

Exploring Hip-Hop Therapy with High-Risk Youth

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Abstract

This article explores a new approach in the field of social work entitled Hip-Hop Therapy (HHT). Hip-Hop can be described as an urban mainstream culture driven by youth and young adults. HHT uses Hip-Hop music and culture to engage youth and address their issues in therapy by encouraging them to reflect on Hip-Hop lyrics as they relate to the youths' own life experiences. HHT also utilizes concepts from established forms of therapeutic approaches such as music therapy, behavioral therapy, and narrative therapy and may be instituted in either individual or group settings. Analyzing Hip-Hop lyrics engages participants, stimulates discussion, and promotes critical examination of life issues, struggles, and experiences. HHT also embodies the person-in-environment (PIE) approach that is a central component of social work practice and explores the social, cultural, and environmental orientations and contexts of participants. Using HHT allows practitioners to embrace youth culture while simultaneously attempting to deconstruct negative attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors held by the youth and replace them with healthy and positive goals and objectives.

Introduction

I like to listen to rap music because it speaks to the lifestyle I live as a young black male. Me and my friends, other young black males, love rap music. When I use [sic] to go to see white female therapists, they did not understand what could help us. They don't understand that what they are saying is going in one ear and out of the other, it just gives me a headache when I go there, I just want to get out and go get high, because it does not help me at all... My reality and rap music are probably too violent for them. (Elligan, 2004, p.1)

In the last 30 years, Hip-Hop music and culture have become a pervasive part of youth culture (Tyson, 2003). Consequently, teachers and youth workers have turned to Hip-Hop to interact successfully with the youth with whom they work, though the idea of using Hip-Hop music within the social work profession is relatively new (Tyson, 2003). Because of Hip-Hop's mass appeal, its use in social

work settings with both voluntary and involuntary youth clients could prove to be a promising and culturally-sensitive approach to therapy.

Youth described as high-risk are often referred to therapy involuntarily by way of court mandate or parental force. Since youth often do not initiate the therapy process, they may be apprehensive about participating in a therapeutic relationship, the construction of which practitioners have traditionally found to be a challenge in working with this population (Elligan, 2004; Tyson, 2003; Mischne, 1997). For example, not all youth have the adequate ego structure to observe their own need for therapy (Mischne, 1997). Other youth may feel as if practitioners are allied with the other adults (such as parents or probation officers) in the youths' lives rather than with the youth, and still others may feel disconnected from the therapeutic environment because it is so different from their lives outside of therapy.

Creative and sensitive approaches that address youth apprehension and resistance are therefore necessary. Elligan (2004) emphasizes that one's culture is often shaped by one's background, experiences, and environment. The practice of HHT incorporates all of those components and uses them to address youth issues in therapy. How, then, is this achieved? In order to be able to implement this approach in an effective manner, one must first obtain an understanding of what Hip-Hop is.

What is Hip-Hop?

Hip-Hop is a modern mainstream young urban American culture. I know there are a lot of ideas there, but Hip-Hop's impact is as broad as that description suggests. Like rock and roll, blues, and jazz, Hip-Hop is primarily a musical form. But unlike those forms of Black music, Hip-Hop is more expansive in the ways it manifests itself, [and] as a result its impact is wider.... Hip-Hop communicates aspiration and frustration, community and aggression, creativity and street reality, style and substance. It is not rigid, nor is it easy to sum up in a sentence or even a book. Simply put, when you are in a Hip-Hop environment, you know it. It has a feel that is tangible and cannot be mistaken for anything else. (Simmons & George, 2001, p. 4-5)

The term Hip-Hop and its foundations emerged from the Black and Latino communities of New York City in the late 1970's (Ciardiello, 2003; Kitwana, 2002; Simmons & George, 2001; Ayazi-Hashjin, 1999). The early development of Hip-Hop was underground; only a few took part in its creation (Ayazi-Hashjin, 1999). Early pioneer Hip-Hop artists such as Afrika Bambaataa, Sugar Hill Gang, Run DMC, Red Alert, Boogie Boys, and Public Enemy were instrumental in establishing the four tiers of Hip-Hop: MCs (emcees), DJs (deejays), Breakdancing, and Graffiti Art (Ayazi-Hashjin, 1999). These four tiers of Hip-Hop are considered to be the roots of the movement that empowered urban youth to use music, dance, and other forms of artistic expression to describe life as they saw it.

Today, Hip-Hop is primarily known for its connection with rappers. Hip-Hop in its musical form is unique because it is a fusion of rap, rhythm and blues, and pop music. Some of the current artists who are major influences in Hip-Hop include Russell Simmons, Mary J. Blige, Alicia Keys, Sean 'P. Diddy' Combs, Usher, and Jay Z, all of whom have helped Hip-Hop evolve beyond its musical boundaries into an authentic cultural force that now includes fashion, television, cinema, advertising, magazines, sports, language/slang, and attitude (Simmons & George, 2001). As KRS-One, an early pioneer of Hip-Hop, explained in *The Science of Rap*, "Rap is something you do. Hip-Hop is something you live" (Ayazi-Hashjin, 1999, p. 43).

What is Hip-Hop Therapy (HHT)?

Because of Hip-Hop's influence and its social, political, and cultural content, exploring its musical form in therapy can be effective in engaging youth. The concept of Hip-Hop Therapy with high-risk youth was first explored and documented in a scholarly manner by Tyson (2002), who defined the approach as a synergy of rap music, bibliotherapy, and music therapy. Tyson (2002) noted that few would debate Hip-Hop music's widespread acceptance and popularity among youth and concluded that practitioners may find success in connecting and relating to youth by exploring with them the social, cultural and political content of the lyrics.

Hip-Hop Therapy has evolved into what may now be described as an innovative, culturally-sensitive technique infused with established therapeutic approaches such as music therapy, behavioral therapy, and narrative therapy. Analyzing the Hip-Hop music lyrics engages participants, stimulates discussion, and promotes the examination of life issues,

struggles, and experiences in a way that participants experience as relevant to their own lives. HHT also takes a person-in-environment approach by exploring the social, cultural and environmental orientations and contexts of the participants.

Hip-Hop Therapy is designed and best utilized as an engagement tool in a psychotherapeutic or educational setting for high-risk youth and young adults. The intervention is diverse enough to be utilized with any racial or ethnic group familiar with and/or affected by Hip-Hop music and culture. It is educational, creative, culturally-sensitive, engaging, empowering, and therapeutic. HHT may be understood as a response to more traditional therapeutic approaches that are often ineffective with high-risk populations because they were not designed to address the unique issues that these youth encounter in their everyday environments and social development. Moreover, it is an ideal and practical tool to help build "youth-centered" capacity in communities that have been traditionally disenfranchised from the mainstream social, political, and economic systems.

HHT and Music Therapy

Historically, music therapy has been an effective approach that has often been used with youth (Luce, 2004; Chase, 2003). Music evokes emotion via a non-threatening medium, which facilitates the therapy process (Luce, 2004; Tyson, 2003). Elligan (2004) emphasizes how music speaks to one's experiences, challenges, passions, fears, and hopes. It also breaks down resistance and allows practitioners to perceive emotions and behaviors that might not be as accessible through traditional therapy approaches (Tyson, 2003). Furthermore, until recently music in therapy has been used only as an auditory stimulus and expressive activity, whereas HHT's emphasis on lyrical content allows practitioners to explore their clients' self-concepts, influences, relationships, and goals (Tyson, 2002).

HHT and Behavioral Therapy

The behavioral therapy approach is systematic in its attempts to facilitate behavioral change (Cooper & Granucci-Lesser, 2002). HHT applies many of behavioral therapy's systematic components insofar as it looks to engage participants in a review of their behaviors as they relate to themes encompassed in Hip-Hop music and culture. It also has as an aim the deconstruction of negative and employment of positive skills needed for adulthood. Similar to both

cognitive and behavioral therapists, HHT practitioners encourage clients to learn about themselves and to seek ways to change potentially destructive behavior patterns (Elligan, 2004; Cooper & Granucci-Lesser, 2002). Many of these destructive behaviors – sex, violence, crime, drugs, and gang activity, for example – are frequent themes of Hip-Hop music. Using that lyrical content presents HHT practitioners an opportunity to discuss and break down the destructive behaviors with youth in an attempt to introduce and construct positive behaviors.

In order to use this medium effectively, HHT practitioners may need to modify their own attitudes toward Hip-Hop music and culture if they are not comfortable or familiar with this musical/cultural genre. Embracing Hip-Hop offers practitioners the ability to make a genuine connection with the youth during therapy, which in turn assists in facilitating behavioral change.

HHT and Narrative Therapy

The narrative therapy approach focuses on allowing clients to construct their own stories in therapy. Clients' disclosures are shared from their own frames of reference and points of view. It is through the sharing of their stories, as well as the validation of these stories, that clients shape and re-shape their lives (Boyd-Franklin, 2003). Many youth take pride in being able to tell their stories and may like Hip-Hop because it often discusses "street reality" and gives voice to issues that might otherwise be silenced. It gives the youth an opportunity to say and acquire things normally denied them, such as attention, respect, a voice, and money (Simmons & George, 2001). Furthermore, analyzing Hip-Hop lyrics for relevant life issues and struggles that relate to the participants allows for open and possibly non-personalized discussion; some youth might find using the third person less threatening and may be more willing to share their thoughts in this format, which would allow them to move at their own pace (Ciardiello, 2003). This is important because many youth vary in their ability to disclose information and tolerate anxiety during emotional discussions (Levine, 1978 as cited in Ciardiello, 2003).

HHT and Person-in-Environment (PIE) Theory

Person-in-environment (PIE) theory is a culturally-sensitive and ecological approach that fosters collective behavior in the context of interdependence with larger institutions and social systems that interact dynamically (Daly, 2001). One of the

strengths of the PIE perspective is that it enables practitioners to focus on linkages between the social, environmental, political, legal, and educational systems with which many of today's youth come in contact (Daly, 2001). This perspective focuses on the goodness-of-fit between the clients and their environments. This approach is also valorized within the social work profession because it effectively allows practitioners an opportunity to establish a rapport with their clients and meet them at the clients' social and cognitive levels. Utilizing all of the available resources in the environment helps clients realize their full potential.

How Hip-Hop Therapy (HHT) Works

HHT can be employed in an individual or group therapy setting. It can also be used on a long-term or short-term basis. It can be very creative and diverse because of the different types of Hip-Hop music from which practitioners may choose, such as gangsta rap, rap/rhythm and blues, rap/pop, political rap, positive rap, gospel rap, or pro-social rap (Elligan, 2004; Tyson, 2003). It is important to take into account what type of Hip-Hop music the youth enjoy.

As with any therapeutic intervention, it is important to cover therapy procedures, including clients' rights and responsibilities, the role of the practitioner, limitations on confidentiality, mandated reporting requirements, fees, signatures on agreements, and what clients may expect from the overall therapy process. After the basics are covered practitioners could utilize the following in HHT:

- *Assessment.* It is first important to discuss the clients' reasons for participating in therapy. Reviewing the clients' presenting issues establishes the goal and direction for the HHT approach with each client and assists the practitioner in discerning each client's level of engagement. The practitioner can then explore the clients' levels of interest in Hip-Hop as well as their favorite Hip-Hop artists and songs. This will help the practitioner in choosing the appropriate music and lyrics for the HHT sessions. The assessment should also include the clients' familial, social, and behavioral histories. Articulating what life issues or struggles the clients have experienced or may be currently experiencing will be helpful in referencing the appropriate Hip-Hop songs in the therapeutic sessions.
- *Utilizing "Icebreaker Activities."* "Icebreaker Activities" are a convenient way to ease tension and anxiety that the participants may be feeling. For example, playing brief samples of different types of

Hip-Hop music and then asking the clients to name the appropriate Hip-Hop artist may spark curiosity and enthusiasm. It also assists the practitioner in establishing a rapport with the clients.

- *Establish HHT group guidelines.* This is an opportunity for clients to become invested in their experience of HHT, as they may be asked to assist with setting rules for the group as well as consequences for breaking these rules. For example, one rule could be for one person to speak at a time. To be creative with the rule, the practitioner could bring in a toy microphone, and the person with the toy microphone would be the only one allowed to speak. When the person was finished speaking, he or she could pass it to someone else who would like to speak. Another example would be to start each client off with "Five Mics" (a term awarded to Hip-Hop artists for having exceptional Hip-Hop albums). If a rule is broken, the client gets one of his or her "Mics" taken away. At the end of the group, the clients with "Five Mics" would receive a small reward.
- *Gather materials and resources.* To effectively facilitate Hip-Hop therapy, practitioners would need a compact disc player, Hip-Hop music, copies of the lyrics, and notebooks for participant journaling. Based on the information gathered from the assessment, practitioners should gather Hip-Hop music and lyrics that embody the clients' presenting life issues or struggles. To be more creative, practitioners could also utilize Hip-Hop music videos and movies to facilitate discussion. Practitioners could either purchase the Hip-Hop music on their own, rent from their local library or video store, or ask the clients to bring in their music. Practitioners can search for lyrics on the Internet on sites such as www.azlyrics.com or www.lyrics.com. It may be worthwhile for practitioners to establish their own library of Hip-Hop music and culture because clients may vary in what types of Hip-Hop they do and do not like.
- *Preparation.* Before each session, practitioners should listen to and study the Hip-Hop music and lyrics so that they may become familiar with Hip-Hop, the artist's message in the music, and the relevant life issues that are particularly salient to their clients' lives.
- *Establish HHT learning objectives.* It is important for practitioners, based on the data obtained during the assessment, to highlight what groups can expect to learn and get out of the HHT experience. During this process it is important for practitioners to be aware of group dynamics and facilitate the stages of group development.
- *Goal setting.* Setting realistic goals allows clients to have something to work toward in HHT. The practitioner can work closely with clients to set goals that will facilitate change and progress in the necessary areas.
- *Journal writing.* Since many clients vary in their ability to discuss and disclose information about themselves, the journal-writing component is an optional application of HHT that allows clients to share their thoughts, reactions, and any self-identified meanings. This component also allows for self-expression of feelings and emotions in a non-threatening way. Practitioners collect the journals at the end of each session and therapeutically respond to the clients' disclosures, questions, concerns, and comments. The content in the journals and the practitioners' responses provide material for the next HHT session. Practitioners can also be creative and ask clients to write their own raps or poems in their journals. This form of self-expression is useful in allowing the clients to disclose difficult issues in the third person and move at an individual pace.
- *Discussion.* The discussion of Hip-Hop music and its lyrics with clients who enjoy Hip-Hop breaks down resistance. Practitioners may be witness to attitudes, emotions, and behaviors that might not have been accessible in traditional approaches to therapy. HHT also creates an opportunity for clients to share their own stories as they relate to the content of the music. Practitioners are thus first able to explore the clients' attitudes, behaviors, values, and beliefs and then respond with appropriate interventions.
- *Intervention.* The intervention component attempts to facilitate attitudinal and behavioral change by encouraging clients to learn about themselves, deconstructing negative behaviors, and introducing positive and healthy behaviors. Practitioners should also implement behavioral techniques such as exposure and modeling. Additionally, this is an opportunity for practitioners to be supportive, validating, and affirming of clients – core qualities necessary for establishing a therapeutic alliance.
- *Facilitating a closing round activity.* At the end of each session, a closing round activity allows clients to summarize what they have learned or experienced in the group as well as to comment on the overall HHT process.

Table 1. Sample of Hip Hop Song List

Hip Hop Artist	Album	Song Title	Relevant Experience, Issue, or Struggle In Music
Kanye West featuring Syleena Johnson	College Drop Out (2004)	"All Falls Down"	Insecurity, trying to fit in with peers and family, materialism
D12	D12 World (2004)	"How Come"	Conflict with friends
Jay Z	Black Album (2004)	"99 Problems"	Problems with friends, police, money, family, and girlfriend
AKON	Trouble (2004)	"Locked Up"	Being incarcerated, away from family, changing life around
Tupac featuring Notorious B.I.G.	Resurrection (Soundtrack) (2004)	"Runnin' (Dying to Live)"	Product of environment, violence, trying to change negative behavior
50 Cent	Get Rich or Die Tryin' (2003)	"Many Men"	Violent conflict with others, gang/street violence, thinking about death, faith in God
Mary J. Blige	No More Drama (2001)	"No More Drama"	Letting go of pain, moving forward in life, being happy

Source: <http://www.azlyrics.com>

When practicing HHT, it is important that only components of Hip-Hop music and culture that clients understand, like, and find relevant are used. The music functions more as a point of reference for clients' life experiences and may assist in engaging them into therapy and its processes because of its extant influence on youth. These components will assist in identifying and processing negative themes within Hip-Hop music and culture, helping the clients deconstruct those themes as they relate to the clients and their environments, and focusing on constructing positive themes that will assist clients in making appropriate decisions and managing positive attitudes and behaviors.

Case Scenario:

LW was a 17-year-old African American female in the 11th grade who was referred to the 10-week Hip-Hop therapy group at her school by her principal for constant disruptive behavior in and outside of her classes. On her first day of attendance in the group LW stated that she did not want to participate. Based on the feedback from the participants' intake assessments, the group topics were centered on family conflict, lifestyles, role models, relationships, and at-risk

behaviors such as substance abuse, unprotected sex, and involvement with gangs. During LW's intake assessment, she disclosed life issues that included all of the stated topics. During the group a number of LW's favorite Hip-Hop artists and songs were used to facilitate discussion, and in the "family conflict" session LW reacted intensely to Hip-Hop artist Jay Z's "99 Problems" song. LW was able to relate to the line "if you having girl problems I feel bad for you son, I got 99 problems but a girl ain't one" in the song. LW liked to change the lyric to "if you having boy problems I feel bad for you son, I have 99 problems, and my mother is the main one." When asked about the conflict with her mother, LW would disclose very little. Continuous reference to the "99 Problems" allowed the whole group to relate and discuss their own problems. As a result of the other participants' disclosures, LW eventually revealed that she had been sexually abused at age 12 by one of her mother's boyfriends. The conflict between LW and her mother began when LW disclosed the sexual abuse. LW stated that her mother responded negatively and that she did not believe her, which had been causing tremendous strain on their relationship.

Clinical Summary

The initial concern was LW's attitude and behavior. After LW's disclosure of sexual abuse the focus shifted to her symptoms of insomnia, poor concentration, and low self-esteem. It was also crucial to ensure that LW was comfortable with discussing the abuse in front of the group and that the group was comfortable as well. LW had no problem being honest and forthcoming, and her disclosure led to further discussions about how she felt about people in her life and the purpose they served. Significant time was spent addressing and validating LW's senses of self and self-worth. After several weeks of journaling, group discussions, and discussing the struggles of others, LW felt reassured knowing that she was not alone and comfortable moving forward. Her newly constructed view of the world helped her to cope with both the abuse and her mother's reaction to it. LW also began to make positive changes in her attitude and behavior, which was reflected in her listening to more Hip-Hop songs that focused on love and happiness. For example, when referencing Mary J. Blige's song "No More Drama" and its lyrics, "Oooh, it feels so good when you let go of all the drama in your life, now you're free from all the pain, free from all the game, free from all the stress," LW was able to relate and realized that it took more energy to be angry and to hold a grudge than to let go of the pain. With LW's permission, her mother was called in to discuss what LW disclosed, and a referral was made for both individual and family therapy. LW stated that she felt relieved and was glad that she participated in the Hip-Hop Therapy group. The Hip-Hop music used in the group sessions allowed LW to express herself and experience an emotional catharsis that might not have occurred had another therapeutic format been employed.

Implications for Social Work Practice

Hip-Hop music and culture has many critics who allege that the genre is materialistic, misogynistic, violent, and sexist. Therefore, caution must at times be used before implementing HHT, particularly when dealing with parents, educators, and even other clinical practitioners who may not be aware that many of today's youth are already familiar with Hip-Hop and its prevalent themes. These individuals may need to be convinced that because youth are familiar with the at-times negative messages of Hip-Hop, challenging the perpetuation of these messages may be best accomplished by directly examining them under a therapeutically infused lens.

Practitioners and critics also need to be aware that many of those who enjoy Hip-Hop music and culture do not equate the questionable lyrics to themselves. There is a high level of reality contained within Hip-Hop lyrics, but they are often simplistically viewed as a source of entertainment, humorous jargon, and/or social parody. Asking youth to relate their own lives to the messages conveyed by Hip-Hop encourages them to become critical thinkers, a skill that may be carried out of the therapeutic setting and applied to multiple facets of their lives. Exploring the questionable lyrics as they possibly relate to a client's real-life issues, struggles, and themes could also prove to be vital in creating a therapeutic alliance. It creates an opportunity for practitioners to adopt the clients' perspectives. Also, examining lyrics that are relative to the clients' realities allows practitioners to explore the validity of the clients' values, beliefs, and traditions. Aligning with clients and exploring their lives using a tool (Hip-Hop) already present in clients' lives affords practitioners an opportunity to reshape negative aspects of their lives into positive aspects that will help them to create healthy behaviors, lifestyles, and choices, thereby enhancing their overall well-being and quality of life.

In conclusion, HHT is a creative approach to treatment with high-risk youth. It encourages practitioners to formulate a culturally competent and sensitive practice as well as establish and maintain a therapeutic relationship. Tyson (2003) suggests that if there were more therapeutic interventions inclusive of youth culture, there would be less oppositional interaction amongst youthful clients and practitioners. In his research, Tyson (2003) postulates that by not using HHT, practitioners could be missing out on a critical opportunity to impact youth. Furthermore, if practitioners can grow to appreciate, tolerate, and respect the youth clients' music and culture, then perhaps the therapeutic relationship would become less oppositional and treatment more effective.

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