



*I gracefully grab a pen and embrace it ' :
Hip-hop lyrics as a means for re-authoring
and therapeutic change*

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Paulo Arroyo was born in Newark, New Jersey, in the United States and has been around hip-hop culture and rap music since he was a small boy. His family moved to California in the early '90s, which gave him the opportunity to embrace two distinct styles of rap music. California is also where he began to write and record his own music, which he still does today. He is currently enrolled at Metropolitan State University of Denver with plans to pursue a career in psychology using rap music as a means for therapeutic change. He can be contacted c/o psarroyo09@aol.com

Abstract

This paper documents the use of hip-hop culture and rap music as a vehicle for change within the context of narrative therapy. Ways in which hip-hop lyrics can provide a voice to a population that is often not granted one, are explored. In addition, dominant stories about hip-hop music as a genre that is exclusively misogynistic, irresponsible, derogatory and offensive, are challenged. A framework for using hip-hop lyrics to assist in core narrative processes such as deconstructing the problem story, unique outcomes, circulation of the new story and re-membering, has been developed. Finally, one of the authors shares his insider experiences with hip-hop music as a tool for change.

Key words: *hip-hop, rap music, narrative therapy, deconstructing the problem story, points of resistance, unique outcomes, circulation of the new story, re-membering, definitional ceremony*

Introduction

"My life is all I have, my rhyme, my pen, my pad/and I've made it through the struggle don't judge me/cause what you sayin' now/won't budge me.../I've made it through the pain and strife/it's my time now, my world, my life"

- *My Life* by Styles P and Pharoahe Monche.

Over the last decade I (Travis) have worked with hundreds of marginalised young people in Los Angeles and Denver in the United States. Most of these young people have been involved in street gangs where threats of violence are a constant companion. I first encountered such work a decade ago. It became readily apparent that 'traditional' ways of working were being adopted by practitioners assisting these young people. While the intentions were often pure, the work was largely unsuccessful and culturally distant. This left many of my colleagues feeling hopeless and uttering sentiments such as, 'These kids aren't good candidates for therapy'.

This feeling of general hopelessness created a sense of purpose and fire inside of me to make sure these young people were not left behind or cast as folks who could not benefit from the process of therapeutic conversations. Watching another young person being written off and then ending up in jail or dead was not an option, although these remain threats to this work on a daily basis.

My initial goal was simply to form a connection in a way that was meaningful. I quickly discovered that music served as a powerful communication tool. Hip-hop culture and rap music provided a voice to a population that all-too-often was not granted one by the more powerful elements of society. Music from popular artists was used as a means to help adolescents understand their own stories and the politics of the stories told about them. Such songs vicariously expressed many of the struggles the young people I was working with were going through. The power of rap music is that it is a medium which is culturally relevant and is one the young people we work with are already familiar with. It serves as a testimony or story of their experience prior to any therapeutic conversations. Rapping about experiences feels comfortable and culturally near, whereas talking often feels foreign.

This paper will explore ways in which hip-hop music can be used to help create a unique form of narrative practice highlighting key concepts such as re-authoring, re-membering, and circulation of the new story (White, 2007). In addition to a theoretical exploration, case studies will be used to help the work come alive and illustrate triumphs and challenges. These case studies are composite accounts, typical of the stories that are told on a daily basis, rather than specific individual stories. This has been done intentionally and was deemed necessary by the community to protect

confidentiality and safety. Please also note that up until this point, our work has been done exclusively with young men. Expanding the reach of this work across genders represents an exciting possibility for the future.

Hip-hop: a dominant story

'Hip-hop is the representation of this oppressed culture.'

~ KRS-One, (Spirer, 1997)

Hip-hop music is often viewed by the dominant culture as a violent and dangerous form of expression. Misogynistic, irresponsible, derogatory, offensive and un-American, are just a few of the terms often used to describe it. These dominant descriptions are extremely powerful in that the stories told about hip-hop music come to be representative of hip-hop culture as a whole and therefore representative of the young people who are a part of this culture.

Fried (1996) discovered a racial bias in the way people judged rap lyrics. In her study, she took the same lyrics and presented them as a rap song performed by a Black artist, and as a folk song performed by a White artist. When the participants heard the lyrics as a rap song the 'subjects found the lyrics objectionable ...[and] supported some sort of government regulation. If the same lyrical passage was presented as country or folk music ... reactions were significantly less critical on all dimensions' (p. 2135). This study helps to demonstrate that the hip-hop content is often negatively prejudged by those informed by more dominant knowledges.

There's no doubt that some hip-hop lyrics are direct and blatantly honest about the struggle of the people it represents. Some of this honesty includes rage against injustice. But rap music is no different than any other medium of expression in that it can be used as a vehicle to tell virtually any story. Moreover, just because the lyrics are direct and sometimes angry, it does not mean the music poses a threat. While there are examples of hip-hop that are hostile or misogynistic, that does not mean the vehicle itself is such. Instead, what we have been fortunate enough to learn from the young people we work with is that rap music can be a potent tool for therapeutic and even social change.

An introduction to hip-hop music as a tool in narrative therapy

A number of accounts have demonstrated how music can be used as an effective tool in narrative therapy (Denborough, 2002; Hegarty, 2009; Wever, 2009). Our work has sought to build on these ideas. More limited research has investigated how rap music specifically can be helpful in a therapeutic

context (Elligan, 2004; Kobin & Tyson, 2006). What makes our work unique is the use of hip-hop culture and rap music in conjunction with narrative therapy, since rap music serves specifically as a collective voice for the voiceless in many economically deprived areas of the United States.

Kobin and Tyson (2006) noted that rap music can help young people acknowledge themselves and their propensity for overcoming hardship, all while transforming these stories into a medium that sounds more celebratory than brooding. Our work has yielded similar results and helped to demonstrate how rap music can serve as a mechanism of empowerment that promotes resiliency for primarily African-American and Latino youth.

If a therapist is familiar with norms of hip-hop culture, a rapport with the youth can often be established. The norm of honour/genuineness is of particular importance. In many rap songs, rappers declare their undying devotion to 'keep it real' and 'word is bond'. This sense of honesty and sincerity is a driving force in providing the solidarity to which many members of the hip-hop culture identify. This is logical when one considers two points: hip-hop culture is a youth movement (Pough, 2004) and the external environment from where hip-hop originated and where many members of the culture come, is ravaged by poverty, creating a need to unify with other members (Ogbar, 2007).

It is important to note that young people do not have to be musicians to participate in this work. If they are, this is certainly an ability that should be called upon, but it is not a prerequisite. With the relatively recent proliferation of MP3 players and smart phones, most young people in the United States have an entire library of music at their beck-and-call. These same young people bring this technology with them almost everywhere. It is not uncommon for a young person to arrive at his or her first therapeutic conversation with headphones dangling from the ears. This can serve as a first point of contact in the work. The therapist simply enquiring about what they are listening to in a curious and genuine tone can pay real dividends in the work down the track. It introduces music as a routine part of every meeting.

Deconstructing the problem story

Rarely is music listened to accidentally. Young people have stories about the music they consume. Moreover, the lyrics often represent a parallel story to the one they may be experiencing and this creates an opportunity to process the problem story that is attempting to dominate their lives.

Take for example an all-too-common story that we hear in the communities we serve. A young person with whom the author worked (we will call him Marcus), who never knew his father and lives with his mother, grandmother and three remaining

siblings, is referred for therapy. He witnessed his older brother being shot and killed and has lost a number of his friends to gun violence. Despite all of the obvious trauma Marcus has experienced, the reason given for his referral is 'aggressive behavior' at school and fear that he was 'selling drugs'.

In a case such as Marcus's, enquiring about what kind of music he is listening to can open up an important door that helps to reveal how he is experiencing the world. It is also something that, when done with proper care, can help build rapport and decrease defensiveness. Rap music can represent a chronology of one's life and one's story at different points in time. With Marcus, it served as a fruitful starting point for deconstructing the problem story in a way that feels safe and natural in his context.

Marcus identified with the following passage from artist Tupac, a rapper with whom many of our clients have strongly identified over the years:

Mercy is for the weak when I speak I scream

Afraid to sleep; I'm havin' crazy dreams

Vivid pictures of my enemies, family times

God forgive me cause I know it's wrong but I plan to die

Either take me in heaven and understand I was a G'

Did the best I could, raised in insanity

Or send me to hell cause I ain't beggin' for my life

Ain't nothin' worse than this cursed-ass hopeless life;

I'm troublesome

The lyrics take 30 seconds to listen to but open up a therapeutic conversation's worth of content. Elements of trauma and loss are clearly indicated in the passage and align with Marcus's experiences. The threat of death is a constant companion, as is the chaos that is a part of daily living. The totalising nature of the problem is apparent when life is deemed hopeless. Perhaps the most impactful words are the final two: I'm troublesome. These two words come to serve as an all-encompassing label that defines who Marcus believes he is at this moment.

As opposed to starting off the therapeutic process by asking questions about the problem story, which has been a tactic we have found to be only sporadically effective within this context, music has allowed us to explore the problem story in a way that is culturally near and in a way that clients have told us in retrospect often 'does not feel like therapy'. In addition, using music as a tool in the first few meetings can lead to young people feeling more comfortable expressing themselves in conversation.

Points of resistance/unique outcomes

The goal of this work is to lean on music as a unifying tool in the change process. While more traditional therapeutic conversations often occur to a certain degree each session, music is used to initiate the interaction. Often we start each conversation by simply discussing what the young person is listening to that day or a new favorite song that has been listened to throughout the course of the week. Keeping a record of lyrics that are particularly meaningful at any given moment in time has proven to be important. This has been done successfully in a number of different ways. Sometimes people prefer to keep a journal of the work, as Paulo demonstrates later in the manuscript. It can also take the form of the therapist writing down passages the young person deems important. Whatever the format, we have found it imperative to make sure a record is kept. This will prove vitally important when the re-authoring portion of the work is described in the following section.

It is also worth noting that much of the work we do in collaboration with these young people is long-term in nature. Establishing at least one genuine and caring long-term relationship has been found to be of paramount importance in creating resilience in high-risk youth (Werner, 1989). While effectiveness of short-term narrative practice has been well documented, a longer course, when possible, has proven to be important in this context.

As the work progresses, a loosening of the problem story can be seen in the young person's preferred lyrics. Often this begins as a subtle shift which one may not be consciously aware of. Over time, however, the changes can become more obvious. Calling the young person's attention to the changes can serve as a tangible way of helping them see the shift from problem identity to more preferred identity. It is important that the therapist always be on the lookout for counter-stories, or stories that move against what the young person has come to believe about themselves as problematic.

For example, here are some lyrics that Marcus identified with as his course of therapy progressed from Lupe Fiasco, another artist many of the young people we work with gravitate towards:

*So no matter what you been through
no matter what you into
no matter what you see when you look outside your window
brown grass or green grass
picket fence or barbed wire
Never ever put them down
you just lift your arms higher*

raise em till' your arms tired

Let em' know you're there

That you struggling and survivin' that you gonna persevere

Yeah, ain't no body leavin, no body goin' home

even if they turn the lights out the show is goin' on!

Compare these lyrics to the ones Marcus identified with some months earlier. The tone is much different. In the most recent passage, adversity is still present, but a spirit of perseverance is almost saturating. As noted previously, drawing a person's attention to these changes and opening up a conversation about them, can prove beneficial. Often young people have been surprised by the shift, but seeing it helps to reinforce their identity separate from that of the problem.

Questions that have proven helpful in further eliciting unique outcomes include:

- What are the specific verses in this rhyme that most speak to you? Why?
- What do these verses express about you and your life that some people miss or fail to see in you?
- What do these verses help you see that [the problem] sometimes makes you blind to?
- What do these verses express about your neighborhood that some people miss or refuse to see?
- In what ways do these verses help you see possibilities for the future that you did not always see?
- If these verses were to be applied to your life, how do you think it might impact on your future? Would this lead to a more or less preferred version of yourself?

Re-authoring

The primary goal of this work is to help people experience an identity shift. Simply encouraging them to think differently or teaching coping skills is often not enough in this context. If a young person like Marcus still fundamentally believes he is a flawed human being living in a hopeless world, the aforementioned skills offer only short-term relief. However, if he can begin to shift to a more preferred identity he is doing more than just learning skills to cope with the world around him. Instead, he is altering who he believes he is. We believe making this distinction is critical to understanding the work.

The re-authoring process in our work often begins by looking back at the musical journal noted in the previous section. Since each of these entries is date stamped, the evolution of the person's understanding of self through music can be explored. Often young people engaged in the work (and sometimes therapists) forget just how much the lyrics

may have shifted. This can open up some very interesting conversations around identity shift.

Sometimes people select a single song that may represent the shift in identity that has occurred, but this does not necessarily have to be the case. Other young people have created a new identity 'playlist' with a selection of songs that stand in support of their new more preferred identities. For those who are a part of this work who are rappers, creating their own rhyme about their new identity can be transformational. It can be equally beneficial for a person who does not view themselves as a rapper to try their hand at creating a verse, as this process itself can sometimes be the impetus for a shift in identity.

For example, consider a passage from a song that was given the name 'I see light' as a declaration of new identity for Marcus:

*Yet and still regardless of the obstacles diverting me
destiny presses me to overcome the adversity ...
Determination, urgency, dedication and strategy
Implement them all and it equals the greatest of mastery*

*I see the light from the end of the tunnel
so I work hard to put an end to the struggle
I see the light and it's approaching so fast
so ready to takeoff and arrive with no bags
Crash!*

These lyrics make a clear statement of qualities integral to the person's new identity, qualities that were buried by the problem story at the beginning of the work. In addition, there is acknowledgement of a light at the end of the tunnel, but also fear at how quickly change is occurring. The reference to arriving 'with no bags' speaks specifically to the fear of whether or not he is equipped to deal with his exciting and optimistic yet very new and different reality.

In much the way a letter is written to stand in support of a person's new identity in traditional modes of narrative therapy, a song, or group of songs, has served this function in our work. We have found it helpful for people not just to write a song but to actually perform and record that song. The advent of recording technologies on laptop computers and tablets has allowed us to convert an office into an almost makeshift recording studio. The creative process of moving a song from an idea in one's head to an actual recording has proven to be a beneficial one for many of the young people with whom we work, and one that only further solidifies the person's new, preferred identity.

Questions we have found helpful at facilitating this stage of the process include:

- What does this rhyme you've created tell you about who you are?
- What does it tell you about who you wish to become?
- What did creating it teach you about yourself that you may otherwise not have known?

Circulation of the new story/re-membering

Perhaps one of the most rewarding aspects of the work has been facilitating the opportunity for young people to share the music they have created or identified as being central to who they are with others. Music has provided a dynamic way to circulate the new story and can be done in different ways. A definitional ceremony (Myerhoff, 1986) can be held with the young person's family members, friends and others in the community. We have found these meetings to be especially transformational over the years.

Questions often asked at this point include:

- Are there others in your family or neighbourhood who you might wish to share this rhyme with?
- Who might be most excited to hear it?
- What might they appreciate most and why?

Parents, grandparents and other relatives have noted how they often have trouble conversing with the young person, and the young person often feels the same way. However, as was the case with Marcus and his family, music has been able to knock down some of these walls. It seems to disarm defensive tendencies and create an environment where people truly listen and seek to understand. Instead of people interrupting the young person as they might during the course of a conversation, they show great respect during the performance. Many tears have been shed by all involved in these meetings as the community begins to stand in support of the new identities of young persons.

Another format we have used to facilitate the re-membering process (White, 2007) involves getting together a group of young people who share their new preferred identities through music with one another. This can provide peer support of a preferred identity that is invaluable, and often very different than the kind of support provided by family members. The fact all of the participants in these groups have been through similar life experiences and, more recently, similar relationships with rap music produces a certain level of understanding, respect and empathy that has helped produce a unique environment to support growth.

Co-author's reflections

Co-author Paulo Arroyo is a hip-hop artist who has long understood the potential therapeutic effect of rap music before the work even became formalised. While preparing this manuscript over the last two years, he mapped the influences of hip-hop music on his identity by looking back at his lyrical journal and serendipitously created a new song in his attempt to deal with current life circumstances that surfaced during this writing. What follows are his reflections, including original song lyrics, that help to illustrate the therapeutic power of hip-hop music.

People at Metropolitan State University of Denver, and especially in my area of study, have asked me why I started college late; I enrolled at Metro when I was 26 years old. Answering honestly, I was a rapper. My colleagues are surprised when hearing this due to the fact that I am not Black, and although my family hails from South America (and Latinos have an influence in hip-hop culture and rap music), I do not look Latino. People are often surprised to hear that I am a Peruvian-American, and doubly surprised I was a rapper. If one is to look at pictures of my crew from those days it is apparent that I stick out. However, my crew, composed of individuals who come from poverty-stricken areas, embraced me as one of their own as we had battled many of the same demons over the years from authoritarian parenting to alcohol abuse, as well as failures in romantic relationships, and parents who are separated. My parents got back together yet there were still arguments and drunken rages in the middle of the night.

I am fortunate to have been around the hip-hop culture as long as I can remember. I had relatives who expressed this through break-dancing and graffiti art. Rap was my chosen form of expressing hip-hop and it began in 1994. In the space that follows I will offer a selected number of lyrics I have written over the years. What I am attempting to communicate to the reader is that, if one pays close attention to certain rhymes, they offer an ocean of information to how young people truly feel and what they are going through.

'... analyze my own rhyme and treat them as doors to the confines of every emcee's (rapper's) life ...' (Arroyo, 2014)

Since I was thirteen, the amount of music I recorded, along with the many notebooks I have filled with my thoughts and feelings, and the multitude of audiences that have come to hear me rap, have allowed me to externalise my issues. As a small boy, it was difficult for me to communicate to my parents, teachers etc. In the 6th grade I checked out *Dear Mr. Henshaw* (Cleary, 2000) from the school library. The story

focuses on a boy who writes letters to his favorite author. Realising this is an effective approach to express his feelings regarding his parent's divorce, the new school, and a lunch-bag thief, he heeds Mr. Henshaw's advice to begin writing a journal instead of the boy mailing letters almost every week. I decided to emulate this by writing lyrics, and throughout my life this technique has continued to serve me well.

'... I gracefully grab a pen and embrace it ...' (Arroyo, 2003)

In the spring of 2002, I recorded music with a fellow emcee and old friend. The name of the project was *Marvelous Supreme Beings*, one track included the lyrics:

'... I write and they will criticize, yeah at least I'm doing something with my life ...' (Arroyo, 2003)

This line was directed at my family. During adolescence, it was a challenge for me to enjoy this genre of music, mostly due to my parents who subscribed to the negative portrayals of rap music being perpetuated by the media. I mentioned I enrolled in college in my mid-twenties, but during this period I was not engaging in any serious unlawful behavior, and I was working full-time. This endeavor to pursue a career revolving around my deep passion for rap music was supported but criticised. Still, this album was recorded during an idealistic, positive period of my life. I was 21 years old and I had my whole future ahead of me.

Four years later, I recorded a new album, *Superman Is Dead*, which was noticeably darker and had more of a hopeless tone:

'... 'cause I reveal every inch of heart and still feel stranded at the starting point ...' (Arroyo, 2006)

Having realised I needed something more, I decided to move to Colorado to be with my girlfriend and go to college full-time. After ten wonderful years together, we then decided to part ways. Since my move to Colorado, my rap persona had been repressed and eventually retired. In 2013, after the break-up, and in the spirit of this project with Travis, I wrote a rhyme about my life up to this point. The name of this rhyme is *Deep Reflection*. This is the first time I wrote in almost four years:

'... my Queen gone, so I gather my troops on this chess board, more tools means better chance to soar ...' (Arroyo, 2013)

I accepted the fact that she was gone, but strength was something that I found hard to grasp, let alone embrace, after the break up. As a result, I returned to the aspect of my life where I was most confident ... when I was rapping:

'... explore this pyramid and if they ask who this is the name is Bolical Jenkins ...' (Arroyo, 2013)

Bolical Jenkins is a rapper persona of mine that projects confidence, ability, and amazement. Paulo Arroyo also exudes these things yet, at this point in my life, he called on Bolical for

that extra push. I am grateful to be able to slip into my rapper persona when needed:

'... rediscover destiny and strength with the pad and the pen ...' (Arroyo, 2013)

There is no way for me to express what I felt as I sat there with my rhyme book scripting this recent rhyme, *Deep Reflection*. I reflected on experiences as a nine-year-old; my first emcee battle; that first buzz of alcohol; the first time I held the microphone and looked out to a sea of people; my girlfriend's first kiss and her goodbye. I do not know what my future holds nor will I predict a happy ending. However, I will leave you with this; if rap music can serve as a vehicle for me to shed these troublesome internalised messages, just imagine what it may do for other young people who identify with hip-hop culture ... and all from a pad and pen.

Final reflections

It is our hope that we can continue to expand this work and find creative ways to implement rap music into therapeutic conversations. While we have found much success with the work, the challenges are immense. There are many threats in the everyday environment of the young people with whom we work. We have lost some to unexpected moves, the criminal justice system, and violence. Further, old associations with

rap music, including violence, misogyny, and aggression, remain a constant possibility given that western pop culture often accentuates songs with these themes. Despite these challenges, the work remains largely energising for all involved. The process of meeting these young people 'where they are at' and serving a population that has traditionally had trouble fully trusting and engaging in the therapeutic process, has been especially meaningful.

It is our hope the work will continue to expand in the future. This opportunity to circulate it amongst our colleagues worldwide is a great privilege. We hope that it inspires your work in some small way even if using music is not a part of your everyday practice. We also welcome any attempt to build from the theoretical foundation presented in this paper, in an effort to devise a more refined way of using rap music and narrative ideas to help shape preferred identities.

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