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Integrating Rap Music Into Counseling With Adolescents in a Disciplinary Alternative Education Program

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ABSTRACT

Rap, hip-hop, and R&B music are often referred to as violent, misogynistic, and a reflection of a culture promoting interpersonal violence. The genre, which provides a cultural lens through which many urban adolescents forge identity and express themselves, subsequently holds potential to combat emotional and interpersonal distress. Creative techniques that incorporate music can be used to help adolescents understand and regulate coping responses to difficult and emotionally sensitive situations. This article presents a rationale and implementation strategy for incorporating rap music into counseling practices with at-risk minority adolescents enrolled in a disciplinary alternative education program. Examples of two interventions designed to assist therapists and clients using music therapeutically are presented. In addition, a discussion of the adaptations and limitations of these activities is provided.

KEYWORDS

Adolescents; creativity in counseling; interpersonal violence; rap/hip-hop music; rap therapy

Many adolescents express a dialectical view of interpersonal violence, believing fighting to be both necessary and wrong (Johnson, Frattaroli, Wright, Pearson-Fields, & Cheng, 2004; Rudatsikira, Muula, & Siziya, 2008; Shetgiri, Lee, Tillitski, Wilson, & Flores, 2015; Teitelman et al., 2010). Positive attitudes for engaging in violence may be justified as necessary for maintaining respect, protecting popular reputation, and solving problems. Simultaneously, adolescents may endorse disengaging from fighting because it is ineffective and often leads to peer rejection and additional harassment (Johnson et al., 2004; Quinn, Bell-Ellison, Loomis, & Tucci, 2007). Adult admonitions against fighting, such as “walking away” and “turning the other cheek” are often viewed as disconnected and unrealistic solutions to interpersonal conflict (Johnson et al., 2004). This article is in response to Thelma Duffey’s 2015–2016 American Counseling Association’s presidential initiative again bullying and interpersonal violence.

Counseling interventions that focus on building strong therapeutic alliances and rapport are essential to addressing violence with adolescent clients. Adolescents exposed to empathic and affirmative adults are less likely to be involved in interpersonal violence (Shetgiri, Kataoka, Ponce, Flores, & Chung,

2010; Teitelman et al., 2010). Moreover, a therapeutic focus on adolescent problems and emotional experiences within the context of culture are highly related to successful therapeutic outcomes and positive youth development (Van Acker, 2007). Researchers have highlighted how the incorporation of rap music in therapy in particular may bridge cultural and generational gaps (Gonzalez & Hayes, 2009; Tyson, 2004). Capitalizing on multiple themes expressed in music, creative interventions allow therapists to incorporate cultural components into the therapeutic process thereby reaching clients in a way traditional modalities do not. This article discusses a theoretical rationale for integrating rap music into counseling practices with minority youth especially at-risk for interpersonal violence. Best practice considerations as well as detailed recommendations for interventions using rap music as a therapeutic tool with adolescents are offered.

Creative approaches in counseling

Expressive and creative activities such as play, sand tray, art, bibliotherapy, music, psychodrama, and dance have been identified as useful when working with children and adults (Duffey, Haberstroh, & Trepal, 2016; Gladding, 2011; Malchiodi, 2013; Schaefer & Drewes, 2013). Expressive and creative techniques are especially useful in that they can assist clients to communicate their inner thoughts and feelings. Techniques using creativity and self-expression create an outlet for healing by assisting the process of reframing ideas, shifting perspectives, externalizing emotion, and deepening the understanding of an experience (Bradley, Whiting, Hendricks, Parr, & Jones, 2008; Kimbel & Protivnak, 2010). Creative processes further allow for integration with several therapeutic modalities, for example, narrative therapy, in particular (Petersen, Bull, Propst, & Dettinger, 2005; Wolter, DiLollo, & Apel, 2006). Narrative approaches seek to explore the human experience by encouraging clients to use their own words to tell meaningful stories (Corey, 2012). These stories reveal information about client beliefs and perceptions that are foundational to how they construct meaning in the world around them (Duffey, 2007). Therapists can use this information to assist clients in processing and re-constructing stories; including re-examination of and adding new conceptualizations, fresh perspectives, and language to the client's story (White & Epston, 1990). Client and therapist co-examination of narratives present in rap music provide a framework for counselors to explore cultural assumptions and strengthen therapeutic rapport by engaging in content meaningful to the client. Using rap music as a narrative tool in therapeutic settings may be an especially useful creative technique for working with minority youth.

Music in counseling

Music is fundamental in the lives of many adolescents, playing a role in social-emotional, interpersonal, and intellectual-artistic development, and as

an outlet for self-expression and emotional release (Campbell, Connell, & Beegle, 2007). Research on the effects of popular music has been explored in a variety of fields and been shown to have effects on schoolwork, social interaction, mood and affect, and behavior (Council on Communications Media, 2009; Hakanen, 1995). With the rise in portable technology, music consumption by adolescents has increased drastically. Although music consumption varies with age, reports estimate that youth listen to an average of 1.5–6.8 hours of music daily. Further, youth report spending an additional two hours watching music videos (Council on Communications and Media, 2009; Ward, Hansbrough, & Walker, 2005).

Using rap music in therapy

Rap music has become a ubiquitous voice for urban youth. The influence of rap music has expanded far beyond the South Bronx, urban New York neighborhood where it began in the 1970s. Rap and hip-hop have demonstrated international influence on art, dance, dress, language, and speech (Romero, 1997). Many African American and Latino adolescents, in particular, have assimilated rap culture into their identities. Creative and expressive use of rap music can therefore be a powerful, culturally appropriate, rapport building intervention for adolescents who identify with the genre.

Rap music, though frequently overgeneralized as promoting substance abuse, violent behavior, and misogyny, “is rich with messages about life experiences, strategies for overcoming life obstacles, and perspectives on how to prioritize these strategies” (Travis, 2012, p. 148). As developed by Don Elligan (2000) rap therapy has proven effective in promoting positive mental health outcomes by therapists and social workers in a variety of settings (Alvarez, 2012; Allen, 2005; DeCarlo & Hockman, 2003; Elligan, 2000, 2004). Rap therapy (Elligan, 2000) uses narrative themes in rap music to increase client reflection on beliefs and emotions that connect with personal lyric interpretations heard in the music. Through mutual exploration with clients, rap therapists facilitate awareness on how personal beliefs and emotions underlie patterns of engagement in problematic behaviors and prospects for empowering positive changes. Rap therapy involves five theoretical stages of implementation: assessment, alliance, reframing, role play/reinforcement, and action/maintenance (Elligan, 2000, 2004). In the assessment stage counselors investigate client’s interest and rap music consumption, favorite songs, artists, and groups. During the alliance stage, counselors focus on positive rapport building and active, nonjudgmental listening of musical content with the client. Client perspectives are validated. Counselors work to support increases in the depth of examination and processing of narrative themes represented in the music in the reframing stage. Clients are asked to “listen more deeply” to the content as they appreciate the music.

Clients are further encouraged to process personal meaningfulness of themes heard in the music. In the role-playing stage, counselors and clients work together to develop and interpret their own rap lyrics. By empowering clients to use their own voice to tell their own story clients again are challenged and empowered to reflect on the personal significance of the content. Finally, in the action and maintenance stage, counselors and clients work together to develop an action and maintenance plan to address and manage issues discussed in earlier stages for reducing negative behaviors. In particular, clients are asked to review responses to themes in the music and encouraged to reflect the relevance to their current situation. Counselors help clients to re-story experiences that lead them to negative personal consequences. Throughout the therapeutic process, Elligan emphasized, a focus on rapport building and empowering reframing of personal interpretations in support of positive and resilient behaviors (Elligan, 2000, 2004).

Rationale for use of rap music in counseling with interpersonally violent adolescents at disciplinary alternative education programs

Disciplinary alternative education programs (DAEPs) were established in the 1960s to provide the general and vocational education, community support activities, and manage behaviors of students who had difficulties functioning at their home campus (Foley & Pang, 2006; Mitchell, Booker, & Strain, 2011; Raywid, 1999). Unlike traditional alternative educational settings, DAEP campuses are aimed at managing and correcting behavioral problems of disruptive students; wherein students are enrolled not by choice but following administrative and judiciary referrals (Aron, 2006; Raywid, 1999). Students may be referred to DAEPs for a variety of infractions including physical aggression, disruptive behaviors, substance abuse and possession, constant academic failure, truancy, weapon possession, mental health needs, or recommendations from the criminal justice system (Foley & Pang, 2006; Mitchell et al., 2011; Nelson & Eckstein, 2008). Students often find themselves at a DAEP campus because of frequent suspensions and academic referrals (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Frustration and impulsive reactions to persistent disciplinary action (Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder, 2001) and difficult negative experiences with school faculty (Cook, Purdie-Vaughns, Garcia, & Cohen, 2012; Haager, Watson, & Willows, 1995) has been found to be associated with personal perceptions of ambivalence, recklessness, and hopelessness for goal pursuit and future prospects among students enrolled at DAEPs (McNulty & Roseboro, 2009). Sixty-one percent of student referrals to DAEP result from interpersonal conflict and aggression (i.e., fighting; Carver & Lewis, 2010). Many students attending DAEP campuses continue to engage in disruptive or antisocial behaviors at the DAEP campus (Foley & Pang, 2006; Tobin & Sprague, 2000) and often reject

therapeutic opportunities to change their behavior. Researchers have documented how impulsive and often aggressive coping responses to persistent “threats to identity” (McNulty & Roseboro, 2009; Sherman & Cohen, 2006) are in fact effort to gain respect or arrest control from distrusted authority figures (Matsuda, Melde, Taylor, Freng, & Esbensen, 2013). These continued negative school interactions, only further exacerbate negative societal consequences (Losen, Hewitt, & Toldson, 2014).

The demonstrated effectiveness of rap therapy with difficulty and aggressive minority youth indicates that a positive impact of a rap therapy-based intervention with DAEP students might be expected. Rap music narratives often reflect similar disaffection with societal contexts expressed by minority youth. Moreover, the demographic make-up of DAEPs is disproportionately compromised of African American, Latino/a, male, low income, and special education students (Cortez & Cortez, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2011). As a culturally responsive counseling that validates disaffected sentiments of at-risk minority youth, rap therapy-based interventions proposes to empower reflection and awareness for personally meaningful change. This active co-listening to music with adolescents aims to provide therapeutic space for personal processing of heartfelt emotions and disaffection with school and society that often underlie persistent patterns of violence and interpersonal aggressiveness.

Technique assumptions

The activities are based on the following assumptions:

- (1) The counselor is using a rap therapy-based intervention in treatment with an adolescent who has been influenced by rap music and identifies the genre as being a part of their cultural narrative.
- (2) The counselor has given the client options to express his or her connection with the genre, identifying songs that resonate with them, which may empower the client and provide them with a sense of ownership in the counseling process.
- (3) The counselor has invested in the selection and identification of a library of songs that are developmentally appropriate for the session and would aid in furthering the emotional development of the client.
- (4) When developing a narrative, counselors should encourage the client to describe thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of the event, individuals, and any other related stimuli.

Technique goals

The goals for these interventions are as follows:

- (1) To establish a culturally meaningful therapeutic setting that facilitates increased disclosure or expression of emotions and attitudes about feelings of disaffection and intra-interpersonal difficulties leading assignment at DAEP;
- (2) To scaffold a personal understanding of how emotions and beliefs about self and others motivate behaviors that are adaptive and maladaptive; and
- (3) To promote personal understanding of and responsibility for developing a meaningful personal narrative regarding strategies for addressing personal feelings of distress and disaffection in more personally adaptive and positive coping ways.

Process

Activity 1: Catching feelings and expressing emotions

Students at DAEPs are frequently referred for interpersonal challenges, physical aggression, and verbal altercations with other students and teachers are common reasons for referral to DAEPs (Nelson & Eckstein, 2008). These interpersonal deficits can be seen as a lack of social emotional learning wherein students are unable “to generate and coordinate flexible, adaptive responses to demands and to generate and capitalize on opportunities in the environment” (Waters & Sroufe, 1983, p. 80). Direct instruction on interpersonal effectiveness skills have proven especially impactful for reducing interpersonal conflict and fighting (Linehan, 2014; Nelson-Gray et al., 2006)

The goal for this exercise is to teach students to identify emotions as messages and use effective coping skills to tolerate stresses of difficult situations sufficiently so as to mobilize skillful and adaptive responses to resolution that will not worsen the situation. Students may need to simply be with difficult emotions long enough to learn about them and not feel like they have to avoid them (experiential avoidance; Hayes, 2007) or act on them in some way.

In this activity, the counselor identifies a rap song prior to the counseling session. Counselors should consider content, themes, subject matter, developmental suitability, and educational or therapeutic purpose of the song. “FourFiveSeconds” performed by Rihanna, Kanye West, and Paul McCartney (West et al., 2015) specifically, can be used to discuss interpersonal violence and emotional regulation. In “FourFiveSeconds,” the artists discuss interpersonal conflict as a product of emotional distress. During the activity the counselor plays a rap song to students three times. The first time, the counselor encourages students to listen to the song, being mindful of how the song

makes them feel, and for any lyrics that resonate with them. The second and third renditions, the counselor provides students with a sheet of paper to write down the lyrics that stood out most to them. The counselor assists students in making connections between song lyrics and the student's therapeutic needs. Throughout the process of identifying themes and emotions, the counselor will probe the client to further dissect the song. Roberts and Christenson (2001) estimated that approximately 17% of male and 25% of female adolescents liked their favorite songs because the lyrics reflected their feelings. These statistics suggest adolescents listen to music without giving conscious thought to the impact of the lyrics on their mood. This exercise teaches student to connect song lyrics and emotions as messages about something they need to know.

Some possible follow-up questions that can be used to process the activity throughout the session include:

- (1) What was this experience like for you?
- (2) How do you connect with this song?
- (3) Is there a song that better describes your emotional experience?
- (4) Describe some of the coping skills you use when your emotions have reached a boiling point?

Activity 2: Dollars & dreams

This exercise encourages students to identify their values, learn the difference between goals and values, and to create goals based on their values. Rap music is loaded with rags-to-riches stories and often boastful narratives that can be explored to promote positive mental and visual imagery in clients. The seemingly bragging rags-to-riches narratives illustrate a pattern of resilience and reference situations in which individuals move from a non-ideal position to a more desired state (e.g., poverty to wealth, low self-esteem to high self-esteem). Within the genre there is an abundance of rap and hip hop songs with resilience themes from which clinicians may select a song to spur therapeutic process. Counselors are encouraged to select a song based on their knowledge and experience with clients. "Rich" by Rich Homie Quan, for example, can be used to drive student discussion of goals and values. The appendix highlights an excerpt from "Rich" that can be used to encourage discussion. Prior to the session, counselors select a rap song with a rags-to-riches or resilience based theme and provide a print out of the lyrics to be provided to clients. Counselors work with students to identify themes and analyze messages within the lyrics of the song. For example during the song "Rich" the artists sing "although, they'll tell me that I'll never get out of here, I swear, I'm driven by a better life" (Bangz & Azlina, 2014). This brief snippet, counselors and clients might infer, refer to the artists feeling driven to move out of poverty and having others disparage this goal. Counselors and clients work conjointly to discuss what values might underlie the artist's goal (e.g. personal growth; see Appendix).

The aim of this activity is to encourage student resilience through affirmation of personal values and goals. Counselors assist students in identifying goals within the lyrics and interpreting what values are represented during this introductory phase of the activity.

Clients are encouraged, with the assistance of the counselors, to discuss individual goals and values so as to promote meaningful dialogue and reduce superficial responses. To further assist discourse counselors might use the following prompts: What would you do if you had more money than you could possibly spend? If you bought everything wanted and traveled, what would you do with your life next?

Having recognized some of their values students will then identify three specific goals they and how they plan to achieve them. Counselors can use this activity as they discuss disengaging from interpersonal conflicts and violence with adolescents. Next having discussed values and goals, counselors may prompt students to use the SMART goal structure to encourage clients to think concretely about making progress toward achieving their goals. SMART goals, are built on the follow the acronym: specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time bound. Using this acronym encourages perceptions of goal attainability and realness for the student; challenging students to take ownership and autonomy within the session and in their change.

Some potential follow-up questions that can be used to process the goals and values activity throughout the session include the following:

- (1) What was this experience like for you?
- (2) What connected you to the song you selected? Are there values expressed in your song that you do not agree with?
- (3) What are some of the challenges you anticipate in reaching your goals?

Adaptations of the processes

These interventions are presented here for inspiration. Although rap and hip hop music have been presented for use with minority youth, these interventions are adaptable for use with different populations, genres of music, and presenting issues wherein the aim is to empower the client. When using these interventions one should be mindful of the musical content and the client's developmental level and readiness to process content. Although these interventions were implemented in a school group setting, they can also be applied to individual and clinical settings. Furthermore, another possible adaptation of the processes presented is to infuse greater collaboration and participation with client in selecting songs. Clients with whom greater rapport and trust has been built may select songs to process during sessions.

Requirement and limitations

The use of rap therapy-based interventions depend on a client's ability to process emotional and musical content, it is important that clients have the ability to regulate and tolerate strong emotions. If clients are unwilling or unable to process, the use of this intervention is irrelevant and unproductive to the therapeutic session. The development of these skills equip clients with the ability to cope with strong emotions, which may emerge throughout the therapeutic process. Further, it is important that counselors identify themselves as counselors using creative modalities if they are not licensed or certified as an expressive or creative arts therapist or a creative arts therapist (ACA, 2014, Section C.4).

Conclusion

Professional counselors should recognize and validate a multifaceted student connection with music. Song lyrics and rhythms have long been considered powerful influences on consumers. Listeners young and old find meaning, and connect with lyrics and beats in a fluid, shifting dance of moods and emotions. Rap music provides many African American and Latino youth with an outlet to express challenges and difficulties in their daily lives. Our proposal for incorporating music into counseling provides an opportunity for counselors to join youth in a culturally meaningful experience. By acknowledging the importance of music in the lives of students' clinicians are able to enter into an adolescent's world in ways that are not easily accessible to adults. In this way school counseling professionals can work to establish trust and rapport with adolescent first as colisteners and perhaps co-authors with respect to helping their clients cultivate new song lyrics for better personal outcomes. Through the use of rap therapy-based intervention as a culturally sensitive technique, counselors can use rap music positively reframing the experiences rap music portrays to better reach clients.

Future research might empirically evaluate the usefulness of rap music-infused interventions, and specifically, in addressing interpersonal violence with adolescents. In addition, future research might look into the effectiveness of rap music interventions in different therapeutic and population samples.

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Appendix

Goals and values example

Lyric	Value	Analysis
Am I wrong for wanting better? Should I just settle forever? Oooh, I swear it feels right like this is as good as it gets	Accomplishment, achievement	Sometimes it's easy to feel trapped in your circumstances and feel like nothing will ever get better or change
Am I wrong for wanting cheddar? Although they'll tell me that I'll never get out of here I swear, I'm driven by a better life	Community, family, and growth	Feeling guilty for dreaming of leaving your community and pressured to not challenge the status quo Feeling discouraged about chances of moving out of poverty
I wanna be rich So tired of sleeping on the floor I wanna be rich	Affluence, comfort, and stability	Having to live with multiple relatives, not enough space, or having a bed be a lower priority than having a place to live
Man, I'm tired of feeling pain, tired of feeling rain Tired of being ashamed, tired of second place Tired of hiding my face, man, I'm tired of getting no love	Striving toward peace, love, prosperity	Physical, spiritual, and emotional pain at one's current circumstances driving motivation and need to make and attain change