Hip-Hop Social Work

Contributed by Barbara Trainin Blank

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. — Russell Simmons, in Life and Def: Sex, Drugs, Money * GOD {mosgoogle right}

Rap music, hip-hop, and social work may seem like an unlikely combination. They may, in fact, seem contradictory, because of rap's themes of misogyny, violence, and racism—but some social workers find hip-hop not only a possible but highly beneficial therapeutic tool in working with some of their high-risk clients. As hip-hop and youth culture have become increasingly pervasive, it's likely the combination will become even more common as practitioners seek ways to interact successfully with the youth with whom they work.

One social worker who used hip-hop in her practice for a time is Lauren Collins. Hip Hop Heals is a group therapy program for at-risk youth and young adults, whose passion for rap encourages an acceptance of therapy and an understanding of its goals, according to Collins, who holds an MSW from Hunter College's Graduate School of Social Work. "Hip Hop Heals provides a comfortable forum for honest self-examination while helping participants find their way along the path to personal growth," she adds.

One reason Hip Hop Heals may have been successful is that Collins shared her clients' passion for hip-hop. Realizing many of them were influenced by the hip-hop culture and its values, she developed a curriculum structured around the sounds and messages of rap music. The curriculum was first implemented at Palladia-Starhill, a residential alternative to incarceration in the Bronx, NY.

Collins used the lyrics of hip-hop to separate out "what's true and what's false" about the reality. "I'd tell them that rappers have a lot of money but can't pay for their kids' education. We talked about the misogyny, drug references, and gang violence—what's smoke and what's mirrors. Only about one percent of rappers really have money, and kids can't eat diamonds or learn from a car," says Collins.

Collins' clients were African American and Hispanic males, 18-25, all mandated to be in the group. When they saw her, she admits, they started laughing, wondering what she'd know about hip-hop. They didn't want to talk to her. She started playing a Tupac song, "calming and equalizing them. It started a discussion, and they opened up," Collins says.

Ironically, she found, not all of her clients were into hip-hop—some really didn't like it. But she helped them understand that the songs topically had relevance to what brought them to jail and found the hip-hop program "made a huge impact." It helped unite the group and foster camaraderie.

Collins also used identification technique. She'd play the "worst" of hip-hop lyrics, the most demeaning, then point out that if anyone said them to their mother or sister, they'd beat up that person. "Then why buy into it," she would say to them. "How will you learn if you buy into this? You can like the beat, but not about beating 'bitches and hos.' " She also tried to play some socially conscious songs and to tell them they'd have to make changes if they didn't want to end up in jail again.

Since a number of her young clients had kids, Collins would also emphasize that the lyrics of hip-hop weren't "valuable for the kids to emulate." She adds, "We tried to help them learn a different skills set and perspective, the reality of what is being sold in these songs. You need to listen with a critical ear."

Although Collins completed her last cycle of Hip Hop Heals for inmates last July to begin work at the Lexington School for the Deaf in New York City, she feels there's still a market for such a program for use in prisons, rehabilitation, and after school. "There was great receptivity to it," she says.

Another practitioner of this therapy, who has registered the name "Hip-Hop TherapistTM" and "Hip-Hop Therapy®," is Nakeyshaey M. Tillie Allen in the Los Angeles area. She uses the culture and music to engage high-risk youth and to encourage them to address their own issues in therapy by reflecting on how the lyrics of the songs relate to their own experiences. But hip-hop therapy uses concepts from established forms of therapeutic approaches, such as music therapy, behavioral therapy, and narrative therapy, Allen points out, and can be used in individual or group settings.

Allen sees hip-hop therapy as engaging participants, stimulating discussion, and promoting critical examination of life issues, struggles, and experiences. But while allowing practitioners to embrace youth culture, she says, it simultaneously attempts to deconstruct negative attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors held by the youth and to replace them with healthy and positive goals and objectives.

While opponents of hip-hop may find it monolithic as well as objectionable, Allen sees hip-hop therapy as "creative and diverse," because of the many different types of music, from gangsta to pro-social rap.

As part of assessment, Allen adds, the practitioner can explore the clients' level of interest in hip-hop and their favorite songs. Hip-hop can also be used as a group icebreaker. "Lyrics that embody the clients' presenting life issues or struggles can be chosen," she says. "They can also write their own rap songs, and discussion of hip-hop music with those who enjoy it breaks down resistance." As for the negative aspects, the social worker wrote in an article in the Fall 2005 issue of Praxis, "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...could also prove vital in creating a therapeutic alliance."

The clients Allen had been working with when she turned to hip-hop therapy had problems with anger management, alcohol and drugs, as well as family relationships. But beyond that, she found it was "difficult to get them engaged" in therapy.

A lover of hip-hop personally, Allen was sitting in graduate class one day during a discussion of Freud and Maslow when she found herself relating some of her passion for this music to traditional psychotherapy.

"I use hip-hop through the intake and assessment process to determine what people like and enjoy and to help me get to know and understand them," Allen says. "Hip-hop has roots in music and art, but also has cognitive and narrative concepts. A lot of my clients are young adults and adolescents, and they identify with the hip-hop culture through their dress and attitudes—not everyone really cares about the music, but the culture has an impact on them. They're up on the players in the culture—movies, books, language."

Hip-hop is also a useful tool in discussing the issues that brought clients to therapy. Often, Allen points out, they say that they don't have a problem, but it's only their Mom or some other adult who thinks they do. "How can I engage them and get to the heart of the issue?" Allen asks. "I'm able to ask probing questions about their likes and interests and to create a profile through the assessment."

The responses of her clients to hip-hop aren't always what she expects, Allen says. Some young ladies don't have problems with the vulgar, misogynistic language of some rap songs, whereas some young men do. The main point, though, is the opening that the music provides for what the therapist calls "ah-ha moments." "Clients would say to me, 'I didn't want to talk, and you got me to talk by focusing on someone else.' Once there's that breakthrough, we can start doing the work."

How do therapists deal with the negative moral aspects of hip-hop? Allen's response is that for many people, rap and hip-hop are about "truth and reality"—and the language part is very important. "There are those who find it difficult to embrace the language," she says, "but it's really how people think and feel. People use that language in everyday life, including the 'N' word. The major part of it is working with people to help with their problems. The goal is to get at the presenting issue using aspects of music and culture. It's not about hip-hop."

Hip-hop also represents a "this is who I am, in your face" attitude, says Allen. But through hip-hop, she helps introduce more "pro-social stuff" for kids and teaches the art of assimilation to society. "Once I have them engaged, I tell them they can't go into other environments and be in people's faces, that they can't get their point across that way. That's the relational aspect of therapy.... You have to be real and honest and have a thick skin about it. You can't teach a young person anything new if you're not relating to him or her."

Further, Allen says, hip-hop is a bridge between clients and teachers, therapists, anyone who works with youth. "Many therapists are scared of clients, and many of the young people know it. They're not taking anything seriously or getting anything out of anything. They're disconnected from the clients, and no real work is being done.... We're already prejudging them, and they know that. We have to take some ownership of how we work with our clients. It's not just knowledge but skills."

For Allen, hip-hop is not theoretical. After sexual abuse by a family member, having a child at 16, and legal trouble, she managed to graduate high school and found a way to connect through music—songs like "Hey, Young World" by Slick Rick's "The World Was Yours." "I felt let down by adults, and I knew I had to be there for my child. I became rooted in education, volunteered as a parenting mentor and facilitator."

The trauma of her own life helped Allen relate to her clients—what it's like to be an adolescent parent on welfare. "Many young people are products of failed relationships, and they don't know why," she says. "A lot are hurt and don't care. If they can find someone to relate to, they'll do it. They don't want to be alone. They gravitate toward gangs, music, popular culture. They don't understand it's just to entertain you." On the other hand, no matter what their parents have done, Allen finds that many kids want to "run back" to them and to relate.

Hip-hop culture and the therapy it has engendered are not unique to the United States. In Canada, social worker Stephen Leafloor founded Blue Print For Life Consulting, offering creative consulting, project management, and training in the fields of social work and education. Leafloor has more than 25 years' experience as a front-line social worker in the areas of wilderness programs, street work with youth at risk, residential group homes, child protection, and community outreach. He has also been an active participant in the hip-hop culture since 1981.

Music has been described as "the universal language," and that goes for hip-hop, as well. Leafloor has been doing a number of hip-hop therapy projects in remote Cree, Dene, and Inuit communities in Canada. And he continues hands-on involvement in hip-hop himself. Leafloor, who describes himself as one of the oldest Bboys (breakdancers) still getting down actively, has been nicknamed Buddha by his clients. He is also the founder of Canada's oldest Bboy crew, known as "The Canadian Floor Masters."

"My team does social work through hip-hop programs through the Canadian Arctic and first-nations communities," says Leafloor, who completed his thesis on hip-hop and its importance as a social and community development tool. "This work has been described as the most important social outreach in the Arctic in 20 years." But they have not worked exclusively with aboriginal youth. "We also work with youth from a 24-hour lockup and inner-city youth, including Sudanese refugee kids in Calgary, Alberta, and other locations," he says. Leafloor also teaches cast members at Cirque Du Soleil and helps train their staff in the company's social outreach program, Cirque Du Monde.

Leafloor and his team have been keynote speakers at national conferences on bullying, as well as a United Nations youth conference, among other such gatherings, and the subject of a number of documentaries have been done about their work.

The "cornerstone" to what he and his team do, Leafloor continues, is to re-educate young people on the real positive

messages of hip-hop while encouraging them to “find their own voice through bringing their traditional culture into hip-hop, so that throat singing, an ancient Inuit tradition, might be mixed with Beat Box—drum beats made with one’s mouth in hip-hop.”

As part of the team’s projects, they encourage youth to create a large graffiti piece in each project—of a positive youth message the participants can come up with. The message is “full of their symbols and often done in their own language,” Leafloor adds.

Dr. Edward Tyson, a professor at Fordham University in New York, has been providing the research framework for what other social workers are doing clinically. He has been studying the relationship between rap music and youth attitudes, perceptions and behaviors, as well as the therapeutic use of rap music.

Tyson’s interest in hip-hop was piqued in 1998, when he worked as a social work practitioner in a shelter in Miami for kids with problems of delinquency, running away, and homelessness. “Kids would sing rap lyrics, and I was interested in whether they realized the underlying message,” he says. “For example, there was a song in which the rapper sang about the death of a friend and seeing that person in the next life. I wondered whether the kids would understand the spiritual message, and to my surprise, they were right on point.”

Rap lyrics in particular opened a conversation with a young man whose mother was on drugs and whose grandmother, who had cared for him, had died. He never wanted to talk about the death and had been in the shelter for three months already. “I asked the boy if he felt the way about his grandmother that the song said, and he said, ‘Yes, stop asking me about it. I’m on with it.’ It took music to have the conversation. The lyrics gave the breakthrough to have the discussion. Before that, he just said he didn’t want to talk about it.”

Tyson’s academic research continues. He has gotten a grant to study scientifically the themes of violence and sexism in hip-hop and to see if people could agree on their perceptions. “If the responses are too individualized, it makes no sense to say the lyrics do this or that,” Tyson explains. “We try to make generalizations.”

Tyson is about to submit for publication a study of 350 African American and Latino youth in a Paterson, NJ, high school comparing the effect of rap they listen to with videos they watch. His team asked how many hours they watched or listened and then compared the data with the students’ school records—such as grades and number of suspensions, for example.

“There’s indisputable evidence that video games and media imagery have an effect on kids’ behavior,” Tyson says. “But I wondered whether hearing violent, racist, or sexist themes has an effect. We found that the lyrics had no effect.”

Not that Tyson is minimizing the negative aspects of hip-hop, especially the “highly commercialized and regimented” kind. “That’s what gets promoted,” he says. “But if you look at underground or unpublished rap or rap online, it’s different. So many popular artists wrote and produced interesting songs about peace, unity, and nonviolence that aren’t being played mainstream. There are good and bad rap lyrics. Tupac has a lot of bad stuff, but also has fabulous music he promoted. Most rappers are more complex and sing across the board of messages.”

To Allen, Tyson is the originator of both the phrase and the concept “hip-hop therapy.” “I give him homage,” she says. "

One of Tyson’s contributions is the RAP—Rap Music Attitude & Perception Scale—a 24-item measure of a person’s thoughts and feelings about the effects and content of rap music. He designed it as a rapid assessment instrument for youth programs and practitioners using rap music and hip-hop culture in their work with young people, their families, and the community. The model draws from traditional social work principles, as well as established therapeutic models, Tyson says.

Knowing about hip-hop before you employ it as a therapeutic technique is critical, even if you can’t necessarily relate to the backgrounds of clients who have grown up with drug dealers or bullets whizzing past their heads, Collins notes. “If I didn’t know the stuff, I’d get torn down,” she says. “The clients would see through you. You have to have the foundation—of the history, culture, and artists. You can’t pretend to know if you don’t.”

For More Information

Hip Hop Heals
http://www.hiphopheals.com/

Hip-Hop Therapy Project
http://www.hiphoptherapyproject.com/

BluePrintForLife
http://www.blueprintforlife.ca/

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