
TURNING THE TABLES ON THE HIV/AIDS EPIDEMIC: HIP HOP¹ AS A TOOL FOR REACHING AFRICAN-AMERICAN ADOLESCENT GIRLS

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Although African-American adolescent girls are disproportionately burdened by human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection, scholars have a limited understanding of the dynamics of HIV sexual risk among this group. Despite the need for culturally and developmentally tailored HIV risk reduction efforts for young African-American girls, most empirical published literature on HIV risk reduction programs for females of color focuses on adult women. Thus, few programs address the broader social, cultural, developmental, and gendered context of HIV sexual risk relevant for African-American adolescent girls.

A growing body of literature explores the use of hip hop culture as a tool for spreading information and educating youth (Rose, 1994a) about academic, social (Yasin, 1999), and health issues (Harper & Harper, 1999). A more limited body of research investigates the utility of rap music as an element of HIV prevention for African-American adolescents (Stephens, Braithwaite & Taylor, 1998). We argue that this popular genre provides a window of opportunity for communicating with African-American adolescent girls. Since African-American adolescents are heavily influenced by youth popular culture including the hip hop genre, popular films, music videos, and television (Harper & Harper, 1999; McLaurin, 1995), hip hop culture is an important link between traditional HIV prevention and African-American youth culture.

By incorporating elements of hip hop culture into HIV prevention interventions tailored toward African-American adolescent girls, critical issues in HIV risk can be explored through a culturally relevant medium. Although the relevance for using hip hop as a tool for preventing HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) in African-American adolescent girls has not been systematically investigated, there is evidence that HIV prevention programs incorporating hip hop culture can be promising and innovative approaches.

¹ The *hip hop* spelling of the genre used in this paper is consistent with academic style manual suggestions regarding cultural movements and styles.

Epidemiology of HIV Infection Among African-American Adolescents

Despite dramatic increases in HIV seroprevalence in this population, African-American adolescents living in the United States remain underserved and under-investigated (DiClemente & Wingood, 1997). African-American adolescents represent approximately 15% of the adolescent population (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2000), but comprise 60% of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) cases reported in 1999 among 13- to 19-year-olds (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2000). A 1998 CDC study of 16- to 21-year-old entrants to the United States Job Corps program found the highest HIV infection rate occurred among African-American young women (Valleroy, MacKellar, Karon, Janssen & Hayman, 1998). Approximately half of adolescent and young adult women reported with AIDS identified heterosexual transmission as their mode of exposure to HIV. In contrast, approximately 4% of young men in this same age group reported heterosexual contact as their exposure category (CDC, 2000).

Limitations of Relevant Prevention Research

Epidemiological data illustrates the need for HIV risk reduction strategies for African-American adolescent girls. However, reviews of literature suggest that HIV risk reduction interventions designed to reach this population are scarce. While progress is being made in developing HIV prevention interventions for African-American adolescents (Jemmott, Jemmott, Fong & McCaffree, 1999), existing strategies have targeted mixed-gender groups of adolescents or African-American adult women (Wingood & DiClemente, 1996). A smaller number of HIV risk reduction interventions were developed to reach ethnically diverse populations of adolescent girls, and most have relied on traditional health behavior models that have neglected to consider the broader social, cultural, and developmental context of HIV risk experienced by adolescent girls of color (Amaro, 1995; Wyatt, 1994).

Sexual behavior is more complex than traditional health behavior theories would suggest, and caution should be exercised when applying these models to African-American adolescent girls (Wyatt, 1994). While new research investigates critical gaps in the literature, most HIV research among women of color has focused primarily on adults. Few studies have disentangled interactions among race/ethnicity, gender, class, culture, and age.

HIV Sexual Risk in African-American Adolescent Girls: A New Perspective

Black women have been associated negatively with sexuality throughout history, with pathological images of black women's sexuality pervasive in every aspect of American culture including the mass media (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1981). Research-

ers are not “immune” to these social constructions of women, and several have further exploited the cultural myth that urban girls of color are the root of most social problems (Collins, 2000; Tolman, 1996). Despite the popular emphasis on preventing adolescent childbearing and controlling the sexuality of women and adolescent girls of color (Geronimus, Korenman & Hillemeier, 1994; Nathanson, 1991; Roberts, 1997), a limited body of literature explores the dynamics of heterosexual relationships and sexual decision-making among young African-American girls. Some researchers have acknowledged the sociocultural and power imbalances relevant for African-American adolescent girls in heterosexual relationships and emphasize the importance of incorporating awareness of gender role norms into HIV prevention interventions (Crosby, DiClemente, Wingood, Sionean, Cobb & Harrington, 2000; Wingood & DiClemente, 1992).

Heterosexual Relationship Dynamics and HIV Protective Behaviors

Several relationship dynamics affecting African-American young adult women’s sexual risk-taking behavior have appeared in the literature. These include power in relationships, male partners’ support for condom use, fear and history of abuse, history of child sexual abuse, communication, and type of relationship (Amaro, 2000; Gutierrez, Oh & Gilmore, 2000; Wingood & DiClemente, 1995; Wingood & DiClemente, 1997a). As heterosexual relationships develop, a male partner may evolve into the most influential person in an adolescent girl’s life (Wingood & DiClemente, 1992). A few qualitative studies suggest that relationship dynamics play an important role in adolescent girls’ sexual risk behaviors; however, there is little empirical analysis of these associations (Crosby et al., 2000).

Negotiating condom use takes place within relationships, thus reaction of a male partner plays a critical role in an adolescent girl’s ability to protect her sexual health. Adolescent girls may remain silent about condom use in their relationships due to stigma associated with using female condoms or asking their male partners to use condoms (Amaro, 2000). Gilmore, DeLamater and Wagstaff (1996) reported that an adolescent girl’s request for her male partner to use a condom may generate a variety of opinions, including viewing the request as (a) an indication of a sexual partner’s maturity or desire to protect herself, (b) a warning that she is infected with an STD, or (c) that she believes that he is infected. Adolescent girls may lack experience in communicating with sexual partners, and in the absence of an effective anti-HIV microbicide (Kaler, 2001), adolescent girls may also protect themselves against HIV infection by avoiding sex (Crosby et al., 2000).

An adolescent girl’s ability to adopt self-protective behaviors including abstinence may be complicated by relationship dynamics such as power imbalances created by differences in age and sexual experience since girls frequently date older male part-

ners (Clark & Moore, 1997; Miller, Newman & Zimmerman, 2000; Rotheram-Borus, Jemmott & Jemmott, 1995). Previous research has also established differences in protective behaviors for women and girls in steady and casual relationships. Crosby and colleagues (2000) found that African-American adolescent girls in steady, long-lasting relationships reported a significantly greater frequency of unprotected vaginal sex (UVS). Additionally, these researchers found that African-American adolescent girls with steady partners were more likely to report having had UVS if they more strongly believed that male control in relationships is normative. These findings suggest an association between increased frequency of UVS and trust and commitment. Regardless of the type of relationship, Crosby et al. (2000) found adolescents who reported ever having an STD were more likely to report UVS.

Fear of Abuse and History of Abuse

Several studies of African-American women and adolescent girls report a significant relationship between fear of abuse, history of abuse and high-risk practices that place women at increased risk for HIV infection. Wingood and DiClemente (1997a) found that African-American women who were sexually abused during childhood were 5.1 times more likely to have a partner who had been abusive in the previous three months, and 2.6 times more likely to have a partner who was physically abusive when asked to use condoms. In another study by the same authors (Wingood & DiClemente, 1997b), African-American women who had an abusive primary partner were more likely to experience threats of physical abuse when they discussed condoms and were more fearful of asking their partners to use condoms. While this research on African-American women gives insight into how gender-based structural inequalities and abuse are manifested in relationships with male partners, there are few published studies investigating the relevance for African-American adolescent girls.

Adolescent girls are influenced by stereotypical “scripts” pervasive in society and reflected in their peer group interactions relating to appropriate gender role norms and sexual behavior. Amaro (1995) discussed the need to consider gender roles in risky sexual behaviors among adolescent girls of color, and several studies have demonstrated relationships between gender roles, sexually risky behaviors (Bowleg et al., 2000), and condom use. Adolescents are socialized to believe that girls should be passive in sexual matters, contributing to a lack of communication with partners about sexual experiences (Rotheram-Borus, Jemmott & Jemmott, 1995). Examining these issues is important as research indicates gender role norms affect which partner will control sexual decision-making (Crosby et al., 2000). In a representative sample of young men, attitudes supporting more traditional gender roles were associated with reporting more sexual partners, lower condom use, and the belief that getting a girl pregnant is a sign of masculinity (Pleck, Sonenstein & Ku, 1993). Few existing studies have investigated adolescent girls’ attitudes about gender role norms.

Intervening with African-American Adolescents Girls

HIV interventions not informed by the cultural context of the African-American community have limited effectiveness (DiClemente & Wingood, 1997c). Many health behavior theories and HIV risk reduction interventions do not reflect the unique cultural and social realities of African-American youth, creating a major barrier to the development of effective HIV prevention programs for African-American girls. Innovative research informed by conceptual frameworks that address the lived experiences of African-American adolescent girls who experience the multiple burdens of oppression based on their race/ethnicity, gender, class, and age are urgently needed. In this context, hip hop is an appropriate cultural framework for exploring HIV risk among African-American adolescents since the experiences of marginalization and oppression are expressed through this medium (Rose, 1994b), and hip hop cuts across multiple categories including race/ethnicity, gender, class, and age.

Rationale for Using Hip Hop as a Strategy to Enhance HIV Risk Reduction Efforts

Hip hop is embraced by youth globally, and is, currently, America's dominant youth culture (Ross & Rose, 1994). As hip hop evolved, corporations began to realize the benefit of using hip hop as a marketing tool by incorporating hip hop fashion, breakdancers, and the music of emcees and deejays into television commercials and magazine advertisements. Just as adolescents of color are devalued and stigmatized in the mass media, the majority of media attention on hip hop is fixated on violence, misogyny, substance use, and sexual promiscuity. Despite this negative publicity and oversimplification of hip hop, it can be a useful educational tool since its often controversial content opens the lines of communication for critical discussions with adolescents about sex, substance use, violence, and gender roles. Some rap messages have an educational function (Yasin, 1999), and public health professionals recognize the use of hip hop culture as a tool for communicating health and other educational messages with young people (Harper & Harper, 1999).

HIV/AIDS prevention messages must effectively compete with adolescent exposure to pervasive negative mass media images of African-American youth as "thugs," "pimps," "players," "project bitches," "hoes," and "chickenheads." African-American adolescent girls must learn to define themselves and interpret these messages within the framework of a society that undervalues young women of color. These stereotypical gender roles have also been identified in qualitative research conducted with African-American adolescents (Eyre, Hoffman & Millstein, 1998; Dimitriadis, 2001).

One of the central locations for discussions of black sexuality is in contemporary popular music (hooks, 1997), and preliminary evidence suggests that a promising

approach to reaching African-American girls with HIV prevention messages is through hip hop culture. Thus, since HIV/AIDS education messages typically are presented in the vernacular of the dominant culture (Martin & Stroud, 1988), HIV risk reduction interventions and strategies tailored for African-American girls may be more effective if they incorporate rap songs, music videos, and other familiar communication vehicles (Wingood & DiClemente, 1992). In practice, this means updating HIV prevention materials and incorporating aspects of youth popular culture into new risk reduction efforts. For example, African-American adolescent girls are likely to perceive the popular adolescent rap artist, Lil' Bow Wow as more credible than a dated performance of "Let's Talk About Sex" by Salt 'n Pepa (circa 1990), who are featured in a videotape included as part of a widely disseminated HIV/AIDS curriculum (Jemmott, Jemmott & McCaffree, 1994) tailored for African-American adolescents.

The Role of Hip Hop in HIV/AIDS Prevention

The use of hip hop as an education tool for HIV prevention with African-American youth is not new, although empirical studies are rare. Martin and Stroud (1988) describe a joint task force that included teachers, parents, school administrators, and health department staff that convened in the mid-1980s to develop an AIDS curriculum for middle and high school students in San Francisco. As a result of this effort, the "Rap'n Down AIDS" contest was created to reach youth 13 to 19 years of age. The authors state, "Since rap'n is a contemporary form of communication among black adolescents, we felt it would be an effective medium for motivating youth to educate peers about ways to protect themselves from AIDS and to prevent its spread" (p. 354). The winning raps from the contest were developed as television and radio public service announcements. Unfortunately, it is unknown whether this creative endeavor was ever evaluated.

The primary author (Carla Stokes) began incorporating hip hop-influenced youth popular culture into STD/HIV preventive efforts for African-American adolescents in unpublished activities conducted in Atlanta, Georgia and Washington, D.C., beginning in the early 1990s. In this capacity, the author and another African-American undergraduate student (Caya Lewis) used hip hop cultural content including rap music lyrics, music videos, and popular television and movie clips as a common language for communicating about protective behaviors in health education classes and summer academic enrichment programs. Additional activities were created and implemented that investigated gender role norms and sexual scripts through the use of recently aired scenes from the television show, *Martin*, and relevant rap songs identified by the adolescents as popular with their peers (i.e. "Pimps" by 8 Ball & MJG). After completing graduate-level public health training, both women continue to collaborate to develop hip hop-influenced public health programming for black

girls and young women.

Stevens and colleagues (1998) used a small group methodology incorporating hip hop music and lyrical content in a model designed to reduce high-risk sexual behaviors among this same population. The findings of a pilot study at three-month follow-up revealed significant differences with respect to health self-efficacy and communication about sex and risk behaviors between participants and parents (Stephens, 1999). Working with African-American youth peer educator groups, Jahi and colleagues (1999) used hip hop music videos and popular films as sources of information about sexual decision-making and safer sex in single and six-session interventions.

Implications for Developing Culturally, Developmentally, and Gender-Appropriate Interventions

Effective interventions must reach adolescents in the context of their daily lives. Hip hop-influenced popular culture serves as a socializing agent for many adolescent girls of color who acquire cultural values including perceptions of gender role norms from this popular genre. With respect to relationship dynamics, young women are often portrayed in submissive and sexualized roles in popular songs and music videos, while men are often portrayed as being in control and having more power in relationships (Signorielli, 2001). Given the highly gendered nature of hip hop portrayed through the mass media, incorporating hip hop genre and popular culture into research efforts allows for a comprehensive examination of how gender ideologies influence sexual decision-making among African-American adolescent girls.

Methodologically, current studies of hip hop-infused programs have perhaps unintentionally neglected discussion of the gendered context of HIV sexual risk among African-American youth. Future HIV prevention programs infused with hip hop content should be gender-specific. Moreover researchers should consider incorporation of hip hop's multiple central forms, rather than focus on singular forms such as simple infusion of lyrical content. Researchers should also conduct rigorous evaluation of hip hop-infused interventions.

Finally, collaboration between researchers and African-American girls should inform development and direction of these initiatives. Although HIV/STD prevention programs for adolescents have traditionally considered adult researchers and public health practitioners as the "experts," successful interventions have included components of peer-based strategies. However, many programs are developed by adults, and incorporating youth into collaborative research is still considered novel (Harper & Carver, 1999).

For HIV/AIDS prevention efforts with hip hop content to be effective, the target population must perceive these strategies as relevant and authentic (Romer & Kim, 1995). An important factor for enhancing effectiveness is involving participants in the design and implementation of interventions. Qualitative and quantitative methods should inform research collaborations with African-American adolescent girls, and their unique perspectives should inform future HIV risk reduction initiatives.

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