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A Community-Based Intervention: A Hip Hop Framework Toward Decolonizing Counseling Spaces

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ABSTRACT

The use of hip hop practices within the minority youth counseling environment have demonstrated patient improvement in areas of critical consciousness and civic mindedness, creativity and activism, and the development of a verbal artistic voice. In this study, hip hop is used as an expressive dance tool that is supportive and congruent with intersectional youth identities, offering a decolonized approach to coping skill development for urban youth. The goal of this qualitative study was to illuminate the perceptions and experiences of youth who engaged in a hip hop dance program in a community center. The results of this study indicate that, through participating in a hip hop dance program, participants experienced: stepping out of their comfort zones, developing increases in self-confidence, and experiencing positive feelings associated with processing difficult topics verbally with their peers. Results highlight the need to honor and integrate youth and cultural practices in future therapeutic interventions.

Childhood and adolescence are fraught with difficult emotional experiences, particularly for those living in urban communities where youth are at a greater risk of being exposed to adverse life events such as violence (Deane et al., 2018) and loss (Lansing et al., 2018). Given increased exposure to these adverse events, adolescents face a high risk of experiencing physical, emotional, and mental health challenges (Lin & Yusoff, 2013). To this end, data indicates that nearly two thirds of all adolescents have experienced a traumatic event prior to the age of 17, thereby leaving them vulnerable to posttraumatic stress disorder (McLaughlin et al., 2013). Taken together, there is an evident need for adolescents to develop coping methods for emotional stress (Nguyen et al., 2015).

However, the experience of emotional stress is particularly noted amongst African American and Latinx adolescents. As a result of systematic oppression, African American adolescents experience more emotional distress when compared to white adolescents including, but not limited to, financial concerns (Simons et al., 2016). For example, African American and Latinx stress might be exacerbated due to a lack of access to school-based resources, supports, safety, and services (i.e., from teachers, staff, administrators, and school peers), and because they do not have a buffer against instability within their home environment (Pierce et al., 2017). Economic stress and exposure to violence, alongside ongoing discrimination of African American and Latinx youth, have also been associated with increased internalizing (e.g., anxiety, depression, withdrawal)

and externalizing (e.g., delinquency, aggression) symptoms, further justifying the need for interventions that help to develop effective coping strategies (Sanchez et al., 2013; Sánchez et al., 2017). Scholars have advocated for culturally competent counselors who are equipped with the tools to present culturally relevant therapeutic options for African American and Latinx youth (Farr & Trumbull, 1997; Ratts et al., 2016). Despite this advocacy, many African American and Latinx youth are still offered services rooted in a white-cultural lens, with their own strengths being ignored, ultimately rendering intervention efforts inadequate and underutilized (Emdin, 2016; Tao et al., 2015).

Cultural competence

Counselors and psychologists are charged with facilitating social and emotional development among their adolescent clients (American Counseling Association, 2014; American Psychological Association, 2017). Despite this, alongside the high rates of mental health concerns among racial-ethnic minorities generally (Sun et al., 2016), and the subsequent need for culturally relevant counseling to address these concerns, research suggests African American and Latinx youth are one third to one-half less likely to receive counseling services in comparison with white youth (Creedon & Lê Cook, 2016; Holm-Hansen, 2006). Highly westernized approaches to counseling are often blamed, described as both inadequate and potentially harmful to ethnically and racially diverse individuals (Tao et al., 2015; Wendt et al., 2015). It is clear there is a need for specific training in developing cultural competency to safely and effectively intervene with adolescents of color.

To respond to issues regarding cultural competency, counseling professionals must learn about individual cultural differences and engage in social justice advocacy (Ratts et al., 2016). However, this endeavor requires an understanding that the development of cultural competence is an ever-changing and lifelong process, which requires a commitment to social justice and cultural humility (ongoing self-critique, self-reflection, and collaboration) (Hook et al., 2016; Ratts et al., 2016). Without a commitment to social justice advocacy, and cultural humility, "It is impossible to understand all the intersectionalities that we, our students, and our clients inhabit and enact" (Anastas, 2013, p. 91). Consequently, it is highly recommended that counseling professionals adopt an ecological perspective, which they develop an in-depth understanding of a client's social context and cultural values (McMahon et al., 2014), as an effort to engage in culturally responsive therapeutic interventions (Ratts et al., 2016).

Decolonizing as social justice

To meet the needs of individuals from diverse cultures, it is necessary to engage in social justice advocacy, which both challenges and reimagines counseling spaces that have traditionally been oppressive to communities of color (Lewis et al., 2011). Marsella (2015) introduces pathway toward such advocacy work, by way of the term decolonization, or "An effort to free a counselee from the sources of their imposed socialization that ultimately deny them the opportunity to explore their roots and to build their character and person within the historical context of their native cultural traditions." (p. vii). Social justice advocacy in counseling requires counseling

professionals leave the confines of their office, and enter their clients communities in order to address systemic barriers (Ratts et al., 2016) To create counseling environments that respond to individual needs, it behooves counselors to understand the forms of oppression that have inhibited the expression of knowledges held by oppressed communities (Tate et al., 2015).

L. T. Smith (2012) extensively discussed how indigenous people's values, beliefs, and knowledge were lost after being colonized and imperialized by Western Europeans, noting how they had been disconnected them from their histories, landscapes, languages, social relations, and their own ways of thinking. Consequently, under the premise that they lacked intellect and value, indigenous peoples were historically barred from the creation of institutions, stripped of their rights, and forced to acculturate, ultimately rendering their cultural worldviews and histories lost. In order to combat colonialism in current counseling environments, research has moved away from traditional talk therapy, plagued by problematic client-counselor power dynamics (L. Smith & Chambers, 2015), to the cocreation of interventions with clients. This shift enables counselors to address aspects of the counseling process where they have knowledge deficits, specifically in identifying interventions most relevant to the client (L. Smith & Chambers, 2015). Moreover, cocreation prompts clinicians to view their clients as the experts of their cultural forms of healing and expression in the context of their own unique environment (Hannon & Vereen, 2016; Hansen et al., 2014).

The neoindigenous and Hip Hop culture

As a modern framing of L. T. Smith's (2012) research on the indigenous Emdin (2016) labeled contemporary urban youth of color as the *neoindigenous*, considered part of the hip hop generation. Emdin (2016) further stated, "the term *neoindigenous* carries the rich histories of indigenous groups, acknowledges powerful connections among populations that have dealt with being silenced, and signals the need to examine ways that institutions replicate colonial processes" (p. 9). Given this definition, Emdin argued that it is imperative to consider the way that neoindigenous (e.g., hip hop) voices have been silenced by institutions that replicate the process of colonization and imperialism. To combat colonialism and imperialism, indigous peoples found mediums to construct and share their own stories, in order to protect their histories and cultures from being white-washed (L. T. Smith, 2012). For neoindigenous youth use hip hop is similarly used to tell their own stories, in their own ways, for their own purposes (Emdin, 2016). While Hip hop is essential for promoting urban youth voice, it is often viewed by Western culture as negative, and lacking value (Emdin, 2016; Love, 2012; Lamont-Hill, 2013).

Hip hop culture is rooted in the corralling of a community to combat social inequities (Chang, 2005). In the 1970's the South Bronx underwent significant systemic and structural changes (Caro, 1974), stripping schools of their instrumental music programs (Chang, 2005). In response, local Bronx leaders promoted pro-Black messages to mobilize the community to aspire against various inequalities (Decker, 1993). Within these organized community spaces, hip hop culture emerged. Emcees (rappers) and dancers (known in hip hop "bboys" and "bgirls") became primary voices crating and commenting on social issues their community (Farr & Trumbull, 1997; Forman, 2002). While the creation of hip hop culture was part of an authentic and community-driven movement, public

perception of hip hop culture became skewed over time (Rose, 2008). Hip hop artists reported feeling the need to produce musical content that highlighted violence, drug use, partying, and other stereotypical aspects of African American and Latinx communities to access record deals (Rose, 2008). Images promoted by record labels, or road shows featuring bboys and bgirls, further painted the hip hop community as inferior (Rose, 2008; L. T. Smith, 2012; Yousman, 2003). Reyna et al. (2009) discussed how rap music, dances, and videos feed into negative stereotypes about African American and Latinx populations. The deliberate stereotypical promotions of hip hop culture ensured that mainstream demonstrations of hip hop were no longer rooted in cultural origins (Graham, 2017).

Hip Hop in counseling

The prevalence of hip hop culture has resulted in the use of hip hop lyric writing and dance to address inequities and process difficult emotions with youth (Travis & Deepak, 2011; Tyson, 2002; Washington, 2018). Examining the impact of a group work intervention in a foster care setting, Tyson (2003) reported that listening to and discussing hip hop music helped his African American and Latinx youth clients identify and discuss emotions. Kobin and Tyson (2006) noted that the use hip hop practices helped clinicians develop strong relationships with their clients. Also in a group work setting, Hip hop interventions have been found by clinicians to be valuable in increasing client engagement, fostering a deeper understanding of their client's experiences, and supporting client's communication and interpersonal skills (Travis & Deepak, 2011). This research engendered hip hop and spoken word therapy (HHSWT), an approach to counseling where students engage in previously validated counseling interventions through the process of writing, recording, and performing hip hop music (Levy, 2012). Romero (2012) found a hip hop dance intervention lead to significant increases in self-efficacy and vigorous physical activity amongst youth of color.

Hip hop practices in education and counseling have fostered critical-consciousness and civic mindedness, provided an outlet for creativity and activism, supported writing skills, and developed a verbal artistic voice amongst urban minority youth (Gardner, 2014). It has also facilitated youths' identity development as a medium to resist, critique, and produce discourse that counters mainstream culture (Farr & Trumbull, 1997; Gardner, 2014). Because of this, hip hop is used as an expressive tool that is both supportive and congruent with intersectional youth identities and may offer a decolonized approach to coping skill development for urban youth (Gardner, 2014).

Levy (2019) studied the use of a HHSWT course at an urban school to help students explore difficult emotions. Following Emdin's (2016) model, students in the course co-developed content and personally identified emotional themes. Drawing from HHSWT, students in the course processed difficult emotions through lyric writing (Levy, 2012). The current study adapted the Levy (2019) framework to allow for forms of hip hop expression to be used as a medium for emotional discussion. The present study illuminates the perceptions and experiences of youth engaging in a hip hop program at a local community center in the Northeast. Two research questions guided the study: 1) Did participants develop any social or emotional skills as a result of participating in the

HHSWT program, and 2) Which parts of the program were valued by the participants, if any?

Method

Study design

To evaluate the impact and experiences of the participants who engaged in the HHSWT program at the Boys & Girls Club, a qualitative methodology was deemed appropriate. Moreover, given that the aim of the interviews was to understand participants' lived experiences, an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework was used to guide interview questions, data collection procedures, and data analysis (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). To this end, and consistent with best practices in qualitative inquiry, the researchers identified an epistemology and ontology to guide the data collection and analysis process (B. Smith & McGannon, 2018). The researchers in this study operated from a stance of ontological relativism and epistemological constructionism. That is, the authors acknowledge the relative nature of truth, and acknowledge each participant as having their own relative reality consistent with ontological relativism (B. Smith & McGannon, 2018). Furthermore, the researchers acknowledge the inherent co-creation of knowledge that occurred during data collection and do not claim to have been objective outside viewers into participant worlds, but rather active participants during the interview process, and therefore, own that the content created therein is a reflection of both the researchers and the experiences and perspectives of each participant (McGannon & Smith, 2015).

Program participants

Following Institutional Review Board approval, the principal investigator (PI), a licensed school counselor, two graduate assistants (GA), and doctoral students within a counseling psychology department, visited a local Boys & Girls Club. This particular community partner was selected given a longstanding relationship between this Boys & Girls Club, and the research lab director. Moreover, in the preceding year, the research lab, and one of the graduate students in the current study, had engaged in a different youth development program which was received well by participants at the Boys & Girls Club, thereby prompting continued collaboration. During the first meeting, the Boys & Girls club arranged space for the researchers to meet with prospective participants, communicate expectations of the program, solicit interest, and explore topics to address during the program. Prior to the start of the program, The Boys & Girls Club staff obtained written informed consent from the parents/guardians of the participants and verbal assent from the participants.

Procedure

Logistics and overall structure

The 10-week HHSWT program was delivered across the 2017–2018 academic year, with the number of participants ranging from 6 to 12 in each session. The format was based on Levy's (2012) HHSWT, and a Levy (2019) pilot study, with adaptations that allowed the

research team to fit the needs of the Boys & Girls Club. Each week, participants engaged in one, 90-minute, session that explored one of the topics suggested by the participants (e.g., the struggle, formation). While a variety of topics were discussed across the course of the program, students consistently reverted to discussions of formation, or coming together for a cause, and the struggle, which represented diverse experiences that participants identified as difficult or requiring resolve to get through. Ultimately, these two topics and the songs they believed represented them, were used to guide their final choreography and lyric writing. All sessions were designed with a specific format, but were flexible enough that activities modified to support student growth. Students chose the basement area of The Boys & Girls Club for sessions due to a discovered wall of reflective windows that participants used to practice dance routines. Throughout the program, to ensure safety for participants, the PI and GA on site worked with the group members to facilitate discussion around the weekly topic and process any emotions that arose.

Warm-up

Each week, the session began with a 5-minute check-in where participants, prompted by facilitators, discussed likes and dislikes from the prior session and what they wanted to discuss that day. Following check-in, the sessions were broken into two parts. During the first part of the session, participants were given 15 to 20 minutes to watch a music video that group facilitators selected based on the match between the video content and the identified session topic. Participants were given space to reflect on how the video related to the weekly theme and their own lives.

Main event

Participants then divided into a lyric writing group and a dance group and asked to create particular dance movements and/or lyrics that exemplified the weekly topic and therein process what the topic meant to them. Both groups were given the same instrumental music to create their lyrics or dance routine. In the lyric writing group, participants worked closely with the PI who actively listened to the participants' lyrics, and asked follow-up questions regarding underlying thoughts and emotions that warranted further exploration. In the dance group, participants worked with the onsite GA who supported students in creating dance routines they felt expressed the topic being discussed. Routines were created in several groups of three to four participants, who then worked together to combine small group dance movements into a larger dance routine. The GA engaged with students while they worked on their dance moves, and asked questions inquiring what the choreography represented. The role of the GA through this process was to facilitate a safe space for participants to discuss and express their emotions through dance. Emphasis was placed on privileging group members as holders of the cultural knowledge of their dance and music.

Cool-down

The last five to ten minutes of each group were reserved for a group close-out, which provided time for participants to process their group experiences by either discussing the process with other group members or engaging in self-reflection through writing in their journals. In the lyric writing group, participants were able to share their rhymes with the rest of the group and tell their peers what the verse was about, which opened up further

discussion to the rest of the group. During the close-out time for the dance group, students were provided an opportunity to show their move(s) to the group and explain how their movements were connected to the topic, which was followed by a discussion that allowed participants to process salient emotions across the group. Reflections from both groups were also used to inform future group sessions and topics to ensure that the process was being driven by the participants as the experts of their cultural expression.

Data collection

Following program completion, individual interviews were conducted with eight willing and available participants. Table 1 outlines pseudonyms, demographic information, and specific program information for the group members who participated in interviews. The interview guide (Appendix A) was developed by the first author to prompt discussion around participant experiences, including perceptions of what they learned in the program, and what they identified as important to them. Consistent with standards in IPA (J. ASmith et al., 2009), the semi-structured interview guide was flexible enough to allow participants to lead the discussion. Interviews ranged 10–30 minutes and were conducted by the first and second author. The interviews took place in a private room at The Boys & Girls Club and were audio recorded. To reduce recall bias, prior to the interview, each participant had the opportunity to review the video they made of their dance, or the song they wrote along with the process videos that had been recorded throughout the program. Process videos were 1–2 minute clips recorded each week with two willing participants who identified the main topic of the session, described what the group did that day, and their perceptions of the session.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using IPA standards with an explicit focus on understanding the participants' world and subjective experiences as they related to the specific event common to all participants being interviewed (Chapman & Smith, 2002). All recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim using InqScribe technology (Inquirium, LLC, 2013). To begin analysis, the second author read and re-read a randomly selected interview transcript to improve familiarity with the data. Once familiar with the transcript, the second author started with micro-analysis which included making descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments in the right margin of the transcripts. J. A. Smith et al. (2009) suggests that descriptive comments are those focused on the content of the

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Program
Brianna	10	F	African American	Dance
Alexis	11	F	Hispanic	Dance
Kayla	11	F	African American	Dance
Jasmine	9	F	African American	Dance
Jordan	10	F	African	Dance
Taylor	8	F	African	Dance
James	10	M	Hispanic	Lyric/Rap
Elijah	9	M	African American	Lyric/Rap

communication, and linguistic comments consider the tone and use of language through-out the transcript. Conceptual comments begin interpretation as descriptive and linguistic comments are considered together alongside the interpretation of the transcript by the researcher (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Once microanalysis was completed for the entire transcript, the same author reviewed the notations made to identify initial emergent themes throughout the interview, which were noted on the left margin of the document. The same process was followed for all eight interviews until all transcripts had been read and emergent themes identified. The initial emergent themes for each interview were then compared across individual participants to identify the lower-order themes, which were then combined to inform identification of the higher-order themes (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). In the final stages of data analysis, emergent themes that represented the lived experiences of participants in the group were situated within the extent literature to offer an interpretation of the experiences through existing theoretical frameworks, a hallmark process of IPA research (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Transcripts were then sent to the GA who was involved in delivery of the program at the Boys & Girls Club, but who did not participate in data collection or analysis. This GA was selected given that she had experienced the program and had important insight into the participants, but she did not engage in data collection allowing her to raise questions about identified themes when she observed discrepancies. When discrepancies did exist, all three researchers engaged in discussion until consensus was reached.

Trustworthiness

Consistent with the epistemological and ontological stance of the authors, and informed by recent debate within qualitative research, the authors did not attempt to secure against co-creation or strive for objective reporting of the results. Rather, the authors acknowledge the relative nature of truth, and the co-creation of knowledge inherent in qualitative inquiry (Smith & McGannon, 2015). However, to ensure the voices of the participants were forefront, and to improve transparency of the process, specific steps toward trust-worthiness were taken. First, in acknowledging the way in which the researchers will impact knowledge creation, the authors who conducted the interviews engaged in a reflexive process which resulted in primary themes of: a belief in the potential signifi-cance of the program, ownership of white privilege, a neophyte understanding of HHSWT for the GA, and an awareness of the power differential present during both the delivery of the program and the data collection process. These acknowledgments were discussed throughout the research process, not to eliminate them, but to acknowledge where they may have impacted our process. Additionally, to allow for transferability of the research process and results, the authors have provided a rich description of the research processes including outlining program implementation, participant selection, data collection, and data analysis so that readers may decide for themselves whether the findings are applicable to them. Moreover, to increase transparency in the co-creation of knowledge, exemplar quotes are placed in the body of the manuscript and all supporting quotes in Table 2. The authors hope that this allows others to assess the way in which researcher biases may have impacted theme identifications. Finally, to prevent against any single researcher's voice from dominating the creation of knowledge, marked transcripts were sent to the GA who was not involved in data collection process, but did engage in program delivery. This GA

Table 2. Participant interview quotes by theme.

Participant Outcomes	Participant Values
Increased self-confidence	**Feeling of normalcy**
• "At first I was kind of worried. I was like I don't really think I'm gonna be able to do this. Since I was very young I didn't really think I was gonna be good at anything … But I was wrong".	• On discussing how dance is used in their lives: "So then we like, some people perform, I really, I really like dance with my cousin and my cousin shows me more moves and stuff like that. Like we all dance every time it's a birthday, we're always like, creating a circle or something to dance and everybody's just dancing."
• "Um because um I want like, every time I do new dance moves, I get to learn like more stuff … and then I show people and they do the same thing"	• "I just felt like I was in the shower or something … I was just like dancing, cause that's what I do!"
• "Like before when I used to start rapping, they used to make fun of me, but then after I realized that I don't have to worry about other people judgin' me, and I can just do it by myself, so I got used to it … because it's not about how people think about it, it's how you feel about it".	• On how the group reflected dancing used in their life: "It's really fun at my house on Saturdays … my sister is always blasting music with my cousin and yeah and it's just really fun."
• "I heard Ian tell me that there was a rapping session thing going on and then I heard about it and then I felt something and then I was like whoa I think I can rap, I think I can do this and I felt like I could do it, so I did".	• "I changed because I feel happy, um cuz, I like rapping and I listen to rap every day, every time I go with my dad … he puts music on and I like to sing to it"
• "Um I really like to dance and I like to, when I dance I just like, when I'm teaching people to dance, I just like make them, I just like to bring things to life"	• "It felt natural [to dance to a specific topic] … because when I dance, I dance a lot and I struggle a lot … So when I dance I try to make things perfect for myself, so I keep practicing and practicing but it never comes out, like 100% great"
Processing difficult topics out loud	**Sharing and learning with others**
• On what it was like to discuss The Struggle as a topic: "It felt good because every time I went to mission hill, these people, these people with their, holding up signs, and yeah and I just feel bad."	• "I like the dancing because we, we were able to get it to um, match up with the other person's well the groups dancing … and we were able to compromise with what dances we wanted to do and how to add them in"
• On discussing struggles seen in the changing community: "So like, they be chagin' stuff like, breakin' stuff down, makin' stuff, new stuff, and it's just kinda weird because I remember like, I remember it, like every year."	• "I like how I learned was like, I was lookin' at people how they danced, they teach me how to dance"
• On future topics to rap to: "Another struggle like me doing my work at school and stuff"	• "I didn't go swimming because I left my swimming clothes at my house so I brung my notebook cuz you said I could bring it. So I did, and up there I said to my friend ey can you help me um making this rap song, and he was like yeah sure, so so I did half and he did half".
• On discussing specific topics, such as The Struggle: "Oh. Yeah. Yeah it was good … it actually talked about something important"	• "It was really fun to get to know more people that joined into it. I knew most of the people but like, I've never seen them really dance, and some of them teached me new dance moves and stuff"
Pushed outside of comfort zone	**Responsibility to and for their community**
• "It was kind of weird, cuz usually I dance to what I want but it was better for me because it was a specific topic so it was easier to figure out ideas and we pitched in."	• "I think I played a big role in the group, I think everybody played a big role in the group because we all pitched in ideas and helped each other dance … and we all choreographed, we all like we were all like pitching in ideas for dance moves and stuff, that's how I learned some new dance moves"
• "When I wasn't doing it [dancing] on camera, it was okay. But when I was doing it on camera, so nervous."	• "I learned … they would put food on the table and then they'd run outta food they won't be able to get none cuz they don't have that much money … If I was a grownup I would try to give them money to like be a better person".
• "I got less aggravated by people … probably because some people I get along with but like other days I don't, and then we just like come together and stuff."	• "Uh, the group, we tried to work together, but when there's something hard, everyone just gives up, and then they come back and try again"
• On trying to rap before the group started: "I tried to do it, but I always mess up."	• "My mom would tell me … always remember that when you grow up you have to help people out sometimes."
• "It was fun. But yeah, it was fun trying to get together to like figure out dance moves, it was easy for me, kinda, but it was kinda tricky".	

Table 2. (Continued).

Participant Outcomes	Participant Values
	Safe, judgment free, space
	• "We each get, gotted to express like, we each gotted to like show our dance moves and we were not judged"
	• "Yeah we all share our stuff and we all learn new stuff and every time people mess up we always help them … and um every time people mess up, we don't laugh, we just help them"
	• On why they liked the group: "Because they help me, and every time I mess up, they tell me what to do"

operated as an outside auditor to identify discrepancies and discuss disagreements between the PI and other GA. Through the abovementioned processes, the researchers believe that readers can decide for themselves whether the findings apply to them and their work (B. Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Results

Through data analysis, seven themes emerged which were grouped into two higher-order themes. The first higher-order theme identified answered the first research question, (i.e., did participants develop social or emotional skills across the HHSWT program). The lower-order themes that within this theme suggested that participants were: experiencing improved confidence, stepping outside of their comfort zone, and having an ability to process difficult emotions verbally with others. The second higher-order theme that was identified answered the second research question (i.e., Which parts of the program did the participants value, if any?) which included: sharing and learning from others, feeling that the program was normal to their life outside of the program, valuing that the space was safe and judgment free, and feeling pride in their responsibility to and for their community. Selected student quotes are provided below to describe each theme, and a more comprehensive list of the student quotes are provided in Table 2.

Participants' expressed changes across the program

Stepping outside of comfort zone

The first lower-order theme participants identified as a program outcome was the experience of stepping outside of their comfort zone. While participants highlighted their comfort with many aspects of the program, performing in front of their peers, being video or audio recorded, and learning new skills they did not already possess were all identified as ways in which participants stepped outside their comfort zones. Jasmine reported that dancing around a specific topic was more challenging to her than just dancing without direction and, therefore, caused some discomfort. However, she did report the positive aspects of stepping outside of her comfort zone in that it improved feelings of group cohesion and effort. "It was kind of weird cuz usually I dance to what I want but [the topic] was better for me because it was a specific topic so it was easier to figure out ideas and we all pitched in". Discomfort was a common feeling for many participants and was discussed as both a challenge as well as a facilitative method of

learning. Furthermore, the process of stepping out of their comfort zone enabled other emergent themes like increased self-confidence.

Increased self-confidence

The second emergent lower-order theme showed participants expressing increased self-confidence. Across the course of the HHSWT program, participants described an increased confidence in their ability and skills in dance, and to manage challenging tasks within a group. Taylor attributed her initial lack of confidence to her age, reflecting on how engagement in the program challenged her expectations of herself in a positive way. "At first I was kind of worried. I was like I don't really think I'm gonna be able to do this. Since I was very young I didn't really think I was gonna be good at anything … but I was wrong". Taylor, like others in the program, experienced an increase in confidence as she moved beyond what she initially perceived herself capable of doing.

Processing difficult topics verbally

The third lower-order theme that emerged was participants' expressed discomfort as they started to process difficult topics verbally the group. Members of the two groups described difficult topics such as gentrification and homelessness in their communities as well as food insecurity. Participants reflected on these difficult topics and the impact they had on them individually. James, who was in the lyric writing group expressed relief after discussing difficult topics, reporting that "it felt good [to talk] because every time I went to mission hill these people, these people with their holding up signs and yeah and I just feel bad". While relief after discussing difficult topics was not reported universally, difficult topics were reported as important to each participant and were present in their dance and lyrics. In addition to the changes experienced across the program, participants discussed components of the program they valued, which emerged as the second higher-order theme.

Aspects of the program valued by participants

Feeling of normalcy

The first lower-order theme that emerged as a valued aspect of the program was the normalcy of the program to participants' everyday life. That is, while parts of the program pushed participants out of their comfort zone, the activities of the program (i.e., hip hop dance, lyric writing) were activities that the participants were familiar with and many had engaged with in their friend groups and families. Many participants initially described the program as "just normal", and when prompted to consider what about the program felt normal, participants pointed to other events where hip hop was present in their lives and compared the program experience to those events. Jasmine explained the program in relation to holidays and birthday events in her family. "So, then we like, some people perform, I really, I really like, dance with my cousin and my cousin shows me more moves and stuff like that. Like we all dance every time it's a birthday, we're always like, creating a circle or something to dance and everybody's just dancing". In this way, the program felt normal or natural to participants, suggesting a congruence between the program and cultural traditions.

Sharing and learning with others

Another area that participants valued was the group norm to share and learn with others. A norm in the HHSWT group was to share dance moves and lyric ideas with each other, as well as engaging in teaching opportunities when group members did not know a dance move. Moreover, participants described sharing the new dance moves and lyrics they had learned with others in their family and community. Sharing both within the group as well as outside of the group was expressed as a positive element of the program. Participants also reported that they not only shared what they had learned with their community, but also solicited help from their families and community to inform the work they were doing in the program. The sum of these values was highlighted by Jordan when she described the process of sharing in group sessions, "yeah we all share our stuff and we all learn new stuff and every time people mess up, we always help them … and um every time people mess up, we don't laugh, we just help them". In this reflection, the expressed appreciation for the opportunity to share and learn with each other highlighted the importance of community to participants, which was further emphasized in the third emergent theme.

Responsibility to and for their community

The third lower-order theme that emerged was participant pride in feeling a responsibility to and for their community. Participants expressed pride in their community and discussed what they hoped to do to give back to their communities in response to the difficult experiences that many in their communities may face. The program mirrored an identified cultural value of being responsible to and for their community (Hollander & Quinn, 2016), and the participants reflected on this as a positive attribute of the program. As James described her own role in the hip hop group, she highlighted the way in which this value was carried out through the program process, "I think I played a big role in the group, I think everybody played a big role in the group because we all pitched in ideas and helped each other dance … and we all choreographed, we all like we were all like pitching in ideas for dance moves and stuff, that's how I learned some new dance moves". The mentality held by participants to engage with the group as a community and work together to accomplish their goal helped contribute to the final emergent lower-order theme.

Safe and judgment free

The fourth, and final, lower-order theme suggested participants valued the safe and judgment free space created through the program norms. Participants described feeling able to try new dance moves and fail in their attempts without being judged, reported safety as a part of their enjoyment across the program. The appreciation for this group norm was communicated by many participants, with Kayla reporting valuing the group because, "we each get, gotted to express like, we each gotted to like show our dance moves and we were not judged". In aggregate, student comments suggested that the safe and judgment-free space in the group may have helped members express themselves more freely.

Across participant experiences, the aspects of the group process that were most appreciated consistently pointed to the importance of congruence between community values and the structure and norms of the program. The lower-order themes that comprised the expressed valued program elements included the perceived normalcy of

the group, the experience of sharing and learning with each other, the felt responsibility to and for their community, and the safe space that was created. As the participants felt normal and safe in the program space, they expressed appreciation for the group as a whole and the way in which the group allowed them to maintain consistency with the values and norms they had established in other parts of their lives.

Discussion

The experiences of participants in the current study support previous research findings that have demonstrated evidence for the use of hip hop lyric writing in groups to bolster the confidence of participants (Gonzalez & Hayes, 2009; Levy, 2019; Travis & Deepak, 2011; Tyson, 2002). Travis and Deepak (2011) demonstrated that hip hop interventions in a counseling setting support the development of communication skills and relationships necessary to persevere through challenges. Harkness (2011) suggested it is necessary to forgo comfort in order to participate authentically in hip hop spaces. Moreover, Levy (2019) evaluated a HHSWT program within a small sample of Black and Brown adolescent youth (N = 12) and results from qualitative interviews indicated that participants developed an increased sense of confidence in their ability to navigate conflict-ridden situations. In the current study, the HHSWT curriculum used by Levy (2019) was adapted to meet the developmental needs of a younger elementary-age population, however, results maintain support for increased self-confidence amongst participants.

In the current study, hip hop lyrics and music videos were used as a platform through which students could discuss a given emotional theme, and then choreograph a dance or create lyrics reflective of the identified theme. Results suggest that through these processes, students were able to process difficult topics aloud. Similarly, Olson-McBride and Page (2012) conducted a small study (N = 6) in which poems and song lyrics were used to facilitate therapeutic dialogue amongst a group of mostly African American adolescent males. Results of that study suggest that hip hop elements (poems, song lyrics, dance moves) enable participants to disclose difficult emotional content in a group format. In a classroom setting, Emdin et al. (2016) found that a hip hop lyric writing curriculum could support students in disclosing emotions, and cultivating deeper emotional self-awareness. Similar to these findings, emergent lower-order themes in this study support the claim that the participation in the HHSWT program allows students to embrace discomfort through hip hop performance.

The four remaining lower-order themes represent the aspects of the program that the youth expressed they valued. Specifically, youth felt a sense of normalcy in the program, able to share and learn from others in the program, safe and unjudged within the program, and a responsibility to their community that was highlighted and fostered in the program. These findings are important given L. T. Smith's (2012) research on the indigenous, suggesting that promoting voices of marginalized individuals is not solely about the sharing of personal stories, but a "very powerful need to give testimony to and restore a spirit, to bring back into existence a world fragmented and dying" (p. 30). Results of data analysis suggest that participants did not value the hip hop program per say, but valued elements of the program, namely the autonomy to collectively engage in cultural practices which engendered positive outcomes.

L. Smith and Chambers (2015) called for counselors to treat clients as experts and co-create interventions to in areas where they have knowledge deficits. Levy et al. (2018a) asked clinicians to pinpoint cultural practices that communities use for catharsis and bring them into sessions. The hip hop cypher, cultural circles where individuals take turns showing some form of hip hop art/performance with each other (Levy et al., 2018b), was in the current program as an intervention where youth shared dance moves. This was reported to resemble practices participants engaged in outside of the program and is therefore in alignment with the abovementioned calls to both researchers and practitioners.

Facilitators of this current program intentionally positioned youth as experts, and collaborated with them on curriculum design and implementation. Quotes from interviews support the notion that youth felt normal, or at home, within the program. Participant statements indicate that activities within the program reminded them of frequent interactions with their cousins or siblings. Emdin (2016) theorized that for neoindigenous youth, the beliefs, values, and customs of hip hop culture are traditionally barred from institutional spaces, leading to feelings of isolation and alienation. In contrast, this program relied on HHSWT based interventions which enabled youth to bring in their expert cultural knowledge (their contexts and lived experiences) into the program. As counseling professionals, the ingenuity of youth participants challenged us to debrief after each group and re-construct curriculum for future sessions. In essence, the researchers and program facilitators became the students listening intently to the knowledge youth participants shared, thereby upholding and empowering youth voices.

In this HHSWT program, the themes of sharing and learning with others, and feeling that the environment was safe and judgment free also emerged. Specifically, participant experiences highlight the group process wherein they could try out new moves, learn from, and feel supported by others, even when they made a mistake. These themes support prior research regarding suggesting Hip hop cultural spaces are socially acceptable places for youth to feel vulnerable (Levy & Keum, 2014), and supported in the event that they do not perform well (Levy et al., 2018b). The hip hop cypher (Levy et al., 2018b) and hip hop battle (Emdin, 2013), are collaborative processes where artists share and express content, and push their peers to their intellectual and emotional limits for collective growth. While the act of engaging in hip hop dance about emotional themes was uncomfortable for youth, benefits were also described by group members. Students reported feeling safe, not judged, and able to receive feedback that elevated their abilities while in the program.

A final theme that emerged through data analysis was that participants felt a sense of responsibility to and for their community. Moreover, although students were only asked to engage in the construction of songs or dances around themes that were important to them. It was the students' autonomous decision to use the creation process to either speak to social issues, and/or support their peers. This finding reflects the foundational hip hop practice of forming community art events to collaborate on a group goal, and to combat systemic issues (Chang, 2005). Ultimately, it was observed that students used the hip hop program in the way their communities designed it to be used.

Limitations

Although this HHSWT program demonstrated several strengths, particularly through the autonomous nature of the creation and implementation, some limitations were present as well. By working with an after-school community center programs, such as The Boys & Girls Club, attendance was often variable which may have negatively impacted group cohesion. As such, in the future clinicians should consider closing the group to maintain size and cohesion. An additional barrier to group development and process was the physical location of the groups which often led to interruptions that were not conducive to emotionally-laden artistic expression. Consideration for the physical space in which the program will take place is important to allow for optimal group processing. In regard to the facilitation of the groups, although the program was developed to be culturally informed through the participants' values and interests, both facilitators did not have personal expertise in the area of hip hop dance. Providing rudimentary training opportunities prior to implementation and/or selecting facilitators that are more rooted in the hip hop dance culture could be helpful. While we believe initial important steps were taken in this program to place the children as cultural experts and challenge historical precedent that those with more privilege and power are the experts, it is notable that other power dynamics still may have been impacting the process and outcomes. Namely, all three authors hold more relative privilege (i.e., racial, educational, socioeconomic) than the participants of the program. In the future, exploring programs by diverse leaders (e.g., nonwhite cultural, linguistic, racial minorities) would be valuable to assess the role power plays, even when cultural expertise is deferred.

Implications

The findings of this current study precipitate implications for researchers and clinicians. Namely, findings suggest that HHSWT offers a modality for therapeutic intervention that facilitates desired therapy processes in a format that is culturally relevant and impactful for youth. Clinicians wishing to use HHSWT are likely to find value in allowing hip hop cultural knowledge to guide the creation of group activities and interventions. Those wishing to respond to the need for communities of color to access culturally responsive counseling services are encouraged to consider this approach for counseling interventions. More broadly, it is recommended that clinicians learn about the cultures of their clients, and consider how to integrate those cultural practices in their group work. To support this integration, the researchers encourage clinicians to trust their clients as experts in their own cultural knowledge and put them in positions to guide the development and deployment of interventions. It should be noted that clinicians also need to continue to develop their own cultural competence, which is an ever-changing and lifelong process, requiring that they commit ongoing self-critique, self-reflection, and collaboration.

Implications for research are also presented in the current study. Hip hop is unique in its multigenerational reach which may allow for implementation across the developmental lifespan as well as a potential modality for cross-generational therapeutic work. Given the findings of this study, particularly in regard to the power and potential of hip hop to challenge traditional counseling spaces and reach untouched populations, there is a need for further research. In particular mixed methods research with a larger sample size is recommended to further evidence this approach. Future research, including quantitative methodologies, should consider using a control group to minimize threats to internal validity.

Conclusion

Overall, the current study illuminates the importance of honoring the strengths and knowledge that clients bring with them to counseling spaces. Specifically, the results of this study highlight the need to integrate youth and their cultural practices in future therapeutic interventions. Findings support that hip hop as an expressive dance supportive and congruent with intersectional youth identities, and as a counseling tool, transcends traditional talk therapy and offers a decolonized approach to coping skill development for urban youth.

Funding

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Appendix A. Post-Program Interview Questions

*Given that we are exploring participants' experiences through an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), we will not focus on particular categories of exploration. Instead, we will invite participants to share their overall engagement with the program, situated within the larger context of participants' lives. In keeping with IPA, we will follow participants' direction using prompts, probing questions, and reflective listening. The following questions may initially guide our conversation.

Tell me about yourself as an artist or athlete?

How have you used hip hop lyric writing or dance in your life?
  -Did you use it differently here?

What was it like for you to be a part of this group?

What was it like to talk about your experiences in this group?
  -What was it like to talk about who you are?
  -What was it like to talk about violence?
  -What was it like to talk about family and friends?

Tell me about what it was like to create lyrics or dance movements about your experiences
  -What were some of your favorite moments from this process?

Do you think you've changed throughout this process, if so how?
  -What has been like to see yourself change?