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Hip-Hop Hermeneutics: A Fusion of Horizons

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Abstract

In an effort to increase engagement and rapport, professionals often search for creative ways to connect with youth. Often bored with antiquated psychoeducational methods, adolescents become unresponsive. Joining with young clients through using music has been a successful in enhancing relationship and increasing participation in the therapeutic and educational process. This paper begins by summarizing the distinction of rap music as a larger part of hip-hop. It continues by explaining aspects of postmodern language and discourse evident in this medium that prompt a reconsideration of rap's "bad rap." Theory and examples of practical applications illustrate how focusing on lyrical content to foster discussion can help build rapport. The article ends with implications of how future studies can expand the scope of this intervention.

Hip-Hop Hermeneutics: A Fusion of Horizons

“Turn that crap down! I forbid you to listen to that foolishness! That’s not music!” These are examples of some of the many expressions of disapproval that today’s youth hear regarding rap music. Notwithstanding the controversy, rap music has gained widespread acceptance from youth throughout the country and the world. The popularity of rap music has transcended race and class, making it a multibillion dollar industry. Challenged with student apathy, teachers sometimes modify traditional instructional approaches in hopes of gaining more interest and participation (Paul, 2000). Referring to hip-hop as “a vehicle through which privilege student voices,” Paul advocates using rap in the classroom as a tool to advance critical thinking skills and increase cultural synchronization.

Dyson (2001) states that many separate rap into mere a category which ignores its complexities and downplays artistic motivations. Although not the focus of this paper, rap music has been condemned due to a) desensitization and glorification of violence, b) sexism, c) misogyny, d) homophobia, e) objectification of women, f) navigation of cultural stereotypes, g) explicit language, and h) materialism (Kitwana, 2002; Morgan, 2002; Paul, 2000). Despite such critique, rap music can be utilized as an intervention with youth due to its underlying positive themes that have been applicable across cultures (Tyson, 2002).

Beyond (or perhaps through) the beat, lyrical messages of historical, cultural, social, and political content are transmitted. Yet, the majority of scholarly research tends to be in opposition of rap music, presenting it as detrimental to adolescents’ proper growth and development. As mentioned by Tyson (2002), there is a negligible amount of research on the therapeutic uses of lyrical content. For that reason, his article presents favorable results of an exploratory study on

the use of rap music as an innovative group activity with youth.

The purpose of this paper is to a) highlight the significance of rap music as a component of the hip-hop culture, b) draw attention to the use of language and discourse as an integral part of conveying socially constructed realities through artistic expression, c) demonstrate the connection between hip-hop culture and the philosophies of Gadamer, Gergen, and Foucault, and d) describe the clinical applications of rap music and hip-hop culture to the therapeutic issues of clients, including a discussion of interventions within classroom settings and group sessions. In essence, this paper aims to deconstruct the dominant discourse of the subject of hip-hop in an attempt to underscore its postmodern similarities.

Introduction to Hip-Hop

As an integral component of the larger hip-hop culture, Tyson (2002) defines rap music as "...a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America...a form of rhymed storytelling...poetry." Similarly, Paul (2000) legitimizes "rap music" as a form of poetry by asserting that "...regardless of culture... [poetry is] the use of rhyme, imagery, typography, grammar, syntax as a medium to share personal stories." Although the origin of hip-hop is an inexhaustible point of contention within the industry, its derivation has been identified as rhythmic stories from African-American, Afro-Caribbean, and Puerto Rican inhabitants of New York (Kitwana, 2002; Morgan, 2002; Potter, 1995). Labeling all of the above ethnicities as 'black,' Kitwana describes the 'hip-hop generation' as generally consisting of those born between 1965 and 1984.

Describing hip-hop, he lists its four original elements as 1) graffiti, 2) break dancing, 3) DJ, and 4) rap music. Current literature extends the definition of the hip-hop to include 1) verbal language - the "flow" or "freestyle" of emcees as well as the call-and-response interaction with

the “crowd,” 2) body language, 3) attitude, and 4) style/fashion. Such deconstruction prompts realization that rap music is a mere portion of the larger hip-hop culture (Kitwana, 2002).

Social Reconstruction of Hip-Hop

Attributing the new elements of hip-hop to expansion across cultures and emerging societal phenomena, Kitwana (2002) implicates that this phenomenon has been socially reconstructed. He further denotes that this complex, new meaning is an amalgamation resulting from a) the growth and influence of pop culture via media and commercialism, b) conflicting messages that continuously marginalize certain cultures in a society that advocates democracy and inclusion, c) changes in public policy such as anti-drug campaigns, anti-violence initiatives, school bans, and raucous criminal sentencing, d) negative media representations of minorities, and e) shift in quality of life due to unemployment, AIDS, incarceration, suicide, gangs and other societal plagues.

Potter (1995) positions hip-hop as a form of radical postmodernism by indicating its liberating potentials. He states that hip-hop crosses racial and regional lines thereby promoting a basis for solidarity and coalition. Because of the shifting discourse regarding its meaning and influence, Dyson (2001) maintains that hip-hop is not really ‘black’ music. Likewise, as cited by Dyson, renowned playwright Toni Morrison believes that “...it is a conversation from one part of the country to another.” These authors elucidate the impact of hip-hop by pointing to the diversity of its listeners. “Hip hop is the singular most important melding of black and white cultures that has ever existed in the United States,” Walker (2006) reports as she announces the new exhibit planned by the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History in Washington.

Gadamer and Hermeneutics

According to Rosen and Kuehlwein (1996), hermeneutics is defined as the art of interpretation and understanding. It takes into account the historical and social context in an attempt to construct meaning. Baker (2002) posits that hermeneutic moments, a point where understanding becomes participation in its meaning, occur through entering into dialogue with the poetic text. In other words, the meaning does not necessarily lie in the words or text of the author; rather, comprehension occurs when there is a fusion of horizons resulting from the integration of new perspectives (Rees, 2003).

Considering rap music as a form of poetic text, the application of Gadamer's ideas can be useful to therapists working with youth. As formerly mentioned, rap music is criticized for its ostensibly overt negative messages. In response to such criticism, Baker restates Gadamer's belief that "what makes understanding possible is the forgetfulness of language...forgetting the formal elements in which the discourse of the text is encased" (p. 152). The clinical applications below will extend upon the therapeutic utility of applying Gadamer's principles.

Gergen and Social Constructionism

Rosen and Kuehlwein (1996) declare that social constructionism involves the co-creation of meaning. They further note that language is critical to the interactive process of social construction. The authors also contend that "the boundaries of our narratives are constructed through historical, political, economic, social, and cultural constraints and potentials" (p. 200). Hence, applying such to rap music and hip-hop culture, the lyrical content is a reflection of the writers' socially-constructed reality. Many rappers personify themselves as 'street disciples' or 'voices of the ghetto' dropping 'hood anthems' to share their stories to the world:

"...Like Paul, Michael and Matthew, Peter, James and Andrew

Phillip, Simon and Judas -- I'm disciple of music
Street beats is the main thing minus the traitor..."

Nas, 2004, *Disciple*, from *Street Disciple*. NY: Sony Records.

"...Rappers & hoopers we strive to be like
G's with 3 stripes seeds that need light
Cheese & weaves tight needs & thieves strike
The corner where struggle & greed fight
We write songs about wrong cause it's hard to see right
Look to the sky hoping it will bleed light
Reality's and I heard that she bites..."

Common, 2005, *The Corner* from *Be*. CA: Geffen Records.

During an interview on 60 Minutes II, hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons replied (in response to being questioned about negative aspects of hip-hop), "... [referring to rapper 50-Cent] his poetry is...his reality...you may not like the truth that's coming out of some of the mouths of young people...but those are people that you wouldn't hear from at all" (Rose, 1994). Considering the ideas of both Gadamer and Gergen, perhaps rap music is the lyricists' only way of telling their stories to the world.

Foucault's Reflections

In *Essential Foucault*, Rabinow and Rose (2003) summarize the major contributions of Michel Foucault: a) the belief that knowledge is power, b) definition of ordering codes as the organization of experiences in language resulting in social oppression, and c) the impact of political movements that shape society. The text explicates Foucault's ideas about the constraints of political movements as a) dominant ideas about sexuality and gender, b) scientific

classifications in relation to medicine and illness, c) indirect intents of prison and punishment, d) governmentality - constant focus on techniques and policies, e) biopower - use of societal issues to rationalize and exercise governmental policies, f) problematization - relational recursiveness of society and government, g) subjectification - mediation of internal dialogue due to external cultural values. To elucidate the above points as related to hip hop culture, consider the lyrics of the following artists as they make reference to the double bind of issues in their communities:

“...Me and my family moved in our apartment complex
A gate with the serial code was put up next
The claim that this community is so drug free
But it don't look that way to me `cause I can see
The young bloods hanging out at the sto 24/7
Junkies looking got a hit of the blow it's powerful
Oh you know what else they trying to do
Make a curfew especially for me and you the traces of the new world order
Time is getting shorter if we don't get prepared
People it's gone be a slaughter
My mind won't allow me to not be curious
My folk don't understand so they don't take it serious
But every now and then, I wonder
If the gate was put up to keep crime out or to keep our ass in...”

GoodieMOB, 1995, *Cell Therapy*, from *Cell Therapy*. GA: LaFace Records.

“...Say no to drugs but the governments keep it
Running through our community, killing the unity
The war on drugs is a war on you and me
And yet they say this is the Home of The Free

But if you ask me its all about hypocrisy...”

2Pac, 1992, *Words of Wisdom*, from 2Pacalypse Now. CA: Priority Records.

In fundamental praxis as related to the political movements identified by Foucault, many authors note the ironies of reactions to hip-hop as: a) subculture resistance - individuals and groups sharing the same ethnicity who speak against rap music, b) political hegemony - capitalization of the media on subculture resistance, c) cultural heteroglossia - global impact of hip-hop culture that both unifies across cultures and sustains its criticisms, and d) hip-hop nihilism - imprudence and disregard of its creators and listeners (Kitwana, 2002; Morgan, 2002; Potter, 1995).

Madigan (1998) presents Foucault’s observation that the cultural construction of power subjugates alternative knowledge. Moreover, alternative knowledge is often silenced through disqualification. Rejecting the term, Foucault pointed out that the concept of ‘author’ represents a privileged, individual perspective. He further stated that “literary discourses are accepted and valued when endowed with the author function: ‘From where does it come? Who wrote it? When? Under what circumstances?’” (Rabinow & Rose, 2003). Such thinking relates to the disentanglement of hip-hop for educational and/or therapeutic purposes. Despite the attempt to devalue this phenomenon, top universities such as Harvard, Yale, University of Pennsylvania, UCLA, MIT, NYU, and Stanford have offered college courses focused on hip-hop (http://www.hiphoparchive.org/research/course_listings.htm).

Languaging in Hip-Hop

In *Language, Discourse, and Power*, Morgan (2002) speaks to how language and cognitive ability are inextricably linked. She recalls the disparagement of writers such as Paul Laurence Dunbar who were shunned for their “plantation dialect.” Presented as a double bind, the paradox was that writers wrote with such dialect to communicate within the culture. The

irony lied in that most of the criticisms came from individuals who shared their culture.

Similarly, rap artists today are ridiculed for their colloquial speech.

Morgan (2002) refers to hip-hop artists as lyrical geniuses in their use of language by means of: a) counterlanguage - protects and confirms existence of anti-society, b) duality in speech - reflection of local knowledge of alternative meaning, c) indirect speech (i.e. - uses of metaphors and analogies for popular terms), d) code switching - versatility in context, e) dialect, f) expansion of semantics, g) symbolism (i.e. - “word is bond”), h) lexical creativity, and g) spelling reforms. The citations below illustrate the clever linguistic dexterity of the writers:

“...You know how to work bread cheese & dough
from scratch but see the catch is you can get caught
Know what ya sellin' what ya bought so cut that big talk
Let's walk to the bridge now meet me halfway
now you may see some children dead off in the pathway
it's them poor babies walkin' slowly to the candy lady
It's lookin' bad need some hope...”

Outkast, 1998, *Aquemini* from *Aquemini*. GA: LaFace Records.

“...Speech is my hammer, bang the world into shape
Now let it fall
My restlessness is my nemesis
It's hard to really chill and sit still
Committed to page, I write rhymes
Sometimes won't finish for days
Scrutinize my literature, from the large to the miniature
I mathematically add-minister

Subtract the whack

Selector, wheel it back, I'm feeling that..."

Mos Def, 1999, *Hip Hop*, from *Black on Both Sides*. CA: Priority Records.

Clinical Applications

Although research is scant, rap music has been established as a helpful tool to utilize when engaging in group work with adolescents (DeCarlo, 2000; Paul, 2000; Tyson, 2002). In a pilot study of twelve to fourteen year old adolescents, DeCarlo designed an intervention aimed at 1) analyzing irrational thoughts that led to inappropriate conduct, and 2) promoting prosocial behaviors. He outlined six specific areas associated with aspects of lyrical analysis: 1) identity, 2) morality, 3) judgment and decision making, 4) anger management, 5) impulse control, and 6) crime and punishment. The youth were told to discuss lines from their favorite songs by stating their opinion of its message and principles. According to DeCarlo, the uses of the prosocial conduct group model resulted in increased interactions during discussions including awareness of how certain conduct leads to negative consequences. The youth were genuinely engaged in the process more through self-disclosure and perceived understanding of accepting responsibility for actions. DeCarlo notes that this is paramount for so-called nihilistic youth involved in the juvenile justice system.

Elligan (2000) utilized a similar approach when working with a young male coping with grief and anger following the death of his father. Giving neither sanction nor reproach for rap as a whole, Elligan presented the positive results of applying what he calls "rap therapy." He denotes five nonlinear stages of this process, 1) assessment, 2) alliance, 3) reframing, 4) role play with reinforcement, and 5) action and maintenance. During the first two stages, therapists gauge if the client favors rap music and forms a bond through supporting his or her interest. In stages three and four, therapists discover what rap means to the client and give written exercises to

facilitate reinforcement. The last stage of rap therapy consists of further modeling and discovering how writing can be transformed into action. Elligan found that as the result of rap therapy, the client's anger management skills improved as he found a new way to release his frustration and to grieve his loss.

Tyson (2002) presented qualitative and quantitative results of an exploratory study using rap music with "at-risk" and "delinquent" youth. Calling it the most popular form of music among youth, Tyson stated that hip-hop can be used to enhance the therapeutic experience when viewed as a strength and resource. He highlighted a plethora of applicable therapeutic purposes based on his study with youth in a Miami residential facility. Some of emergent themes included a) perseverance, resistance to oppressive forces, and resilience, b) spirituality as source of strength, c) unity and racial pride, d) effects of personal and parent drug use, e) dangers and irrationality of violence, f) parental love and attachment, g) sadness and grief, and h) social activism. He concluded his study by noting that the youth showed improvements in self-concept, introspection and rational thought, sense of responsibility, and peer relations.

Conclusion

In response to the negative discourses about rap music and hip-hop culture, Dyson maintains that "the complex relationship between art and social responsibility is evident" (p. 112). However, as stated by Toni Morrison, "...its discourse wouldn't be outlawed or policed if they spoke the fake language of the press...they do so to maintain quality...while making art" (p. 115). Rees (2003) supports the fusion of horizons referred to by Gadamer in an effort to exemplify a multi-voiced discourse.

Since the language of rap music emanates from the marginalized voices, hip-hop takes a fundamental oppositional stance of resistance, and brings power to communities. "I don't judge

it,” says Perez, Smithsonian curator, “On the whole, the majority of hip-hop is positive and creative; it just happens that the worst of it can also be the most commercial” (Walker, 2006). Even though many react against what seems vulgar and violent, they fail to realize that rappers speak through the power of language (Potter, 1995). Comparable to the reactions against Foucault, rap music is a form of linguistic militancy. Referred to as ‘the music ya’ love to hate,’ hip-hop artists ‘drop knowledge’ to the masses (Potter, 1995).

Nonetheless, rap music and hip-hop culture continue to be growing in popularity and influence. Today, rappers and activists join to promote social activism and empowerment, thus, shifting the dominant discourse of its destructive portrayal by the media. In the spirit of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, therapists can make use of such positivity by reconstructing a new, expanded horizon through the use of hip-hop. Suggestions for future studies include increasing the population and expanding the ages of youth to be studied, expanding upon the effects of using rap music in various contexts, and perhaps researching other forms of popular music with youth.

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