Contextualizing Hip Hop and Rap in Music Therapy

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Hip Hop and rap can have great healing power within music therapy. Hip Hop can promote self-efficacy, reduce self-blame, help individuals assume personal responsibility, and provide emotional catharsis (Viega, 2015). Music therapists who are newcomers to Hip Hop culture and hip-hop should approach the culture with humility and reflexivity so that they do not engage in cultural appropriation; in addition, they should develop skills in at least one area of Hip Hop culture. They should understand both the historical role of Hip Hop within the Black and Latinx community and its significance for oppressed people worldwide.

Some institutions and individuals suggest that hip-hop is harmful to society because it uses language that degrades women (bitch, hoe) and people of color (n*) and because some kinds of rap seem to glorify criminal behaviors (*Hip Hop on Trial*, 2012). While it is essential for music therapists to be aware of the ways that hip-hop can reflect the sexism, racism, and homophobia that are institutionalized within American society, this is not a reason to avoid all uses of the genre. These negative messages, which are present in all forms of media culture, need to be recognized and deconstructed when working with clients, and can sometimes begin a discussion of internalized racism, sexism, or homophobia.

### Culturally-Bound and Historic Elements of Hip Hop

Hip Hop developed in the 1970s in impoverished areas of The Bronx among the Black and Latinx communities as an alternative to disco, which was popular at the time but irrelevant to their lived experience. It was rooted in West African *griot* oral traditions and came into American culture through the noncolonized African culture of *Warn-ers* in Jamaica. It was centered around dance parties in public housing and other urban settings, and from the beginning it consisted of multiple creative elements, including graffiti art, DJing, breakdancing, Emceeing,

Beat Boxing, Street Language, Street Knowledge, and Street Entrepreneurialism. It was both the voice and expression of disenfranchised people and an alternate economic system for those who were alienated from broader society socially, economically, and through physical neglect as a result of public policies.

In the *Hip-Hop on Trial* debate, several people raised the point that people rap about their experience. If their experience is jail, or marginalization by a racist society, that will be reflected in their raps. If they grow up in a culture of misogyny and violence—which current American culture is—that will be reflected in the music. KRS-One (2009) also writes that Hiphoppas (his term) reflect the reality in which they live.

Hip-hop came to the attention of mainstream record producers, who began to produce recordings for people outside the community. Over time, hip-hop became international, and "today, Hip Hop Culture is global and provides unconditional acceptance for all people whose voices have been marginalized, oppressed, and stifled by societal structures" (Viega, 2015, p.138). The global appeal of Hip Hop, according to Jay-Z (2010), is that the hustler's story is "the ultimate human story, the story of struggle, which is what defines us all" (p. 19).

Hip-hop has continued to be the voice of the voiceless in many countries. As poet Benjamin Zephaniah says (*Hip Hop on Trial*, 2012), rap is street poetry that comes out of the oral tradition, and "the oral tradition gives voice to people who don't have access to publishers and money. It gives voice to people who would otherwise be voiceless and it gives them the ability to speak uncensored." In the same debate, Middle Eastern rapper Deeb (*Hip Hop on Trial*, 2012) says that:

If you look at all the countries that had a revolution, Hip Hop was there

expressing the youth's concerns. Arab pop music that was prevalent for decades

had no relation to the reality they were living. Hip Hop provided that platform,

that alternative, for people who wanted to listen to a song with meaning, to have a

message, entertain and give knowledge. What's happening now in the Middle

East is comparable to the early days of Hip Hop in the U.S.

Another significant aspect of the development of hip-hop is the invention of new

technologies, and the subversion of existing technologies such as the turntable. This creates a

space that questions the hegemony of Western classical music traditions. This surfaced in the

*Hip-Hop on Trial* (2012) debate, with Sewell asserting that we've lost our musicality and ability

to play instruments through our obsession with Hip-Hop, but Dyson commenting that if you

want children to learn classical music and instruments then you need to provide more funding for

schools.

## Universal Aspects of Hip Hop and Their Therapeutic Implications

KRS-One (2009) stresses that Hip Hop is an international culture without prejudice.

Although individual rap artists may express views that are sexist, racist, homophobic, etc., true

Hip Hop culture is against all forms of oppression. The universal aspect of Hip Hop is its

"transformative power that has its beginnings at the genesis of human awareness" and its "unique

awareness that enhances one's ability to self-create" (KRS-One, 2009, p. 70). Travis (2015) also

emphasizes this universality and therapeutic potential, writing that, "At its best, Hip Hop heals,

among artists, listeners, observers, and communities of all different racial and ethnic groups,

nationalities, geographies, genders, and economic standing" (p. 38).

One of the five elements of Hip Hop is self-knowledge. KRS-One (2009) emphasizes that

knowledge of ourselves is critical to being able to create a new and brighter future. He also says,

"At its core, Hip Hop is not just an art form; it is the pursuit of one's authentic being through the

Arts" (p. 64). Psychological music therapy—and other forms of therapy—are focused on gaining insight into one's self and learning how to deal with the past to make better future choices. Helping others access and develop their authentic being through different uses of music is the epitome of music therapy.

KRS-One (2009) writes that it is necessary to "take responsibility for oneself and accept the consequences of one's own doing (p. 97). This concept of personal responsibility is critical in therapy. Although an individual may have been abused or have experienced trauma, they will not be able to move forward with their lives until they accept that they are responsible for their own mental health and healing. KRS-One also relates Hip Hop to its history and points out that it is an alternative behavior. In its early days, it was an alternative to engaging in gang activity. In mental health work, there is a focus on developing positive leisure skills. Hip Hop can be one of those activities.

Since the beginning of Hip Hop culture, there has been a strong emphasis on improving both individuals and the community. Music is seen to activate self-healing as well as to provide healing experiences for all within a community. This kind of healing experience was documented in the video *Mott Haven* (2018) which focuses on high school students rapping about their experiences following the murder of a classmate.

It is important to recognize that Hip Hop therapeutic approaches do not necessarily include rap and are not limited to work with urban youth populations similar to those among whom Hip Hop emerged. People in other demographics also experience marginalization; for example, people with persistent mental disorders.

**Therapeutic Benefits of Hip Hop and Rap**

KRS-One (2009) writes that Hip Hop builds self-esteem, which is a critical component of psychological well-being. He emphasizes that mastery gives us strength to deal with adversity: "For as long as we stay within the mastery of our own self-expression we shall always possess a special strength in the material World against all challenges, foreign or domestic" (p. 106). He emphasizes that Hiphoppas express what they need to express. These concepts are critical to nurturing mental health, as transforming violence through art rather than expressing it physically supports health. Several of the rappers in *Hip-Hop on Trial* (2012) commented that Hip Hop saved their lives. As ?uestlove phrased it, "I'm the positive result of how Hip Hop can affect you."

Travis (2015) lists five dimensions of empowerment that are a result of musical choices: esteem, resilience, growth, community, and change (p. 45). He writes that "everyday individuals, marginalized groups, and communities rely on Hip Hop in all its forms to speak truth to power." (p. 37) and that "Hip Hop becomes inspiration for those who have lost hope, and a cathartic release for those needing to let wilt away hurt, fear, or despair" (p. 37).

Viega (2015) writes that Hip Hop can increase empowerment and self-efficacy, develop group consciousness, reduce self-blame, help individuals assume personal responsibility, and provide the possibility for emotional catharsis. In *Hip-Hop on Trial*, (2012) Peterson comments that Hip Hop "empowers young people to control and use language to their benefit; it's both empowering and liberating." Toni Blackman (2013) comments that working within a cypher helps develop both authenticity and empathy. She says that:

> The cipher offers us a plethora of opportunities for personal growth, in terms of
> building critical thinking skills, building community, expanding our vocabulary,
> developing our self-confidence, heightening access to our creativity, which then

heightens our access to problem solving and adaptability. The cipher offers us so

much wisdom.

She also emphasizes how having the right music helps people be more authentic.

Music therapists, because of their understanding of the effects of different kinds of music,

and their sensitivity to the responses of individuals to the music that is happening in the room,

can be the ones to provide the right music. It is important for music therapists to become

proficient in at least one of the refinitions of Hip Hop. Becoming proficient deejays, for example,

would enable them to create "a medium in which co-constructions of new identities are created"

(Viega, 2015, p. 142) and to use technology to allow "people who have been oppressed and

marginalized the agency to invent new identities, express and voice selfhood, and become

stakeholders in global digital culture" (Viega, 2018, p. 159).

As Viega (2018) states, music therapists can also use technology in therapeutic

songwriting to foster agency, expressing selfhood, voicing selfhood, and increasing stakeholder

engagement. Agency "is negotiated within the relational interactions between the songwriter,

digital technology, and the music therapist within the therapeutic relationship" (p. 152).

Technology is another way to foster therapeutic relationship. It is also a way to transform "social

narratives related to health, trauma, youth culture, and injustice" (p. 152).

As Short (2013) writes, "Rap music is often seen as a way for poets and rappers to

express cultural problems and issues facing the world, speaking for and to those voices that may

have been suppressed by society…These qualities may lend an important function in music

therapy in that by using Rap as a therapeutic intervention, clients might be encouraged to share

their own "current" issues and a narrative of their own life events, truthfully and honestly." This

makes it important to therapists support their clients' musical choices and expressions.

Multimodal interventions can be particularly effective because switching modalities maintains interest, and also can deepen insight. Because Hip Hop includes multimodal forms of cultural expression, including Emceeing, Deejaying, Breaking, Graffiti, and Beatboxing, it provides opportunities to explore these different creative mediums. This can increase therapeutic effectiveness.

### Cultural Humility and Reflexivity of Hip Hop and Rap in Therapy

As Viega (2015) asserts, "Music therapists must adopt reflexive positions on issues such as the cultural appropriation of Hip Hop's artistic elements and the manifestation of power and privilege within its musical and therapeutic relationships" (p. 138). This means that music therapists must understand "the musical, cultural, experiential, and relational dynamics that occur for people who deeply identify with various styles" (p. 139). It is important for music therapists to understand the difference between being Hip Hop and producing the material product hip-hop. It is also essential for music therapists to understand their own intersectionality and positions of privilege as well as positions of vulnerability so that they are aware of the power dynamics within the therapeutic relationship. The therapist needs to be have enough self-awareness and reflexivity to be able to engage in what might be an uncomfortable conversation about race and power.

Music therapists also need to recognize their limitations. Hip Hop is a multi-expressive artistic practice, so therapists should invite experts in to share breaking or graffiti art. It is also important for music therapists to take a multimodal approach and to recognize and empower traditional cultures, as in the Blueprint for Life program. Being facilitators and providing the training and equipment, as JC and Dre Pharoh do, is also important.

Drawing from empowerment, resource-oriented, community therapy and feminist therapy approaches to therapy is critical. Community therapy focuses on community engagement and on being aware of and addressing the societal oppressions that affect people's development. Feminist therapy focuses on understanding power relationships both inside and outside of therapy. In work with people who experience oppression in one or more forms, therapists need to address the societal conditions that can exacerbate mental health disorders.

As KRS-One (2009) clearly states, book learning is not enough and hands-on experience is essential. If therapists do not have a knowledge of Hiphop Kulture, then their use of the techniques of the musical genre hip-hop are a form of cultural appropriation, and do not show honor and respect for Hip Hop. Fortunately, he offers encouraging words to those who do not (yet) have mastery: "even though we place great emphasis upon the mastery of one or more of Hip Hop's real elements…it is really one's love for and loyalty to Hip Hop that rests at the fundamental foundations of Hip Hop's scholarship and citizenry" (p. 59). This suggests that if music therapists approach their work with the same philosophical goals of peace, unity, self-respect, self-control, and self-knowledge, they can become part of Hip Hop as they work toward competence in at least one of its elements.

The music therapist also needs to be competent with urban language, so that they don't judge speech that seems violence or disrespectful to them. As discussed in *Hip-Hop on Trial* (2012), hip-hop is poetry and within poetry words carry multiple meanings. The street elements of Hip Hop include fashion, language, knowledge, and entrepreneurialism. Urban language is a legitimate form of expression, and it does use words differently than white American English. There is a difference, for example, between within-group use of the word "n*" and a white person's use of it. As Tricia Rose pointed out in *Hip-Hop on Trial* (2012), however, the fact that

the majority of rap fans are young white men who are unaware of the multiplicity of meanings problematizes the use of the word.

Music/artistic production is a safe space to express anger and violent impulses, rather than enacting them in the world. The therapist needs to recognize that there is a reason for anger, because of decades and centuries of oppression and failure to work toward justice and listen to the oppressed, and to accept its expression nonjudgmentally; to sit with it rather than redirect it. As KRS-One (2009) says, "Yes, we are extreme in our art; our art reflects the violent and unjust conditions in which we live" (p. 140).

**Ethical Implications and Contraindications of Hip Hop and Rap**

Therapists should take a resource-oriented approach to therapy and should "challenge power differentials that interrupt the health and well-being of the communities in which they work…they must be an integral part of the community and not the 'expert'" (Viega, 2015, p. 143). Most importantly, "Music therapists should be mindful of not appropriating Hip Hop as a means to achieve their own goals but instead determine goals reflective of their clients' cultural values and the intention of the creative arts within the culture" (Viega, 2015, p. 143).

Because of the importance of music technology within Hip Hop, it is an ethical necessity for music therapists to develop technical competency in order to provide the best treatment possible. It is also ethically essential for music therapists to work toward skills in one of the refinitions so that they engage with the culture and do not use it in a culturally appropriative manner.

The music therapist must be multiculturally competent and comfortable addressing racial tensions and racism, including their own internalized racism. The music therapist also needs to be aware of voices that have been marginalized in hip-hop, such as the voices of women and the

new voices in Hip Hop that are addressing issues of sexuality and gender identity. This is

particularly important in working with women and with LGBTQI individuals. Because Hip Hop

as a philosophy addresses the need for social change, it is also ethically important for music

therapist to become politically involved in working towards changing marginalizing conditions

within the community.

The content of rap music is often provocative. Viega (2015) suggests "monitoring the use

of evocative lyrical and musical content in rap music guided by levels of practice as defined by

Bruscia" (p. 141). At an augmentative level (activity therapy), avoid evocative content. At an

intensive level (re-educative therapy), use evocative content "if its purpose is geared toward

exploring themes directly related to the needs of the client… increasing pro-social behaviors and

other therapeutic concerns" (p. 141). At a primary level (reconstructive therapy), use of

evocative content is "a necessary component toward understanding the inner world of the client.

Lyrical and musical content may be seen as metaphoric and reflect client processes in therapy"

(p. 141). At the latter two levels, the therapist should have advanced training, seek advanced

supervision, and engage in personal therapy.

Much of the focus in the *Hip-Hop on Trial* debate was on the provocative content of hip-

hop. The question under discussion was itself provocatively-worded: Hip-hop doesn't enhance

society, it degrades it. The arguments against hip-hop primarily focused on the three words,

bitch, hoe, and n*, although glorification of gangsta lifestyle was occasionally mentioned.

Several respondents replied that those who hold power in our society are the ones who are

degrading it, through wars and unjust economic policies. KRS-One commented that

"The question whether it degrades society is an arrogant question; because if the

society that we're talking about is a society that starts wars all over the world;

degrades indigenous cultures; is misogynistic in itself—if that's the society we're

talking about, then it's not a bad thing if Hip Hop did degrade that society" (*Hip-*

*Hop on Trial*, 2012).

Several respondents also pointed out that misogyny, sexism, and homophobia are ubiquitous in

our culture, from movies to the church.

The question of misogyny was raised several times. dream hampton commented that "this

is a resistance culture; even in the face of misogyny, women in hip-hop have created space to be

confrontational about sexism and misogyny" (*Hip-Hop on Trial*, 2012). In the debate, however,

there were only two women on the panel, and they were frequently interrupted. As Tricia Rose

pointed out, the moderators tended to ask them questions only when they were gender-based

questions. An audience member asked at the end of the debate whether this in itself was a

representation of misogyny in hip-hop. Shaun Bailey, on the anti-hip-hop side, actually said at

one point, "I will take on a girl issue, right"; in addition, he and Sewell consistently talked about

rap in relation to Black men, occasionally adding as an afterthought, "and girls too."

One point of contention was whether Hip-hop causes racist perceptions of Black men, or

whether the negative representations of Black men are a result of racism. Tricia Rose comments

that "commercial mainstream American hip-hop responds to a legacy of violence against Black

people but it also exacerbates and glorifies violence against Black people." dream hampton also

points out that removing the words "bitch" and "n*" will not get rid of the underlying narratives

of misogyny and racism, which must be addressed. Focusing on the specific words and ignoring

the underlying issue deflects attention from the real problem. For this reason, Veltre & Hadley's

(2012) emphasis on using hip-hop feminist music therapy is critical. One of their four main goals

is Hip-Hop as social transformation, which puts the listener in the role of critical theorist. Critical

theory seeks to confront and politicize social problems by situating them historically and culturally. Learning to listen through the lens of critical theory would empower the listener to understand the poetry of rap music as well as to understand Hiphop as the spiritual and creative force from which Hip Hop culture is born.

As many of the articles and Hip Hoppers have said, and as T.I. so articulately put in in his interview with Trevor Noah, if you change the environment the artist lives in, it will change the message they present, because rap is about telling the truth. Societal focus should be on addressing the problems of institutionalized racism, high rates of incarceration, lack of access to jobs, addiction and the role that Big Pharma plays, not on policing drug and jail references in rap songs.

It is critical for clients to be able to tell the truth about their own life and their own experience through their song choices. As Deeb says in *Hip-hop on Trial* (2012), "rap is genius poetry reflecting a bad reality… if the reality is bad, then what you will hear in the song is bad." Therapists need to accept what their clients share nonjudgmentally. As discussed in Viega (2015) and Short (2013), there is often a period of testing during which clients first introduce material that may be offensive to see if the therapist can handle it, and thereby determine whether the therapeutic space is a safe place to disclose their true emotions and vulnerabilities.

Several debaters mentioned that Hip-Hop is self-critical and self-reflective. dream hampton commented that you can't address sexism in the church the way you can address it in hip-hop. This is an important consideration for therapeutic uses of hip-hop because it means that provocative content can be discussed and processed. In fact, Veltre & Hadley (2012) suggest that "When working with young females, in particular, the elements of rap that are controversial are where the opportunities lie, that is, in developing the skills to analyze and think critically about

the messages that they are hearing and seeing" (p. 86). This is because it equips women to recognize sexism and become empowered when they are faced with it outside of rap. Addressing it in a place where it is openly visible—a commercial rap video, for example—can help individuals learn to recognize it and address it in situations in which it is less visible, such as an executive boardroom.

## Conclusion

Hip Hop and hip-hop are valuable healing resources for music therapy. It is necessary to acquire an overstanding, as KRS-One would say, of the history and meaning of the culture in order to be Hip Hop in therapy, and not to use hip-hop in a culturally exploitative way. This requires cultural humility and reflexivity on the part of the therapist. Issues of racism, misogyny, homophobia, and the glorification of violence must be critically examined, with an understanding that they are ubiquitous in contemporary American culture and do not exist only in hip-hop. The self-reflectiveness innate in Hip Hop encourages this critique. Music therapists can use their knowledge of music and music technology to create soundscapes that encourage the telling of authentic stories, through which clients can increase empowerment and self-efficacy, develop group consciousness, reduce self-blame, assume personal responsibility, and experience emotional catharsis.

As a field, music therapy should move away from a conservatory mentality and towards a practice that embraces multiple ways of creating music, not just music based in Western classical practice. This means providing more instruction in music technology, as well as changing admissions practices so that the field becomes more diverse and is no longer limited to those whose economic class allowed them to study instrumental techniques. Music therapy should also move towards becoming more multimodal and incorporate other artistic modalities, as is the case

in Hip Hop culture. This openness to other forms of expression is in the best interest of clients

because it deepens the therapeutic experience.

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