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Hip-Hop Cypher in Group Work

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ABSTRACT

Group work holds significant value in communities that face mental health disparities. Although there is an array of research that supports the use of group therapy as a therapeutic medium, populations such as urban youth of color are often unable to access these services or fully benefit from them. To compensate, some communities have developed their own cultural methods of healing. In this article, the authors argue that by using expressive methods of healing social workers can accentuate the power and potential of groups with these populations.

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“Well you trippin if you think I’m gonna sit on this couch/
And tell this shrink what my deeply rooted problems about/
The words out my mouth like acts of vengeance/
From the blackest dungeons in a mass abundance/
We move together like shadows and figures/
We strike when we like, with a mind like the Gravediggaz/
Painted pictures and still photography/
Movin images, reverse psychology.” (Hendriks, 2003)

There are groups in the United States that are consistently underserved by mental health professionals (Vakalahi, Wells-Wilbon, & McPhatter, 2015). Most often they live neighborhoods in urban America and lack access to quality mental health care. Consequently, some have responded by creating their own spaces and approaches for support and healing.

In these spaces, many young people question traditional methods of mental health care and employ community-defined hip-hop-based methods of their own. An example of this is captured in the quotation that opens this article.

In the quote, a hip-hop artist whose stage-name is Prevail (Kiley Hendricks) speaks of his communities feelings towards traditional mental health professions by rapping: “you trippin if you think I’m gonna sit on this couch, and tell this shrink what my deeply rooted problems about” (Hendriks, 2003). Rap is a highly codified method of communication that involves sentences that rhyme while conveying a thought, theme, or idea (Emdin, 2010).

For Prevail, and others who see eye-to-eye with him, hip-hop lyrics are a form of therapy, that provides a path to fighting back against a system that demonizes him—“the words out my mouth like acts of vengeance” (Hendriks, 2003) and consequently, a path to healing.

Beyond rap serving as a form of personal healing, hip-hop culture is a form of group therapy as Prevail and his crew (in hip-hop culture a “crew” is one’s close group of friends) “move together like shadows and figures”(Hendriks, 2003).

To better understand how and why hip-hop serves as a form of therapy, social workers must acknowledge the limitations of traditional approaches to mental health care, recognizing that urban youth of color are looking for alternative means to address their mental health needs and developing new approaches that are more reflective of the realities today’s youth.

Through a thorough analysis of Prevail’s words about the people he represents, it is apparent that Westernized approaches to counseling and therapy often fall short of meeting the needs of urban youth of color (Chandra & Minkovitz, 2007; Griner & Smith, 2006).

Hip-hop cypher as community-defined practice

We have a vested interest in identifying practices that emerge from the cultural practices in communities that are deployed to counter mental health care disparities. For example, in a recent visit to the South Bronx, we discovered a handful of black and brown youth engaging in a hip-hop cypher on a street corner. Hip-hop cyphers are highly codified yet unstructured practices where youth who identify with hip-hop culture information exchange in the form of raps or dance. (Note: A cypher represents something that is cyclical, such as in freestyle rapping where each participant in the circle takes turns after the other) (Emdin, 2016).

Interestingly enough, the same youth participating in the hip-hop cypher represent a population that has been known to face multiple barriers to accessing mental health care and, subsequently, are often left with unaddressed emotional distress and trauma. However, for many of them, when they are in their sacred hip-hop cypher space, these same young people appear to be working through otherwise unaddressed thoughts and feelings. We have observed young men and women reciting rhymes over a beat generated by another participant in the cypher. As rhymes were shared, other members of the cypher called out in support and applauded when each person finished reciting his or her verse. When an individual stumbled over their lyrics, others in the cypher provided verbal validation to encourage the individual to continue. It reminded us of a sort of home-grown system of mutual aid.

The content discussed in these raps appeared to focus on emotional experiences that those in the cypher had faced. We were particularly struck by how others in the cypher reacted when deep emotional experiences were spoken about. They included, but were not limited to, losing a friend or family member and navigating

drug abuse and poverty. On multiple occasions when deep emotional experiences were shared in the cypher, other participants responded with verses that offered advice or disclosed similar experiences, as if to say, “We’re all in the same boat.” Each time emotions were released into the cypher they were validated by others. In observing the interactions of the youth in cyphers, it became apparent that the cypher itself acted as a community-generated form of group support.

The cypher, which emerges from cultural practices of urban youth, is a modern version of African drum circles. African music as a social and cultural practice was designed for collective community building and emotional release (Anku, 2000). As much as drum circles are used within African culture as places for socialization, they also create space for individuals to build community and work through issues that arise (Anku, 2000). For example, the integration of West African drum circles in an urban high school counseling program resulted in various therapeutic benefits for students (Snow & D’Amico, 2010). That is to say, group dynamics, therapeutic factors and mutual aid exist and can be observed within the natural structure of the hip-hop cypher.

Hip-hop cypher in social group work practice

After observing the hip-hop cypher on a street corner, we were interested in testing the application of the hip-hop cypher in a more traditional therapeutic setting. The lead author works full time as a school counselor at a South Bronx high school, where he works with a population of urban youth who identify with hip-hop culture. As such, he began to integrate hip-hop culture and the hip-hop cypher into his daily practice. Following is a practice illustration of his experiences in implementing the hip-hop cypher in a group work setting.

Recording studio as group meeting place

By establishing a hip-hop studio inside my high school counseling office, I sought to create a culturally-sensitive environment to engage students who were typically disengaged from mental health services. Within a week after the initial construction of the in-school studio, a slew of students gravitated toward the space. Inside the office (the studio) students played with DJ equipment, wrote rhymes, and utilized music recording and production software to create full songs.

The initial investment in using the counseling space for the creation of art demonstrated that there was enough student interest to begin holding formal group work meetings. Although there were roughly 30 young people in the office at a given time, I began with a group of eight students composed evenly of male and female participants. The purpose of this group was to use the hip-hop lyric writing process and the hip-hop cypher to enable students the opportunity to express and explore a multitude of emotional obstacles they were facing. The group had a total of 15 meetings.

Capitalizing on the interest in the counseling office for the production of hip-hop music, the group set a goal of creating an emotionally themed hip-hop mixtape. A mixtape is a collection of songs, recorded over known hip-hop beats, created to share with one's community at no cost. As such, the group worked to generate a list of song themes that could be explored in the cocreation of the group mixtape.

On the surface students worked together to generate a list of song concepts, these included songs on police brutality, family issues, relationships, drug use, gang violence, death, and many others. The students listed a total of 10 song concepts because they believed that 15 group meetings provided them with enough time to discuss, write, practice, and record each song. However, from a group worker's perspective, I saw this as the group developing a list of important life and personal themes for each group meeting.

Laying down tracks

To write, practice, and record each song the group would have to discuss what the track would entail. Due to the emotional content in each song, I helped to engage the group members in discussions that revolved around each emotional theme. For example if the group was working on a track on police brutality, they would engage in a discussion of each group member's experiences, and/or thoughts and feelings about, police brutality to prepare to write songs about that theme. This allowed the students to write their verses and engage in a hip-hop cypher to share their rhymes with group members.

The group members' engagement in the hip-hop cypher was a particularly important process that allowed all group members to express their thoughts and feelings about a given topic, as well as respond to one another in typical group work fashion.

The students in the group seemed most emotionally expressive during the hip-hop cypher portion of the meeting, as opposed to the early, less structured discussions in the group meetings. In time, as certain group dynamics unfolded, and a safe space to communication thoughts and feelings emerged, the group members began to see the therapeutic value of the hip-hop cypher.

Hip-hop cypher norms to unite and affirm

Inside hip-hop cyphers there is a specific structure and a set of unspoken norms that govern group interactions. For example, in any hip-hop cypher, the following unspoken norms are always present: (1) everyone stands equidistant from one another in a circle, (2) everyone has a chance to share, (3) all voices have equal value, (4) praise is awarded to individuals when they share, and (5) equal support is provided to participants when in need. In cyphers, these norms converge to create a sense of comfort, safety and belonging for group members.

At the beginning of the first group session I asked everyone to stand in a circle and imagine we were in a cypher. I then provided them with various hypothetical situations and asked the group how they would respond if this was a hip-hop cypher. For instance I asked, “If I was rapping and I said something really dope, how would you all respond?” One member called out a positive exclamation, “Wooo!”

I then asked, “If I started messing up what would you guys do?” Another group member responded by saying, “We’d tell you not to worry about it and keep going.” By garnering these types of responses from group members the group drew connections between the cypher, and our counseling space, which helped them to establish familiar norms for the counseling group.

Consequently, the group spoke about how the rules of the cypher could apply to our group meetings. Collectively they decided to create norms that included “Support each other in times of struggle,” “Cheer for each other when others were doing well,” “Don’t rap over people or cut them off,” “Hold your spot within the circle,” and “Allow equal space for everyone to participate.”

Reinforcing norms through the lens of hip-hop culture

The roles and status of more seasoned cypher participants were imperative for the maintenance of these group norms and to encourage others to participate. When the norms established in the cypher were violated, members within the group reinforced the rules. For instance, in one session a member of the group monopolized the conversation by cutting others off. This group member was called out by another member who recited a verse asking him to create space for everyone to share equally.

Another violation of norms was when the cypher (circle) got too close or someone who was rapping moved into the middle of the cypher. In these instances, group members would yell out a phrase such as “Hold the circle!” Or rhyme like: “Before we move forward and get any hyper, take two steps back and open up the cypher!” These peer-generated directives and reminders helped to restore balance to the group. The latter rhyme became a chant at times that group would recite together as they all physically stepped back and reestablished the circular space. The development of roles and norms described, allowed for new members to enter the cypher, and help establish a space that felt open, communal, and accepting.

Mutual support in the cypher

The roles or status of members in the cypher also inspired others to participate. When more novice rappers entered the cypher, they saw others sharing stories and showcasing an ability to adequately explain their thoughts and feelings through rhyme. As the less experienced members begin to participate, they received

support based on the norms of engagement, and were offered chances to participate in rhyme activities designed to help them better their own emotional expression and communication skills. By observing more seasoned participants sharing their narratives within the cypher, using emotionally descriptive and succinct language, newer members began to imitate what they saw and heard.

In the hip-hop cypher it appeared group members were able to communicate more openly and freely than they were in normal conversation. For example, when an individual began sharing rhymes, the rest of the cypher fell silent and bobbed their heads up and down. Sometimes group members smiled or patted the back of the individuals who were sharing, communicating to them that they should continue to rhyme.

Verbal cues are often provided as well to support the sharing of meaningful content. There were multiple moments observed in which the participants rallied behind individuals while they rapped. For example, the group decided to slow their beat down to create easier rhythms for more timid and novice rappers to also share their lyrics.

The group also chanted statements, such as “Ooohh!” and “Go in, go in, go in!” to encourage more rhyming, which in turn provided a welcoming space for individuals to express emotional content. When individuals stumbled over their rhymes, cypher participants yelled out words of encouragement like; “It’s all good, keep going!” supporting the growth of group members.

Intimacy

Through observations of hip-hop cyphers in the community we had witnessed that they lent themselves to the expression of feelings, either positive or negative, among group members. Inside these organic street corner hip-hop cyphers we observed, it was commonplace to share personal narratives through rhyme. This is likely because hip-hop culture was birthed out of the need to push back against forms of oppression and is rooted in storytelling (Chang, 2007).

Consequently, I structured the sessions so that folks could share emotionally themed rhymes after taking time to discuss with the group and write. The cyphers became a space during our sessions where the group came together and participated in sharing their individual narratives, affording the group a chance to find out more information about fellow group members and subsequently themselves.

Through this process I saw that the cypher was naturally a cathartic space that led to the universalization of feelings. Often when individuals shared an emotional rhyme, others within the group built off that emotional content by sharing some of their own rhymes surrounding the same theme. For example, if someone rapped about losing their father, others within the cypher were likely to rhyme about going through a similar experience.

By expressing through rhyming, whether the content was positive or negative, it brought the group closer together. Individuals received encouragement

and validation to share their content because they appeared to feel as if they were relating to others in the group. This increased participation, allowed the group to feel unified, and caused individuals to always ask to share out in the cypher because of the support, validation, and catharsis they experience.

Cultural sensitivity in forming and developing groups are essential to overcoming disparities that serve as obstacles to accessing mental health care. In this case we found the use of hip-hop cypher with urban youth of color to be an effective means of group work in an inner-city high school. Although there are certain populations that do not access traditional mental health services despite experiencing high levels of stress, it is clear to us that the use of the hip-hop cypher in group work can be of great value. It afforded the students described herein with the opportunity to engage in important group processes in a safe and welcoming space.

Conclusion

We lament the fact that there are too many who are unable to access needed care due to mental health disparities. We encourage social workers to identify cultural practices that marginalized communities have developed as a means for their own healing and integrate those into their groups. These community-defined practices allow for significant levels of mutual support and catharsis and can be adapted for use in more traditionally defined therapeutic environments such as social work with groups.

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