

"Exploring Hip Hop Therapy as a Therapeutic Intervention with High Risk Youth"

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Introduction

The concept of "*Exploring Hip Hop Therapy (HHT) as a Therapeutic Intervention that Engages High Risk Youth*" is a relatively new approach to treatment in the social work profession. HHT takes a non judgmental approach to the use of hip-hop music to provoke discussion and the critical analysis of an issue, idea, and events that impact youth socially, culturally, and environmentally (Ciardiello, 2003). HHT attempts to validate the experiences, beliefs, and values of youth influenced by hip-hop music and culture by using the lyrical content to engage youth in a therapeutic alliance. A variety of disciplines suggest that it is often difficult to engage youth in a therapeutic relationship. More approaches that address youth apprehension and engagement are necessary. Work with youth should be inclusive and sensitive of their culture. Rather than being apprehensive of youth culture, it is important for practitioners to attempt to understand the culture of our youth without judging its value. Taking interest in youth culture may add to the engagement of their therapeutic experience.

Review of Literature

In the last 30 years, hip-hop music and culture has become a pervasive part of youth culture. In most recent years, it has become a trend to use rap (a sub-context of hip hop music and culture) music in an educational and culturally centered youth programming environments (Tyson, 2003). This approach to treatment is relatively new in the social work profession. Because of the mass appeal and influence of hip hop music and culture amongst youth, the use of hip hop music in social work settings with voluntary and involuntary youth clientele, could prove to be a promising and culturally competent approach to treatment.

Youth who are described as high risk are often referred to treatment involuntarily. Traditionally, practitioners have found it difficult to engage youth in the therapeutic process (Elligan, 2004; Tyson, 2003; Freud, 1978 as cited in Mischne, 1997). The referring agents are often parents, probation/parole agents, educators, youth workers, etc. Many youth often resist and resent the referral to therapy because they do not feel anything is wrong with them. Not all youth have adequate internal ego structure for self-observation and self- awareness to comprehend the need for therapy (Mischne, 1997). Obvious symptoms, such as anguish or anxiety are not present to the youthful client, and may be more representative of the referrer (i.e. parents) (Mischne, 1997). Since the youth did not initiate the client/therapist relationship, youth are often apprehensive of the therapeutic relationship. The therapist is seen as a friend of the referrer, and in control of the relationship (Mishne, 1997). Often youth feel defensive, and believe that the

therapist/referrer alliance is more important than what their true wants or needs are (Mishne, 1997).

The need for therapeutic approaches to address youth apprehension is necessary. Therapeutic processes should be inclusive and sensitive to youth clients and youth culture. One's culture is often shaped by their cultural background, experiences, and environment (Elligan, 2004). Elligan states that this type of therapy is an affective, positive, and constructive way too communicate and engage youth in treatment. In a study by Tyson (2003), the youth reported that they appreciated the respect and knowledge of "their" music. Tyson (2003) also stated that when youth culture is affirmed, the client/practitioner relationship becomes less oppositional. Furthermore, he states that practitioners and researchers could be missing out on an opportunity to impact youth.

HHT is comprised of a variety of treatment approaches, such as music therapy, behavioral therapy, narrative therapy, and hip hop music and culture. By using hip-hop music as a platform for discussion, practitioners have the potential for creating a therapeutic connection with the youth. Analyzing music lyrics that fosters youth culture enhances the practitioner's ability to engage youth in the therapeutic process. Engaging youth can encourage youth to self-disclose, activate buried emotions and experiences bringing them to surface for discussion (Ciardiello, 2003).

Some hip-hop lyrics are considered questionable, and are often criticized to be materialistic, misogynistic, violent, and sexist. Exploring the lyrics for relevant life issues, struggles, and themes that relate to the youth client will be vital to creating the therapeutic alliance. Breaking down the lyrics as the lyrics relate to the youth's reality allows for the practitioner to assist the youth in thinking about goal setting, appropriate and healthy life skills, and planning their future. Also, it allows the practitioner to explore the youth's ability to construct positive development skills in the areas of anger management, unhealthy/healthy relationships, lifestyles and role models, communications, coping skills, education and career planning, human sexuality, and attitudes and behavior management.

Discussion

It is true that many social work practitioners find it difficult to engage youth in the therapeutic process (Elligan, 2004; Tyson, 2003; Cooper & Granucci Lessor, 2002). In fact, it is considered one of the most challenging components of social work practice. Tyson (2003) suggests that if there are more therapeutic interventions that are inclusive of youth culture that there would be less oppositional interaction amongst youthful clients and practitioners. Traditional methods of treatment are difficult to apply if they are not diverse and supportive enough in nature, particularly where African American youth are concerned.

Kitwana (2002) stated in an interview that over 1 million African Americans were currently incarcerated, and the majority of them were born in between 1965-1985 (the time in which hip hop music and culture began and made its impact today's society).

African Americans (adolescent and adult) are known to be leery of political, government, and educational systems. This is partially due to historical injustices that have taken place for many generations. Many established systems have allowed for the distrust from African Americans to pass on from one generation to the next adding to the phenomenon-generational inferiority (Boyd-Franklin, 2003) In addition this adds to the marginalized inclusion of African American (youth and adult, etc.) culture by the overall society (Boyd-Franklin, 2003). This revelation is what makes hip hop music and culture so pervasive for this specific population. It is representative of their lives and their experiences. It is important to explore this ideology, and how it would benefit this population as they continue to voluntary and involuntary participate in therapeutic relationships.

A review of youth at risk statistics proves evident that more research and supportive practice are in need. HHT will work from the influence hip-hop music and culture has on youth of today. The HHT application will identify implied negative themes within hip hop music and culture, assist the youth in processing the themes, deconstruct the themes as they relate to the youth and their environment, and reflect on constructing positive themes that will assist youth in making appropriate decisions and managing positive behavior.

Conclusion

This “study in progress” begins to look at the effectiveness of HHT and how well the intervention engages youth in the therapeutic alliance. The HHT intervention will be explored with high risk youth at an urban alternative high school in a moderately diverse city. The youth attend the high school because of excessive absenteeism, disruptive and violent behaviors, and low academic achievement displayed while previously attending the regular public school system. Other youth are referred and mandated to attend the school by the Department of Juvenile Justice as a condition of their probation and/or parole. Many of the youth are considered to be gang affiliated. Attending this school is considered to be a last resort for all of the youth. If they fail at this school, there are little to no other options for them.

Overall, HHT is a creative intervention approach to treatment with youth. It gives practitioners an opportunity to establish and maintain therapeutic partnerships. A core component to the social work practice is "to work with the person in their environment". It is important to understand what influences the population with which that practitioners come in contact. It is also relevant to explore and understand that population's value and belief systems. Practitioners must attempt to understand the importance of hip-hop music and culture in youth culture. It is effortless to work with clientele on a social level, but not understand how to reach them socially.

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