Hip Hop Therapy: An Exploratory Study of a Rap Music Intervention with At-Risk and Delinquent Youth[1]

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This article presents the results of an exploratory study of the therapeutic potential of a rap music intervention in group work with youth. "Hip-Hop Therapy (HHT)" is an innovative synergy of rap music, bibliotherapy, and music therapy. A pretestposttest experimental design with random assignment to groups was used to compare outcomes of youth that attended HHT sessions (n = 5) and youth that attended comparison group therapy sessions (n = 6) at a residential facility for at-risk and delinquent youth. Post-hoc qualitative data are also presented to provide depth to our understanding of the experiences of the youth in the HHT group. Because rap music has become increasingly popular among youth, it was expected that under a specific set of conditions rap music would improve the therapeutic experience and outcomes for youth. Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative results partially supported the hypothesis. Implications for clinical practice, as well as future directions in research are noted.

KEY WORDS: bibliotherapy; cultural sensitivity; music therapy; poetry therapy; rap music.

INTRODUCTION

Juvenile delinquency remains one of the most troubling social problems in society. In terms of arrest data and self-report surveys, age 18 remains the peak year in life for offending, and adolescents commit crimes at higher rates than any other group (Mendel, 2000). Clinicians working with delinquent youth and youth at risk of becoming delinquent are increasingly encouraged to develop and

implement innovative approaches to treatment. Particular emphasis is now placed on the importance of including culturally sensitive forms of treatment with troubled youth (Kim, Omizo, D'Andrea, 1998). Therefore, treatment innovations that are culturally sensitive and demonstrate promise through empirical research are of significant importance to practitioners working with at-risk and delinquent youth.

One of the most potent, culturally sensitive tools in working with youth that has not been systematically explored is rap music. Rap music is now the most popular form of music among youth (Dyson, 1996; Fried, 1999; Rose, 1995) and has outpaced all other music formats, surpassing the previous top-selling music format, country music (Farley, 1999). Moreover, rap music has transcended all divisions of race and socioeconomic status to become what is now a multi-billion dollar music industry (Chappel, 2001). Since few would debate rap music's widespread acceptance among youth throughout the United States and possibly the world, it is suggested that the social, cultural, and political lyrical content and underlying themes found in rap music can be used as an intervention in therapeutic work with youth. More specifically, there might be particular skills important to youth development that could be enhanced through the use of a culturally relevant, rap music intervention. For example, the literature on juvenile delinquency and adolescents with behavior problems suggests that self-concept and peer relations are two areas of significant interest (see Zimpler, 1992). It was hypothesized that self-concept scores and peer relations scores would show greater improvement for members in the "Hip-Hop" treatment group than for members in the comparison group. Furthermore, it was expected that the results would support the following, general thesis: When viewed as a resource and strength the "hip hop culture" can be utilized to engage youth in treatment and improve their therapeutic experience.

The intervention introduced here is called Hip-hop Therapy (HHT). HHT is an innovative synergy of hip-hop, bibliotherapy, and music therapy. Relevant research on bibliotherapy and music therapy are briefly discussed below, followed by a review of the hip-hop culture and past research on rap music.

Bibliotherapy

Bibliotherapy is a well-established therapeutic technique in poetry therapy that utilizes literature (e.g., stories and poetry) to facilitate treatment (For a comprehensive review of biblio/poetry therapy, see Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1994; for poetry therapy, see Mazza, 1999). A group of researchers have recently reported significant findings on the use of literature and poetry to help adolescents cope with problems (Holman, 1996; Mazza, 1999; Pardeck, 1995, 1992; Pardeck & Pardeck, 1993). The major goals of bibliotherapy are: (a) provide information on problems, (b) provide insight into problems, (c) stimulate discussion about problems, (d) communicate new values and attitudes, (e) create an awareness that others have dealt with similar problems, and (f) provide solutions to problems (Pardeck, 1995).

This technique has been found to be extremely useful in facilitating culturally competent practice. For example, Holman (1996) found that a bibliotherapy intervention (using guided discussions to help integrate both feelings and cognitive responses to a selected work of literature) with a Puerto Rican adolescent was significantly helpful in improving the subject's self-concept and ethnic identity. The author found that maintaining cultural sensitivity when using this technique appears to be an essential aspect of its success.

Because a significant number of youth today spend more time listening to music than reading books, music appears to be an underutilized resource in working with our youth. Maintaining cultural sensitivity with the juvenile delinquent and at-risk population may involve the use of a therapeutic innovation that utilizes hip-hop music. The rationale for incorporating bibliotherapy in this discussion is that the process goals of the rap music intervention are taken directly from the goals of bibliotherapy. Introducing rap music as a therapeutic tool might increase the likelihood for success with a select population of youth. Because of its popularity, youth may be more willing to discuss various themes in rap music, more so than reading literature (as found in bibliotherapy).

Similar to bibliotherpay, principles of music therapy are important to this study. Using music as a tool in therapy requires some discussion of previous research on music therapy, which is the topic of the next section.

Music Therapy

The effectiveness of music therapy has been demonstrated by numerous, well-designed empirical studies (for review, see Standler & Prickett, 1994). Until recently, music as a therapeutic tool has been utilized almost exclusively as an auditory stimulus (or other auditory uses), and as a constructive and expressive activity (i.e., playing a musical instrument) (Clendenon-Wallen, 1991). However, there appears to be scant research on the use of the lyrical content of music as a therapeutic innovation. Recently, Freidlander (1994) discussed the use of a group music psychotherapy approach that developed in response to the demands of the milieu treatment setting of an inpatient psychiatric unit. However, Freidlander (1994) did not present empirical evidence to support his contention that group music therapy was efficacious. In a recent examination Darrow and Molloy (1998) found relatively few studies covering multicultural issues in the music therapy literature.

There were two particular studies of note, both of which were exploratory and descriptive (Apprey & Ragland, 1974; Mark, 1986) of the use of music lyrics as a means of therapeutic intervention. Apprey and Ragland (1974) were among the first researchers to document the use of song lyrics in group work. These researchers used the interpretation and discussion of lyrics as a specific group goal in their work with a group of adolescents. More recently, Mark (1986) used rock music lyrics about drugs to encourage a group of adolescents in substance

treatment to explore the content of these songs and to relate these lyrics to their own experiences. This approach was also used as a means of promoting group interaction and communication. The current study is an attempt to expand upon the research in this area by exploring the therapeutic qualities of a rap music intervention on a selected group of youth using a randomized experimental design. The central mechanism of HHT is the hip hop culture, which is discussed below.

Hip Hop Culture

Academic scholars have written highly acclaimed texts on the subject of the "Hip Hop Culture" (Dyson, 1996; Potter, 1995; Rose, 1994). Dyson (1996) critiques the incomplete analysis of rap music as "gangsta" and suggests that the art form and socio-political, cultural genre is a reflection of not just African-American life, but American culture as well. Dyson condemns the sexist, misogynistic, and homophobic content as depressing and argues that under the right conditions a person can make rap lyrics meaningful in the context of the black community. This is partly what the group facilitator attempts to do in HHT.

In the book, "Black Noise," Tricia Rose (1994) offers what appears to be the most compelling analysis of the history and development of hip hop as both musical and artistic expression. Although the current study is specifically concerned with rap music, rap music must be understood as one component and within the larger context of the hip hop culture. According to Rose (1994), rap music can be defined as, "a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America . . . a form of rhymed storytelling" (p. 2). More broadly, Rose (1994) assessed that hip-hop culture:

> . . . attempts to negotiate new economic and technological conditions, as well as new patterns of race, class, and gender oppression in urban America . . . It is in fact, the dynamic and often contentious relationship between the two- larger social and political forces and black cultural priorities-that centrally shape and define hip-hop (p. 22).

Previous Research on Rap

Although there is currently a wide variety of literature on rap music, most of the articles are theoretical and descriptive in nature. It appears that the majority of the limited number of experimental and quasi-experimental studies on rap music examined negative outcomes that may be associated with certain types of rap music (e.g., Barongan & Hall, 1995; Epstein, Pratto, & Skipper, 1990; Fischoff, 1999; Fried, 1999; Gadstrom, 1999; Johnson, Trawalter, & Dovidio, 2000; Zillmann, Aust, Hoffman, Love, Ordam, Pope, et al., 1995). For example, Gadstrom (1999) conducted a study on the music listening patterns of juvenile offenders and their

perceived influence of the music on their fantasies and behavior. In this study only 4% of the youth surveyed ($N = 106$) perceived a connection to music listening and their negative behavior. This appears to support the contention that rap music is not perceived as a weakness or a detriment, but is viewed as strength by most youth. In another study, Zillmann, et al., (1995) exposed African-American and White high-school students to one of three music video conditions (popular rock, nonpolitical rap, or political rap to test whether radical rap furthered ethnic. The results did not appear to support the authors' hypothesis that radical rap would be divisive, as evaluations by African-American students of the candidates with respect to their agendas did not show any impact at all of radical political rap or rap generally. Finally, Epstein, Pratto, and Skipper (1990) conducted a correlation study to determine whether or not preference for heavy metal or rap music could predict behavior problems in a racially mixed population of middle school teenagers. The findings by Epstein et al., did not appear to support the hypothesis that commitment to particular types of music could predict behavior problems.

There is also research that explores the positive outcomes associated with rap music (Keyes, 2000; Henderson, 1996; Martinez, 1997; Pressley, 1992; Woldu, 1997). For example Keyes (2000) explores the lyrical content of female rap music and demonstrates its empowering ability to deconstruct and reconstruct black female identity. One researcher revealed a training program designed to develop teachers' ability to teach a rap music course to college students (Woldu, 1997). Henderson (1996) wrote a theoretical article, which appeared to be a sociopolitical analysis of the similarities of black-nationalism and rap music. Although Henderson's analysis was not complete and is descriptive in nature, it appeared to lend support to the notion that what was called "conscious" rap music is a positive and vibrant agent for change among black youth. Following the approach of the previous three articles mentioned, the present study attempts to highlight the positive aspects of rap music and demonstrate that it is an underutilized resource in therapeutic work with at-risk and delinquent youth.

Selection of Rap Music

There appears to be a consensus that there are positive rap and negative rap music songs that have been created by rap artists (Henderson, 1996; Pressely, 1992; Rose, 1994). Positive rap invariably refers to rap that depicts solutions and self-protective concepts and skills, as well as inspires to improve unwanted conditions (i.e., uplifts a people and raise their consciousness). The present study involved only positive rap because of the intended purpose of the intervention. In keeping with Pardeck's (1994) stages of bibliotherapy, the author selected a series of rap recordings that would create discussion specifically on issues of self-concept, positive racial identity, group identity and peace and unity. Table I provides a

Table I. Sample of Artist(s), Selected Lyrics, and Therapeutic Purpose of These Lyrics

Artist/song/album	Selected sample of lyrics	Purpose
Goodie Mob, 1995 "Free," from Soul Food. NY: Arista Records	Lord, it's so hard, living this life, a constant struggle each and every day. Some wonder why I'd rather die, then continue . . . this way	Perseverance, resistance to oppressive forces, resilience, and spirituality as source of strength
Goodie Mob, 1995 "Blood," from Soul Food. NY: Arista Records	It's a shame, when n—s gonna realize we the same . . . use precision, don't make a decision in haste. Your blood is a terrible thing to waste . . .	Unity, racial pride, collective good, strengthening the will and mind, peace and non-violence
Guru, 1993 "Take A Look (At Yourself)," from Jazzmataz. NY: Chrysalis Records	Step back and analyze, use your own eyz to see I can't be you, you can't be me. For your problems you can't blame no one else . . .	Introspection, confronting one's reality, critical thinking, self-image, personal responsibility
Out Kast, 1996 "Babylon," from ATLiens. NY: Arista Records	I come into this world high as a byrd, on 2nd hand cocaine powder . . . they made them guns, & they got some s—t that'l blow out our backs	Effect of parent drug abuse on youth, the irrationality of using guns to fight oppression, use the alternative (the mind)
2Pac, 1995, "Dear Mama," from Me Against The World, NY: Priority Records	. . . even as a crack fiend, mama, you always was a Black Queen, . . . I finally understand for a woman it ain't easy tryin to raise a man . . .	The maturing process of young black men, coming to understand and appreciate the protective love of their mother, and their mother's hard work in the face of all odds
2Pac, 1995, "So Many Tears," from Me Against The World, NY: Priority Records	. . . been a witness to homicide and drive-by's taken lives, little kids die. Wonder why as I walk by, . . . this ain't the life for me, I want to change	The sadness and despair that exist in poor, drug-invested communities, and the will to change it all

sample of the artists and types of lyrics (and their purpose) used in this study (see Table I). Holman (1996) found that a specific type of music used for a specific type of intervention intended for a specific client yielded positive results for a bibliotherapeutic intervention. The present study expected to yield positive results for the "HHT" intervention because of its specificity in type of music, target goals, and target population.

METHOD

Study Setting

The study was conducted at Miami Youth Services Center (MYSC), Inc., from October to December, 1997. MYSC is a private agency, which operates a 24-bed residential facility for runaway, abused, abandoned, neglected, truant, and youth who are otherwise homeless. Clients may have had or currently have minor involvement with the Department of Juvenile Justice, and most have current case

with the Department of Children and Families. Some youth have been exposed to some form of abuse and others have been adversely affected by alcohol/drug addicted parents, or parents with other pathologies. Individual and group counseling services, as well as extensive family counseling services are provided at MYSC. Social workers at MYSC intervene and advocate in the legal, educational, and physical and mental health arenas on behalf of their clients, as well as provide other case management services. The comprehensiveness of the shelter's services is an important element of this study.

Participants

Independent samples t-tests were conducted on all demographic variables and there were no significant differences between the groups. All fourteen teenagers residing at the facility in Miami at the time the study began were asked to participate in the study. Initially there were a total of seven youth in each of the two conditions. However, due to attrition (three youth were placed in foster homes during the study), complete data were obtained from 11 youth, five in the experimental group and six in the comparison group. There were four males (two African-American, one white, and one Hispanic) and one female (Hispanic) in the HHT (experimental) group and the mean age was 15.4 years (SD = .55). In the comparison group there were three females (two African-American and one white) and three males (two African American and one Hispanic) and the mean age in was 16.2 years (SD = .75). The range of family income was similar (i.e., $10–15,000 per year) for both groups.

Design

A pretestposttest control (comparison) group experimental design, with random assignment to conditions was employed, to compare the effectiveness of HHT to the standard agency group curriculum. A table of random numbers was used to randomly assign clients to the two conditions based on the last two digits of their client number. Agency policy is to assign clients numbers upon entering the residential facility.

Data Collection

After each youth read, discussed, and signed the informed consent form, they completed two pretest measures. Agency procedure is to have the parent, DCF caseworker or DJJ caseworker sign the intake forms for youth being referred to the shelter, which includes a statement giving the agency permission to have youth involved in research. Each youth was told that they might be assigned to a group

where they would be asked to discuss lyrics from rap music selections. There were three group sessions per week for four (nonconsecutive) weeks, for both the HHT group condition and the standard group method condition during the period the study was conducted. Six weeks after taking the pretests, 12 group sessions had been completed. Participants in both conditions were then assessed a posttest on both outcome measures.

Instrumentation

Self-Concept Scale For Children

The Self-Concept Scale For Children (SC; Lipsitt, 1985), a 22-item Likert scale used to measure self-concept in children, was chosen for this study for various reasons. Two-week test-retest correlations range from .73 to .91, which indicates good stability of the SC. The SC correlates significantly in predicted directions with the Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale (i.e., the greater the anxiety scores, the lower the self-concept score on the SC) (Corcoran & Fischer, 1994). The SC is short scale, which allows young subjects to complete it with limited difficulty, and in a relatively brief period of time. Established norms were not available, although the mean score for all children was reported to be 86.75, from a potential range of 22 to 110, with higher scores indicating higher self-concept.

Index of Peer Relations

The Index of Peer Relations (IPR; Hudson, 1992), a 25-item Likert scale used to measure the severity, or magnitude of peer related problems. The IPR has an alpha of .94, suggesting good internal consistency (i.e., reliability) and has a good (i.e., low) Standard Error of Measurement of 4.44. The IPR distinguishes between clients having or not having peer relationship problems (whether judged by themselves or their therapists), which indicates good known-groups validity. Scores range from 0 to 100 and scores above 30 indicate clinically significant problems, with scores above 70 indicating the possibility for some type of violence to be used to deal with problems (Cocoran & Fischer, 1994). Mean score for 107 youth engaged in counseling was 55.9 and mean score for 50 youth evaluated as not having peer relationship problems was 20.8.

Procedure

The comparison group workers were instructed to concentrate their group work efforts on goals such as self-concept enhancement and improved peer

relations at the shelter. The HHT sessions and the comparison group sessions were conducted at approximately the same time and day during the study. For ethical reasons, youth who entered the shelter after the study began were allowed in the control group sessions, but were not part of the data collection process. Although six youth participated in the control group data collection process, a total of five additional youth were allowed in the control group sessions during the study.

The initial HHT session began with an introduction to HHT, which included a brief history and discussion of hip, hop and rap music. The investigator facilitated the development of group rules and goals (i.e., the process that would be implemented each session). The remainder of the initial session and subsequent session involved listening to part of a rap song and then discussing the groups' reactions, thoughts, and feelings about the lyrical component of the song. The investigator would initiate the discussion, giving particular attention to relevant themes in the music. All songs discussed had themes relevant to improved self-identity, peace, unity, cooperation, and individual and (ethnic) group progress.

Data Analysis

Quantitative and qualitative data were assessed in this study. Quantitative analyses included paired samples t-tests to assess differences between pretest and posttest scores for each group, and a linear regression analysis to determine the effect of treatment on posttest scores after controlling for pretest scores. Because of the innovative nature of the HHT group therapy approach, the author also solicited qualitative feedback from HHT group members.

RESULTS

Quantitative Data Analysis

Table II indicates the mean scores, standard deviations and results of paired sample t-tests for difference between the pretest and posttest scores on both outcome measures for both groups. As shown in Table II, only the difference between the IPR pretest group mean (38.40, SD = 4.56) and posttest group mean (36.80, SD = 5.26) for the HHT group was significant, $t(4) = 3.14$, $p = .035$, two-tailed. However, an ANCOVA revealed that after controlling for IPR pretest scores, IPR posttest scores were not significant. This suggests that pretest scores had an impact on posttest scores and little can be said about the statistical significance of the treatment's influence on the improvement in HHT group IPR scores. Nonetheless, these results were in the direction predicted by the researcher and for a deeper understanding of the effects of the HHT intervention, a post-hoc qualitative exploration of these data was justified.

Table II. Results of HHT Group's ($n = 5$) Mean Pre- and Posttest Scores and Comparison Group's ($n = 6$) Mean Pre- and Posttest Scores on the SC and IPR

| Condition | Scale | Pretest | | Posttest | | | | |
		M	SD	*M*	SD	*t*	df	*p***
HHT	SC	72.00	8.60	73.60	8.17	−2.36	4	.078
	IPR	38.40	4.56	36.80	5.02	3.14	4	.035
Comparison	SC	74.67	7.66	76.33	6.86	−2.19	4	.080
	IPR	41.33	3.50	40.33	3.44	2.24	4	.076

Note. Higher scores on SC Scale indicate more positive self-concept. Higher scores on IPR Scale indicate more negative peer relationships.
*Alpha level was $p < .05$, two-tailed.

Qualitative Data Analysis

For a more in-depth assessment, the HHT group members were asked for their feedback during individual debriefing sessions conducted at the end of the treatment sessions. Several themes emerged from these debriefing sessions. First, all group members ($n = 5$) stated that they enjoyed the HHT group sessions more than any previous group session that they had been involved in at the shelter. Secondly, all youth in the HHT group expressed excitement and enthusiasm for the group sessions and all youth pleaded with the author to continue using this group method after the study ended. The majority of youth (i.e., four) stated that they appreciated the "respect" for "their" music that was demonstrated by using this approach in our group. Moreover, the majority of youth (i.e., four) also expressed that their friends in the shelter had "beef" with them (i.e., resented them) for being in the HHT group session. Finally, four of the youth expressed a desire to create their own rap songs and then share and discuss these songs during group. This was the most significant result of the study. Furthermore, many of the other youth (i.e., four) in the shelter voluntarily expressed displeasure for not being allowed to be part of the HHT sessions, which confirmed the debriefing reports of some HHT group members.

DISCUSSION

Limitations of the Study

The main limitation of the study is the small sample of youth that were included. Having small numbers of youth from which to gather data to test the impact of the HHT intervention is a problem that must not be understated. It is possible that the limited success of the HHT intervention is largely due to the lack of statistical power that is found in such a small sample (i.e., $n = 5$). However, as is often the case in social research, practical considerations did not allow for optimum numbers of youth to participate. The investigator was limited

by the number of youth that were in the residential facility at the time the study began. It is possible that the null hypothesis was falsely rejected because of low statistical power associated with the small sample (Cohen, 1988). Moreover, in clinical research, it is important to also consider the clinical significance of an intervention (Ogles, Lunnen, & Bonesteel, 2001). In this regard, the qualitative data deserve some, if not equal, weight in our assessment of the efficacy of HHT. Nonetheless, the validity of the inferences made from these data, both in a positive and negative direction, should be viewed with considerable caution and further research with HHT should include larger samples of youth.

A second limitation is the possible bias of additional youth participating in the control group sessions. Five youth who entered the shelter during the study was assigned to the control group. These youth might have negatively influenced the perceptions of the youth who completed the self-report measures and there was not a similar extraneous variable in the HHT group. This is a credible concern and future research should hold both groups constant as much as possible.

A third and final concern is that the attrition of three youth from the HHT group presents a different type of potential bias in the results. It is possible that the missing data of the three youth that left the shelter during the study (one from the control group and two from the HHT group) might have changed the results of the study. Although the effects of the missing data are not clear, we do know that the demographics of those youth in the HHT group that left the study were not statistically different from the final sample of youth in the HHT group. However, given these limitations, the results presented here should be interpreted with caution.

Implications of the Study

Despite the limitations presented above, the results of this study appear to indicate that HHT might be a viable tool to assist practitioners working with at-risk and delinquent youth. The HHT group reported improvement on the IPR, which was found to be in the appropriate direction. This result partially supports the hypothesis that HHT group members would show greater improvements on the IPR. However, since the ANCOVA revealed the IPR pretest influenced the IPR posttest, the hypotheses were not "statistically" supported by these data. These limitations notwithstanding, the general thesis that the "hip hop culture" can be utilized as a resource to engage youth and facilitate greater effectiveness in treatment appears to have some "clinical" validity. Based on information obtained in the debriefing session, the author found that youth in the HHT apparently supports the use of the rap music intervention and that HHT has some potential for increasing the effectiveness of group work with youth. As reported in previous research, popular music is a viable tool to engage and inform youth (Mark, 1986). Given the exploratory nature of this study, the results appear to support the contention that

HHT can be a salient tool for engaging and informing youth and it is a model that warrants further research.

CONCLUSION

Generally, rap music has been presented and perceived very negatively by the media and the larger society (Fried, 1999; Fischoff, 1999; Henderson, 1996; Pressly, 1992). This study is an example of how researchers can also identify and investigate positive aspects of rap music. The field of social work and related mental health fields would benefit from a more balanced literature on rap music. It is possible that when social workers, counselors, and other practitioners shift their paradigm on rap music and utilize this resource as an engagement tool, greater success might be gained with youth. Clearly, some youth seem to have greater acceptance of therapies that take into account their strengths (Saleebey, 1996). The social work profession claims it does not assumes client pathology, but instead engages clients from what is considered the strengths perspective. Offering HHT as a group service is one example of how social workers can substantiate this claim.

HHT was applied and empirically tested for a specific goal, with a specific client-group, using specific types of rap music. This specificity of treatment approach has been found to yield the greatest success in previous research on bibliotherapy (Holman, 1996). Furthermore, the study was conducted within the context of a comprehensive social service agency, which also has been reported to contribute to greater likelihood for success in bibliotherapy (Pardeck, 1995; 1994). Additional studies should be conducted to build upon the work presented here. The development of empirical methods of working with at-risk and delinquent youth that are creative and increases their motivation for treatment are of significant importance to society. Future studies that include larger sample sizes, the specificity considerations mentioned above, and are conducted within the comprehensive program for youth might significantly improve upon this study.

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