Making it Real: Exploring the narratives of youth rappers

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ABSTRACT: The present study explores how youth create social connections around rap and describes how rap contributes to development and maintenance of friendships. Through ecological analysis, the study demonstrates how transition-age youth use rap to form important connections and tell stories about their lives. Individual interviews were conducted with 5 rappers. Identifiable themes emerged through qualitative analysis. Those working with at-risk youth may incorporate these findings into practice to meet youth's needs who are often difficult to reach. The research indicates that meaningful connections were formed through identification as rappers and the creation and sharing of their music.

Keywords: rap music, young people, voice, story-telling, trust, cultural competence, ethnography

1. Introduction

"Rapping influenced my life in a lot of positive ways because how I started off rapping, I was really a storyteller, whatever was on my mind, whatever came from my heart, whatever I was going through, was all in my music."

(Khazi, 2012)

Adolescents use media for a variety of reasons: entertainment, forming identities, creating a high sensation or adrenaline rush, coping or escaping their realities, or identifying as a young person (Arnett, 1995). Researchers have shown that a sense of belonging to something is an important aspect of social development for youth (DeCarlo, 2005; DeCarlo & Hockman, 2004; Elligan, 2004; Author, 2011).

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2. Rap and Hip Hop

History and definition

Rap music is a diverse art that takes multiple forms. According to Chang (2005), pure rap has been identified as consisting of only the most basic elements of the art: "the rhythm, the motion, the voice, the name" (p. 85). Tyson (2003) added DJ-ing, MC-ing, and knowledge. The roots of rap music lie in the South Bronx during the 1970s (Kitwana, 2002), developing from a combination of "poverty, music, dance, graffiti, and fun" (Elligan, 2012, p. 28).   The music genre quickly caught on; by the mid-1980s, rap music began to exert a greater "national influence on music, art, media, and the social development of youth" (Elligan, 2012, p. 29).

Throughout the 1980s, rap music's popularity expanded across the youth cultural spectrum resulting in a definitive impact on the culture of youth across the country (Chang, 2005; Kitwana, 2002).

Concerns regarding rap music and hip-hop culture

Several concerns have been identified in using rap music when working with at risk youth. Social science research on rap music has predominantly focused on its negative aspects (Tyson, 2003). Despite much public scrutiny of rap lyrics, not all rap music focuses on negative messages, with many raps focusing on themes of resilience and acceptance (Kitwana, 2002; Kobin & Tyson, 2006).   Over the past decade, other scholars have written about the positive impact that rap music can have on the lives of young people and the positive role that rap can play in the therapeutic process (DeCarlo, 2001; Lighthouse, n.d.; Tyson, 2005). For example, Elligan (2004) noted that critiques of popular music genres do not consider the positive influences of the music on youth in their culture or the artistic influences that led to the writing of the lyrics. Most youth do not associate rap music with negative behavior or negative thought patterns (Gardstrom, 1999); instead, youth report that rap music helps focuses public attention on their predicament (Toldson & Toldson, 2002).

One of the most commonly made arguments against practitioners using rap music with adolescents is the lyrical content (Elligan, 2012). DeCarlo (2001) wrote that whether rap music includes prosocial or antisocial lyrics, it can be an effective intervention for adolescents as long as the method is based on the needs of the client. Tyson (2005) also noted that rap music can help raise youth's social consciousness and assist them in resisting oppressive conditions. Whatever the lyrics, rap music is a central aspect of life for many at-risk youth, thus providing practitioners

with a potential culturally relevant tool for reaching youth.

Adolescence is a period of transition from childhood to adulthood, as youth negotiate their developing identities and begin a period of transition (Erikson, 1968). The influence of peers, during this period of development, is heightened as they become a central group within a person's ecosystem (DeCarlo, 2005; Erikson, 1968; Lloyd, 2002).

Purpose of the Study

This purpose of this study is to explore how young men create and develop social connections through rap music. The study explores how groups of transition-age youth use rap music to form communal and social connections and tell stories about their lives.

3. Methods

Participants

Empirical evidence for this study was collected from individual interviews with five young men, ages 18 to 22, each self-identifying as a "rapper." The ethnic backgrounds of the participants were varied (African-American, Asian-American, and bi-racial). Each participant lived in the same medium-sized, Midwestern city. The researcher knew two of the participants as neighbors who were selected as the first participants. These two participants helped to identify the other participants.

By selecting the participants in this purposeful manner, the researcher gained access to a closed, tight-knit group that may have been otherwise unwilling to talk openly or honestly during the interviews. The study reflects the responses from a single "community" of male rappers.

Interview Schedule

Each participant agreed to an individual, semi-structured interview. The interview questions were designed to elicit information regarding the participants' attitudes and beliefs about rap music as well as background information. When necessary, follow-up or probing questions were asked for clarification (King & Horrocks, 2010). Questions were separated into sections, and participants were advised as each new section of questions began. The six sections were as follows: (1) describing himself, (2) describing peers, (3) describing family, (4) educational and employment histories, (5) childhood experiences, and (6) the influence of rap.

Procedure

Each participant consented to the interviews being video-recorded.   The interviews were approximately one hour in duration. Consistent with qualitative interview techniques, all interviews were conducted at the participant's homes or other locations of their choice (King &

Horrocks, 2010). This research was conducted under the auspices of an IRB.

Information was co-constructed with the researcher and the participant to ensure consistency and allow for feedback during the process. The researcher was sensitive to the fact that sometimes people relive stories as they are sharing them and was willing to change subjects within the questions if the participant experienced discomfort and wished to move on to other questions. Twice, participants did not want to answer questions without explanation, and once a participant appeared to become upset while answering questions regarding childhood trauma. The interview was paused to ensure that he was safe and resumed when he was ready to proceed.

Thematic analysis was chosen for this exploratory research because it allows the researchers to recognize patterns that have developed in the data which reflect the lived experiences of the participants (Aronson, 1994; DeSantis & Ugarriza, 2000; Floersch, Longhofer, Kranke, & Townsend, 2010; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2010).   Individually interviewing each participant allowed for significant insight into the histories, lives, and relationships of the youth.   To analyze the empirical evidence, the interviews were transcribed, read and reread, and coded for initial development of themes (Tuckett, 2005).

4. Themes

Through thematic analysis, four identifiable themes emerged that related to the research question: (1) Family redefined through Friendship, (2) Trust through Shared Experiences, (3) Music as a Unifier, and (4) Unrecognized Trauma. These themes provide the basis for the discussion, recommendations, implications, and conclusion.

Family redefined through Friendship

> *"My friends are the most important people in my life. I*
>
> *couldn't make it without them, they keep me real and got*
>
> *my back." (Ty, 2013)*

The distinction between "family" and "friend" was oftentimes made not through blood relationship but through choice. The rappers identified their closest friends as family, describing them as "brothers," "my peeps," and "family" in more than one instance. Khazi (20) identified a friend as the person he most admired, stating that without this friend, "I would not be the artist I am today, or even the person I am today." Three of the other participants identified their mother as the person they most admired. Ty (18) stated succinctly, "You just gotta admire your mom." Roger (22) said his mom was a "tough woman." Chandler (18) cited his mother and then added his grandfather as the other person he admired because his grandfather filled the role of father in

his life. Zhane (19) stated he did not admire anyone but himself.

Participants were asked for their thoughts regarding their peers and their families. Responses regarding family were diverse. Khazi, Roger, and Ty all quickly replied that they loved their family, each indicating in some way that love of family is unquestioned. Roger added that family "helps you become who you are as a person" while Khazi said his family may get on his nerves but they are still integral to his life. Chandler and Zhane had distinctly divergent responses. Chandler described his family as "something else," going on to describe how they are all different but have some of the same attitudes. He never used the word "love" in his description of family. Zhane began his response by stating, "That's messed up." The researcher asked him to explain his answer. He said that, "people change up like one minute they cool with ya, and then the next minute they don't want nothing to do with ya, cuz they good." The researcher attempted to clarify further and Zhane said, "I gots nothing else."

The responses regarding friends were much more uniform. While all five participants avoided saying that they loved their friends, two (Khazi and Chandler) did use the word love to describe the environment around those with whom they are friends. Zhane juxtaposed his response regarding his friends with that of his family by saying, "They there when you need them, for real, for reals." Ty immediately described them as family.

Another distinction regarding family and friends came when asking about how the participants behave around each group. When asked how they acted around their friends, responses ranged from "I live life to the fullest" (Khazi) to "I am just me, I am chill" (Zhane) with the other participants giving similar responses. This contrasts with the responses regarding behavior with family. "I treat my family like strangers," Chandler said. He clarified this remark, adding that "some things are not for your family to know and it is for your friends." Ty said he was quiet and didn't "kick it" with his family. Zhane did say that he was himself around his family, but later added that he never sees his family.

Overall, each of the participants indicated that on some level they were only truly themselves when they were with their friends. This could be expected from young men this age; however, the responses appeared to indicate a level of authenticity of relationships among friends that developed a deeper meaning than in all other relationships. While some said they had an automatic love for family, the answers indicated this may have been a response of duty rather than conviction. Each described varying levels of trust for their families, and the trust appeared to have been granted automatically out of familial status rather than earned. The trust granted to

friends, however, appeared genuine once earned. All participants indicated their friends were the people they could turn when in need. Important to this research is that the participants identified that the friendships of most value in their lives were the ones described as "family" to them. These friendships specifically were all formed through their identities as rappers and through the sharing of their music.

Trust through Shared Experiences

> *"I trust my boys. That don't mean every friend but just my*
>
> *real 'friend' friends, my homies who got that."*
>
> *(Chandler, 2013)*

The emergence of the differences in trust between family members and friends led to a more in-depth discussion of trust. The question of who is a trusted person came up early in the first interview. The researcher began asking each participant if he trusted his friends and his family.   Each of the participants talked about their lack of trust for almost everyone except a small circle of people.

When discussing trust and family, the results were mixed. Khazi said he felt he had to trust his family since they were family. Roger said he could trust his mother but didn't feel that trust would be automatic to other family members: "If you're just a cousin or something, [it] don't mean I am going to trust you." Zhane said trust must be earned, no matter who they were, even family. Chandler and Ty both said that family was not to be trusted. Ty explained, "Trust is something for friends. I love my family, but trust is just not a family thing."

As the participants discussed their friends, they made clear distinctions about groups of friends. They each had a small group of friends that they described as family that was distinct from other friends. None of the participants described any trust for these other friends. They all agreed that trust had to be earned and was not easily given up. When it came to the small group of close friends, each participant trusted this group. Chandler made trust a condition of entering the group: "They got my trust if they my close friend." Roger was the most hesitant to state that he trusted anyone. When asked initially about trust, he said, "I don't trust people." With further discussion about people in his life, Roger identified core friends whom he said he trusted: "If they real…then I trust my real true friends, just like that two or three niggas who are real and there."

The participants discussed why they felt that the group of people they could trust was so small. Earning trust and depending on others were identified as being difficult things in their lives. Khazi stated that "you got to go through it together to know they can be trusted." By "it," Khazi

indicated that they had to have shared experiences of overcoming difficulty to know that the other had done it before.

Overall, trust was rare among the participants. They had a general mistrust for people in their lives, whether strangers, peers, professionals, or other adults. While each had a small group of friends (ranging from one to four) who were given trust, and each had varying levels of trust among family members, they also expressed that they had to make it on their own and could really only count on themselves for what they needed in life. While many systems in their lives appeared fragmented or separated, the rappers identified the core group of friends as a cohesive group. These groups were all formed through their music and their place within the local rap scene.

Music as a Unifier

> *"I can respect that if you can tell your life story then it is like*
>
> *your rap is real."*
>
> *(Khazi, 2012)*

Music was an expected theme since each of the participants was a rapper; however the depth of attachment to music and its strong influence as a medium through which youth identified and created important relationships was not expected. Three unanticipated results from the theme of music emerged: marijuana use, the strength of their attachment to rap music, and the potentially therapeutic outlet provided by rap music. All five participants talked about their marijuana use while listening to music, writing lyrics, or performing raps. Chandler stated that when he listens to music, he liked to "chill and tree it up" (smoke marijuana). Ty said nearly the exact thing, saying he "smoked it up" when listening to and making music. Zhane judged the quality of his songs by whether or not "people are just gonna to want to sit back and smoke to it." Roger described that he enjoyed a song where he could get his "kush" (marijuana) while he "chilled."

Participants were asked how rap changed their lives. Ty stated that "rap chills me, makes me calm down." Chandler described rap music as a "drug" that calms him down, focuses his mind, reduces his anxiety, and provides him with friendships that he might not otherwise have. Roger echoed this saying that all his friends are connected through rap music. Khazi said, "I don't know where I would be without rap music."

The idea that rap music could be used in a therapeutic setting has been discussed by several of the researchers cited in this study (DeCarlo, 2004; Elligan, 2004; Lighthouse, n.d.;

Tyson, 2003). While it was not a question asked to the participants, many of their responses lend insight into how rap may be used as a tool for the social worker in a therapeutic practice. Khazi had this to say when asked how rap had influenced his life in either positive or negative ways:

> Rapping influenced my life in a lot of positive ways because how I started off rapping, I was really a storyteller, whatever was on my mind, whatever came from my heart, whatever I was going through, was all in my music. So, it was like, it was kind of like a diary for a guy, because…if I didn't have no friends or if I felt like I couldn't talk to nobody, I could put it in a song and make it a song. It was like I am writing down my feelings so it is like me expressing myself.

Khazi was not alone in expressing this use of rap music. Roger talked about rap lyrics containing images of things he grew up around such as drugs and violence. He said that hearing these negative things expressed by others helped him calm his anger and cope with his reality, much in the same way that he described marijuana. Chandler said that one of the best things about rap music is its ability to expose people to different experiences through the stories it tells. Zhane described the impact of rap music on this life in this way:

> You gotta see some shit and put your hands through some shit and touch on some shit for it to be real, before you can for real be cool and talk about some shit that people are gonna want to listen to…[My music] would be about a feeling, whatever I am feeling at that point. Then I feel like it gotta be written down so I can get it off and then as long as I get that emotion out then I can be cool with it.

Rap music was about the realities faced by the rappers. Roger described rap music as "real-life stuff, just what's going on." Chandler stated that "rap is about your life and what you experience." Through the telling of these realities, which sometimes cannot otherwise be expressed, youth rappers create a therapeutic outlet. While this outlet is not based in a therapeutic setting, the rappers are using it in a therapeutic manner. Through their music, they tell stories about their lives that they do not share in other forms.

Unrecognized Trauma

"No, I mean, some [of] it I have gotten out, gotten it off my

chest, but there is still some shit I haven't told nobody. I

mean you can't just say that shit. Who am I gonna tell?"

(Zhane, 2012)

The theme of unrecognized trauma emerged from a series of questions about events in participants' childhoods. First, participants were asked if they had ever experienced anything traumatic in their lives, without the researcher defining "trauma" in any way for the participant. Khazi didn't say that he had experienced trauma but described his parents getting divorced when he was very young. Roger related that his mother left his physically abusive father. Chandler told a story about breaking his leg that was so embarrassing that it was traumatic. Ty said he could not think of anything. Zhane stipulated, "No, not extra traumatic or anything, like murder."

Because Zhane's response stood out for attempting to define "traumatic" with something as graphic as murder, the researcher asked him to identify if anything bad had happened during his childhood. He identified that a few things had happened and described them as "horrible." The researcher asked what had happened. Zhane replied, "A couple molestations, a couple drive bys, a couple robbings, a whole bunch of verbal assaults, just a lot of shit." Zhane said after those things happened, he "didn't tell nobody, just kept it in."   When asked if he still held all of it in, Zhane said, "No, I mean, some it I have gotten out, gotten it off my chest, but there is still some shit I haven't told nobody. I mean you can't just say that shit. Who am I gonna tell?" The researcher stopped the interview at this moment to ensure that Zhane was safe and wanted to proceed with the interview. Zhane indicated he was okay and the interview continued. Zhane was asked if he felt that he never had an opportunity to share his story or he just never wanted to tell anyone. He felt that not wanting to tell anyone was maybe one third of why he had not told anyone. The remaining portion was not having an opportunity. He did not want to sit in therapy and "talk to someone who just gets paid to be there."

None of the other participants had stories as extreme as Zhane; however, the remaining questions in the section were designed to solicit events or experiences that may be considered traumatic without describing them as such. Each identified some of these things in his life. Roger described multiple adults in his life who were arrested at home for "selling drugs and gang banging and just stuff like that." Khazi also described multiple arrests of men in his life, from his father and step father to his uncles and cousins. He did not remember details regarding why they were

arrested. The experiences of Zhane, Chandler, and Ty were all similar with so many arrests at home that they could not identify the number of times the police had been to their homes or who had been arrested or why.

Violence was a topic identified by all five participants. Zhane and Ty both witnessed domestic violence growing up. They indicated the abuse was frequent and involved multiple people. Both Ty and Zhane stated that they were sometimes abused during these violent episodes, often by their mothers' boyfriends. Chandler did not identify any violence when asked about it, but later said that his neighborhood has "a lot of shootings and fightings and crazy stuff." As with domestic violence, Zhane and Ty both reported frequently seeing the abuse of illegal drugs and/or alcohol in the home. Ty said, "Anyone who came over, it was usually to get some" (indicating drugs).

Of the five participants, only Roger had never been arrested. Khazi, Zhane, and Ty were all arrested as minors. Khazi and Zhane did not want to reveal their previous offenses, but said they had not been in any trouble since they turned 18. Ty stated he was arrested multiple times for charges such as petit theft, truancy, fighting, battery, and curfew violations. Zhane and Ty were on intensive probation until their 18th birthdays. Chandler had no criminal record as minor but had recently been arrested for aggravated robbery.

Participants were asked if they or their siblings had ever been in foster care. Roger said no and Khazi described a "big problem" he had with his step mom and "someone had to go and it was me." He was able to return home after about two weeks. Zhane said he had not been in foster care but "maybe should have been." Chandler had never been in foster care but his sisters were. His mother was in prison from the time he was an infant until he was 11 or 12 years old. He lived with his aunt but his sisters lived with his grandmother. He did not know the reasons why, but they ended up in foster care and were then adopted by his grandma.

Ty said he and his siblings had been in foster care. He was in out of home placement approximately 3 years, two of those in foster homes and one with his aunt, before being reintegrated with his mom. He could not remember why he was in custody originally. He indicated while in foster homes for those two years, he had 8 or 9 different homes and only once lived with his siblings before moving to his aunt's home. His sister and her newborn baby were subsequently placed back into foster care. Ty and his brother were not taken into custody because of their ages. His sister has not been allowed to reunite with the family. According to Ty, the "workers say we are bad or some shit." Ty stated that his sister was coming home the day when she turns 18

because "those people don't care" about her.

5. Implications

Those who work with at-risk youth can benefit from the knowledge gained in this study. Practitioners may incorporate these findings into meeting the diverse needs of a population often difficult to reach. Mogra (2014) wrote that "researchers can gain perspective/s on the meaning of interviewees' lived experience" (p. 5).

Family redefined through Friendship

Family was defined broadly by each of the research participants. Family may be the people with whom one has important connections or bonds and may not necessarily indicate a blood relationship. Social workers should recognize this in working with youth and allow them to define their "family" in whatever terms they choose. Often, a "chosen" family has more meaning to someone than the family into which he or she was born. Chandler described this process. When he spoke of trust belonging to friends and not to family, he was placing an added emphasis on the importance of the people whom we choose to have in our lives. Each participant at some point described these friends as family, demonstrating the level of importance of those relationships.

The difference between chosen families and families of birth was shown in other ways as well. When speaking of love, the participants were reluctant to describe their feelings towards their friends as love. For the three who described the relationship with family as one of love, the researcher felt the motivation was one of duty not honest feeling—young men are expected to love their families. Only Khazi and Roger described love when talking about friendships, although neither said they loved their friends. The researcher notes that the topic of love may be a difficult one for young men to express, especially when another man is interviewing them, which could explain their reticence in describing their love for their friends.

Practitioners should recognize the way that young people define their families and give them the freedom to place value on relationships that may be formed outside of blood relationships. The importance of close friendships is highly valued. Taking note of these valued friendships may offer insight into the nature of the relationships, whether beneficial or destructive, depending upon their nature and course. Practitioners should recognize the strength of that bond if addressing a negative friendship which is highly valued by the youth.

Trust through shared Experience

Trust was highly valued in forming friendships and other relationships of importance in the youth's lives. Each of the participants expressed that trust was developed through shared

experiences, namely the desire to write and perform rap music. Youth place a high value on these trust-building exercises and find it difficult to develop healthy trusting relationships with others. Because trust-building is such an important part of practice (Jensen, et al, 2010), practitioners working with at-risk youth should give attention to the ways in which youth form trusting bonds with others. Youth should be given opportunities to express themselves, their past, and their current functioning through a mode that feels right to them. Creating a safe place fosters a trusting environment open to communication. By being open to forms of expression used by youth, practitioners create a culturally-competent model where trust may begin to form.

Unrecognized Trauma

Trauma is often not defined as such by those who experience it, especially if the trauma is experienced in early life, throughout childhood, or in a prolonged and consistent manner. Those who have experienced trauma often must negotiate the impact that these events have had in their lives. In many neighborhoods, those who live with poverty are isolated from systems of care. Their daily lived experience is one where children are more vulnerable in terms of traumatic occurrences.

Youth who live such experiences must be met with practices that accept other realities. From the findings, we see that, for youth who experience trauma, building a trusting relationship becomes difficult. This further implies that practitioners must meet the youth in their own environments, allowing self-expression however they find most comfortable. Because of the nature of trauma and its treatment, implications of this research demonstrate that social workers should use care in addressing these concerns. Practice modalities that are designed to address trauma such as Trauma Informed Care (Hodas, 2006) may be implemented prior to beginning services. When practitioners work with youth, concerns regarding trauma should be noted.

Music as a Unifierc

Research findings indicate the power of music in the lives of young people. Music was used in a variety of circumstances by the participants, including calming down, focusing on an activity, providing an escape, and building relationships. Research demonstrated that rap music positively influenced the participants, giving them not only a safe place to express themselves and their experiences, but also providing a place whereby they could engage with the experiences of others, through sharing and creating raps. Rap music also informed others of experiences that may be unique to the rapper.

The implications of these findings can be implemented into the practice setting. Through

the use of rap music, practitioners may create an opportunity for youth to build awareness of themselves, their environments, and their important relationships. Furthermore, rap music provides a creative form of expression to introduce new concepts and new ideas to an audience in a format to which they may be receptive.

Each of the participants identified that the lyric is one of the most important parts of rap music. Lyrics tell a story, an eye witness account of the lived experiences of that person. By encouraging this form of expression, practitioners can harness the power of this creative form to assist in expressing past traumas that may otherwise never be recounted. Because of the detail and passion exposed in the lyrics, rappers may form connections through this expression that develop into trusting relationships.

As practitioners gain trust, they can assist the youth in the development of their story. As Zhane talked about abuse, violence, and trauma he experienced in his childhood, he described how he had never truly expressed how these experiences had impacted him. He discussed that rap music allowed him a means through which he could express his feelings regarding the traumatic experiences from his past in a way that he would never have been able to otherwise.

The power of telling his story lies not only in sharing his feelings and experiences but also in knowing that others listen to and value the story. Through telling our stories, we learn, help, and grow. Creative expression of our story is empowering and can provide a "voice" for the youth, alleviating the oppressive feeling that Khazi spoke to when he expressed that he did not have a voice in society. This creative outlet becomes their voice, and its power lies in finding and sharing a story to be celebrated. Khazi, Roger, and Chandler each described their music as something they share to express aspects of their lives. Practitioners can assist in this celebration; through it, they can deepen the trust that is built with the youth.

6. Conclusion

This research sought to explore how rap music affects the creation and development of social connections in transition-age males. The research appears to indicate that the most meaningful social connections in the lives of the participants were formed through identification as rappers and the creation and sharing of their music. The young men discussed that the friends who had their trust and were considered "family" were all fellow rappers.

Further research needs to include studies with larger *n* sizes and needs to be conducted to understand how rapping can facilitate the creation of such close, personal connections among rappers. Diverse groups regarding race, gender, age, and geography would add to the literature

base. The research also appeared to indicate that the young men were using their rap lyrics to express events that happened in their lives and to describe emotions that they otherwise may not be able to express. This would seem to indicate that rap music may offer practitioners an entrance into the inner lives of at-risk youth who identify with the rap culture.

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