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On: 30 November 2012, At: 05:06

Publisher: Routledge

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Journal of Poetry Therapy: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Practice, Theory, Research and Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tjpt20>

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Version of record first published: 30 Oct 2012.

To cite this article: Ian Levy (2012): Hip hop and spoken word therapy with urban youth, Journal of Poetry Therapy: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Practice, Theory, Research and Education, 25:4, 219-224

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08893675.2012.736182>

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Hip hop and spoken word therapy with urban youth

Ian Levy*

Theorizing from the perspective that effective counseling should enact deep awareness and trust of self, hip hop and spoken word therapy (HHSWT) is presented as an alternative modality when working with urban youth. HHSWT uses a combination of elements from cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), bibliotherapy, music therapy, and person-centered therapy (PCT). At its core, this theory seeks to take the lens through which urban youth see the world and use it as a vehicle for intrapersonal development. Hip hop (a combination of poetry and music) lies at the heart of urban mainstream culture among youth and adults. In hip hop, artists often talk about experiences, dreams, values, and beliefs of oppressed populations. This therapy will use resources familiar to the client which allow him or her the chance to build a deeper emotional understanding of self.

Keywords *Hip hop; music; poetry; spoken word; therapy; urban youth*

Introduction

Often in urban schools, clients suffer from more personal issues than they are able to verbalize (Tyson, 2003). The use of music, poetry, and literature in combination with person-centered and cognitive behavioral theories attempts to create an environment conducive for emotional exploration. The use of hip hop and other music in therapy provides a safe medium to identify and discuss emotion (Tyson, 2003). Poetry therapy (Mazza, 2003) and bibliotherapy (Harper, 2010; Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1994/2011) have proven helpful to clients in providing a vehicle for emotional expression and to universalize feelings. Text and music combined were found to have elicited greater emotional responses than just text or instrumental music by themselves (Gfeller, Asmus & Eckert, 1991). Evoking emotion is a necessary prerequisite for emotional evaluation and the eventual discovery of cognitive distortions. In order to achieve the primary goal of helping the client become a self-actualizing person, a combination of emotional exploration and problem identification needs to occur. The use of instrumental music and poetry combined is called hip hop. Hip hop and spoken word therapy (HHSWT) intends to expose coping or defensive

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mechanisms embedded in the individuals' worldview by means of exploring emotions through listening to and composing lyrics. The purpose is to assist the client in moving from living in an insecure world to living with a mindset of high self-esteem and authenticity devoid of cognitive distortion and denial of real self.

Role of the counselor and counseling relationship

Drawing from the constructs of person-centered therapy (PCT), the role of the hip hop and spoken word counselor is to be congruent and genuine in the relationship with the client. The major focus is to allow the client to feel understood and accepted. Having a profound understanding of hip hop and spoken word poetry, the counselor has used these vessels for personal exploration. The counselor's immersion in poetic self-expression not only contributes to the role of being congruent, but allows the clients to see that he or she can relate to them. Additionally, having gone through the process of exploring their emotions, they understand the difficulties it entails and empathize with the road blocks clients will inevitably face. Even if a client has no interest in poetry or hip hop, the counselor is more than capable of using regular interventions and techniques devoid of musical or poetic influence. It is also necessary to note that the counselor is able to make use of all musical genres that rely heavily on lyrics. Those individuals who are not necessarily interested in hip hop will be encouraged to bring in the music they are interested in, and those lyrics can be the source for the interventions and counseling process.

The feeling of the counseling relationship should be calm, accepting, honest and welcoming. Clients should be willing to attempt to explore the full range of their experience. This includes their feelings, beliefs, behaviors, and worldview. The use of music and poetry that the client reads, writes, or listens to is seen as being essential in establishing this acceptance. Discussing emotions through this medium makes counselors seem natural, honest, and genuine. A counselor who allows clients to listen, read, and converse about hip hop or poetry will be relatable on a personal level (Kobin & Tyson, 2006). It is important that active work be done by the counselor to give the client a way to feel comfortable exploring emotions. In PCT, Rogers (1957) mostly applied interventions such as summaries, restatements, mirroring, paraphrasing, and restating. These were nondirective interventions that prompted the client to explore themselves. In HHSWT the counselor would additionally provide some direction to the client through cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) techniques. The goal of these techniques is to evaluate the clients' negative thought patterns and show them how their own beliefs and attitudes effect how they feel (Corey, 2009). A person-centered approach with the addition of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) techniques has proven to be effective (Tursi & Cochran, 2006). Speaking to a client through a channel that they are interested in, and passionate about, should allow them a unique opportunity to explore themselves. Music and poetry can open up the door to those who relate to it. Clients will be able to deal with their issues independently by analyzing, listening, and writing music or poetry outside of

sessions. Considering its aforementioned grasp on our society, hip hop and poetry can be used to relate to a widely diverse clientele (Tyson, 2003).

Salient aspects of the counseling process

HHSWT seeks to have clients analyze the content of lyrics or poetry, write their own poetry or music, and explore poetry or music for underlying emotions. The analysis and composition of music and poetry is an outlet for self-expression and exploration of emotions. Jones (2005) found that song writing and lyrical analysis provided for immediate changes in emotional reactions from substance abusers. His results further indicated that the use of music in therapy reduced negative feelings like anxiety, guilt, and anger, while at the same time increasing positive feelings. The use of music in therapy provides insight into a barrage of varying feelings (Jones, 2005). Put simply, HHSWT encourages clients to know themselves on a profound level through exploration of affect. The client accepts all emotions for what they are and embraces every one of them.

Clients who are mandated to seek therapy (e.g., court) are not usually eager to participate. The HHSW counselor seeks to immediately make the client feel comfortable. With this in mind, the “assessment phase” of counseling is merely a discussion of both the counselor and client’s taste in music and/or poetry. The counselor obtains a list from the client of their favorite songs and listens to/analyzes them on their own time (or in session if the material is appropriate). The counselor will search for both positive and negative messages that could play into the client’s state of mind. These songs and lyrics will be used as tools to facilitate discussion in session. Counselors try to get clients to report on their feelings regarding the lyrics of their favorite songs, or songs provided to them. These cognitive behavioral techniques are used to generate topics of discussion. Person-centered interventions can be used to promote emotional exploration of the lyrics.

Tyson (2006) composed and tested the Rap-music Attitude Perception Scale (RAP) which had the intent of getting a deeper understanding of the different ways that rap was perceived in the USA. He found results indicating that individuals either tended to see rap music as violent or misogynistic, or as empowering, or an art form. His results provide reason to believe that it is highly possible that through the use of hip hop techniques in therapy, counselors can get a glimpse at someone’s mental state. In line with this thought, scholars have found that individuals who endorse violent and misogynistic music were more likely to display violent risk taking behaviors (Little & Zukerman, 1986). Either way hip hop in some form is still widely listened to by youth and adults (Tyson, 2006). A significant aspect of HHWST is that the counselor can provide clients with music they feel fits their emotional state of mind. By reflecting on music both in and out of session it empowers clients to think about how it makes them feel. Through the analysis of their favorite music, personally written music (if they have any), and diaries/journals the counselor can begin to gather an understanding of the clients’ automatic negative thoughts and cognitive distortions. Poetry and music therapy in the form of hip hop or any other

genre can be adapted to cognitive behavioral techniques used to help the client evaluate and reframe their cognitive distortions.

Another cognitive behavioral technique is homework assignments. This allows the client to continue working outside of the session. All assignments are discussed and agreed upon by the counselor and client. The aim is to have the clients reflect on their emotions and continue to practice rational and honest personality development (Corey, 2009). Each client will be provided with a diary in which they will complete numerous tasks. Clients are to work on listening to and analyzing new music on their own time. They will reflect on questions like “How does this music make me feel?”, “What is the artist trying to tell his audience?”, “How do I relate to this music?”, etc. The idea is that the clients will develop deeper understanding of themselves by discussing music of a third party. This has proven to be easier for some clients who are uncomfortable talking about their own feelings off the bat (Tillie Allen, 2005). Additionally, clients will be encouraged to write their own songs or poetry in the form of self-report diary keeping. When clients report back to session they are expected to bring new music they want to listen to and talk about. They will also be asked to share their own songs or rhymes written throughout the week. The counselor will focus on gently challenging the client to explain the feelings in their diary entries, to test if they are rational. The goal is simple, to search for cognitive errors and identify them. This is done for the purpose of then trying to help clients rework their lyrics so they properly explain emotion. On the surface it may appear as if the client is working on a song or poem, but in reality they are working on themselves.

Also included in HHSWT are modeling techniques such as role playing. Role-playing is used to have the client confront a side of themselves that they are not in touch with for any number of reasons, such as anxiety, fear, or anger (Tursi & Cochran, 2006). In hip hop there is a concept called a collaboration which is essentially two or more individuals working on a song together. In counseling, the counselor and client will both have written verses about their feelings surrounding the same topic. The counselor will help the client fine-tune his/her verse to make sure it accurately speaks to how he/she is feeling. This is done by questioning certain phrases that seem like they may be irrational thoughts or feelings, otherwise known as cognitive distortions (Beck, 1963). The client will also get a chance to read the counselor’s verse and ask why he/she may have written certain lines. They together create a song that is about the client’s most salient problem. Once the writing of the verses is complete, the two will verbally recite the verses. If the counselor has the necessary equipment they can record it and have the client listen and reflect on it throughout the week (this technique can be used for all genres of music). The goal is to have the client experience outwardly expressing a side of themselves they wrote about, while at the same time hearing the counselor confront his or her own emotions. This not only strengthens the therapeutic relationship but also it gives the client a chance to work on becoming a better lyricist, which in this case means a more expressive and self-actualizing being.

Music therapy has been shown to evoke emotion and positively alter mood states with substance abuse clients. The ability to have a place to explore emotions gives individuals the chance to cope with their emotions more easily (Baker, Gleadhill &

Dingle, 2007). Additionally the coupling of lyrics and instrumental music has been empirically shown to elicit emotions (Jones, 2005). After creating an accepting, and safe atmosphere for the client to express emotion, the counselor will be responsible for finding the most salient emotions, highlighting cognitive errors, and working with the client to fix them.

Strengths and limitations

One of the most significant strengths of HHSWT is that it promotes genuineness in the relationship between the counselor and client. It creates a warm and safe environment for the counselor and client to be true to themselves. With their growing presence in our society, hip hop and spoken word poetry have become a large part of urban culture and begun to spread further (Tillie Allen, 2005). Many children are excited about hip hop because of the presence it has in society. The opportunity to work on writing this music is appealing in itself, and it makes sense that these techniques would generate interest. In fact, hip hop-based interventions were shown to have improved the therapeutic experience and outcomes of both African and Latino youth and delinquent youth (Tyson, 2002, 2003)

HHSWT does present some limitations. Those who are not aware of the self-exploration side of hip hop music often see this music as either violent or misogynistic (Tyson, 2006). Additionally, the vast majority of people portrayed by mainstream hip hop are men which may very well create a problem in the interest levels of women to participate in this type of therapy. Due to this, certain individuals will likely not have interest in hip hop and spoken word interventions. Counselors have some flexibility in using other musical genres in counseling, but this may hinder his genuineness with the client since his or her passions lies in hip hop. Furthermore, role playing techniques entail some disclosure on the part of the counselor. While this is in some ways effective in helping to strengthen the therapeutic relationship, it sometimes may be inappropriate depending on the topic of discussion. It is expected that some clients will want to write lyrics about the common themes in mainstream hip hop, like drugs, sex, and money, which may make it harder to have them to use hip hop as a means of genuine emotional expression. Again, the appeal of using hip hop and spoken word poetry in therapy is that children who are part of that culture will be more willing to participate in therapy. It is a challenge for the counselor to show clients that hip hop is more than violence, sex, and drug use, but if that is how they view life in general then the counselor would have to confront those irrational cognitions at some point anyways. Of course, it should be noted that there is a limited amount of empirical support for hip hop therapy, and it should be used with caution and subjected to critical evaluation.

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