

More than noise: Employing hip-hop music to inform community development practice

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Abstract:

The quality of information which a community development professional has access to will limit her ability to understand the issues, concerns, and desires of a community. Artistic expression, specifically hip-hop music, can provide a novel level of understanding of community dynamics to community development practice and research. This research established a methodology that would enable practitioners and researchers to effectively extract relevant details embedded within hip-hop music. We employed a microanalysis approach to study 100 hip-hop songs to extract the relevant themes and codes. We found key relationships in the music between the artists and how they relate to their physical surroundings.

Keywords: community art; hip-hop; microanalysis; practitioners

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Sometimes the best way for a community development professional to understand what is happening in a community is to pay attention to the kind of music community members are listening to. Community development revolves around many complex, multifaceted problems, and gaining insight into those problems—what ordinary people in a community are facing—can be daunting. Conventionally, government censuses, academic journals, anecdotal observations, and real estate trends are used to establish a base understanding of an issue or problem facing a community. Community development professionals then expand their knowledge through community outreach in the form of surveys and interviews to learn more about an issue from the actual people involved. This practice is well established and has served the professional community well. But better sources are available, including the music so often listened to in distressed urban environments: hip-hop music. This genre of music speaks to many of the same issues community development practitioners are interested in: urban poverty, racial disparities, drugs, gang violence, police brutality, ghettos, incarceration, welfare, hunger, and homelessness. This paper asks: (1) What knowledge about urban conditions and community development is embedded in hip-hop music? (2) How can community development professionals access this knowledge? (3) What are some of the possible ways practitioners can utilize this knowledge to enhance and compliment other data sources?

A deep, systematic understanding of hip-hop music can be a tool for training community development professionals to understand and appreciate urban communities. As with any cultural resource, hip-hop music must be utilized in concert with street level relationships built over time within a community.

A brief history of hip-hop and the city

Hip-hop has steadily become a strong force within the global music industry (Hodgkinson, 2013). Between 1990 and 1998, the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) reported that rap captured, on average, 9-10% of music sales in the United States. This figure increased to 12.9% in 2000, peaked at 13.8% in 2002, and hovered between 12 and 13% through 2005. To put the importance of this nearly 40 percent increase in rap/hip-hop sales into context, note that during the 2000-2005 period, other genres, including rock, country, and pop, saw decreases in their market percentage (Rose, 2008).

Hip-hop has become the voice of a generation. Kitwana's (2002) *The Hip Hop Generation* describes how hip-hop was largely born out of, and shares similar themes with, the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Born out of the South Bronx in New York City in the 1970s, hip-hop began largely as urban art form (Rosen, 2006). Since hip-hop began in the city it often reflected the dynamics within the city. In the tradition of defiance, of creating something out of nothing, urban Black youths developed artistic expressions that came to be known as hip-hop. Rapping, or MCing, is now the most well known dimension of hip-hop, but there are three other defining elements: DJing, break dancing, and graffiti writing. For most of the seventies, hip-hop was an underground phenomenon of basement parties, high school gyms, and clubs, where DJs and MCs improvised using record player turntables and microphones, creating music from the borrowed beats of soul, funk, disco, reggae, and salsa, overlaid with lyrics reflecting their alienated reality.

“Rap music takes the city and its multiple spaces as the foundation of its cultural production” (Forman, 2002). In the rhythm and lyrics, the city is an audible presence, explicitly

cited and sonically sampled in the reproduction of the aural textures of the urban environment. Rap's lyrical constructions commonly display a pronounced emphasis on place and locality. Whereas blues, rock, and R&B have traditionally cited regions or cities (e.g., "Dancing in the Street," initially popularized in 1964 by the Motown artists Martha and the Vandellas and covered by the rock acts Van Halen in 1982 and David Bowie and Mick Jagger in 1985), contemporary rap is even more specific, with explicit references to particular streets, boulevards, and neighborhoods, telephone area codes, postal service zip codes, or other sociospatial information (Forman, 2002). Further, the lyrical content of many early rap groups concentrated on social issues, most notably in the seminal track "The Message," which discussed the realities of life in the housing projects (Grandmaster Flash, 1976). Kitwana emphasizes hip-hop's role in reflecting urban reality:

No matter how widely accepted in the mainstream, it isn't entertainment alone; it's also a voice of the voiceless. More than just a new genre of music, hip-hop since its inception has provided young Blacks a public platform in a society that previously rendered them mute. It has done the same for youth of other cultures as well. This in large part explains hip-hop's mass appeal (Kitwana, 2002).

The outcome of these artistic expressions is a well thought out, poetic reflection on places, actors, and problems within urban environments. No other musical style or genre represents urban existence quite like hip-hop. It is a musical genre that nicely encapsulates key knowledge of the urban experience that community development professionals can tap into.

Access and utilization of hip-hop knowledge

The current hurdle for community development professionals looking to tap into this knowledge appears to be access to and understanding of the music. A formal methodology to facilitate the extraction of specific themes and ideas has not yet been developed specifically for practitioners. Lyrical analysis of hip-hop songs has been conducted in the field of sociology, examining issues related to alcohol use (Herd, 2005), depictions of homicide (Kubrin, 2005; 2006), and relationships between urban youth and the “street code,” (Hunnicut & Andrews, 2009). However, the methodologies used in these studies do not answer the questions that community development professionals would ask about communities. Therefore, this paper begins a research agenda to develop a new methodology for coding and extracting relevant themes needing to be developed specifically for the field of community development.

What knowledge about urban conditions is embedded in hip-hop music?

Many of the most prominent themes that are of interest to community development professionals are the same themes that are embedded in hip-hop music. Early rappers were regarded as storytellers, disturbers of the peace, and cultural historians who were “testifying” to the lived experiences of urban Blacks during a period of political backlash, urban neglect, and stigmatization as a criminal underclass (Powell, 1991; Smitherman, 1997). There is not a complete agreement among scholars as to whether rap is *still* an expression of real-life conditions (Hunnicut & Andrews, 2009). One perspective maintains that rap continues to serve as a conduit to voice concerns about the deprivation in the Black community and to protest existing conditions (Kopano, 2002; Stephens & Wright, 2001). Rap artists are often viewed as ambassadors of inner city Black life, especially the gangster life. Kopano (2002) calls rap music

a “rhetoric of resistance,” primarily with regard to issues of race—a rhetoric belonging mostly to young Black males.

For some social critics and cultural historians, hip-hop is rooted in lyrical content and street-based narratives; as such, reality becomes more than “just music,” as it is “situated within the lived contexts of black expressivity and contemporary cultural identity information” (Forman, 2002). Barack Obama told cultural historian Jeff Chang that “rap is reflective of the inner city, with its problems, but also its potential, its energy, its challenges to the status quo” (Chang, 2007).

Data and methods

Prior research cited above suggests eight main elements are critical to a lyrical analysis of hip-hop: (1) approach: quantitative or qualitative analysis; (2) sample selection source: Billboard, Gavin, RIAA; (3) sampling strategy: representative or purposive; (4) year selection: 1979-1997, 1989-2000, 1992-2000; (5) unit of analysis: single or album; (6) sample size; (7) lyrics source selection; and (8) codes: a priori or inductive.

A quantitative approach looks at the frequency of occurrence of a particular theme or idea. However, we were not looking to determine how often rappers speak about urban conditions or the change of frequency of a theme over time, both of which would necessitate a quantitative analysis of codes gleaned from the analysis of the lyrics. Rather, we were looking to understand *what* hip-hop artists say about urban conditions whenever they do talk about them. Therefore, we took a qualitative approach, as outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994). It is important to note that, as with any artistic endeavor, hip-hop changes over time. Overall, the hip-hop genre has morphed over the last several decades, with respect to fluctuations in popularity,

who is creating it, and who comprises its audience (both of which are increasingly suburban and White). Nevertheless, an effort was made in this research to capture a snapshot in time for which sales and lyrical data were available.

To start, we explored the three main resources that determine which songs are most popular (by sales) that can be used to generate a viable sample for the purposes of this analysis: Billboard, Gavin, and RIAA. Each of these resources maintains various music charts that track the most popular songs and albums in various categories on a weekly basis. We settled on Billboard as the best source for this research in defining a song as “popular music.”

We chose to employ a purposive sampling strategy (Hunnicuttt & Andrews, 2009). This strategy isolates songs that were at the top of the Billboard charts, reasoning that the top-rated songs were heard by a larger audience and therefore may have a greater presence in cultural memory. The goal was to look specifically at the popular music in a specific time period, rather than all music released during that period of time.

The *Billboard Book of Top R&B and Hip-Hop Hits* (Whitburn, 2006) contains all of the artists and all of the titles that hit between #1 and #40 on *Billboard* magazine’s R&B Singles charts from 1942 through 2004. Marking the origins of hip-hop around 1989, we set the popularity-based research timeframe from 1989-2004. We added some content-based songs from 1986-1988 and from 2005-2008 in order to create a complete sample stretching from 1986, continuously, until 2008 (seen as a pivotal point for hip-hop music, commercially speaking [Coates, 2007; Rose, 2008]). Details on the construction of the sample are described later in the paper.

Since the primary goal of this research was not to determine the frequency of a theme over time, we used a convenience sampling strategy. However, we did want to obtain a sample

large enough to allow us to gain a rich understanding of the themes present in the music. We also wanted to make sure that the split between the popularity-based tracks and content-based tracks was relatively even. Therefore, we decided a sample of 100 tracks would be large enough to obtain a fair representation of both types of songs without being too cumbersome to analyze. The entire sample contained 1,740 tracks; 100 tracks represents roughly 5.7% of the entire sample.

Lyrics were obtained from searches on the established website, Lyrics.com, that contained lyrics published by the record companies in the released material. We used inductive coding, where a researcher may have some expectations of what will be present in the research material, but goes through a small sample of the material and allows it to reveal what the codes ought to be (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The codes for this kind of research may be words like “levy,” “response,” “failure,” “President Bush,” “abandonment,” “Super Dome,” or “Katrina” (Hughes, 2003; Dukes, Bisel, Borega, Lobato, & Owens, 2003). It would be up to the researcher using this methodology to determine what codes would be most valuable to their community.

Constructing the sample

The popular-based sample, which included singles that reached a position of 20 or higher on the Billboard charts between the years 1989-2004 (Whittman, 2006), generated 1,740 tracks. We then identified songs within this sample that contained the subjects that were relevant to this research through a content analysis of the song title, followed by a secondary selection process of the artist.

The content analysis of the song title involved a simple, straightforward review. We selected titles that included words related to urban issues or problems, including: shackles, street, emergency, police, Compton, money, babies, work, rent, ghetto, Harlem, 911, banned, pressure,

trouble, gangsta, thug, “G”, freedom, etc. For the artist selection, we identified artists known for gangsta and/or cultural and political rap.

The result was a list of 132 songs. To narrow the list down to include only those songs that would be relevant to our research, we conducted a quick search of the song’s lyrics in Google. We skimmed the content of the lyrics and decided if the song could be classified as “social/political” or “gangsta” as defined by Herd (2005). If it could be classified as “party,” “brag,” or “love/sex,” it was eliminated. We were left with approximately 45 songs.

For the content-based songs, we first identified songs from the research playlist that we personally knew to have the type of content that would be relevant to the analysis, as well as songs that had been deemed “influential” by reviews in magazines such as *Source*, *Vibe*, and *Rolling Stone* via the International Index to Music Periodicals (IIMP). We then supplemented the list with songs analyzed in Herd (2005), Kubrin (2006), and Hunnicutt and Andrews (2009)’ studies.

The final combined sample contained a total of 96 songs: 45% were “popular” songs, and 55% were “content-based” songs (see Figure 1). Table 1 illustrates the breakdown among possible songs that met the initial selection criteria and actual songs selected for each sample type.

Figure 1 about here

Table 1 about here

Results

With the sample prepared, we uploaded song lyrics into the program qualitative research management software, Atlas T.I.¹ We began the coding with four specific subgroups in mind: Actor, Place, Problem, and Solution. We did not start the analysis with established codes under each subgroup, but we wanted to look for codes that could be categorized within these four subgroups. We selected these four subgroups based on a preexisting perception of what we would encounter in the lyrics. Based on the inductive coding approach, we began assigning codes to stanzas within songs based on specific keywords.

Within each small stanza, many different ideas were being represented and overlapped with one another. Isolating just one code outside of its context did not seem to be advantageous for our purposes, so we decided to assign multiple codes to the same stanza in order to maintain the integrity of the narratives. This is known as “co-occurring codes” (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Definitions of subgroup groups and codes¹

Definitions used for the subgroups were as follows. An Actor is a person or entity, used without a positive or negative charge—simply an actor within the narrative. A Place is the physical surroundings, specific or in general, used without a positive or negative charge. A Problem is an issue facing the artist and his/her community. Problems inherently have a negative charge. Solutions arise when some hip-hop artists offer messages of hope in response to the problems the rap lyrics depict. There are instances of these hopeful and instructive messages throughout the sample (see Tables 2-5).

¹ Atlas.ti assists researchers in conducting content analysis by helping to organize, filter, and sort rich qualitative data through keywords.

Table 2 about here

Table 3 about here

Table 4 about here

Table 5 about here

Results of lyrical analysis

The lyrical analysis was organized around the four subgroups of concepts: actor, place, problem, and solution. The lyrics demonstrated a heavy emphasis on the harsh conditions in urban “ghettos” and the proverbial street. Major actors include God, peers, and police, and the artists are struggling to address desperation, violence, death, and drugs. Remarkably, the artists focus much of their attention around solutions on the notion of hope.

Section 1: Subgroup: Actor

Table 6 about here

God appears at the top of the list of actors, followed by peers and then police (see Table 6). Part of the appeal of God may be that He is seen as understanding the plights that people are going through better than anyone else, including authority figures (see Table 6):

A child is born with no state of mind
Blind to the ways of mankind
God is smiling but he's frowning too
Cause only God knows what you go through
(*Grandmaster Flash, 1976*)

In this quotation, the artist expresses the importance of the relationship people form with God and the corresponding exclusion of others, as this entity seems to offer a level of understanding that others cannot. What is important here is that God is revealed to be a central actor in the sample and shows that religion could play a more important role in decision-making than peers or police.

When the artists speak of their friends, it is often in a memorial tone, as many of the friends had died (see Table 6):

My childhood years were spent buryin' my peers in the cemetery
(*Scarface feat. Tupac, Johnny P, 1997*)

Still, those peers who did survive become sources of competition and spark feelings of anger and inspire acts of violence as former friends turned on one another:

Living in the city of the Scandalous
Shisty motherfuckers can't even trust my own brothers
So who can I choose to trust me that's who?
Niggas want a piece of the pie, fuck off and die
(*Cypress Hill, 1995*)

These depictions of peer relationships are complicated and do not seem to engender a sense of support and community. Rather, individualism tends to replace connection and cooperation; valuing one's self over the group becomes the dominant mindset.

In *6 In the Mornin'*, Ice-T recalls waking up to hearing the cops at his door, and he's not quite sure what they're there for other than to check in on him (see Table 6):

6'n the morning' police at my door
Fresh Adidas squeak across the bathroom floor
Out the back window I make a escape
Don't even have a chance to grab my old school tape
(*Ice-T, 1986*)

The artists in this sample depict an adversarial relationship with police in which people are presumed to be guilty of crimes, often because of race or suspected gang association. This co-occurrence was significant in that police served as agents of injustice. The depiction of this relationship further complicates the idea of connection and community and enhances the sense of isolation and self-reliance.

Section 2: Subgroup: Place

“Ghetto” and “streets” predominated this subgroup, followed by “prison” and “city.” The overlap between Ghetto (Subgroup: Place) and Desperation (Subgroup: Problem) is particularly strong (see Table 6). Many of the artists attribute the surroundings of the ghetto as a core component to their feelings of desperation:

My memories bring me misery, and life is hard
in the ghetto, it’s insanity, I can’t breathe
Got me thinkin’, what do Hell got?
Cause I done suffered so much, I’m feelin’ shell-shocked
And driveby’s an everyday thing
I done lost too many homies to this motherfuckin game
(*Tupac, 1995*)

The ghetto is a place where poverty persists, employment options are limited, aspiration is replaced by survival, and violence is ever present. Additionally, the ghetto also has a relationship with drugs, including selling drugs, doing drugs, or having problems with police and gangs over drugs.

Look back on childhood memories and I’m still feelin’ the pain
Turnin circles in my ninth grade, dealin cocaine
Too many hassles in my local life, survivin’ the strain
And a man without focus, life could drive him insane
Stuck inside a ghetto fantasy hopin’ it’d change
(*Scarface feat. Tupac, Johnny P, 1997*)

In this sample, the place the artists talk the most about is the ghetto—the environment in which they live. Such a bleak view of their physical environment, including prominent themes of desperation, drugs, and violence, permeates deeply into the communities these artists come from and becomes one of the central backdrops in hip-hop music.

However, because the streets are different from the ghetto, the way the artists talk about problems is distinct in this context (see Table 6). The streets serve as the place of action, where activity is focused. This is where drugs are bought and sold, and violence filters into the transactions. The streets also opens the narrative to display the physical surroundings.

Felt good in the Hood, being around niggas yeah
And the first time everybody let go
The streets is death row
I wonda if heaven's got a ghetto
(*Tupac, 1997a*)

In a particularly creative narrative, *Streets Raised Me*, Mobb Deep has a conversation with the streets, recognizing the streets as an entity that was instrumental in his upbringing:

Why you have to raise me this way,
You showed me how to survive the concrete
If I survive only time can say,
You were a part of me
(*Mobb Deep, 1999*)

Depictions of the ghetto, where the artists live, and the streets, where business is conducted, illuminate many of the problems facing residents of inner cities. The third most-popular place in the sample was prison (22 codes, 16%).

Tupac's depiction of prison is particularly haunting but poignant:

And my cellmate's raped on the norm
And passed around the dorm, you can hear his asshole gettin torn
They made me an animal
Can't sleep, instead of countin sheep, niggaz countin cannibals
And that's how it is in the pen
Turn old and cold, and your soul is your best friend
(*Tupac, 1997*)

Akon depicts the desperation he feels being inside prison while the world moves on outside:

My cell mates getting food without me,
Can't wait to get out and move forward with my life,

Got a family that loves me and wants me to do right
But instead I'm here locked up
(Akon, 2004)

This was the only Place code that had a significant cross with race. The artists depicted prison as a place that was heavily dominated by Blacks, and a clear racial tension emerged when the artists spoke about time in prison:

Locked up you get three hot meals and one cot
Then you sit and rot, never even got a fair shot
That's where a whole lotta niggas end up
(Dead Prez, 2000)

Recognizing the distinction between ghetto and streets helps identify and isolate where problems arise. When thinking about housing deficiency (subpar living conditions), it is helpful to consider depictions of the ghetto, whereas when thinking about drugs, gangs, violence, and tension with police, focusing on the streets is more helpful. Finally, when considering the racial undertones present in hip-hop music as it relates to places, allusions to prison would be the most apt place to listen, as the racial disparity seen in the prison system is reflected heavily in the music.

Section 3: Subgroup: Problem

Problems identified in the sample were primarily related to desperation, violence, death, and drugs. The feeling of isolation and a lack of support from authority figures suggest a prevailing negative attitude toward authority.

Yo; I've seen child blossom to man,
some withered and turned to murderers
Led astray by the liars death glorifiers observin us
Watching us close, marketing host is here to purchase, purposely overtaxin the earnings
Nervous, burning down the churches
They're scared of us, rather beware than dare to trust
Throw us in jail, million dollar bail, left there to rust
(Big Punisher, 1998)

Here Big Pun is cleverly illustrating how the lack of support and care in the ghetto break people down significantly. But beyond that, he alludes to the people who profit from the existing conditions and have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, rather than working to ameliorate the situation. He crystallizes the thought by depicting how the conditions under which people live have created “monsters,” so to speak, who are exiled.

Beyond the feelings of animosity toward authority figures, sometimes artists express those same the feelings of animosity towards themselves:

I smoke a blunt to take the pain out
And if I wasn't high, I'd probably try to blow my brains out
I'm hopeless, they shoulda killed me as a baby
And now they got me trapped in the storm, I'm goin crazy
(*Tupac, 1995*)

Tupac is echoing the frustration exhibited by Big Pun above, but rather than showcasing how that pain can go outward (burning down churches), he talks about how the pain is immense and impacts him personally, likening the feeling to that of being in a storm.

Finally, some artists illustrate desperation so strong that they contemplate suicide as a solution to the pain they feel:

They're just like crabs in a bucket, these people pull me down
If I didn't have so many obstacles think where I could be now
On MTV or BET or in some magazine
Instead I'm stressin, hooked on codeine, headed to tragedy
Sometimes I think it's better just to die
On the verge of suicide, I deeply wish I had a friend
I start my mission tryin to find my fate
CDC #4 in name I'm feelin oh-so-helpless in this place
(*Scarface, 1995*)

Another problem arises around drug dealing and related financial stresses. Tupac shows

below how selling drugs advances the seller, albeit often at the cost of others.

Try to show another way but you stayin' in the dope game
Now tell me what's a mother to do
Bein' real don't appeal to the brother in you
You gotta operate the easy way
"I made a G today" But you made it in a sleazy way
Sellin' crack to the kid. "I gotta get paid,"
Well hey, well that's the way it is
(*Tupac, 1998*)

Tupac outlines the three places he sees people from the ghetto go: hell (the ghetto), jail, or selling crack or other drugs. When these appear to be the only paths in life, it is no surprise that he sees living as an inherently futile exercise.

Our lifestyles be close captioned
addicted to fatal attractions
Pictures of actions be played back
in the midst of mashin'
No fairy tales for this young black male
Some see me stranded in this land of hell, jail, and crack sales
Hustlin too hard to think of culture
Or the repercussions while bustin on backstabbin vultures
(*Scarface feat. Tupac, Johnny P, 1997*)

Nas demonstrates how the money earned from selling drugs allows people to live flashy lifestyles and obtain expensive items and how this appeals to young kids. Nas describes how, as a young boy, he viewed drug dealing was an attractive career option

Growin up project-struck, lookin for luck dreamin
Scopin the large niggaz beamin, check what I'm seein
Cars, ghetto stars pushin ill Europeans
G'n, heard about them old timers OD'n
Young, early 80's, throwin rocks at the crazy lady
Worshippin every word them rope rockin niggaz gave me
The street raised me up, givin a fuck
I thought Jordan's and a gold chain was livin it up
Some niggaz went for theirs, flippin coke as they career
(*Nas, 1996*)

Seeing through the lens these narratives provide allows one to better understand the

complex role that drugs play in the lives of inner city youth. On one hand, selling drugs appears to be the most accessible means of getting outside a life in poverty; on the other hand, selling drugs is a serious business that regularly claims lives. The stresses of being in “the game” lead some of the artists to use drugs themselves as a coping mechanism.

Another code that rounds out the story of desperation is Financial Dependence/Strain (Subgroup: Problem).

All the pain inside amplified by the
Fact that I can't get by with my nine to five
And I can't provide the right type of life for my family
'Cause man, these Goddamn food stamps don't buy diapers
And it's no movie, there's no Mekhi Phifer, this is my life
(*Eminem, 2002*)

One thing that permeates much hip-hop music is the financial strain people feel when living with limited incomes, particularly when struggling with the demands of providing for one’s family. While many rappers boast about their expensive lifestyles, many real messages prevail of poverty and the mental toll it takes on people. It is this strain and stress that contribute to the desperation and futility depicted throughout these samples.

Finally, the artists describe the injustice they face living in the ghetto, unsupported by society and abandoned by those who are theoretically supposed to help them.

I tell you life just ain't what it used to be
Between you and me, exclusively
Everybody's changed, we're losing our minds
The government won't help, cause they refuse to find
A solution to the problems of the inner streets
It's a shame what our kids are beginning to be
Pregnant teenagers, young gun slangers
There ain't no love, there ain't nothing but anger
(*Notorious B.I.G., 1994*)

Here Biggie calls out the government specifically, as an institution that is supposed to help people but instead fails them. He argues that government refuses to look at what the real problems are and strategize about how to fix them. He sees two sides at opposition with little interest on the side of the government to move toward finding solutions and providing support to inner city families.

Section 4: Subgroup: Solution

Auspiciously, some of the artists find hope in their lives and within their communities. Not all of the narratives were somber depictions of the horrible life to which someone who lives in the ghetto is condemned. Some offered solutions, while others helped put the problems in perspective. These silver linings are important messages to highlight, as many people in hip-hop look to these positive messages to help them get through hard times.

However, what was more interesting than what was said in this subgroup was what *wasn't* said. The Solution subgroup was only able to offer one solution of *hope* which may not be viewed as practical to community development professionals.

Tupac and Big Pun both reflect that each person has the power to endure bad times in hope for better times and encourage the listeners to find strength to survive within themselves:

Livin' in the projects, broke with no lights on
To all the seeds that follow me
protect your essence
Born with less, but you still precious
Just smile for me now
(*Scarface feat. Tupac, Johnny P, 1997*)

Finally, Coolio allows himself to fantasize about an ideal place where he can live life in peace and not deal with all of the trials and tribulations he currently faces. He also calls on

individuals to take responsibility and better themselves for the good of the community:

I'm tryin' to find a place where I can live my life and
maybe eat some steak with my beans and rice, a
place where my kids can play outside
without livin' in fear of a drive-by
(Coolio, 1994)

Summary of findings

The in-depth look at the narratives was very revealing with regard to the thoughts and feelings of hip-hop artists about specific topics. For example, we didn't expect God to be the most prominent actor. Based on the literature and our own knowledge of hip-hop, we expected the most prominent actor to be Gang or Peer. We also didn't expect the most frequent code overall to be Problem: Desperation. We knew many of these songs were bleak and discussed struggles, but we had not expected to encounter such an overwhelming sense of futility and lack of trust of authority figures. The positive surprise was to see the frequency of the Solution: Hope code. It was refreshing to read solutions, positive imagery, and support.

Conclusion and recommendations for further study

One of the principal strengths of this analysis was the novel, systematic approach to generating the study sample. By combining two types of samples—popular-based and content-based—we were able to utilize a larger array of songs for the initial sample. Previous approaches either isolated only popular singles or only content-based songs from albums, thus leaving out many potentially informative songs from the sample. By combining these two types of songs into one sample, we were able to integrate popular singles with deeper tracks from albums to create a new and varied sample. The benefit of this approach was seen in the variety of stories we were able to extract from the narratives.

An additional strength of this analysis was the innovative approach to the lyrical analysis. By thoroughly studying the strengths and weaknesses of existing approaches to conducting lyrical analysis of hip-hop lyrics, we were able to create an approach that would work specifically for community development professionals.

A weakness in this study was our rather subjective nature of song selection. While we approached collecting the sample in a very thorough way, selecting the songs based on a content analysis of the song title alone may have caused us to miss certain songs because the title was not indicative of the content of the song. A solution to this problem would be to pull the lyrics for all of the songs in the initial sample (1,740) and conduct a keyword search across all of the lyrics. However, due to the time constraints for completing this project, this approach was not feasible.

We recommend further research to expand the scope of the sample to include fewer mainstream artists and more socially conscious artists such as Dead Prez, KRS-One, and Common. This change could yield interesting results to a researcher particularly concerned with those hip-hop artists commenting on social issues.

Overall, this research contributes to the community development field by offering practitioners a methodology by which to gain access to the information embedded in hip-hop lyrics. By extension, this provides a pathway to better connect such professionals with a broader array of cultural resources. The messages about the urban condition embedded in the hip-hop lyrics can be accessed and potentially utilized in various ways to complement other data sources. For example, a community development professional can review the lyrics for songs coming out of a local hip-hop youth organization to figure out the messages and trends present in the music and understand what is important to members of their local community through their artistic expression. Policy makers could learn to understand the importance of hip-hop music and

allocate funding to support local hip-hop organizations as a means of providing aid to youth in inner cities.

Beyond community development professionals, other urban public service professionals, such as urban planners, social workers, and neighborhood-based outreach workers, could benefit from accessing hip-hop music in a systematic way. For example, the City of Boston currently engages inner-city youth through a variety of departments and initiatives to provide social, economic, and educational support. The Boston Centers for Youth and Families has a Streetworker Program, which has been hailed as one of the most effective youth prevention and early intervention services provided to Boston's youth. The goal of the program is to connect "hard-to-reach" youth to needed services and resources through direct, targeted street outreach (City of Boston, 2016). Understanding some of the unique local challenges expressed by this demographic through hip-hop could increase the efficacy of the program. Additionally, non-profit youth centers could provide the space and support for people to create their music, as well as a physical alternative to "the streets." Local governments and non-profits can work together to support people in creating music as a means of fostering productive communication between members of the community and policy makers.

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¹To clarify the hierarchy of the subgroups and codes in future discussions, the nomenclature is as follows:
Police (Subgroup: Actor), meaning, the code "Police" is part of the subgroup (Subgroup: Actor).

Figure 1. Sample distribution between popular-based songs and content-based songs

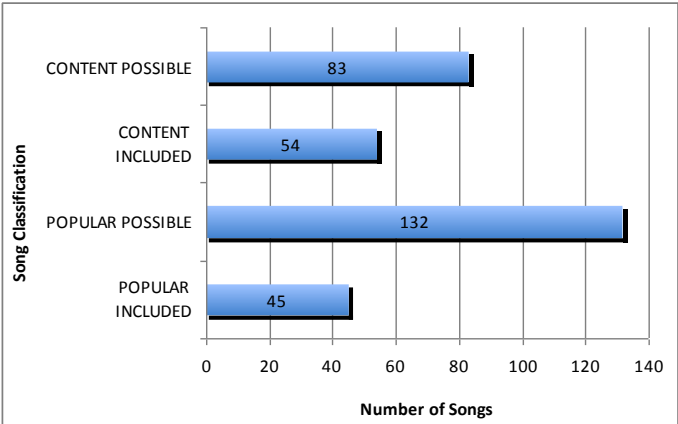


Table 1. Song sample data set

	'76	'86	'87	'88	'89	'90	'91	'92	'93	'94	'95	'96	'97
Total # songs	0	146	154	163	171	169	152	147	90	109	96	99	109
Popular possible	0	0	0	0	4	8	5	1	6	10	10	10	15
Popular included	0	0	0	0	0	4	2	1	2	4	5	3	5
Content possible	1	1	2	2	4	4	4	1	4	3	16	3	9
Content included	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	0	1	2	11	3	6
Total	1	1	2	2	2	7	5	1	3	6	16	6	11
	'98	'99	'00	'01	'02	'03	'04	'05	'06	'07	'08	Totals	
Total # songs	103	87	83	88	81	79	77	0	0	0	0	1740	
Popular possible	10	9	9	10	8	12	5	0	0	0	0	132	
Popular included	4	2	1	2	2	4	4	0	0	0	0	45	
Content possible	12	7	1	0	0	0	1	7	0	1	1	83	
Content included	7	6	1	0	0	0	1	3	0	0	0	54	
Total	11	8	2	2	2	4	5	3	0	0	0	100	

Table 2. Definitions of codes within the Actor subgroup

Subgroup	Code
Actor	Authority figure
Definition	A person with a position of authority, not already mentioned in other codes (i.e. a police officer is an authority figure, but it has its own code)
Keywords	Boss, manager, judge, politician, mayor, the authorities, the City (referring to government), D.A.
Actor	Family
Definition	Family members individual or the concept of a family unit; must refer to more than just one parent (Actor: Parent code would be used instead); also refers to siblings
Keywords	Brother, sister, aunt, uncle, cousin, god parent, parents (plural) families
Actor	Gang
Definition	Established group of organized crime
Keywords	Gang, Bloods, Crips, Gang-bangers
Actor	God
Definition	God specifically as a figure, also includes Jesus
Keywords	God, Jesus, Man Above, Lord
Actor	Parent
Definition	Specifically referring to a mother or father
Keywords	Mother, father, mom, dad
Actor	Peer
Definition	Friends, in a gang or not
Keywords	Friends, brother (non-familial), homie(s), pal, bro, buddy, my nigga, crew
Actor	Police
Definition	Police officer, when used without a negative connotation
Keywords	Police, po-po, 5-0, pigs, cops, crusin blue, detectives
Actor	Priest/religious figure
Definition	An actor within a church, not a divine entity
Keywords	Priest, father (non-familial)
Actor	Society
Definition	The larger society we live in, with its norms and collective goals.
Keywords	Society, "they"
Actor	Teacher/mentor
Definition	Within a school context or any agent of instruction
Keywords	Teacher, leader, educator

Table 3. Definitions of codes under Place subgroup

Subgroup	Code
Place	Streets
Definition	Such as “the streets of Brooklyn” generally referring to the inner city
Keywords	these streets, the corner
Place	Church
Definition	As an institution or physical place
Keywords	Church, place of worship
Place	City
Definition	Can be specific, like New York, or in general, like “The city makes me crazy”
Keywords	The city, New York, Roxbury, the block
Place	Ghetto
Definition	Specific mention of the ghetto, also known as “the hood”
Keywords	The ghetto, the hood, the block
Place	Housing project
Definition	Specific mentions of the housing projects
Keywords	The projects, Marcy, public housing
Place	Prison
Definition	Physical prison, not mental prisons
Keywords	Prison, the cell, being locked up, jail
Place	School
Definition	As a physical place of learning
Keywords	School, classroom

Table 4. Definitions of codes under Problem subgroup

Subgroup	Code
Problem	Death
Definition	Any mention of death or dying
Keywords	Death, dying, killed, gone forever, murder, capped, die, killed, smoked
Problem	Desperation
Definition	Descriptions of helplessness, disparity, failure, struggle, inability to cope
Keywords	Hopeless, helpless, failure, struggle, pain, alone, left behind, insecurity, feeling down
Problem	Drugs
Definition	Use or sale of drugs
Keywords	Smoke a blunt, sling rock, 8 ball, junkies, weed, crack, dope, push weight, narcotic, dime bag/sack
Problem	Education negative
Definition	Descriptions of the futility of education
Keywords	They can't teach me, I never learned nothin'
Problem	Financial dependence/strain
Definition	Descriptions of financial struggles, not necessarily poverty but lack of financial opportunities and/or security
Keywords	Struggle to survive, can't buy, broke
Problem	Injustice
Definition	Descriptions of unjust behavior or activity, including inequity
Keywords	Overtax earnings, ignore us, different set of rules, more of us in jail, targeted by police
Problem	Materialism
Definition	Descriptions of objects or money, in an exaggerated way
Keywords	Love for the dough, bling, make g's, ball out, live large
Problem	Police negative
Definition	Contrast to Police as an actor, which stands as a neutral actor. Police as a problem stands as an actual problem; descriptions include negative attitudes and perceptions of unjust behavior
Keywords	Police, po-po, 5-0, pigs, cops, Feds, L.A.P.D.
Problem	Poverty
Definition	Depictions of poverty, different from financial struggles or strain, but more abject descriptions
Keywords	Hunger, starvation, struggle, being born with less
Problem	Pregnancy negative

Definition	Depictions of pregnancy in a negative or debilitating situation
Keywords	Womb, baby-mama, knocked up
Problem	Race relations negative
Definitions	Depictions of relationships between blacks and whites as negative or adversarial, or descriptions of situations where whites are favored over blacks
Keywords	Negro, brown, minority, nigger
Problem	Religion
Definition	Religion as a problem rather than actor
Keywords	The priest is a crook, God can't save me
Problem	Theft/crime
Definition	Descriptions of incidences of theft and/or crime, either as a victim or perpetrator
Keywords	Doin' dirt, push weight (sell drugs), do a job, hustle, run game, steal
Problem	Unemployment
Definition	Negative descriptions of unemployment
Keywords	Expressions of: No job, no opportunity, no skills
Problem	Violence
Definition	Depictions of violence, including murder
Keywords	Shot, kill, murder, destroy, inflict pain, steal
Problem	Welfare
Definition	Depictions of welfare as a problem or negative part of life
Keywords	Welfare, government check

Table 5. Definition of code under solution subgroup

Subgroup	Code
Solution	Hope
Definition	Depictions of hope and/or instructions to the listener on how the community can solve some of the problems it is facing
Keywords	Build up our hoods, advance minorities, do the right thing, heal each other, be real, make changes, work hard, you can be anything, make a difference

Table 6: Summary of Results across Subgroups and Co-Occurrences

Terms	Authority	Family	Gang	God	Parent	Peer	Police	Priest/Religious Figure	Society	Teacher
Subgroup: Actor	7	18	13	36	15	33	25	4	8	2
Co-Occurrence: Problem + Ghetto (Subgroup: Place)	1	2	0	1	1	4	2	1	0	1
Co-Occurrence: Problem + Streets (Subgroup: Place)	0	0	3	2	3	2	0	0	0	0
Terms	Church	City	Ghetto	Housing Project	Prison	Schools	Streets			
Subgroup: Place	3	15	54	9	22	2	34			
Terms	Religion	Unemployment	Welfare	Pregnancy Negative	Education Negative	Authority	Poverty	Financial	Race Relations	Injustice
Co-Occurrence: Problem + God (Subgroup: Actor)	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Co-Occurrence: Problem + Peer (Subgroup: Actor)	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	2	0
Co-Occurrence: Problem + Police (Subgroup: Actor)	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	4	6
Co-Occurrence: Problem + Ghetto (Subgroup: Place)	0	0	0	1	0	1	7	4	1	4
Co-Occurrence: Problem + Ghetto (Subgroup: Place)	0	0	0	1	0	1	7	4	1	4
Co-Occurrence: Problem + Streets (Subgroup: Place)	0	0	0	1	1	2	1	0	1	3
Co-Occurrence: Problem + Prison (Subgroup: Place)	0	0	0	1	1	2	1	0	1	3
Occurrence (Subgroup: Problem)	1	43	7	9	12	22	24	27	31	38

Terms	Theft/Crime	Materialism	Police Negative	Drugs	Death	Violence	Desperation
Co-Occurrence: Problem + God (Subgroup: Actor)	0	1	0	3	3	1	10
Co-Occurrence: Problem + Peer (Subgroup: Actor)	1	2	1	6	6	12	4
Co-Occurrence: Problem + Police (Subgroup: Actor)	1	0	15	2	3	9	1
Co-Occurrence: Problem + Ghetto (Subgroup: Place)	4	3	5	14	8	11	16
Co-Occurrence: Problem + Ghetto (Subgroup: Place)	4	3	5	14	8	11	15
Co-Occurrence: Problem + Streets (Subgroup: Place)	1	1	3	7	6	5	5
Co-Occurrence: Problem + Prison (Subgroup: Place)	1	2	3	7	6	5	5
Occurrence (Subgroup: Problem)	43	44	49	87	94	120	124