

Me:We – Dynamic Interplay between the Individual and the Collective in Rap and Hip Hop Dance Narratives

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Over the past 40 years, minoritized and marginalized youth from around the globe have utilized Hip Hop culture as a potential means of revolutionary artistic, aesthetic and theoretical practice. Emerging from the aesthetics of Black arts, Hip Hop re-instantiates sounds and aesthetics disavowed from the mainstream neo-liberal institutions as a collective cultural tool re-contextualized according to global space, and personal identity. Currently, youth are living in an increasingly polycultural society where competing and often contradictory value systems are negotiated in order to develop a unique sense of personhood. What are at stake are notions of authenticity, well-being and critical engagement with society. This paper compares urban minoritized youth in two different locations within the United States through two different mediums of Hip Hop culture: rap and Hip Hop dance. We seek to understand how youth navigate development of self vis a vie community across different genres of Hip Hop.

For the past 40 years, Hip Hop has emerged as the revolutionary potential voice of a global diaspora of minoritized or otherwise illegitimized youth and young adults who have experienced global economic and social changes and crises arising from recessions as well as social and political unrest (Porfilio, Gardner & Roychoudhury, 2013).

Through their use of historical tools and devices human beings psychologically develop through cultural phenomena (Stetsenko, 2010; Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004). In this way, the human mind is personal while at the same time social (Lawrence & Valsiner, 2003). Therefore there are myriad ways that social and internal cultures both define and constrain one another particularly in the realm of meaning making (Lawrence & Valsiner, 2003). Many of these meanings exist in the field of collective culture and comprise the emotions and lived experiences of individuals over a life span (Lawrence & Valsiner, 2003).

As individuals become adept interlocutors of individual and collective culture they derive meanings from interaction with cultural symbols, expressions and sentiments, discourses (Lawrence & Valsiner, 2003; Daiute & Lucic, 2010). Collective culture, being historically and spatially situated, is dynamic, malleable and in a constant process of change. Pertinent global forces have created a notion of a non-bound culture, one that exists outside of the realm of state, nation, race, ethnicity or gendered boundaries (Roychoudhury & Gardner, 2012). Hip Hop culture, an example of such a culture, is represented globally through a series of artistic cultural practices that include verbal, visual and kinesthetic discourses,

musical production and emancipatory knowledge building. Hip Hop has become to some a global language of opposition and social change (Porfilio & Viola, 2012).

With cultural indexes, common symbols and linguistic forms of expression, Hip Hop instantiates multimodally and multiplicatively according to political, historical and geographical contexts (Roychoudhury & Gardner, 2012). Individuals interact with global Hip Hop culture through an intersectional identity framework based on their race, gender, nationality, age, sexual orientation to create iterations of internal and collective identity that instantiate Hip Hop artistic production at an interpersonal level. This is the focus of previous work on internalization/externalization between personal and collective culture (Fernandes, 2012).

Among the various discursive elements of Hip Hop, rap narrative stands as one of the most ubiquitous expression of Hip Hop culture. The objective of the current study within this paper was to examine an in-school rap narrative workshop through critical discourse theory (Daiute, 2013). Social interaction with rap narrative can offer insights into how youth manage tensions across value systems. Values are “culturally-specific goals, ways of knowing, experiencing, and acting in response to environmental, cultural, economic, political, and social circumstances—a definition based in socio-cultural theory” (Daiute, Stern, & Lelutiu-Weinberger, 2003, p. 85). Values overlap in sometimes confusing ways with the concept of practice, therefore to clarify we operationalize values as meanings that emerge from collective cultural practices.

Values are particularly relevant in mediating youth and school culture, specifically with regards to the ways individual achievement as defined by the school as a value of “leadership” orients with Hip Hop cultural values of pivoting, or oscillating, between the values of the individual and the collective. A concrete example of this is antiphony, or call and response, an aesthetic in Hip Hop inherited from the Black Arts Movement (Watts, 2001). This study focused on the dynamic interactions youth create between selfhood and the collective when writing from the rhetorical stance of cultural expert about Hip Hop. This dynamic interplay references the aesthetic notion of antiphony to position the artist as in communion with yet simultaneously individual to the group, the cipher or the band (Gilroy, 1993).

The simultaneity between the individual and the collective is not unique to Hip Hop culture although we are interested in the unique lessons Hip Hop culture has to teach about the historical discourse of the cypher. Valsiner (1996, 1997, 1998) and colleagues have raised the question of how to understand the personal in relation to the social. Levi Strauss (1967) expanded the notion of individual subjectivity to include the epistemologies of knowledge as emerging from both the individual and the collective. According to Davis and Harré (1990) the individual emerges from the social processes they engage in (i.e., their activity meaning system).

According to Valsiner (2000) human beings are not passive recipients in the process of becoming but active constructors of their personal culture. They do so by utilizing symbols, tools and signs to construct personal meanings (Valsiner, 2000). In this way, personal

cultures emerge on the basis of collective cultures but they do so in manner that is unique through innovative means (Skinner, Basnet & Valsiner, 1993). Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man* (1952) referred to this phenomenon as looking through the inner eyes instead of the physical eyes. Inner eyes represent the interconnectivity of development that emerges from living in relation to others in society. Hip Hop's inherited Black aesthetic cultural canon has historically legitimized de-legitimized noise into music. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to understand the ways in which minoritized urban youth utilize the semiotics of cultural opposition i.e. Hip Hop to make meaning of their personal culture within a given educational space.

The dialogic view of the relationship between the individual and the collective supposes that conflict between two diametric oppositions can yield change (Markova, 2009). Therefore, in order to produce social change, one may need to understand oppositions as connected through value tensions (Moscovici, 1984). We seek to understand across artistic genres how youth are positioning themselves in relationship to others as a way of negotiating value differences. Our first research question is: Do youth engaged in Hip Hop cultural production value an individual means towards development, a collective means towards development or do they posit a third ontology that is interconnected?

In this study we measured what values emerged in rap and academic genres. Hip Hop and academic genres represent two different arenas of meaning both simultaneously enacted by youth and adolescents in school settings. Due to the relational nature of artistic activity we may hypothesize that the value from the interdependence between self and others will be more common than the value for the development of the self and the development of others as separate entities.

Operational Definitions:

Self within this study is defined as instances where youth speak about how they identify themselves and their process of being and becoming solely in relation to themselves. Self is operationalized here to include values related to the development of the self rather than any statement regarding the self. An example of a piece of narrative coded for self would be "I'm not the type to think of anything secular since I have been a church boy my whole life." *Development: Other* within this study is defined as instances where youth speak about the development of their friends, people in their community or about community or Hip Hop culture in general. An example of development: other as a value in this study is "she says that [hip hop] helped her a lot and thought about starting her rapping career."

Dynamic interplay within this study is being defined as the dynamic relationship between self and community that exists with the understanding that people, actions, and development are something shared and existing between people. An example of a piece of narrative coded for dynamic interplay would be, "Now I am in a rap group at school and while at first I wasn't excited being a part of it, but thanks to support of students and teachers, I have wrote at least four new raps." This showcases the connection of selfhood to the notion of the rap group, a personal artistic identity that is buffered by support from

community members. The preliminary analyses for the Rap Narrative and Well-Being study utilized a particular coding scheme across two coders.

STUDY 1

Methods:

Materials and procedure

A convenience sample of seven youth aged 13-16 in an already established Hip Hop narrative workshop at a charter school in a large urban city were measured longitudinally over seven months. Five of the participants were male and two were female. All participants identified as ethnic minorities and all of the participants belonged to lower-income households. The study builds upon a Rap Narrative curriculum designed by a teacher and rapper at the school who is also functioning as a research assistant for the study. Materials include seven rap narratives that were collaboratively created by the group.

This study utilized values analysis to analyze two different strands of data over a seven-month period. This form of analysis was utilized to understand the nature and impact of school-based rap narrating through various genres including lyrics, group processes, interaction processes, rhetorical processes and traditional measures of well being. Specifically, this study analyzed the genres of: (1) letters written to the president regarding the state of Hip Hop in schools, (2) rap narratives written in the form of collective songs. This study looks at the number of times the specific value for the pivoting between individual and collective meaning making, referred to here as *dynamic interplay*, emerges in the values analysis of one strand of data from the genre of letter writing.

We hypothesize that the value for dynamic interplay will be robust given that youth are already participating in a Hip Hop cultural milieu where the interplay between individual and community is given great valence.

Analysis and results

A discursive values analysis of the seven narratives focused on the emergence of dominant values. Initial findings indicate that the pre-eminent dominant value emerging across the seven narratives is dynamic interplay between the individual and the collective (Development Organizing Principle), which occurred 29 times over the seven narratives making up 26% of all coded values.

The values for Others (Development Organizing Principle) and Self (Organizing Principle) showed total occurrences of six and eight respectively. Therefore, the values for development—Others as well as development—Self *combined* yielded less than *half* the total frequency for development—Dynamic Interplay at 28 and 29 respectively. This suggests that youth are making meaning of their development through the dynamic pivot between themselves and their community, not either or. Rap narrative affords the use of

self and community terms in relational ways both because of communal nature of composing rap narratives in groups as well as the use of the choral sections of rap narrative as call-and response mediators, which is also seen in other Black aesthetic traditions including Black literature and jazz music.

Conclusion:

The results of the first study demonstrated that a) dynamic interplay between individual and collective was the value that emerged most often in rap narratives, and b) the value for dynamic interplay occurred more than two times the amount of the value for the development of self and the development of others combined. The development of selfhood within the context of a Hip Hop cultural milieu occurs at the pivot between meaning-making of collective practices and individual practices in a manner that is focused on both the development of the individual and the collective simultaneously.

STUDY 2

The study builds upon a critical urban arts education curriculum designed by one of the researchers to teach Hip Hop dance and street jazz dance to encourage students to interact with and further develop Hip Hop dance culture, and build upon tools of Hip Hop dance as a discourse (Porfilio, Roychoudhury & Gardner, 2013). Youth utilize Hip Hop dance as a counterspace to explore possibilities for critical inquiry, sites of historical reclamation, as well as avenues that nurture an emancipatory imagination (Porfilio & Viola, 2012). The Hip Hop dance cipher is a “communal and competitive discourse...the height of community and competition...where all (or some combination) of the Hip-hop cultural modes of discourse and discursive practices—call and response...signifying...narrative sequencing” and much more “converge into a fluid matrix of linguistic-cultural activity,” with Hip Hop dance serving as an embodiment of Hip Hop culture (Alim, 2007) and Hip Hop dance as a unique multimodal discourse (Gardner, 2013). The focus of this study is on how youth make-meaning through Hip Hop dance discourse.

The study seeks to address the following research question: (1) What are the affordances of Hip Hop dance in terms of how urban youth use Hip Hop dance as a discourse to develop? To this question, data was collected from the narratives and analyzed utilizing a discursive values analysis

Methods:

Participants and Data Collection

The study consisted of 17 (3 males and 14 females) diverse high-school aged youth from a large city in the Northern United States, recruited from a non-profit organization. The results of this study emanate from a large study entitled the *Hip Hop Dance to UnderSTAND* study conducted with the New York City non-profit organization over 2 consecutive days. The study received IRB approval with parental consent and student assent, and utilized a convenience sampling of 17 diverse female and male high school students (Gardner, 2013).

This study collected three strands of data through youth participation in (1) narrative writing, (2) collaborative choreography workshops, and (3) dance performance, as youth interacted briefly following a critical Hip Hop dance lesson from the aforementioned curriculum. For the purpose of this paper, only strand 1 of the data, the dance narratives, were analyzed. The narrative prompt instructed students to write an essay to respond to the following prompt: (1) "I dance because..." and (2) "I dance to what end or for what social purpose".

Students used pen and paper to compose narrative essay statements.

Analysis and Results

All narratives were collected and analyzed using a discursive values analysis. An initial content analysis of these narratives (N=17) by two independent coders generated nearly 50 topics discussed throughout the narratives. Table 1 demonstrates a coding scheme indicating the final coding scheme and examples from youth narratives to demonstrate how the narratives were coded.

Table 1.
Coding Scheme as applied to dance essays

Organizing Principle	Value Code	Operationalization	Example Narrative
Critical Consciousness	Thought & Reflection	Reflection of self and community, identifying causes for action seeking freedom and justice.	"I dance to show how people with authority abuse power and violence."
	Social Action/Mobilization	Motivating/inspiring others to see what you see and mobilizing them to do something about it.	"I dance to show people what violence does to our communities and how to prevent it."
Emotions	Catharsis	Experience and feel emotions internally.	"Dancing helps pick up my mood when I'm upset."
	Emotional Expression	Externally expressing emotions to other through symbols and discourse so others understand your experience.	"I dance because I get to show people how I am feeling."
Health	Mental Health (Self-confidence & Self-efficacy)	Dancing improves the way I think, feel and understand myself and positively influences how I present myself to the world.	"Dance builds up confidence in a human being and working with a troupe helps you build character."
	Physical	Dancing improves my	"It [dance] keeps the

	Health	body, how I see my body and how my body feels to be through exercise and physical activity.	body tight & fit.”
Development	Culture / Philosophy	Dance is a lifestyle. Hip Hop provides me a philosophy and shared culture to connect with others.	“I dance to connect with my family and heritage.”
	Dynamic Interplay (between Self & Community)	The relationship between self and community that exists understanding people, actions and development as something shared existing between people.	“With my dancing I am hoping to inspire people to find something within them.”
	Identity	Dance helps to express individuality, authenticity and developments towards who someone wants to become.	“It [dance] shows my individuality by the movements I do.”
	Aesthetics	The explicit use of body postures, motifs, signs, shapes, and formations to tell a narrative through dance.	“The purpose of me dancing it to tell a story using motifs and different body and different alignment.”

Additional analysis and reliability coding revealed 10 specific values around four organizing principles: *critical consciousness*, *emotions*, *health* and *development*. Of the 10 values identified, the 17 narratives are dominated by four of them, including: *identity* (development principle), *catharsis* (emotions principle), *thought/reflection* (critical consciousness principle), and *dynamic interplay* (development principle) (Gardner, 2013). Table 2 indicates the frequency of values, which demonstrates which codes were dominant.

Table 2
Frequency of Values

Value Family	Values: Coding Scheme	Totals
Critical Consciousness	Thought & Reflection*	23
	Social Action/ Mobilization	16
Emotions	Catharsis*	25
	Emotional Expression*	17
Health	Mental Health	5
	Physical Health	6
Development	Culture*	17

	Dynamic Interplay*	18
	Identity*	25
	TOTAL CODES	167

Note. *Indicates dominant codes that emerged approximately 10 or more times in either the essay and video genres.

The narratives were also analyzed for value co-occurrence. For the purposes of this paper we focus on a subset of these values, dynamic interplay and identity and we later analyze and interpret their co-occurrence. The value for dynamic interplay in study 2 emerged 18 times out of 162 coded values in the “I dance because” and “to what end” narratives.

An analysis of co-occurrence of values indicated that the values *identity* and *dynamic interplay* are co-occurring in a number of instances across the 17 narratives. Table 3 shows the co-occurrences of dominant values. One specific reason that may account for this result, which answers the call of the guiding research question in this study, is the affordances of group dance where movements cannot be executed to tell a narrative without the aid of other group members or the cypher. Another result which may explain the co-occurrence is the co-occurrence of culture and identity which suggests that dancers may view their audience to be the Hip Hop and dance community, and that the philosophies of dance culture connects the individual dancer to the collective.

Table 3

Co-Occurrences of Dominant Values

Codes	CC:TR	DV:CP	DV:DI	DV:ID	EM:CTH
CC:TR	1	.03	.03	.09	.04
DV:CP	.03	1	.06	.11*	
DV:DI	.03	.06	1	.16*	.08
DV:ID	.09	.11*	.16*	1	.06
EM:CTH	.04		.08	.06	1

Conclusion:

Results from this study indicate that youth are developing their identities through a dynamic interplay between their own subjective experience or personal culture (including personal practices) and the collective culture of Hip Hop dance. Findings indicate that youth utilize Hip Hop dance as a tool for individual development of identity, emotional catharsis, and critical reflection and as a way to position themselves between the individual and the collective. Youth gain more meaning and insight into the world and to develop into the person or future self they hope and plan to become through dance curriculum steeped in historical Black liberatory artistic styles including jazz, salsa, bachata, breaking, Hip Hop and African-American and Caribbean social dances.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Study 1 sought to find out whether conceptualizations of development in the context of Hip Hop activity tend to emphasize the self, others or the dynamic interdependence between the self and others. Study 2 sought to understand how youth utilize Hip Hop dance as a historical discourse in order to posit values for the self, for dance culture or for the interdependence between the self and others. Strikingly, the value of dynamic interplay between the individual and the collective emerged in each study despite the difference of Hip Hop cultural expertise being narrated about—rap in study 1 and dance in study 2.

The value for dynamic interplay in study 1 emerged 29 times out of 110 total coded values in the genre of the letters to the president. This means that out of all values youth were espousing in their rhetorical stance of cultural expertise dynamic interplay occurred at a rate of 26%, making it the most predominant value. This means that out of all the values the dance youth were making, meanings utilizing the dynamic interplay occurred at a rate of 11%.

In study 1, there was no co-occurrence between dynamic interplay and any other values. Whereas in study 2, dynamic interplay co-occurred with identity (.16). The results of study 2 show that dynamic interplay and identity are related in some way. The results showed that a co-occurrence of .16 between self and dynamic interplay suggests that youth are making meaning of their own process of becoming through greater cultural understandings of Hip Hop dance culture.

The results from Study 1 fit into the paradigm of broader literature with regards to the development of Hip Hop epistemology (Porfilio and Viola, 2012; Roychoudhury, Gardner and Stetsenko, 2014; Gardner, 2014). as a rhetorical strategy to mobilize resources for Hip Hop in schools. Specifically, youth in Study 1 utilized what Gergen (1994, 1997) refers to as knowledge constructed in discursive practices to provide reasons for advocating for Hip Hop as a practice in schools. Youth in study 1 posit the theory of knowledge espoused by Levi Strauss (1967) in understanding social reciprocity as critical for creating knowledge.

The results in Study 2 connect with broader literature on personal and collective cultures concerning how the externalizations of personal culture become publically visible (Valsiner, 2000). The personal is constructed in the public domain through the symbolic for interpersonal interactions (Valsiner, 2000). Dance culture, specifically Hip Hop dance culture utilizes the body as a means of communication; specifically dance culture and dance as a collective activity play a significant part in how youth understand their own personhood as evidenced by the co-occurrence between dynamic interplay and development of self values that emerged from Study 2.

The genre of Hip Hop discourse as a site of ontological pivoting between individual and collective has not, until the present work, been analyzed across different genres of discourse, rap and dance. Furthermore, because such interactions are occurring in spaces of education, we theorize that divergent values systems are being negotiated by youth resulting in a more complicated and dialogic notion of dynamic interplay. In such a way,

youth are seeing themselves as transconnected between themselves and their communities, their friend networks and even Hip Hop cultural as a global process. We speculate that in certain educational or artistic contexts the development of selfhood is contingent upon and simultaneously occurring through the pivoting between the self and the collective. Some of these contexts may include a collective rap narrative workshop, a dance cypher, a jazz band, a music troupe, a poetry group and possibly others.

There are specific caveats for interpreting results. Although what is specifically being looked at here is not the individual people but the coded narratives, the uneven sample distribution between two studies is notable. Furthermore, the gender makeup in Study 1 as opposed to Study 2 is quite different. In Study 1, two out of the seven participants were female whereas in Study 2, 14 out of 17 participants were females. Since the coding scheme was generated independently for each study and not from the analysis of both studies, and given the predominance of dynamic interplay in both results, it is possible that gender may not have played a significant role in the emergence of values.

Both studies are limited in that neither includes a comparator sample to draw comparisons across. Because both studies represent very specific activity meaning systems where Hip Hop discourses are occurring, the authors chose to compare across similar cultural milieus rather than to compare with a control group. A control could include school activities that would likely emphasize the individual or school activities, such as a musical band, that may emphasize the dynamic interplay of the individual and collective.

CONCLUSION

Youth utilizing Hip Hop based discourse to navigate through traditional education systems are utilizing a frequent expression of the values for dynamic interdependence. They are positioning their selfhood under the pretenses of a changing and conflictual but interconnected process between the individual and the collective. They understand the change between themselves as being connected to the development of the collective without losing a sense of individuality or authenticity (Markova, 2009).

The semiotics of Hip Hop discourse as materially manifest in the rhetoric of cultural expertise and through the visual mode of communication through the body bring to light the values and beliefs of interconnectedness central to Hip Hop culture. Future areas of study can look at the ways the value emergence of dynamic interplay relate to expressions such as metaphor or Black English vernacular and how these values emerge across other measures including group processes.

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