Theses, Dissertations, and Projects

2016

Internalizing a social justice identity through hip hop values in the Beats, Rhymes, and Life Academy : a project based upon an investigation at Beats, Rhymes and Life

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Internalizing A Social Justice
Identity Through Hip Hop Values
in the Beats, Rhymes, and Life
Academy

ABSTRACT

This mixed method study investigates how the Beats, Rhymes, and Life Academy helps its members subvert systems of oppression. Through a quantitative survey and a qualitative 1.5-hour semi-structured interview, participants assessed their experience with social justice activism while in the BRL Academy. The study outlined three ways subversion of systemic oppression occurs: by developing one's feeling of individual agency and empowerment to achieve one's goals, developing a social justice identity, and empowering their community with the use of the first two factors.

The study found that Academy members felt like they had developed their own strength and were more aware of social justice issues within their community due to participating in the Academy. Participants described ways in which they were involved in direct action against systems of oppression. Participants also felt that they could use their own strengths to empower their larger community to resist against systemic oppression.

This study also used aspects of a Community-Based Participatory Research Model in order to have Academy members direct their ideas about how the research should be implemented. A CBPR model was also used to honor the values of Hip Hop, which was created for the purpose of empowering a community rather than silencing it, through dominant structures.

INTERNALIZING A SOCIAL JUSTICE IDENTITY THROUGH HIP HOP

VALUES IN THE BEATS, RHYMES, AND LIFE ACADEMY

A project based upon an investigation at Beats, Rhymes and Life, submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2016

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Hip Hop Culture and Origin

The delivery of music with one's whole body is a delivery that is viscerally felt by not just the performer, but by the audience as well. When I think of Hip Hop, I think of the energy that is translated from the artist to the listener. When a Hip Hop artist performs, they are creating music through both verbal and physical expression. KRS-ONE outlines this energy through his song "9 Elements." In this song he reminds us of the many ways that the body can create and communicate a musical experience, and he communicates that music honors the culture and race of the community through the vehicle of. breakdancing, graffiti art, DJing, and MCing, KRS-ONE shows the ways that the body engages fully in Hip Hop culture.

Although some understand it as a single art form, Hip Hop actually is an entire culture that has worked to express itself through various artistic mediums. It is worth noting, however, that the culture and energy of Hip Hop is one that is unique to its participants. Hip Hop honors the experience of a community and works to articulate its struggle, beauty, and complex issues of social justice. KRS-ONE notes "Hip Hop is all about victory over the streets. Hip Hop is something you live. Rap is something you do." KRS-ONE describes the life force that Hip Hop has become for its community members and participants. Hip Hop is not just a one thing. To some, Hip Hop is everything. Hip Hop has become a way to build a community of people that understand struggle and sublimate their experiences through various forms of expression and art Hip Hop does not stop at rap, graffiti art, nor any of the other forms or genres that are usually associated with it. Rather, Hip Hop uses and honors history and past influences that is critical to continuing its path to transcend itself, and grow in form and practice. An example of this is using

samplings from jazz artists such as Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, etc. to develop a new sound with lyrics that can reach the listener.

Dalton Higgins (2009) speaks to the birthplace of Hip Hop, stating that the culture was born in the South Bronx when unemployment for Black and Latino youth were at a 60-80%. In this narrative, DJ Kool Herc was the catalyst for the Hip Hop culture after he used two separate records to elongate the song. Now known, as the "break beat," Herc then started to improvise vocals over the beat. DJ Kool Herc, of course, was not intending to create rap music but was rather using his knowledge of how oral historians communicated current events and told stories while playing the djembe, a percussive instrument. Higgins explains that Afrika Baambaata further paved the way for Hip Hop culture with the creation of Zulu Nation, an organization intended to "teach youth self-pride and cultural awareness through song and dance" (p.17).

It's important to note in the 70's, the Bronx developed a reputation for its poverty and crime. After the expressway train was built from New York City to the Bronx, many White Middle class families moved out of the Bronx and into New York City. This predominantly made the Bronx the home of Latino and Black communities. It is because of this perhaps, that Hip Hop became a way to express discontent, issues of race and racism, social justice, but much more importantly, a way to develop and foster a community with one another.

Beats, Rhymes and Life Inc. Beats Rhymes and Life (BRL) is a community-based organization that was founded in 2004 in Oakland, CA. BRL was founded as a response to the necessity for mental health services that engaged and appealed to youth in the community that present with complex health and social needs due to systemic oppression. At BRL, these youth are called youth at-promise. Tomás Alvarez III, who was a school social worker in Oakland, saw the necessity for such interventions since he worked closely with many of the youth in the area.

Many of Oakland's youth are exposed to such high levels of poverty and multigenerational violence that many view it as commonplace. Alvarez, along with, teaching artist, Rob Jackson pioneered the idea of hip-hop therapy groups and later founded the organization. BRL and the hip hop therapy groups were created intentionally using the perspective of the at-promise youth by combining hip hop, which was a culture and musical style that youth seemed to embrace and also, multiple facets of support through leadership and groups.

BRL's innovative program addressed the need for mental health services by providing purposeful, interactive and engaging programs through therapeutic activity groups and other services. BRL not only focuses on treating mental health issues, but also on prevention and early intervention. BRL has expanded to the larger Bay Area and has shared many of its program ideas to areas nationwide. As evident in the quickly expanding program, BRL has de-stigmatized therapy amongst at promise youth and has been successful at effectively providing services to youth. BRL has been coined an innovative program for effectively engaging youth that would historically refuse services.

The Academy. Beats, Rhymes, and Life believes in the value of collaborative work as a community, which shows especially in the Academy program. The Academy is made up of members of BRL that have already had exposure to the organization through participating experience in BRL's Therapeutic Activity Groups (TAGs) or have completed a college program. TAG alumni are recruited to further support their interest in personal, educational and community growth. The Academy program is a two-year program in which Academy members are taught how to facilitate a TAG group while concurrently taking courses at BRL headquarters (known as the WISE sub-program). During the second year, Academy members are then given the opportunity to teach Academy courses to first year Academy members (STEP sub-program). This

program has been created with the intention to grant its members with an alternative, specialized certificate in which Academy members would be able to apply to a higher education program such as a Master's in Social Work.

Goal of the Current Study

The following study was constructed to explore how the BRL Academy helps its members subvert systems of oppression. The study looked for the specific ways that Academy members engaged in resisting against systemic oppression, based on research collected in the literature review, with space for new findings that are unexpected. When creating this research question, a CBPR model emerged as the most thoughtful way to include Academy members in the research process. A CBPR model strives to treat participants as partners in creating change and improvement instead of as objects of research (McTaggart, 1997). Working collaboratively with Academy members honors the idea that they are truly the experts of their own experience and limits the positioning of researchers as holding more valuable knowledge or experience. The principles of community-based practice include consideration of the clinical, practical and methodological considerations in building community partnerships, assessing community needs and issues, analyzing and interpreting results as a community, and disseminating findings in a manner that has direct implications for the community itself (Minkler, Dasho, Wallerstein, & Martin, 2008). Due to not owning membership in the BRL community, researchers relied on Academy members' involvement in developing the research question and interpreting the resulting data.

Community-Based Participatory Research Model

In order to align with the roots of Hip Hop philosophy and ethics, my research partner and I chose to use a participatory study as the research model, as the benefits greatly outweigh a study

where participants are solely involved as study subjects. While participatory studies in general are powerful methods of involving youth participants to use their own agency and empowerment, we utilized aspects of a CBPR model in order to honor the principles of BRL and Hip Hop. As explored in the history of Hip Hop, the movement began with do-it-yourself roots, blending consciousness raising and critical thinking. Because BRL is dedicated to Hip Hop therapy and culture, it is only in alignment that the research involving BRL would also adhere to these roots. We have decided to utilize aspects of a CBPR approach in order to maximize collaboration between Academy members and researchers, empower Academy students, engage in critical conversations, and raise our consciousness of power dynamics in the research process.

The first reason that CBPR is the most effective model for engaging in research with the Academy is because Academy youth, who have been marginalized in academic settings and are actively engaged in countering narratives of not being "good at school", have the opportunity to direct how their ideas and experiences are understood in the context of academic project. It is our hope that collaboration in this project serves as a reparative experience with an educational system and students can see themselves as succeeding at an aspect of academia. Through collaboration between researchers and youth, participants have the potential to take charge of their own learning and thus work towards personal aspirations and growth (Smith, Beck, Bernstein, & Dashtguard, 2014). By utilizing aspects of the CBPR framework in this study, Academy students not only learn about conducting research through the collaborative process, but ideally have participated in a manner that maintains that those in power are not exerting their power over those less systematically privileged.

Second, CBPR has an inherent goal of empowering participants by giving them an opportunity to be agents of change beyond their personal narrative. Youth participatory research

has the potential to create feelings of agency amongst participants, especially if they have experienced limited agency due to their positionality and personal narratives (Smith et al., 2014). Youth in the Academy have experienced structural and individual oppression for a variety of reasons. Through utilizing a CBPR approach,, participants can experience having agency, leading to feelings of empowerment and gaining control over aspects in their social environment. Through direct involvement in the collaborative study process, participants have the potential to increase individual and collective change in partnership with researchers (McIntyre, 2000), which positions them as agents of change initially stemming from their own experiences and expanding to the greater community of which they are a part.

Through the CBPR approach, participants engage in critical conversations about what topic they want to research in their community. At BRL, Academy members' knowledge is the primary focus of the CBPR study and decisions must always ultimately belong to them, not to the researchers as outside agents (McTaggart, 1997). Further, a participatory study "does not accept truths created outside that community or truths created by researchers working inside the community who treat the community as an object for research" (McTaggart, 1997, p. 40). Through engaging in critical conversations between Academy members and researchers, we strive to not taking outside truths as participants' truths. By listening to Academy members thoughts and stories, "giving them the opportunity to speak about their lives and by collaborating with them in designing plans of action to address their concerns" (McIntyre, 2000, p.126), we hope to most effectively develop a research question that honors their experience.

When utilizing a CBPR approach, power dynamics need to be acknowledged and taken into account. This is a crucial aspect of the research, as Academy members likely have been systematically oppressed and silenced just as the roots of Hip Hop were compromised by big

money and record labels. This is especially important to consider when looking at our positioning as graduate students, as we do not wish to serve as the oppressors in power using Academy members as our participants. Power as a researcher over participants can be used as a way of maintaining control and gaining knowledge to be used in coercive ways, giving off an "illusion of participation" (McTaggart, 1997). In a participatory study, "regular checks are made to ensure that the agenda of the least powerful become an important focus of the group's work" (McTaggart, 1997, p. 34). This is an extremely important facet for a research project conducted with people of varying social powers, and although we are aware of ways that this could have been executed more fully, we hope that our collaborative stance and our continued exploration of the roles our work plays in academia, Hip Hop, and BRL was used in a sensitive and thoughtful manner.

Using aspects of a CBPR approach in working with the BRL community may help to increase the authenticity of the study. Issues of social justice and community resilience have been examined in Hip Hop culture since its inception. In 1989, the Hip Hop artist KRS-ONE created the Stop The Violence movement. Higgins (2009) states this campaign was in an effort to "address violence in the black community through education, grassroots organizing, and direct action" (p.97). This is just one of the few examples in which Hip Hop culture has become synonymous with advocacy for civil rights through community awareness. Due to these very powerful ideas, a CBPR-informed approach aims to honor Hip Hop's value of direct action through community involvement and organizing.

Chapter II

LITERATURE REVIEW

A Hip Hop therapy framework highlights the integration of Hip Hop theory and clinical interventions to help shape treatment for an individual. By taking a Hip Hop therapy approach, Hip Hop is used to help the individual cope with both mental health challenges (Alvarez, 2011). Hip Hop culture as a whole is used to subvert systems of oppression With this understanding of Hip Hop culture and the ways it promotes mental health and challenges systemic systems, the following study aims to examine how the Beats, Rhymes, and Life Academy utilizes Hip Hop to help its members to subvert systems of oppression. Specifically, the study aims to examine how the BRL Academy supports its participants with tools to resist against racial and systemic oppression and racism by focusing on the individual's growth and developing social justice identity and by empowering individuals to organize with their communities to create change.

Individual Agency and Empowerment

The Beats, Rhymes, and Life (BRL) Academy supports the development of individual agency through personal, social, and professional means by using a Hip Hop therapy framework. The Academy uses Hip Hop culture to give Academy members the capacity to not just reflect on their experiences, but to identify their strengths in relation to moving their lives forward. In addition to identifying their strengths, Academy members also learn how to use their skills and to identify their own wants, needs, and direction in which they would like to take their new skills. BRL encourages its members to explore any track that they are interested in whether it's a "Clinical" track, an "Artist" track, or an "Administrator" track as well. In addition to choosing their own learning track at the Academy, members engage in a curriculum in which they become the facilitators of the Hip Hop therapy treatment groups with youth in the community. This

engagement may help increase individual agency through increasing self-esteem and level of mastery.

Livingstone, Celemencki, & Calixte (2014) showed the radical effects of youth development in finding their voice. The study consisted of 4 adults and 16 Black high school students that engaged in focus groups addressing issues of racism, multiculturalism in regard to school policy and community-based programs. The study showed that by utilizing a participatory action research model, the youth felt like their voices were being considered and their self-confidence and individual agency was increased. Furthermore, the youth participants demonstrated a developed sense of empowerment to disagree with the perspectives of adults. The youth in this study were able to share their stories and model their own study, which parallels processes in term of how the Academy functions generally and how Academy members were encouraged to inform this study.

In fact, BRL Academy members engage in a curriculum that teaches them how to see themselves in a more positive way. Since BRL Academy members come from marginalized and disenfranchised communities in Oakland, many Academy members have experienced the effects of prejudice, racism, and know the effects of systems of oppression. Stemming from the strength of marginalized communities, Hip Hop resources these Academy members by showing them how to reframe their experiences. By expressing their individual stories and listening to MCs rap about issues that can validate the Academy members' own experiences, Hip Hop helps to show Academy members to engage in healthier thinking attitudes of seeing themselves as capable. Travis and Deepak (2011) state that Hip Hop therapy emphasizes "the importance of embracing youth culture while reframing unhealthy thinking and attitudes… these models emphasizes deconstructing negative attitudes and behaviors to promote a healthier functioning." In this way,

Hip Hop is about the engagement of a community showing its members the frustrating conditions in which racism and systems of oppression have affected one another's quality of life. Though Hip Hop identifies this to its community, it also aims to send a clear message to community members that there is a way to subvert these systems of oppression and racism as well.

BRL uses narrative therapy approaches in all aspects of the work, and Academy members are reminded throughout the curriculum that Hip Hop is rooted in its community and the stories that its members have to tell. Hip Hop artist Talib Kweli writes "Listening to instrumentals/Thinking about all the things I've been through/The music is just a peek into my life, it's a window." A seasoned Hip Hop artist, Kweli understands the use of telling his narrative story through Hip Hop music. The image of him listening to instrumental tracks and writing lyrics that communicate his personal story is simple, yet profoundly self-aware, as he understands the utility of the narrative story.

Combs and Freedman (2013) discuss belief in which people experience their lives through stories, suggesting that there is a collaboration of people's narratives in order to enrich them. These stories, according to Combs and Freedman, do not fix the problem story but rather, they help the individual see that their experiences are complex and can provide information to the main problem story. This use of narrative frameworks helps to shape an Academy member's individual agency as it reframes the member's story using a more strength-based approach. By engaging in this narrative approach, youth can start to externalize their problems as being separate from themselves. The story is externalized from the individual, which means that the problem is externalized without judgment of the Academy member. This helps Academy members to explore their relationship to their problems rather than being pathologized as being problematic themselves.

By providing a voice to the disenfranchised, individual agency and empowerment can subvert systemic oppression such as public education. There is a clear lack of school funding for marginalized communities. A school is funded based on property values and more profitable neighborhoods and communities receive better funding for their schools. This means that marginalized neighborhoods do not receive the funding that is required to support their communities adequately. Forman (2006) states

> With the decline and ruin of traditional spaces of socialization and cultural enrichment (with the public school systems of most major cities being a crucial site of failure) new apparatuses of authority have also emerged to manage those youths who are failing or are designated as 'at risk,' posing a threat (whether real or potential) to their schools' missions.

This supports the idea that marginalized communities are not receiving the proper education that is supportive in terms of developing self-agency and individual empowerment.

In developing an increased sense of self-agency, Academy members also develop their own individual empowerment. This empowerment relates to the way in which Academy members use their capacity to achieve success. Zeldin, Krauss, Kim, Collura, & Abdullah (2015) completed a study in which 299 youth development program participants in Malaysia were asked to complete measures used to identify empowerment and agency. The participants were actively engaged in youth-adult partnerships reflective of the BRL Academy model. The study showed that youth felt that they had an increased feeling of agency and empowerment due to their positive youth-adult partnerships.

Travis (2013) describes the role that empowerment plays within the individual, through the use of Hip Hop by saying that the individual has recognized their potential and uses their

"existing knowledge, positive attitudes, and interpersonal skills" to achieve this potential. Clay (2006) argues that in order for the individual to engage in issues of social justice through resistance, it is critical for the individual to form their own identity in regards to self-agency and empowerment. BRL Academy members likely engage in this empowerment development through being given the attention, individualized support, and resources necessary to achieve success (in this case, educational success). By supporting its members with an alternative form of education, BRL helps to support its Academy members is subverting systems of oppression in education.

  Development of the Social Justice Identity. In understanding the basis and significance of Hip Hop theory, it is important to examine not just rap music but rather the entirety of Hip Hop as a culture and movement and its relation to social justice. Kobin and Tyson (2006) state that Hip Hop embodied the poetic narration of Black history and experience through spoken word, breakdancing, graffiti art, DJing, and MCing, Hip Hop theory believes in using these forms of expression to support issues of social justice. Forman (2013) writes "hip-hop has evolved not only as a crucial mode of artistic and creative expression, but also as a series of practices informing the articulation of collective political agency as well as for the performance and communication of politicized subjectivities." This statement takes into consideration the presence that Hip Hop culture has in the larger context of the political climate. Forman is arguing that Hip Hop has become more than artistic freedom but that it has encompassed a medium for addressing issues of social justice as well. Clay (2006) discusses various examples in her article in which youth from various slam poetry events developed a sense of social justice, through the practice and implementation of Hip Hop culture to "sustain and motivate their own activism." She discusses the way in which youth became aware of their own political activism by bringing to the

foreground the issues that they felt they wanted to see addressed. Clay notes that for marginalized youth of color, that Hip Hop has become a way for youth to participate politically as a starting foundation for developing a social justice identity.

Hip Hop culture has helped Academy members identify their own political interests and provides its members with tools to become involved with direct action. By encouraging members engage in an alternative education program and by having members then teach their knowledge to others in the community, the Academy is supporting one form of direct action and subversion. Another way that the social justice identity is likely developed within the Academy members is the due to that Academy's focus to engage in prosocial and positive Hip Hop. Forman (2013) discusses the way in which Hip Hop has received harsh judgment from youth for engaging in more positive or radicalized political messages:

> Among the core issues isolated for critique among urban teens are materialism and the promotion of ''bling'' accumulation, the depiction of stereotypical racial and sexual identities, tacit acceptance of misogyny and male sexism, and the representation (lyrical or otherwise) of masculine aggression and violence. Moreover, the lines of access are severely curtailed and struggling hip-hop artists feel stymied by a massive commercial system that discourages prosocial themes and activist political messages.

However, BRL Academy members engage in a strength-based form of Hip Hop much like what Forman is describing in the passage. Instead of describing the youth and its members as being "at-risk", BRL community members focus on strengths and areas of growth, focusing on community members to being "at-promise." Further, Academy members are encouraged to engage in their strengths and positivity in their writing. Further, if their lyrics discuss hardships and challenges, then the community members respond positively at the sharing of the story,

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increasing resiliency rather than framing one's experience as pathologized with challenges. Academy members are also from diverse, intersectional identities, which mean that issues of diversity are discussed in the curriculum as well.

Further empirical studies have shown how youth continue the development of a social justice identity through finding their voice. Flores-Gonzalez, Rodriguez, & Rodriguez-Muniz (2006) conducted a participatory action study in which two graduate students and their professor used a sample population of 12 Puerto-Rican participants to examine the effects that Hip Hop had on their developing voices and awareness of social issues. Using the youth development social justice model from Ginwright and Cammarota (2002), the study proved that the participants developed a deeper meaning of social-awareness that contributed to their understanding of systemic oppression and other issues of social justice. Similarly, Petchauer (2011) conducted a study in which Hip Hop culture was used to develop a social justice identity among 25 African-American liberal arts students. The study had the participants engage in a set of learning activities that would promote issues of social justice. The results of the study showed that by engaging in Hop Hop learning activities, that the participants thought more about justice- oriented issues. It seems that once a social justice identity is developed, the individual can then translate this knowledge and skills to their larger community.

Community Empowerment. Community empowerment refers to the way that a community builds and reinforces its strengths through the use of its members. The empowerment comes from the community members identifying and using their strengths to support the community as a whole. The power of the community stems from the fact community members are the experts in their own advocacy and not by needing to defer to a "professional" that is not explicitly from the community. Direct action from community members, as a form of community

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empowerment, helps one another use each individual's strengths. Through fostering relationships within the community, linkages can be created to resources and knowledge that can be used in favor of direct action and advocacy. Community empowerment is important in that it avoids the tokenization and essentializing of marginalized communities. This is a social justice approach in that power is given to the people by the people, and the people come together as a community to advocate for their needs and communicate their struggle. Flores-Gonzalez, Rodriguez, & Rodriguez-Muniz (2006) demonstrate this as their participants developed a social justice identity, which was in turn used to create direct action against gentrification and to resist against the displacement of the Puerto- Rican community. By using Hip Hop as a model for change, youth are able to see other people's struggles outside of their own and "join the struggle to fight oppression and improve their community" (pg. 194).

A Hip Hop therapy framework also facilitates and helps to develop community empowerment through using Hip Hop culture to engage community members through a common language of culture, art, and expression. A Hip Hop therapy framework identifies and honors a community's' history, strength, and value. Rather than perpetuating negative stereotypes of marginalized communities, this framework engages in positive engagement, and through the creation of individual self-worth, the community can become empowered even further. It provides a critical examination of systemic oppression, internalized oppression, and provides tools to community members to resist against the oppression (Forman 2013; Clay 2006; Travis 2013). The BRL Academy members likely become the leaders of community empowerment.

Through the development of self-agency and the social justice identity, Academy members take these skills and attribute them to the larger community. An example of this is by becoming advocates of the community and teaching other community members how to identify their own

strengths. Again, this is apparent in that Academy members use their knowledge of Hip Hop therapy to teach youth how to empower themselves with their own stories and their own power. This phenomena was examined by Zeldin, Krauss, Kim, Lucchesi, & Sulaiman (2014) who conducted a study with 647 youth participants to measure the effect of youth-adult partnerships and its effects on community activism. The studies revealed that youth expressed feeling more empowered to use their voice and to engage in community empowerment through direct action. Travis and Deepak (2011) highlight the way in which community youth empowerment occurs stating, "This community growth includes strengthening environmental assets for youths such as family, schools, community, and institutions. These may be ethnic or culture-specific communities or broader notions of humanity as a whole" (p.214-215). Following the trajectory of Travis and Deepak's argument, BRL Academy members work with youth in school and community settings such as libraries, and always encourage the familial support from the youth involved in the treatment groups and workshops.

An artist's lyrics and experience are important to others because it speaks to a common experience or life from the artist and their community (Kobin & Tyson, 2006). Rap lyrics and MCing becomes the way in which people engage, not just with their shared experiences, but with how they communicate as a community as a whole. This becomes significant in analyzing social justice work in a clinical setting, as the lyrics become a form of direct action in themselves. This form of direct action helps to raise the awareness of the unspoken/unintentional barriers about issues of race and internalized oppression.

Foucault (1965, 1975, 1977, 1985) discusses the use of modern power, in which the power is returned to the community through advocacy work and discourse, Still, this is problematic in that Foucault perpetuated the notion that the higher privileged voice is the one that

the discourse respects and considers more. This is the issue at hand in working with marginalized communities in that the modern power has been removed due to differences in privilege. Still, this is one of the first steps in returning power to communities rather than to leave it to authority figures that perpetuate the dominant narrative.

Implications for Social Work. It is important to note that the amount of research that has been done on Hip Hop therapy in social work is limited, at best. Further there is little research that has been done in examining how Hip Hop Culture can become a model to engage an individual's empowerment to further empower their community and resist systemic oppression. The areas of individual agency and empowerment, development of the social justice identity, and community empowerment can help frame the understanding for the role that social work plays in the BRL Academy, Hip Hop, and social justice as a whole. Although these areas have emerged in internal understandings what happens through participation in the BRL Academy, the current study aims to articulate how these processes, which emerge through the empowerment of Hip Hop, support Academy members to subvert systems of oppression. This study will provide further information about how this occurs and how it can be integrated into clinical social work.

<center>**Chapter III**</center>

<center>**METHODOLOGY**</center>

Formulation

The present mixed methods community-based research study is an exploration into the hip-hop therapy program Beats, Rhymes, & Life, Inc. (BRL)'s clinician training program called the Academy. The study will explore the following questions: (1) How does the BRL Academy utilize a strengths-based model? and (2) How does the BRL Academy support its members in subverting systems of oppression? Findings were collected through a mixed method study comprised of a survey and semi-structured interview. The purpose of the studies were to assess these two values identified by the Academy leaders and members as central to their success. The focus of exploring how the Academy utilizes a strength-based model lends clarity to how an "at promise" rather than "at risk" approach honors Academy member's individuality. The focus of examining the Academy's curriculum and inclusion of the issue of systemic oppression helps shape a clearer view of developing a social justice identity within its members to resist oppression. The method was shared between these two studies, although this paper focuses on the latter research question.

Conceptually, the BRL Academy is a community-based approach to intervention for youth that focuses on utilizing the culture, values, and practices of hip hop to support healing. The Academy serves as a platform for college-aged BRL participants to achieve self-defined professional goals by allowing members to select classes under an artist or mental health clinician track. The Academy also provides in-vivo job training and an ongoing community and source of support for members. While BRL has explored the specific trajectories of members enrolled in the Academy, little has been done to understand how the values that informed the Academy's

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structure impact those enrolled.

Community-Based Participatory Research Model. We utilized aspects of a Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach in the study in order to maximize collaboration between Academy members and researchers, support empowerment of Academy students, facilitate engagement in critical conversations, and attend to power dynamics. The decision to use a CBPR participatory action research method is based on the fact that BRL is a living, breathing entity that has been created through identifying and using community members' strengths to propel the organization forward. BRL was founded on community direct action, and it is vital that the research does its best to reflect this. The members of BRL have social identities that have been developed, are still developing, and are affected by each other's interactions.

After BRL teaches at promise youth "at-promise" how to become engaged with their communities, it then challenges them to take part in their communities using their specialized skills to provide support to others. This is especially important in the Academy as the members are making the shift from being the students, to becoming the leaders that will teach the new generation. To take an individual, outsider approach to researching the Academy would devalue the fundamental community structure that BRL was founded on. Furthermore, Academy members know the program better than the researchers do, and working in collaboration with the Academy to develop and execute the project and disseminate the findings would best meet the needs of BRL as a whole, the needs of the Academy members, and the needs of the SSW students.

While we were not able to incorporate all aspects of the CBPR approach, many aspects were included, and these are outlined below in the procedure section. After submission of the thesis to the graduate school, the researchers will review the study findings with two Academy members and together present and discuss the findings in a symposium during the Smith School

for Social Work second summer term. This further illustrates the living aspects of CBPR.

Procedure

Consistent with a CBPR approach, our research advisor spent several years developing a relationship with BRL and came to understand the organization's need to measure the process and impact of the programs. Then, we were invited by our research advisor to partner with the Academy to identify specific areas for examination, in an attempt to address the needs of two communities: BRL Academy Members and SSW students, who are required to complete a thesis requirement towards graduation.

After our Research Advisor and the Chief Operations Officer (COO) of BRL discussed several possibilities to execute a CBPR study, two advanced members of the Academy were identified by BRL leadership to serve as community collaborators. These individuals had expressed an interest in participating in the developing research program at BRL. The research advisor and chief operations office agreed to (1) facilitate a community discussion about the areas for exploration and (2) support regular check in between SSW thesis students and Academy collaborators during research question development, measure development, data analysis, and dissemination, and (3) provide an executive summary for the findings to be incorporated into BRL's ongoing communications and program development. Working together with community collaborators provided the researchers with access to peer debriefing (to check for bias), member checking, and prolonged engagement with the BRL community throughout the research process.

Researchers were invited to be participant observers in a class in the Academy's research methods course, which included the Academy collaborators. Researchers participant-observed a facilitated discussion, lead by the research advisor and chief operations officer about Academy collaborators' interests in research topics. The researchers were encouraged to participate more

actively as the conversation developed and were given the opportunity to ask questions of Academy members to clarify any ideas or emerging themes.

Next, the researchers developed research questions based on what was heard during this initial meeting and developed a first draft of a survey and interview questions in order to gather necessary data. A follow up meeting was scheduled between researchers and Academy collaborators to review the materials and provide feedback to the researchers regarding identified themes for exploration. Researchers then revised their questions and research materials based on feedback, identified a data collection plan, and discussed their role in interviews. Since two researchers would be conducting the interviews for both studies, the researchers rehearsed interviewing with each other in an effort to present questions consistently and with as unbiased view as possible.

After an Academy member agreed to participate in the study, a meeting was scheduled with one of the two researchers to occur in a private room at BRL headquarters. Researchers obtained written consent from all participants. Participants first were given a paper-pencil copy of the survey, and then they engaged in an interview that lasted 1-1.5 hours, which was recorded, transcribed and analyzed. Researchers also recorded notes during interviews to support the interview process and were not used as a form of data. An audit trail created and continuously documented the entire research process to increase trustworthiness and rigor in the study. Peer debriefing and member checking was also common during this process. This portion of the research took place over the course of two months.

The analytic plan through data collection also included re-assessing and working through the qualitative questions in between interviews. Due to the fact that this is a semi-structured interview, it had the potential to change. This type of inductive method guided the research where

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the participants want to go in terms of themes that felt more pertinent than others. The analysis also included transcribing the interviews as soon as possible to pull out themes that may be relevant. The iterative process of constantly comparing newly collected data to support reliability, validity, and reflexivity was significant as it helped the researchers analyze their own interviewer behavior as well.

Researchers contacted Academy collaborators to discuss results after data intake was completed. The collaborators were asked to provide any input that arose when reviewing the data with the goal of obtaining feedback regarding findings and interpretation. This further ensured alignment with the CBPR principles and the project's dedication to a collaborative process between researchers and participants, thus completing the CBPR cycle.

Participants

Seven Academy members participated in the current study. After meeting the researchers in the facilitated discussion, Academy instructors informed Academy members about the study and researchers were invited into Academy group meetings to discuss the goal of the study and to recruit participants. In order to qualify for the study, participants must have participated in the Academy within the past year or have been currently enrolled in the Academy.

Four of the participants were female and three were male. When asked to identify their race, each participant answered differently, as follows: Afro Puerto-Rican, African American, White/Japanese/Portuguese, Mexican-American/Filipino-American/African-American, Black, Black/mixed and one participant declined to comment. Ages ranged from 21 to 26 years of age, with one participant declining to answer. The length of time involved in the Academy ranged from 5 months to over 4 years. In terms of highest level of educational experience completed, 3 members graduated from a 4-year college, 1 attended some of 4 year college, 2 attended some of

2-year college, and 1 graduated high school. Five members were currently enrolled in the

Academy, while 2 graduated the Academy. When asked about their role in the Academy, 2

identified as focusing on the clinician-track, 3 on the artist-track, 1 on a split

Administration/Clinician track, and one did not specify a current role.

Measures

Demographic questionnaire. Participants were given a demographic questionnaire, with

the purpose of collecting information about participant's identities. Example questions asked for

participants' self-identified, age, sex and gender (See Appendix B).

Quantitative Survey. In order to assess individual agency, community empowerment,

strengths-based focus, self-as-expert, and non-hierarchical knowledge, participants were given a

number of items survey to be completed using a likert rating scale of 1-5, with 1 as "Strongly

Disagree" and 5 as "Strongly Agree." The survey also asked participants 1 write-in question with

space for 2 answers. The question asked "In your opinion, what are the two most important things

that the Academy does for the members" (See Appendix B).

The reliability of the identified factors was examined to see how the items work as a group

to measure the construct we were interested in. Cronbach's alpha was used to assess internal

reliability and ideally is 0.60 or above. Initial analysis showed an acceptable level for IA

(Individual Agency) with all 5 items (alpha=.54) but below threshold for CE (Community

Empowerment) with all 4 items (alpha=.21). Based on this low CE alpha, the items that had lower

ratings were examined.

One participant rated IA1 and IA2 very low but this consistency in scores looked like a

real reflection of variable impact. Two of the IA items were about social justice (IA4 and IA5)-

one which had a low rating- and when further reviewed, one CE item had a low rating (CE)- was

about involvement in activism within the community, which was conceptually different from the other CE items, and could also be considered social justice. As such, the factors were reassessed and cronbach's alpha was recalculated for three factors. In this distribution, cronbach's alpha for IA was 0.85, for CE was 0.59, and for Social Justice Identity was 0.78.

Semi-Structured Interview. The interview segment addressed the former 5 tenants in greater depth, and asked 3-4 questions under each. Researchers asked probes for each question if needed. Questions assess for individual agency, subverting systems of oppression, community empowerment, reframing a strength-based model of resilience, valuing multiple forms of knowledge in a non-hierarchical manner, and honoring client/individual as expert on themselves and their communities. See Table 1.

Data Analysis

To analyze the survey data, the researchers ran descriptive statistics for frequency distributions from the participants' views on strength-based resiliency and their social justice views.

The qualitative data was analyzed by examining common themes, patterns or descriptions in recorded interviews and survey answers. The researchers highlighted themes while writing down their own thoughts to account for their own positionality in the study. After this was completed, the researchers started to clarify the data based on the themes that were noticed. The next step was to identify themes from each research question data set and to create a codebook that reflected these themes. During this step, the researchers continued to examine the data from past interviews to come up with 10 themes that were reflective of their research question domains. The codebook was then used to chunk big pieces of data to make sense of what was said. Researchers then sorted the chunk pieces of data by attributing the created code from the

codebook to the piece of data. After this sorting process was completed, researchers looked at the

implications of the data that was collected and sorted through by code.

Chapter IV

FINDINGS

This chapter will present the findings from qualitative and quantitative analyses of BRL

Academy members' experiences with subverting racism and systems of oppression. This study

investigated the BRL Academy member's experience with issues of systemic and racial

oppression and the role of social justice in the Academy program. Participants completed a

quantitative survey (Appendix B) followed by a 1.5 hour recorded interview that answered the

following research questions: How does BRL academy help its members subvert systems of

oppression? What are the ways that the Academy supports individual agency, the development of

a social justice identity, and community empowerment?

Data from these interviews were grouped together to show common themes and

subthemes based on the data collected. The following themes and subthemes will be used to

organize the data: (1) Individual Agency and Empowerment with subthemes of (1a) self-esteem

and (1b) self-confidence; (2) Development of the social justice identity with a subtheme of (2a)

resisting/weakening systemic oppression; and (3) Community empowerment with the subtheme of

(3a) skill sharing.

Quantitative Data

First, we wanted to see how strongly participants rated the academy's influence on these

factors (Individual Agency, Community Engagement, and Social Justice Identity). Table 2 shows

the descriptive statistics of the survey data. A total score for each factor was calculated for each

participant. Each participant had a total score for IA, CE, and SJ. Each factor was built on three

questions that could be rated from 1-5, so total scores for each factor could range from 3-15.

Community Engagement appears to be strongly impacted by participation in the Academy

as per participant self-report. Scores on the Community Engagement scale ranged from 11-15 points, with an average score of 13.6 (SD=1.4). Again, the possible range of scores on this scale is 3-15 points. The impact of Academy involvement on Individual Agency was also notable, with scores ranging from 7-14, suggesting that there was a wider range of experiences around how the Academy influences this variable. On average, participants rated Individual Agency in the upper-mid range at 11.43 (SD=2.3) This impact was similar to the impact of Academy involvement on Social Justice Identity with scores ranging from 6-14 with an average score of 10.7 (SD=2.7).

Qualitative Data

Individual Agency and Empowerment. Participants discussed how individual agency and empowerment are influenced by their experience in the Academy. Individual agency was described when the participants discussed seeing themselves as capable of achieving their goals and participants provided an example of when this occurred in the Academy. Six out of the seven participants discussed identifying a goal and taking steps to successfully achieve the desired goal.

For example, four of the participants described being interested in a topic, then becoming involved in writing the curriculum for a class or community training. Participant F01 discusses being approached by Academy staff to do a training at juvenile hall.

Definitely through that group. I think that they thought of me and brought the idea to me and it was a workshop that I was able to create with a couple of other people. We created it completely from scratch. It definitely made me feel really appreciated and special because it's a topic I'm really passionate about and so being able to channel that passion into something that's going to be able to touch other people is a really special thing. To have been thought of and tapped on the shoulder to create that was really cool.

Participant F03 who helped create the training with F01, added:

For me, my main goal outside of just teaching here at BRL was to do workshops. I want to

do a lot of outreach and so every time they have workshops, I teach those. They bring

those to me every time they have a chance... It was great because we were able to teach

them but they also taught us a lot, which we were able to take and be inspired by. So I'm

getting knowledge here and then taking that out into workshops in the community to

educate people in the community.

Participant F04 similarly discussed creating their own training from that came to fruition from an

idea.

A powerful time was when I ran my own training. I developed it from start to finish and

was the second person to do so. I think that having that kind of leadership position and

having done the training really helped me see my own value and was able to do something

on my own. I had never come up with a curriculum on my own before so, by the end it

opened new doors for me. I started to see myself as potentially a teacher or other things

that I hadn't thought of before. It was really powerful and one of the administrators said

that it was one of the best trainings they ever had, so it felt awesome.

Similarly, Participant F05 described creating a curriculum for a class they facilitated.

Yeah, the class. So um, very scared to do it, you know, since it was the first one, but I

wanted to do it. That's the thing, it's always been in the back of my mind, like hey maybe

we should do you know, a development, a professional development course for

transitional youth who are no longer in high school and who can't take our therapy classes

anymore but they want to still be a part of BRL.

In addition to leading classes, participants discussed ways that they were agents of their own

learning process, promoting a sense of agency and empowerment. Participant F02 expressed

directing their own learning by utilizing their individual agency and empowerment to communicate needs.

> I got to come back after being away and was able to communicate and say that I didn't want to do my role in the same way anymore. I was able to say that I was more interested in trainings and in the clinical track. It was me saying, 'This is what I want to do, is this possible?' And it was. In that moment it was me taking a stance of saying 'This is what I want to learn. This is what I want to utilize.' They're very open to wanting us to expand and other avenues that we may have more strengths in if we explore them.

Similarly, Participant F07 discussed their desire to start his own business and how the Academy empowers them to do this.

> I'm actually trying to have an all around entertainment multimedia business, like I want to tackle all types of media, from like movies, music, photo shoots, modeling, clothes, anything like that's like pushed out, I kind of want to tackle all that in one big entertainment organization.

These feelings of empowerment did not just emerge around professional decisions, but also emotional ones. Participant F01 discusses feeling empowered after being able to cope with their feelings of anxiety:

> I think that there's a lot of power that I'm finding mental health wise like calling out my anxiety. I've like got into the habit that when I notice anxiety, I just take a moment to myself and I say to myself that's anxiety speaking. This is anxiety and it keeps me from like being debilitated the way I used to get. So that's power.

Taken as a whole, the Academy promotes empowerment and agency thought decisions around ownership of curriculum, professional development, and emotional awareness.

Self-esteem and self-confidence. One of the subthemes of individual agency and empowerment was to examine a participant's' understanding of their own self-esteem. All seven of the participants discussed feeling like their self-esteem had increased due to their experience in the Academy. Participant F04 recalls how their self-esteem has significantly improved since being in the Academy.

> Being in BRL and the Academy, my self-esteem has definitely improved a lot in terms of being comfortable on stage, talking with people, meeting new people, and even being comfortable with myself. I just feel a lot more comfortable in my own skin and feel a lot more aware of my own voice and the value of my own voice.

In addition to this disclosure around general self-esteem growing, the remaining participants shared their experiences with their self-esteem increasing in a group setting through constructive criticism and encouragement, exploring their artist identity, and by finding one's voice.

> Self-confidence was identified as the second subtheme for individual agency and empowerment. Participants all discussed feeling like their self-confidence had increased while in the Academy. Participant F03 said:

> I learned a lot about my confidence level, which has been boosted pretty high now. Also, being able to teach as an artist I'm able to find out that I can heal people through music. I can do that by listening to people too because some people just want to be listened to. Being in the Academy I was able to find that out by myself, that I'm a good listener. A lot of youth like to talk to me about things.

Similarly, participant F07 expressed:

> …it does make me feel better though, like that I'm helping, so ego wise it's like an ego boost you're like oh yeah, I feel like an expert on this topic, you make me feel like the

number 1 authority to go to on this.

The results suggest that it is important to increase one's feelings of self-esteem and confidence in order to express one's feeling of capacity (individual agency) and self-empowerment.

Social Justice Identity. The second major theme that was identified in the findings was the participants experience with their social justice identity. It is important to note that the data presented includes narratives from those with an already developed social justice identity and those who developed it during the Academy. All seven participants discussed the role of activism in doing healing work, with six noting that their social justice identity shifted since being in the Academy. Participant F02 described:

> I feel like in doing this kind of healing work, you're an activist in healing. Even if you don't want to put that title on yourself, you still are. We're workers, we're doing this, we're social workers. Even though we don't have the title, but we are social workers. We are activists for our youth, so they can heal.

Similarly, participant F03 expressed:

> To me it's being aware. Having those problems happen to you but being able to connect with others about those problems... Pretty much having that identity just means that you're aware of it. You're aware and you know what can come from it, you know the ins and outs. You've been through that.

Likewise, participant F07 responded:

> I mean, the word is active, so if you're active in like, in the community, or active with whatever you're trying to serve and whatever purpose you're trying to get out, that's what activism means. Like it doesn't have to be like all in your face like radical protest type but you can be like working like on certain things like not per say behind the scenes because

you wanted to be seen, but you could be working in a way that it's like mentally flipping

things. So that's what activist means to me.

While six of the participants felt like their social justice identity had intensified since being in the Academy, one of the participants explicitly stated that she did not feel like that identity had changed. Said participant expressed "I don't feel like the Academy has really affected my social justice identity. I think I've been moving away from that." This participant did not provide any additional information about what informed that movement. Further analysis should examine additional cases in which this opposite trend occurred.

Resisting/weakening systemic oppression. This sub theme of how social justice identity is developed was identified as the participants started to discuss how activism works to subvert systems of oppression. It is important to note that this sub theme relates to activism on an individual level. Participant F01 discusses how they viewed their membership in the Academy as relating to this a capacity to resist systemic oppression:

Just being a part of the program. Just the fact that BRL exists, the fact that the Academy exists. The Academy is crucial to bridging gaps such as racial or class. The fact that I graduated from an elite university and couldn't find any work even with all my background. And I think that it's just getting harder to get into the workforce you know you need a master's you need internships and being poor meant that I couldn't work an unpaid internship in the summer or during the school year because I was working 30 hours a week to support myself. I think that like having that framework and an understanding is really, really important to combating systems of oppression.

Participant F02 discussed how they viewed their knowledge of systemic oppression as a tool for combating systems of oppression:

I feel like through being at this age and knowing about systemic oppression as opposed to

other people that are...I guess, ignorant. But they're ignorant to knowing about it but also,

not able to receive those tools to learn about it. A lot of times people feel like they have a

sense of knowing about something but they don't really care. You can't know what you

don't know so I feel like this has been an outlet to knowing.

Participant F03 discussed how he uses his own artistry to subvert systemic oppression:

I've definitely been more involved in terms of getting my own awareness and sharing that

awareness. Even if it's something as simple as finding and article and sharing it. I was

recently interested in major companies and their investments in prison systems after

talking to someone. After that I took that article and shared it with people. I learned about

how people were supporting that by going to Starbucks, Wendy's, AVIS and how airlines

use customer service representatives from the prison systems. Whole Foods used to make

goat cheese from prison workers for 60 cents a day but they recently stopped because there

was a big article that just exposed that. Also articles about how geographically, the map is

very Euro-centric and how white countries are on the top and how the people of color are

on the bottom and how they made it seem smaller. The size of Africa is actually shown as

being much smaller than what it is geographically and how it minimized to show the

importance of Africa...I think knowledge itself. So getting that knowledge for myself and

being aware of systemic in oppression in my own surroundings, in my interaction with it.

Then also having a voice to it. I think now more than ever, that voice is becoming really

important and sharing that voice is becoming heard.

Further exploration of how the development of a social justice identify in the BRL Academy

entails methods of resisting or weakening systemic oppression merits further exploration.

However it is important to note that when discussing their individual experience with activism, many participants included the value to empowering the larger community as a whole.

Community empowerment. Community empowerment requires that individual agency and empowerment and a developed social justice identity are present in order to be able to engage in collective action. By engaging individuals in their strengths and have them realize their potential to achieve success, the process of community healing can begin. Aspects of community empowerment were presented for all seven participants in regards to how the members helped the youth become empowered and then ultimately, empower their own communities. One participant shared her experience about empowering young women in the juvenile justice system:

I think it's definitely interwoven into everything that we do. I did have the privilege of

facilitating a talk about women in the industry and misogyny and sexuality and how all

those things come into play and it was really powerful because we spoke to young

ladies/youth that were on probation so they had all been locked up at some point and they

were like at the end of this kind of like rehabilitation program. I think that the information

we were providing was really powerful and empowering. I was so touched that they were

so engaged and they had like such an in-depth understanding of what was actually going

on and were able to tell their stories and that to me was like social justice full circle

because at some point in their rehabilitation process they were able to... Or I don't even

know because I feel like the younger generation is super woke and sometimes we don't

understand because I was thinking to myself at 16, I wouldn't be able to understand what

misogyny was and really put my finger on it. But now in the information age, it's much

different. That was really cool to see...I think that we're trying to get young people of color

involved in therapy of being therapists and being mentors in facilitating collective growth

because it's people from the community staying in the community, healing the community, hopefully going on to gain even more knowledge and bring about and share that.

Similarly, participant F02 extrapolates on this training and its relation to community empowerment.

One I would have to say in creating a different curriculum and teaching it to staff who are going outside of the agency to teach it to others. Also, doing workshops. We had a workshop here with young girls from juvenile hall and just being able to teach them is valuing different kinds of knowledge because usually it's not the youth that's teaching. Usually the people teaching are people who have been in school for years and because they have a knowledge that's beyond. Youth are usually looked at in society as not having knowledge, when in reality it should be knowledge that is even valued more than a class. Education is great but the system that we have of educating is super flawed. A lot of things that you learn there, you can't apply but then a lot of the knowledge we see Academy members have gained has been achieved through their life. Their life stories then become philosophies and solid knowledge that they can bring into a space. Having outside knowledge outside of institutions that is still valued is really important.

Another participant discussed her role in empowering female artists in her community:

Right now we are doing community activism on female rappers. There's a showcase coming up this month and it's uplifting the female musicians in the area. A lot of female musicians sing, rap, dance, do poetry, play drums, anything. They can come here and build a community and let every woman be aware of who it who, to connect and build together outside of the event.

Participant F04 continues discusses empowering the youth and their community through the

annual showcase.

It changed my understanding in terms of empowerment and really what that means. It

helped me think about empowering the youth in terms of giving them a voice, what it

means to have a voice, what it means for people that are marginalized because of their

race, class, etc. Also, in terms of a leadership position like what does it mean to be a

student intern and how powerful that is for them. We had one participant light up because

we let him go around and do the check-in for the TAG. He was so excited to go around

and ask people how they were doing! It's been really insightful to see how powerful and

life-changing empowerment and leadership can be if given a space for that. There's a lot of

opportunities also for them to reintroduce themselves, like the showcase is really

powerful. People who have only seen them in the context of probation officers, clinician,

their parents, whatever the case is, they get to see a whole other perspective of what they're

capable of and who they can be.

Participant F07 echoes this by simply stating:

I feel like we are absolutely helping the community. And then us personally, we go home

and we are still in our neighborhoods too, and we talk to people too. And we definitely

have these conversations with most folks now.

Skill Sharing. The subtheme of skill sharing as a form of community empowerment has

been identified due to the fact that community empowerment is created through the collaboration

of the individual's strengths and expert skills. This sub theme is especially significant in that BRL

Academy believes in this as a value in terms of developing their community in a positive way.

Participant F01 sums up the significance of skill sharing emphatically:

Skill sharing is probably the most important thing ever. America's very competitive and

we kind of learn early on you know, the smarter you are the better you are, the more successful you'll be. So we're not really given this model of collaboration. Not everyone is willing to share knowledge and help each other grow so I think that this idea of skill-sharing is so important because it helps ingrain self-worth in people and it helps people think that their knowledge is valuable, no matter what the knowledge is. I think especially in this space that the majority of people who live in Oakland look like the people who are here, talk like the people who are here and so it really speaks to the fact that everyone's knowledge is really important. For example, we're creating a women's empowerment showcase and the jargon I wanted to use wouldn't speak to a certain population of people and while it was very beautiful and eloquently said, and would get a certain group of people to come, it didn't speak to Hip Hop culture such as the people MCing or doing spoken word. It didn't speak to the larger population we're trying to reach. Something simple as simple as my peers saying 'You know what? That word my not be fit for this environment.' Having all our ideas matter and count is like finding the right equation to balance it all out. Being able to have that different idea valued and being able to grow from each other is very important.

When the rest of the participants discussed their views on skill sharing and how it relates to the larger theme of community empowerment, it was repeated that skill sharing occurs on a daily basis in the Academy and is crucial to the development of the individual and the larger community.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This mixed method study explored the methods of subverting systemic oppression within the BRL Academy among its members. The study examined how the BRL Academy engages in resistance against systemic oppression through the presence of (1) individual agency and empowerment- with subthemes of self-esteem and self-confidence, (2) a developed social justice identity with a subtheme of resisting and weakening systemic oppression, and (3) community empowerment with a subtheme of skill sharing. This chapter will further summarize and synthesize the key findings and connect findings to the reviewed literature. The chapter will also outline the limitations of the study, its strength, and the implications that can be made for social work as a whole.

The results for this study indicate that members of the BRL Academy first developed individual agency and empowerment. After this developed sense of identity, Academy members were then able to incorporate their strength and knowledge to that of issues of social justice, therefore developing a social justice identity to resist against systemic oppression. Further, the study demonstrates that a developed social justice identity was utilized to empower the Academy members' community against systems of oppression. By employing their strengths and empowering their larger community through skill sharing, the BRL Academy proved to play a major role in helping its members and community members weaken institutionalized oppression.

Individual Agency and Empowerment

Self-esteem and self-confidence*. The findings of this study showed that Academy members first started to increase their feelings of self-esteem and self-confidence. All 7 of the participants felt that the Academy had helped them develop and identify a new skill and strength

within themselves. This two sub themes identified that individual agency and empowerment stem from an increased self-esteem and self-confidence. The study supports past studies in which participants voiced feeling more confident and having their self-esteem strengthened as well (Travis and Deepak 2011; Livingstone, Celemencki, & Calixte, 2014). Despite highlighting the strength of the participants, these studies do not show the relationship between an increased self-esteem and self-confidence towards self-agency. This study highlights the effects of developing and increased self-esteem and self-confidence and how this ultimately starts to present as individual agency and empowerment.

Individual agency and empowerment. Academy members expressed that after feeling more self-confidence and higher self-esteem, that they were then able to identify their capacity to achieve their goals and to empower themselves to create a plan in doing so. This study demonstrated that all participants felt that they had developed individual agency and started to see themselves as capable of achieving their goals (empowerment). This finding is congruent with the past studies in which, marginalized youth felt like they could identify their goals, had found their voice, and could empower themselves to advocate against oppressive practices (Livingstone, Celemencki, & Calixte, 2014; Combs & Freedman, 2013; Forman, 2006). Similar to the environment of these studies, Academy members are put into a space in which they are given a voice with the median of narrative therapy through Hip Hop.

Further, this study differentiates further research between the two terms individual agency and empowerment. This is notable in that there have not been clear delineations about the difference in these two terms in the reviewed literature. Though they are similar, in that they relate and influence each other, the results of this study have shown that Academy members first begin to increase their belief of individual agency in order to develop self-empowerment towards

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success. Few studies have shown the difference between individual agency and empowerment but do not explicitly address the difference between the two (Clay, 2006; Travis and Deepak 2013). The results of this study show that the majority of the respondents described identifying personal goals such as creating a curriculum, learning how to rap, or creating a training. Academy members felt that by being in the Academy, they were able to achieve individual agency through community support. Similarly, Academy members felt that once they felt like they could achieve their goals, they felt empowered by their place in the community to achieve these goals.

Development of the Social Justice Identity

The study also shows the relationship between self-empowerment and agency with developing a social justice identity. Eighty-six percent of respondents expressed that they had started to examine issues of social justice while being in the Academy. Although past studies (Forman, 2013; Clay, 2006) have examined specific curriculum for social justice identity development, the current study suggests that social justice identity was more related to political and economic issues. This study noted that the participants believed that there were many definitions of social justice and provided the space for all of these definitions. For example, participants described their social justice identity as a way of providing access to communities of color. Participants expressed that by engaging in healing work in their community, that they were engaging in activism since the resources for communities of color are not present.

Further, the results of the study relate to past studies as it has been found that Hip Hop does support an individual's identity of social justice (Clay, 2006; Forman, 2013; Flores-Gonzalez, Rodriguez, & Rodriguez-Muniz, 2006; Ginwright, & Cammarota, 2002). Many of the participants felt that in learning about social justice in the Academy that they started to identify much more strongly with owning that identity for themselves. Fifty-seven percent of the

participants expressed learning about issues of social justice in BRL Academy for the first time. These same participants expressed identifying with a social justice identity while in the Academy and now actively participate in activism to weaken institutions of oppression.

Resisting/weakening systemic oppression. Further, it is significant to note that the participants not only identified an increased social justice identity, but that they actively engaged in direct action to resist against systemic oppression. The study shows that similar to past studies on Hip Hop and social justice, that the all the participants started to engage in activities to weaken systemic oppression (Clay, 2006; Flores-Gonzalez, Rodriguez, & Rodriguez-Muniz, 2006; Ginwright, Cammarota, 2002; Livingstone, Celemencki, Calixte; 2014)). The participants in these studies became advocates of their community through teaching about issues of oppression, through facilitating groups with peers to discuss racism, and by performing Hip Hop to discuss and break down the barriers of power and privilege. Similarly, Academy members expressed putting on trainings for their communities to discuss these issues, by radicalizing their own Hip Hop artistry, and by educating others about the effects of systemic oppression. This study showed, however, that resisting systemic oppression was sometimes as simple as being a member of the Academy. This is notable in that the study does not discount or specify the ways in which subversion can occur. Academy members believed that by simply providing access to resources and by working with its community members, that the model of the Academy itself was a subversion of systemic oppression.

Community Empowerment

In teaching the Hip Hop therapy model, Academy members felt individual agency and empowerment to further empower the youth in their Therapeutic Activity Groups (TAGs). The cycle of empowering youth in the community to empower themselves and the larger community

was a major finding within this theme. This finding is notable in that it reinforces past studies in which the development of a social justice identity was followed by community activism (Clay 2006; Flores-Gonzalez, Rodriguez, Rodriguez-Muniz, 2006; Forman 2013; Travis 2013). This is significant in that it shows the relationship between bridging the individual's experience with their larger community. This provides more evidence that community empowerment occurs from a radicalized individual that has developed individual agency and empowerment. All Academy members discussed being more involved in their communities to provide knowledge about important issues and to strengthen their community with various skills.

Skill sharing. The results of this study were congruent with past studies that explored not just the concept of skill sharing, but explored it based on youth-adult partnerships such as in the Academy. Much like past studies, it was found that Academy members engage in community empowerment through sharing various and differentiated skills from one another (Zeldin, Krauss, Kim, Lucchesi, & Sulaiman, 2014; Zeldin, Krauss, Kim, Collura, & Abdullah, 2015). In both of these studies, the relationship between youth-adult partnerships is examined and is variably considered in the results. Though the current study did not specifically use youth-adult partnerships as an area of interest, it is important to note that most of the skill sharing was occurring between Academy members (young adults) and the youth from the community. This partnership allows for collaboration between Academy members to engage with the knowledge and skills that their community already has to offer and vice versa.

Similarly, the study also showed that there was a relationship in skill sharing among cohort Academy members as well. This is important to note as it shows that Academy members engaged in resisting systemic oppression simply by engaging in a model of sharing and fostering skills with one another, rather than engage in a predominantly competitive way against one

another. This finding goes against past studies that believed that in order to restore power to a marginalized community, that there must be a privileged voice to be considered and respected (Foucault; 1965, 1975, 1977, 1985). This finding shows how the subversion of this belief is also a step towards subverting institutional oppression.

Strengths of the Study

This study outlines a framework for resisting against systemic oppression. Though this is a very ambitious and large question to deconstruct, it returns the strength to the participants. The study is the first to highlight specific developments within the individual to then collaborate with their community and subvert systemic oppression such as power, privilege, and racism. The study begins to address gaps in research on the power of Hip Hop culture to influence social justice and social work. By suggesting the three major themes of individual agency and empowerment, the development of the social justice identity, and community empowerment, the study creates a map for how marginalized communities and communities of color can uses developed strength as a collective against deep-rooted oppression.

Further, the study also utilized a CBPR model of research in which participants were given a voice in the process of the research. This is vital to this study as it was important to maintain the integrity, strength, and self-advocacy of the participants and the community as a whole by providing space in the research for collaboration. The goal of this model was to remove the notion that the researchers in this case, are experts of the topic of Hip Hop therapy. Though the researcher is a strong proponent for Hip Hop and believes in its radicalized strength to dismantle systemic oppression, he does not believe that he is the expert about the BRL Academy community.

Alternatively, it is important to note that though Hip Hop and Hip Hop therapy has been

examined, it has not specifically been analyzed through the lens of those that teach the model and how it influences their own development and activist identity. This study focuses on the teachers of Hip Hop therapy and how it relates to their social justice identities to empower their community at large.

Limitations of the Study

Limits of the study include the possibility that participants had conflictual feelings about presented issues and chose to be discreet in what information they choose to share. Due to the small pool of participants, participant anonymity is compromised; although participants were aware that researchers would de-identify the data, participants are very familiar with each other's experiences and beliefs, and this may have affected what information was shared.

The personal attributes and structural positions of researchers themselves likely impacted the findings of the study. Researcher bias includes the potential for researchers to be more bonded with specific Academy participants over others. Due to previous meetings between participants and researchers, some Academy members were more familiar with the researchers. This may have lead to some participants trusting the researchers more, which had the potential to lead to an increased amount of authentic or vulnerable information being divulged. It is also worth noting that researchers are currently in their graduate program and that some Academy members are actively applying to graduate programs. This may have created a dynamic issue of a power differential that while not intended, was still present and likely affected the research.

It is also important to recognize that neither of the researchers are part of the community that the BRL Academy members are from. Due to this, it is possible that despite adopting a CBPR approach, the researchers may still communicate the results of the study from a perspective that is not completely authentic to the BRL community.

Other limitations include the limited application of the CBPR model. The current study utilized only two community collaborators who were chosen from the Academy. Furthermore, researchers only checked in with these two members throughout the research process for fact-checking, modification of interview and survey materials, and debriefing, and therefore the results may be limited in terms of the contributions of the CBPR model.

Conclusion and Implications for Social Work

The current study reveals several implications for the future of social work. The first is that there is limited research on the effects of Hip Hop therapy, as the modality that it serves is not one from an academic, dominant paradigm. It is due to this that research on Hip Hop therapy is so difficult to study and assess. By engaging in a research based-study that uses methods and tools from privileged institutions in which the participants are set apart, the researchers engage in oppression in themselves despite their best intentions. In identifying this however, it continues the very vital and tenuous dichotomy of social worker being agents of change and agents of social control as well. By recognizing that Hip Hop therapy is engaging youth in marginalized communities and communities of color to develop their own understanding of themselves, their community, and the deep-rooted systems that continuously oppress them, it should also be recognized that Hip Hop in itself was not created from the dominant structures. It is challenging to examine and study something as radical, visceral, and deeply felt as the power of Hip Hop. Future social workers should take the time to locate themselves in their studies relating to Hip Hop as engaging in this research can further oppress the communities being examined.

Moving forward it would be important to further examine how systems of oppression are subverted and weakened and to use this study as an initial guide. It is recommended to examine the intersections and identities of future participants, as this is a major influence on individual

agency and empowerment, development of a social justice identity, and community empowerment.

This study has shown that there is a relationship between subverting systems of oppression and developing oneself to empower the larger community. Future social workers should explore Hip Hop therapy and the BRL Academy model, as it is a form of clinical social work that limits the effects of oppressive systems such as power, privilege, and racism.

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Table 1

Interview Questions

Factor	Items
Individual Agency and Empowerment	1. How has your experience as an academy member affected your self- esteem? 2. How has your experience as an academy member changed your understanding of your own power? 3. What have you learned about yourself as a result of your experience in the Academy?
Development of the social justice identity	1. How has your experience in the Academy shaped your understanding of Social Justice? Probe: Can you tell me about a time the idea of social justice came up while in the Academy? 2. Would you say that you have a social justice identity? If so, what does that mean to you? How do you feel your social justice identity has changed since being in the Academy? 3. What does activism mean to you? Probe: In what ways are you involved in unconventional activism as an Academy member? 4. How has your experience in the BRL Academy enriched your understanding of systemic oppression? Probe: What does systemic oppression mean to you? 5. How have you been involved with resisting systemic oppression while in the Academy? 6. What tools or skills have you developed through the Academy to help you resist systemic oppression?
Community Empowerment	1. Now I'd like to ask you about an idea called "collective growth." This refers to the idea of historically marginalized communities engaging in activities that support community to further become empowered. How does the Academy's focus on skill-sharing influence collective growth? 2. How, if at all, has the Academy informed your interest in community activism? What kinds of things have you done or will you do in terms of community activism?

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics

N Sub variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
IA Subtotal	7	7	14	11.43	2.370
SJ Subtotal	7	6	14	10.71	2.690
CE Subtotal	7	11	15	13.57	1.397
Valid N (listwise)	7				

Appendix A: Informed Consent

2015-2016
Consent to Participate in a Research Study
Smith College School for Social Work ● Northampton, MA

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Title of Study: Individual Strength and Social Justice Development in BRL Academy.

Investigator(s):

Julia Fogelson, BA; Smith School for Social Work
Alfredo Laris, BA; Smith School for Social Work
Mamta Dadlani, PhD; Smith School for Social Work

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Introduction
You are being asked to be in a research study of the BRL academy and how the Academy
  supports Academy member's development.
You were selected as a possible participant because you are currently a member of the Academy
  or have been within the past year.
We ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be
  in the study.

Purpose of Study
The purpose of the study is to understand what Academy members view as the most important
  aspects of the Academy, how the academy uses a strengths-based models, and how the
  Academy supports its members in subverting systems of oppression
This study is being conducted as a research requirement for my master's in social work degree.
The findings of the study will be shared with the BRL community.
Ultimately, this research may be published or presented at professional conferences.

Description of the Study Procedures
If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:
Complete a paper survey
Engage in a 1.5 hour semi-structured 1-on-1 discussion about your experiences in the BRL
  Academy
Consent to the audio recording of your discussion

Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study
Participation may lead to some discomfort due to sharing of personal experiences.
Should this occur, you should utilize your supports within BRL to discuss your thoughts further

Benefits of Being in the Study
The benefits of participation may include gaining insight, having an opportunity to talk about issues important to you, and contributing to possible published research on BRL. The benefits to social work/society are adding to the limited literature related to Hip Hop Therapy, Community Based Intervention, and defining best practices in the field of social work.

Confidentiality
Your participation will be kept confidential. You will assigned an ID number and Pseudonym in any presented findings. Your name will not be used at any point.
Surveys, interview recordings, and transcripts will be stored using your ID number and kept in a locked filing cabinet. The Investigators be the only people with access to recorded material. Audio material will be erased/destroyed through deletion after transcription is completed.
All research materials including recordings, transcriptions, analyses and consent documents will be stored in a secure location for three years according to federal regulations. In the event that materials are needed beyond this period, they will be kept secured until no longer needed, and then destroyed. All electronically stored data will be password protected during the storage period. We will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you.

Payments/gift
You will not receive any financial payment for your participation.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw
The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study *at any time* (up to the date noted below) without affecting your relationship with the researchers of this study or Smith College.
Your decision to refuse will not result in any loss of benefits (including access to services) to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right not to answer any single question, as well as to withdraw completely up to the point noted below.
If you choose to withdraw, we will not use any of your information collected for this study. You must notify us of your decision to withdraw by email or phone by May 1, 2016. After that date, your information will be part of the thesis and final report.

Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns
You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by us before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact any of the following three researchers: Alfredo Laris , Julia Fogelson, or Dr. Mamta Dadlani by email. If you would like a summary of the study results, one will be sent to you once the study is completed. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you have any problems as a result of your participation, you may contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Committee at (413) 585-7974.

Consent
Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for

this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep.

....

Name of Participant (print): _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Researcher(s): _____ Date: _____

....

Since this study involves audio-recording, please sign either #1 or #2 below.

1. I agree to be audio taped for this interview:

Name of Participant (print): _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Researcher(s): _____ Date: _____

2. I agree to be interviewed, but I do not want the interview to be audio taped:

Name of Participant (print): _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Signature of Researcher(s) Date:

Appendix B: Demographic and Academy Experiences Survey

BRL Academy Experiences Survey

Below are several questions about who you are and your experience with the Academy. Please do your best to answer each question, and if you have any questions, please let me know.

How old are you?

How would you describe your race?

How would you describe your gender?

Which of the following best describes your educational experience?
    _____Attended some High School
    _____Graduated High School
    _____Attended some of a 2-year college program
    _____Graduated from a 2-year college program
    _____Attended some of a 4 year college program
    _____Graduated from a 4 year college program
    _____Other: _____

Where were you born?

How long have you lived in this area?

What prompted you to join the BRL Academy?

How long have you been a member of the BRL Academy?

How would you describe your role in the Academy? (e.g., clinical-track, artist, senior member, etc)

Which program are you enrolled in currently?
    _____STEP
    _____WISE
    _____GRADUATED

The following questions ask you about different aspects of your experiences in the BRL Academy. Please indicate how much you agree with each statement.

1. My confidence in my individual strengths has increased since joining the Academy.

1	2	3	4	5
Completely Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Completely Agree

2. I have the capacity to heal myself.

1	2	3	4	5
Completely Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Completely Agree

3. The Academy values a wide range of knowledge.

1	2	3	4	5
Completely Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Completely Agree

4. My experiences in the Academy make me feel like I can withstand and surpass challenges in other areas of my life.

1	2	3	4	5
Completely Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Completely Agree

5. My experience in the Academy makes me believe that community empowerment is a way to resist systemic oppression.

1	2	3	4	5
Completely Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Completely Agree

6. My self-esteem has increased because of my membership in the Academy.

1	2	3	4	5
Completely Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Completely Agree

7. I feel capable of playing an integral part in healing my community.

1	2	3	4	5
Completely Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Completely Agree

8. I feel encouraged to engage in activism regarding issues of social justice because of my experience in the Academy.

1	2	3	4	5
Completely Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Completely Agree

9. I feel that my strengths are valued in the Academy.

1	2	3	4	5
Completely Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Completely Agree

10. I feel encouraged to contribute my knowledge to the Academy.

1	2	3	4	5
Completely Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Completely Agree

11. I am committed to working with my community to engage in skill-sharing.

1	2	3	4	5
Completely Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Completely Agree

12. The Academy equally values my knowledge and perspective with the same weight as the knowledge from individuals in leadership positions higher than my own.

1	2	3	4	5
Completely Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Completely Agree

13. My experiences in the Academy make me feel capable of achieving success in other areas in my life.

1	2	3	4	5
Completely Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Completely Agree

14. I feel better prepared to discuss issues of social justice as an Academy member.

1	2	3	4	5
Completely Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Completely Agree

15. Since joining the Academy, I have identified new personal strengths I had not previously recognized.

1	2	3	4	5

| Completely
Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Completely
Agree |

16. BRL Academy encourages me to help my community adapt to stress and adversity.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Completely
Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Completely
Agree |

17. The Academy trusts my ability to assess my own needs.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Completely
Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Completely
Agree |

18. I am actively involved in activism within the community as a BRL Academy member.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Completely
Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Completely
Agree |

In your opinion, what are the two most important things that the Academy does for the members?

1)

2)

Appendix C: Smith IRB Approval Letter

SMITH COLLEGE

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

February 19, 2016

Julia
Fogelson
Alfredo
Laris

Dear Julia and Freddy:

You did a very nice job on your revisions. Your project is now 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.

Congratulations and our best wishes on your interesting study.

Sincerely,

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Mamta Dadlani, Research Advisor