, Wu-Tang, Wu-Tang, Wu-Tang, and I didn't even put it together and I'm just like, man, I'm a Wu-Tang head, and he's like, me too! And then, it's like, an automatic bonding right there, that's my brother now 'cause we both love liquid swords. So that's dope, if you can meet somebody and automatically link and greet again like this s* is dope. I don't know talking about this, the theme of not being alone comes up.

This participant described what many others suggested: the connection between themselves and others is due to the passion they feel for the music. To say that someone is “my brother” now because of the love of a group and album signifies the importance of hip-hop and highlights its ability to unify people on a level that is referred to by this participant, as a familial bond. This connection is also spoken about in a way that is universal; some find hip-hop to transcend across cultural and racial boundaries. Participant 9 talks about hip-hop as a connector when working cross-racially with youth, he said,

I deal with and work with a lot of kids that sometimes don't have the same cultural background as I do, which is fine, but that music is still the same, and that connection helps a lot.

This participant expresses that the continuity and expansiveness of hip-hop music allows him, and others to connect with people. Although this participant and several others discussed the universal qualities of hip-hop with respect to their connection to people, they talked about ways the culture was close to them, specifically how it informed their identities as Black men.

Connection to racial identity. Findings suggested that participants used hip-hop to connect to parts of their history. They spoke about hip-hop as being a part of Black culture. As a result, this culture was expressed through their dress and vernacular. Throughout the interviews, the overarching theme of identity formation unfolded as all participants suggested that hip-hop had an influence on their Black identity in adolescence and has continued to reveal itself in larger contexts as adults. As participant 7 stated,

Nas' Illmatic, informed who I was as a person because it felt like a direct connection to my father. The trippy thing about Nas was that his father was a Blues musician and a Jazz musician and my dad was that. And my dad always told me that hip-hop wasn't good

enough and seeing the “World Is Yours” ...the cinematography reminded me of Jazz photography and so I would hear the Pete Rock [producer] music, that sample of Ahmad Jamal’s Awakening, that was something that I had definitely heard from my father and I’m hearing a rapper give a story. Nas really informed my identity as a Black man and what I saw as high art and culture.

As this participant noted and what others have suggested, notions of Black male identity are understood and negotiated through hip-hop practice, music, and culture. As previously mentioned, participants have expressed finding themselves through the music and have navigated this cultural space to inform not only their individual but their racial identity as well. The gravitational pull towards hip-hop as a space that informs racial identity is best described by one participant who explained its complexity; he noted,

...it’s a Black male space and there should be more spaces I think for women and people in the LGBT community should be pretty much a part of that but it’s been this very Black male dominated space, therefore it’s been kind of center for how you view yourself, it’s not all encompassing but it definitely plays a part in how you view yourself as a Black man, it definitely informs notions of manhood when it comes to being Black, but I think why Black men gravitate towards hip-hop so much is, you live in a country that tells you everything Black is bad, tells you that Black males are threats, and hip-hop is a place where you can be a Black man and get a lot of praise and notoriety and also, you can be very threatening and get praise as a hip-hop artist.

This participant and others described hip-hop as a multifaceted space that, perhaps due to its acceptance in popular culture, has increasingly become a space where Black men shape their

individual, gender, and racial identity. These notions of identity and hip-hop's impact on participants are further conveyed as connections to spirituality, history, and resilience.

Connection to spirituality, history, and resilience. Some participants connected their social-racial histories to hip-hop, and saw the latter as a link between them and their ancestries, one that became internalized. One participant described hip-hop's representation of what some define as "urban experience" as a "spiritual practice." Participant 10 echoed this when he described how he draws upon hip-hop in his daily life. He stated,

It's damn near my knowledge bank, because I find myself quoting hip-hop so many times throughout the day to speak on something, you know, how some people quote the Bible.

This spiritual or religious reverence for hip-hop made it feel, to some, as transcendent.

Participant 3 stated,

It's cultural resistance. It's a way to organize people, to disseminate information; it's a way to bring people together. You think about 1,000 people in a room agreeing that this one specific moment is something to elate over... You know Erykah Badu, in that song the Healer, she's like, hip-hop is bigger than religion... it's bigger than politics. It's like, all around the world people are nodding to the same beat and that's powerful to me. It shows that we can cross gender, cross sex, cross race, cross class, cross whatever, and these people have different understandings for it, but it's something that we can all agree upon and identify with. To me, hip-hop's evidence that no matter how hard to you try to destroy a peoples' culture, how hard you try to take their language, their dance, their customs, it just rises again. It just grows as a different plant out of the garden. I recognize that hip-hop is genetic information, genetic memory in human (pause) specifically, Black experience.

This participant and others spoke about the spiritual transcendence felt within hip-hop practices not only as transformational, but understood it as revealing cultural resilience. Hip-hop was described by participants as a forum that is widely accepted and can be utilized for larger practices, such as political organization, that can be universally accepted. To this end, some participants discussed a spiritual reverence that is in some ways, bigger than language, larger than religion, and more expansive than political agendas. Many participants described hip-hop as connecting them to others in a more transformational and transcendent way, a universal language that although cemented in Black culture and history, can be understood and accepted by humanity. Additionally, participants discussed the ways this transcendent experience, combined with their connections to hip-hop, assisted them in their healing processes.

Hip-Hop as Healing

“I used it to inform my identity and what I was feeling and experiencing, so when I was younger I definitely ran towards it as a sort of therapy around any type of emotional stress I was experiencing.”-participant 7

Participants spoke about hip-hop as healing, assisting them through difficult experiences, helping them to transcend suffering. As the participant above mentioned and what the majority of others echoed, they “ran to hip-hop” as a form of “therapy.” The participants explained that the trajectory of hip-hop mirrored their own narratives, including but not limited to their Black culture and history. Emotional processes were reflected in subject narratives as they discussed ways in which they were able to acknowledge feelings and relate to the lyrical content of artists who reflected their lived experience. The healing components of hip-hop were expressed within their experience of pride in Black culture and as therapy.

Healing and Black culture. Participant narratives revealed they felt a sense of healing through hip-hop in terms of their experience as Black men. Many spoke to the ways they relate

to artists as they discussed being touched by the music, finding comfort in being understood. The majority of participants talked about lyrical content that is reflective of not only their experience of oppression, but how that pain has transformed into strength, revealed through this forum of hip-hop. This experience is described by participant 8 when he stated,

There's a Memphis Bleak song I believe, and it's like a little skit in between a song and there'ssomebody having a conversation with somebody else and they're talking about being Black and he says..., "I wouldn't even want to be White" and just kind of identifying with the struggle, and being proud of struggle. And I think that comes out in the music a lot and that in its self is powerful. Being able to express yourself, not being able to, and then you know, making your own forum for your thoughts and ideas, and your expression.

This participant describes hip-hop as a forum that is utilized to express thoughts and ideas which may not otherwise be able to be heard. Many participants, talked about hip-hop's influence on them as artists spoke to the struggles they felt within themselves and their communities. This is revealed by participant 2, who said,

growing up with hip-hop, it taught me a lot about the streets, it taught me a lot about women, it taught me a lot about drugs, because things like that growing up, we've seen it, but we didn't connect with it until hip-hop reached out to us and told us, 'look at what's going on around you!' So, basically what hip-hop means to me is, it's a cutout of my life, it's a piece of the fabric of the environment and society that I grew up in.

This participant and many others suggest that hip-hop spoke to the environmental stressors they faced. These participants describe hip-hop as a genre that is specific to Black culture, one that is cemented into society, something that is continual and is unable to be

retracted or diminished. The sense of ownership and pride for hip-hop as a Black cultural art form is echoed by participant 8 who stated,

I think the fact that we created it, is a powerful thing; unfortunately I don't know if we control it now, being Black people. But you know like jazz, it's something that you can't take away it's something that we put into existence. And just like other people feel pride about you know, different things about their culture that's definitely something about being Black that I think is fresh.

This participant and others suggested that the creation of hip-hop by Black men is viewed as empowering and is something that cannot be taken away. As a genre, most participants discussed hip-hop in relation to other profound musical genres which were reflective of that time period. But it appears that participants found pride in the culture, something that was special and meaningful to them, individually as Black men. Additionally, participants continued to describe other beneficial components to hip-hop, discussing it as therapeutic.

Hip-Hop as therapy. More than half of participants interviewed used the term therapy when asked if hip-hop has helped through difficult experiences. A few found music in general to be therapeutic and five others found hip-hop, specifically to be therapeutic. These participants talked about how important hip-hop was to them in terms of dealing with emotional turmoil such as loss and anxiety. Participants also experienced hip-hop as a form of mirroring and cathartic release. Hip-hop's role in helping participants to overcome difficult experiences was explored as all participants were asked about the genre's effect on them specifically as Black men and its impact on their emotions. Numerous perceived benefits were revealed through participant narratives, including the use of hip-hop in their healing processes. This is shown by participant 2, who said,

Unfortunately in the time I grew up, you know I experienced the death of my peers... You got your Ghostface Killah, Motherless Child, and you got, Tupac over here on the West Coast, Poor Out a Little Liquor, and that part of hip-hop, because it was going on at that time, hearing guys like that...these dudes have been through this too it kind of helps you through the moment because, you know, what you're influenced by... you've seen that through their music, and it relates to you on a more personal note as it did with me. So, it's gotten me through a lot of tumultuous times.

This participant candidly spoke of the difficulty he faced with losing his peers and how he felt in relation to artists who were describing similar experiences. As previously mentioned, many participants spoke of this same sentiment, feeling that they had someone to relate to through the music as well as finding a sense of companionship. One participant mentioned, "it was like company or it was like a therapist" he also stated, "I've healed from other people's lyrics, and other people's experience."

The ways in which hip-hop was beneficial was also revealed throughout participant narratives, assisting some with daily stressors and many others with the larger stressors, such as the negative impacts of racism. This is described by participant 9 here:

One of the areas that I work in... I always feel like there are people who are judging me for the most part, and I feel that my road to success in that area is going to be a little difficult, and a little harder, than it would be for someone who is not a person of color. So, in those moments, remembering song's like (There is a Way by Mos Def) that go a long way. And, helping continuing to drive me in that direction, to drive me to be successful and to push through those moments when you have to deal with people who don't respect you because of your skin color, and who show that clearly.

The drive towards success, as participant 9 suggested, is in large part due to what others have described as a deep relationship to the music. In difficult times, participants have turned to hip-hop to “push through those moments (participant 9),” which they have found assists them in processing their emotions and work through their turmoil. This sense of what participants describe as transcendence of suffering is something that has had positive emotional effect, and is something they continually rely on and turn to in times of distress, similar to a trusted attachment figure. And although all participants found hip-hop to have a positive emotional effect and found it to be a positive relationship, some spoke about the negative impacts of hip-hop and the complexity of this relationship.

Hip-Hop as a Complex Relationship

“I don’t like being automatically, just typecast ...people just assume that, because you listen to rap then you’re obviously one thing, that’s usually sometimes negative..., the glorification of violence and murder and how it’s accepted... I don’t like that either, cause it affects me as a Black man, not necessarily directly, but indirectly, of course”-participant 5

While all participants described hip hop to have assisted them through difficult or traumatic experiences, and found hip-hop to have a positive emotional impact on them, several participants discussed the complex relationship they have with hip-hop. This complexity is described above as people make assumptions about his character; he felt “typecast” because of his relationship with hip-hop. Several participants discussed other aspects of hip-hop which they find harmful to themselves and their community; these aspects are described as negative messages within hip-hop.

Negative messages. Many participants spoke about the negative messages and limitations within hip-hop, including the appropriation and misuse of Black culture and the negative portrayal of Black men within the larger scope of rap music expressed by participant 10 who said,

The fact that it was created by Black people that to me is what makes it so significant. So it's like, well what do we do with it? And that's when, as a Black man, that's when that really hits home for me, 'cause it's like, well what are these Black men doing? Sometimes there are certain things that people do and you're like, damn, you're embarrassing the people, or said something in a rhyme where it's like, you still are providing the jokes that make everyone laugh at us.

This participant is discussed the complexity of hip-hop often seen through popular culture, and its emotional impact on the Black community, described as “embarrassing the people.” The fact that hip-hop was created by Black men has been repeated throughout this study, it was often expressed as a source of pride, but here was discussed in another light. Many participants discussed the duality of this relationship and described other ways hip-hop can be harmful. The complexity of participant relationship to hip-hop and is further evidenced by participant 7 who said,

A lot of people are getting informed of what it means to be a Black man through hip-hop and then that's myopic that's just a small aspect of someone's identity and manhood, so the duality or the flip of hip-hop is now being viewed through this lens where no other, I don't see any other ethnic group having to experience. So, I talked about Trayvon Martin (an unarmed boy who was shot and killed while walking through a gated community wearing a hooded sweatshirt), so the hoodie is something that we wear in hip-hop, it's hip-hop attire and now your fears of Black men are being changed from any old Black man to this one particular type who wears a hoodie, and dresses like this, and does this and that, so people are viewing Black men through this lens of hip-hop which can be problematic at times as well.

This participant and others explained how views of Black men through the stereotypic lens of hip-hop can and does impact them in a multitude of ways. As this participant describes, some minute aspect of hip-hop, such as wearing a hooded sweatshirt, can have devastating effects. Many participants find that notions of Black identity and masculinity are being misconstrued through small aspects of hip-hop culture often depicted in mainstream media. Like the participant above, others discussed problematic components of hip-hop with the complexity of the relationship being further evidenced by participant 9, who stated,

...one area that I have a problem with, and these kids are singing these songs and they're making jokes out of it...people go around using the N word...just carelessly. And, you know, that's an issue of what's going on in our community, not just the African American community but just as our community as a whole and how careless people can be with using those type of slurs, even the word gay, and how people use that word in our culture, especially the younger people, and how insensitive that can and is to most people who might associate themselves as being gay or people who associate themselves with being African American. It's tuff hearing those things.

The complexity of hip-hop's negative messages about marginalized communities affected many participants. The relationship that participants have with hip-hop is deeply rooted in their connectivity to the culture but as revealed through their narration, is a relationship that is complex. Findings have suggested the myriad of ways in which hip-hop has been experienced among Black men involved in this study.

Summary

This study's findings suggest that Black men have utilized hip-hop to inform their own notions of identity and used it as a forum to develop critical consciousness. It has also provided a

tool that has assisted them in healing, aiding in their ability to transcend suffering. The categories in this chapter reflect the dominant themes that arose throughout this study. Findings suggest that Black men use hip-hop was to access schools of thought previously unknown or inaccessible to participants, they also suggest that it has informed positive notions of Black male identity and experience, while enhancing relationships to others.

The most significant finding in this study is that hip-hop can serve as a therapeutic intervention, as all of the participants found healing components within music. This healing found within hip-hop assisted participants in identifying their feelings, provided an outlet for cathartic release, offered a mirror, and provided a relationship that seemed to replicate the role of a companion and therapist. The implications of these findings will be addressed and discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

This study was intended to examine the experience of hip-hop and its contributions to healing among Black men involved in the hip-hop culture. The lack of current literature on this topic led me to conduct a study which captures the personal narratives of Black men in order to explore if and how hip-hop contributes to their healing processes. Findings revealed that hip-hop has assisted participants in their ability to transcend suffering, by providing a trusted relationship which reflects and extends beyond their contextual and historical experience. This complex yet deep relationship to hip-hop revealed the deep sense of love and connection participants felt, and that could only be captured through individual exploration. This chapter will discuss major findings in relation to current literature, the strengths and limitations of this study, and implications for future research will also be addressed.

Major Findings

Hip-Hop as conduit. All participants described hip-hop as a conduit; a means by which knowledge, political consciousness, youth mentorship, and emotional processes have been transmitted. Many of the participants discussed hip-hop as a channel that conveyed certain messages that piqued their interest and introduced them to other ways of knowing. They also talked about hip-hop as informing their professions as educators which was unexpected and not explored in previous findings or literature. As educators, participants discussed hip-hop as a forum that not only enhanced their political consciousness, but some spoke to the ways in which they utilized hip-hop as a tool to engage youth in their own politicization. This is supported by

the work of Clay (2006) who found that youth of color in the post-civil rights era are still experiencing racial injustice, and that through activism, they use hip-hop as a tool for political protest in an effort to promote social justice.

Participants also talked about their relationship to the music and culture, and described ways it has assisted them in identifying emotional processes. Although research on hip-hop and social work is limited, findings in this study are supported by the work of Keen (2004) who suggests that music has been efficacious in facilitating engagement in the therapeutic process, as participants relate to the music resulting in the promotion of a therapeutic alliance. The conduit that allowed participants to access otherwise unknown schools of thought and emotional processes may also serve as a conduit in the therapeutic relationship, and further support the connection to others that participants described.

Hip-Hop as connection. Participant narratives revealed that hip-hop was a means of connection, serving as a relationship that has linked them to their sense of self and to others. The connection that they felt was a global one, to their full and true selves and to others through this deep love they have for hip-hop. This finding supports existing literature (Adams & Fuller, 2006; Clay, 2006; Rose, 1994) that suggests hip-hop is utilized as a means to inform and negotiate individual and racial identity. This study also supports the work of Cummings and Roy (2002), who suggests that the language of urban youth is distinctly African centered, grounded in the historical experiences of a people who have been oppressed by their social and political realities. This was evidenced in this study by the pride some felt as they described the origins of hip-hop being cemented in Black culture, referring to artists and lyrics as speaking to a familiar sense of struggle. This is supported by the work of Clay (2006) who suggests that hip-hop is a representative and narrative media that functions as a catalyst for identity formation. To some,

this art form translated into cultural resilience, and participants continued to expand upon this notion when speaking of their own healing and therapeutic processes within hip-hop.

Hip-Hop as healing. Many participants spoke about the therapeutic benefits of hip-hop, which is something that is under-researched and not thoroughly explored in previous research. Previous work on the therapeutic value of using hip-hop music in practice has not provided in-depth examples of the understanding of hip-hop's importance (Keen, 2004). This study viewed participant personal responses to hip-hop, and found it to be of importance. This supports the work of Sullivan (2003), which suggests that Black youth have a stronger commitment to hip-hop as they view it as life affirming. Additionally, participant responses confirm the work of Kobin and Tyson (2006) who suggest that rap lyrics may aid in relational building and motivate the client to engage in narration, in turn helping the therapist establish relevant, client-centered treatment goals. Through awareness of hip-hop, social work practitioners may be able to engage with clients, but need to fundamentally understand the complexity of participants' relationship to the music.

Hip-Hop as a complex relationship. Several participants discussed the complex relationship they have with hip-hop, one that assists in their emotional processes, but also that can impact them negatively. This complexity is reflected in the literature that finds the language and imagery seen within popular culture frequently depicting hip-hop's producers and followers as violent and misogynistic (Taylor & Taylor, 2004). Other literature highlights the importance of social workers role in understanding these dynamics. As Travis and Deepak (2011) suggest, clinicians can use hip-hop to build cultural competence and practice skills through the individual and community empowerment framework; a tool for direct practice that allows social workers to understand the competing messages within hip-hop culture and how they may impact youth. This

means that social workers may utilize tools like the empowerment framework in direct practice to better understand the complex relationship that participants in this study described as having with hip-hop.

Strengths and Limitations

Although qualitative methods cannot provide any generalizability, a major strength of this study was that it generated rich interview data about the deep relationship that some Black men have with hip-hop. The participants in this study and hip-hop culture are often under-researched, especially with regard to the ways in which positivity is experienced in their lives. The lack of literature on this topic evidences that. An additional strength of this study was that it researched hip-hop as a force of healing, versus its negative associations which are far more often represented in popular culture.

My social location as a mixed-race adult woman who is similar in age to my participants and who is also involved in the hip-hop culture in Oakland and Los Angeles was both a strength and a limitation. The investment I have with hip-hop assisted my understanding of participant narratives which may have been overlooked by those not involved in the culture. Because my location may have been a source of researcher bias, I actively looked for meanings within the narratives of participants that were different than my own, particularly surrounding participant racial and environmental experiences.

As the study sample is rather homogeneous in nature in terms of participant race, age, profession, and what some may refer to as “urban” experience, this study has undoubtedly omitted voices of women, or other racial and ethnic persons who participate or engage in hip-hop culture. And, as I have focused on adult voices due to the sampling strategies implemented, the voices of Black youth have also been omitted.

Due to the documentation process of audio recording, confidentiality was limited to the removal of names from documentation. Participants may have been uncomfortable expressing their thoughts about the music and its influence in front of the researcher or while being recorded in a public space, and may have been concerned that the researcher may discuss comments outside the interview with others. If participants experienced any emotional discomfort or wished to seek mental health services, a referral list would have been offered (Appendix D).

Implications for Social Work Practice

Participants in this study reported to have experienced healing because of their transformational relationship and connectedness to hip-hop. This population of Black men utilized hip-hop in ways that parallel traditional modes of therapy, citing it as a space to negotiate their sense of self. Participants have identified and verbalized their emotions through hip-hop, viewing it as a mirror, or reflective space that helped them to see and validate their lived experience. These narratives also suggest that hip-hop offers a holding environment, a space that embraces and encourages analytical processes and ideas pertaining to identity while offering a nurturing trusted relationship.

As clinicians are required to adhere to a code of ethics, which encompasses respect, the cultural practices of communities of color should be acknowledged and understood. Travis & Deepak (2011) suggest that cultural competence can be enhanced through greater self-awareness of potential biases against hip-hop, but also via knowledge building about youth culture, high-risk environments, and ethnic minority cultures. It is imperative that clinical work is considerate of hip-hop culture, in order to best serve Black men whom engage in its practice. In order to address this populations needs, it is important to recognize the history of this group and its cultural practice, which encompasses historic and symbolic meaning found in hip-hop.

Participants' narratives suggest that hip-hop may be used to engage Black men in therapy as they have described utilizing it as a tool for labeling, understanding, and assisting in their emotional processes. This is supported by the work of Kobin and Tyson (2006), who suggest that lyric analysis from a client's preferred style of rap music can potentially give insight into a client's phase of racial development and gain important information about the client perspectives, values and beliefs. As Kobin and Tyson (2006) further suggest, the RCID model as well as the latter stages of the Nigrescence Model may lead to a better understanding of the socio-emotional processes of Black men involved in hip-hop culture. Through these models, social work practitioners may be better equipped to not only understand hip-hop's role in Black identification, but develop culturally relevant forms of treatment.

Recommendations for Future Research

As Ladson-Billings and Donner (2005) suggest, emerging culturally competent practitioners should be required to think critically and become innovative with clinical research in order to seek culturally responsive intervention that is relevant to the concerns of oppressed populations. This project aimed to explore and document the experience and utility of hip-hop, to Black men who engage in the culture with confidence that it may offer an increased understanding of its importance to social work practitioners who may not be aware of its impact in the communities we serve. In conducting this study, it is important to mention the extreme challenge I faced in fully capturing and communicating the emotional and as some suggest, spiritual bond, that participants experience through their engagement in the culture. As emotions are not quantifiable, the measurement of hip-hop's magnitude is difficult to encapsulate in words. Future research could further investigate notions of hip-hop as a therapeutic medium, perhaps with a larger and broader racial and ethnic sample, utilizing emotional aids, perhaps as

one subject suggested, a feelings chart. I would further suggest utilizing specific modalities, including the four pillars of hip-hop, perhaps documenting participant emotional and affective experiences prior, during, and after participation or listening to music.

This study is in small part a reflection of the experience of the Black male participants who have been involved in the culture from a young age; it may be helpful to conduct a longitudinal study that documents participant experiences at various stages of their development. Unexpected findings also support the need for further research, as half of the participants discussed their own educational processes and their professions as educators, it is unclear if hip-hop was pivotal in shaping their professional goals or if it merely assisted them in their work with youth. Social work could also benefit in better understanding hip-hop as a spiritual practice, as some participants suggest it parallels as a religious framework, citing that lyrics are used as a doctrine to base ethics and moral codes, similar to the Bible, or as a forum to express faults as in confessions.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal rich and meaningful data that offers insight into the hip-hop community through the unique perspective of hip-hop enthusiasts. Although narratives are discussed through individual contexts, they give insight into the importance of hip-hop to its practitioners and followers, and reveal how this art form can be utilized in therapeutic practice. Though the individuals were asked about their personal experience and relationship to hip-hop culture, many described ways that hip-hop can and has been used to connect with others and assist in their healing processes. The movement of the study was supported by the love of hip-hop and similar to participant descriptions of hip-hop helping them to “push through” difficult moments, they and the music also assisted me in the completion of this project. The strength of

this study lies in its ability to expand upon the limited research of hip-hop music by exploring the possibilities for more relevant culturally sensitive social work practices. It is my hope that this study and its results will better inform clinical social workers about the utility and use of hip-hop in practice. This study promotes the implementation of hip-hop as a creative and relevant model that does what social workers seek to do, develop a deep trusted relationship, and assist clients with their emotional processes. I hope that this study reveals the importance of such work to communities of color and draws respect to the healer known as hip-hop.

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Appendix A

Approval Letter from Human Subjects Review Committee



School for Social Work
Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

March 5, 2012

Tawnee Sae-Saue

Dear Tawnee,

Your changes were very good and well done. Your project is now officially approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

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!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David L. Burton', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

David L. Burton, M.S.W., Ph.D.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Beth Kita, Research Advisor

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

Dear Interview Participant,

My name is Tawnee Sae-Saue, and I am a Masters of Social Work (M.S.W.) candidate at Smith College, interested exploring Black males' experience of hip-hop. You have been invited to participate in this research study because you identify as a Black male, are above the age of 18, actively engage in the creation of hip-hop (Emceeing, Djing, Breaking, or Graffiti), or actively listen to hip-hop at a minimum of 10 hours per week. If you are a minor, do not identify as a Black male, do not actively participate or engage in hip-hop culture a minimum of 10 hours per week, and are not conversant in English (the language used for conducting interviews) you will not qualify to participate. The findings from this study will be used for the MSW thesis, professional presentations, and publication.

You will be asked to partake in a 60 min interview, talking to me about your experience of hip-hop music and culture. Demographic data, such as your age, racial or ethnic identification, geographic location and other information such as how many hours you are involved with the genre a week, the nature of your involvement, and the age you were when you began to participate in the creation or engage in the music will be collected at the time of the interview. The in person interview will be audio taped and take place in a safe, agreed upon location (i.e. café or local library) and scheduled according to your convenience. A phone or Skype interview may be considered if an in person interview is not feasible due to travel or scheduling conflict.

Minimal risk from participation is anticipated. You may experience emotional discomfort when reflecting on your experiences of hip-hop, and you will be given a list of mental health services should this occur. Benefits in participation may include your having new insight and perspective on the role of hip-hop in your life, while providing you with the opportunity to share your experience. The information gained from this study will help me and perhaps others gain a deeper understanding of the relevance of hip-hop and the findings of this study may be useful in articulating and conveying its importance to similar populations to those who practice clinical social work. You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

If you agree to be audiotaped there will be limitations to confidentiality. All identifying information (i.e. names) will be removed from data. For purposes of the MSW thesis, research advisors will have access to data only after identifying information is removed. Audiotapes will be viewed and listened to by me and possibly a transcriber who will review materials privately. If transcribers are used, they will be asked to sign a confidentiality pledge. All data will be stored in a securely locked file cabinet for three years as stipulated by federal guidelines and will then be destroyed or maintained securely.

Participation in this study will be voluntary and you may refuse to answer any interview questions. You may withdraw from the study before the interview begins or at any time during

the interview. If you wish to withdraw from the study, you may do so no later than March, 31st, 2012. If you wish to withdraw from the study, all materials related to your involvement in the study will immediately be destroyed. There is no penalty for withdrawal. Should you have questions about your rights or any aspects of this study you are encouraged to call me or the Chair of Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at (413) 585-7974.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTOOD 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

Signature of Participant _____ Date: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____ Date: _____

Appendix C

Interview Guide (or Instrument)

Age:

Geographic Location:

Age at the time of involvement:

Hours and type of engagement:

Nature of involvement:

1. Describe your first and favorite experience of hip-hop.
2. What does hip-hop mean to you?
3. Does hip-hop play a role in your interactions with peers, family, life goals, and dreams, if so, how?
4. Has creating (DJing, Breaking, Emceeing, Graffiti) or listening to hip-hop been helpful to you during a difficult experience(s)? If so, please describe.
5. Is there anything about hip-hop that has meaning to you as a Black man?
6. Does hip-hop have a positive emotional impact on you? If so, how?
7. Please offer the names of your favorite hip-hop artists and describe why you appreciate them.
8. What is your favorite hip-hop verse and why?

Appendix D

Mental Health Referral List

Los Angeles:

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

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

Didi Hirsch Mental Health Ctr.
Crisis counseling, free within 3 months of the event
Medi-Cal required for other services
(310) 390-8896

Bay Area:

Bay Area Psychotherapy Services
Individuals, couples, families, children, adolescents and groups
2901 Shattuck Ave
Berkeley, California 94705
Phone: 510-649-9320

Berkeley Drop-In Center
Outpatient mental health services for adults, families, children and groups
3234 Adeline St
Berkeley, California 94703
Phone: 510-653-3808

Families That Care
Counseling for individuals, groups, families, couples
1404 8th Street
Oakland, California 94607
Phone: 510-433-1121