



FUN AND WELLBEING: THE EXPERIENCE OF DANCING HIP HOP IN A MULTIETHNIC URBAN NEIGHBORHOOD

Claire Lyke

Research for Masters in Transcultural and Social Psychiatry

Introduction

- Research is a critical ethnography within a Hip Hop class at a community centre.
- Results will explore how youth used the concept of 'Fun' to describe subjective wellbeing.
- At the community centre fun was connected to the empowering of youth, learning and building relationships.



Presentation Outline

- **Research Context**
- **Research Questions**
- **Methodology and Methods**
- **Cipher**
- **Results**
- **Group Discussion**



Context: Community Centre



- This youth drop-in centre is located in the neighborhood of Montreal where the majority of the inhabitants were born outside of Canada.
- More families are living beneath the poverty line than elsewhere in the city.
- The combination of migration histories and low socio-economic status (SES) can have adverse impacts on health (Elgar, Trites & Boyce, 2010).

Context: Dance and Wellbeing



- Popular dances and non-Western dances are often portrayed as purely physical.
- Elite dance forms that are positively associated with values like mental control are more frequently promoted in dance programming with youth (Atencio & Wright, 2009).
- As bell hooks states, “many students, especially students of color, may not feel at ‘safe’ in what appears to be a neutral setting” (1994, 39).
- It is important to consider culture in dance in order to increase awareness about what is and is not ‘neutral’.

Hip Hop 101



- Hip Hop originated out of the Bronx in the early 1970's, at a time when factories had left the neighborhood in search of cheaper foreign labour.
- Dance is one of the four elements of the art form; the others are graffiti, MCing and DJing.
- The art form comes from African diaspora cultures.
- For the dancing component, movies such as *Breakin'* (1980) and *Beat Street* (1982) are visible examples of Hip Hop's early commercial success.
- To keep in mind: Hip Hop is a racialized and controversial (because of its violent content and hypersexualization of women) art form.

Objectives

1. To deepen awareness of experience of being a young Hip Hop dancer in Health oriented fields.
2. To increase understanding of how Hip Hop dancing can be integrated into the pursuit of wellbeing by youth who are marginalized in multiethnic urban settings



Research Questions



1. How do youth living in a poor multiethnic neighborhood experience dancing and learning to dance Hip Hop?
2. What are, if any, the connections between this experience and their subjective perception of their wellbeing?
3. Is there a relationship between how youth understand their own positions and experiences of marginality and how this is understood in Hip Hop culture?

Critical Ethnography

- Chosen to address the lived experience of the youth at the centre.
- This methodology actively addressed power differences in research.
- There are four elements that distinguish critical ethnography from ethnography:
 1. Critical engagement
 2. Positionality of the researcher
 3. Dialogue with research participants
 4. Use of theory in analysis (Soyini Madison, 2012).



Performance of Participant Observation



- Five months, weekly dance classes. Take dance class with the youth and stay afterwards for one to three hours of freestyling.
- I experienced myself as both an insider and outsider in the research setting. I am a dancer, but not a Hip Hop dancer. I have a more class privilege than the dancers I was working with, but I am close to them in age.

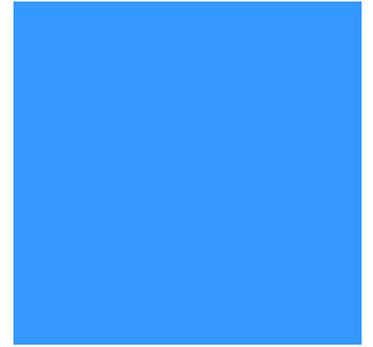
Dyadic Interviews

- In order to address power in the interviews with dancers I interviewed them in pairs.
- Objective was to create dialogue
- 3 pair interviews and 2 individual interviews with youth worker and dance teacher (1 hour – 1.5 hours).
- 4 male, 4 female. Diverse backgrounds, all but one were people of colour with migration histories.
- Participants between 18 and 22 years of age.



Results

- Having Fun!
- Empowering Youth
- Learning
- Building Relationships
- Taking Risks in the Cipher



Having Fun!

- **Glint: “It’s really about enjoying yourself and then having fun.”**
- Placing fun at the core of the experience of Hip Hop dancing was a trend.
- Fun did not arise accidentally but was part of the manifestation of Hip Hop culture at the community centre.
- The community centre environment taught and sustained ‘fun’ through three main threads: youth empowerment, learning and relationships.



Empowering Youth



- **Chip: “Like when I practice I go in the lab. That's how we call it. You go there and you find yourself. You work it to take it to another level. But at the same time you have fun. You can struggle because it's hard to go into an uncomfortable zone but you have fun inside of it because you're doing it for yourself, you're doing it for the love of the music, for the love of dance.”**

Empowering Youth

- Dancing for yourself was positive, dancing for others was seen as negative.
- Focus on self directed goals empowered youth by relieving pressure to conform to external standards.
- Fun was not equated with ease, being challenged was fun.



Learning



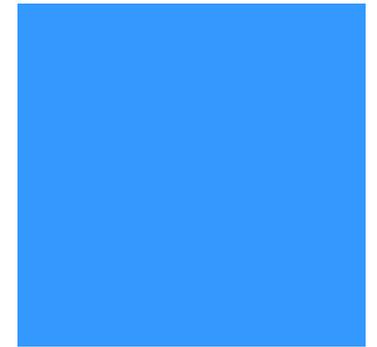
- **Root: “Weekly yeah. Then just trying to dance every day kind of because I was really interested in dancing. Later on when I discovered more into dancing - more the choreography aspect of it I started to take class like 3 times a week. But then later on that’s where I get into more free styling. I was more interested in Free styling then choreography. Because I think dancing is really intriguing...”**
- Having fun learning a new dance steps and styles could lead to an increased desire to dance.

Learning



- **Tufts: “Teachers that transmit a little bit of their vision allow us to get some self knowledge. Self knowledge, but also knowledge of art itself – and our environment. It’s really complicated.”**
- The learning that took place in dance class included learning about the self, the art and the environment.

Building Relationships: Peers



- **Chip: “The people you meet - the whole dance thing - makes you think a lot about everything and the people you meet. You have conversations with them. And a lot of the people. They have different backgrounds.”**
- **Baker: “We have different backgrounds.”**
- For some youth at the centre dancing was their primary social activity.
- The youth at the centre were diverse. They describe dancing as something that helps them connect with people from different backgrounds.

Building Relationships: Teachers



- **Rocket: “I think you research the teachers that you want to go take class from. Because you're not going to randomly stumble into a school and randomly stumble into class and then hope the guy is good. To get there in the first place for me [...] I've looked them up - Because I know how they work. Because I know how they dance, because I've spoken to them personally as a human being.”**

Building Relationships: Teachers



- It was very important at the centre to find teachers who had a good understanding of the history and culture of Hip Hop.
- Students also placed a lot of emphasis on putting effort into finding teachers that you could connect with as human beings.
- The teachers at the centre stressed that they were there to exchange with the students.
- The relationship between teacher and student went beyond the one way transmission of knowledge.

Cipher



- **Angel: “I started dancing in ciphers and I was really embarrassed. It was really hard at first because I had only done choreographies. And so I was really afraid to go in.”**
- Going into the cipher was a risk.
- In the dance circle, or cipher, empowering youth, learning and building relationships would operate together to initiate and nourish fun.

Cipher: Fun



- When asked how she navigates the stress in dancing Glint responds, “**You have to find the balance.**”
- Fun is described not as the lack of challenge, but as challenge that is well supported by internal and external factors.
- Dancers chose whether or not to go inside the cipher based on their sense of how these factors are balanced.

Discussion

1. How does the idea of fun described by the youth relate to the concept of subjective wellbeing?
2. How might Hip Hop culture relate to the experience at the community centre?
3. How might self-expression be connected to the ideas discussed here?

