

From the heart (to the brain)

Akeem Sule and Becky Inkster – collectively ‘Hip Hop Psych’ – are using hip-hop music to start conversations with young people about mental health and neuroscience.

In the late 1970s, urban New York City was beset by problems – poverty, social decay, drugs and violence. In this unpromising environment, disaffected youth created a new genre of music. Hip-hop provided a channel through which young urban black people could articulate their frustrations. Over subsequent decades, hip-hop exploded in popularity. Now it is being used to engage young people with key issues in mental health – and even introduce neuroscientific concepts as complex as the default mode network.

Consultant psychiatrist, Senior Clinical Tutor and hip-hop fanatic Akeem Sule turned to hip-hop in an attempt to persuade more medical students to specialise in psychiatry. He ran into Becky Inkster, clinical neuroscientist and die-hard hip-hop fan, at a hip-hop event in 2002, and their paths crossed again in Cambridge in 2014. Akeem mentioned the success he was having using hip-hop in teaching, and the two resolved to do more to exploit its potential. So Hip Hop Psych was born.

Hip-hop is a perfect vehicle for opening up dialogue with young people about challenging subjects, suggests Becky: “Hip-hop is so loud, so bold, so raw that it channels this ability to talk about difficult things in mental health from the heart.”

Crucially, it is rooted in personal experience and social context. Hip-hop lyrics are often highly personal, a deeply raw form of self-expression. “There’s an assumption that anything you write must be true to the individual,” Akeem points out. “That’s why in hip-hop they hate ghost writers. If someone is writing lyrics for you, that could destroy your career as a rapper. There’s an implication that you’ve got to write from the heart.”

But rappers also draw heavily on their background and environment, often one of social disadvantage and discrimination. In the 19th century, Charles Dickens opened eyes to the darker side of Victorian society. “A lot of hip-hop artists, that’s basically

what they do,” says Akeem. “They write about their environment.”

Opening up dialogue

Through Hip Hop Psych, Akeem and Becky are using hip-hop to engage with young people on their own terms and in their own spaces. As well as nightclubs or other venues for young people, they have also run events at prisons and young offenders’ institutions.

By dissecting hip-hop lyrics, they can start conversations about mental health, factors that affect it, and ways to protect it. The aim is empowerment, suggests Becky: “It’s not about us stating facts, pointing fingers and giving information – it’s a two-way thing to bring out the best in people and help them hold up their own mirrors. Hip-hop has been a beautiful vehicle with which to do this. Many people think mental health and hip-hop are two separate worlds, but they’re not, they’re so intertwined and we just help people see this.”

Akeem and Becky situate Hip Hop Psych within a biopsychosocial model of mental health, which recognises the multiplicity of biological, family and social factors affecting mental wellbeing. The lyrics of artists such as Tupac, Eminem and Kendrick Lamar provide a wealth of material to kickstart conversations about such influences. They are even an entry point to concepts such as epigenetics and transgenerational effects, or depressive rumination and the role of the default mode network.

Research opportunities

As well as teaching and public outreach, the pair also have an interest in developing psychotherapies better tailored to young people. In addition, Becky has a keen interest in neuroscience and young people – her day job is as a Senior Research Manager on the Neuroscience in Psychiatry Network, which is using brain imaging and other techniques to explore the transition from adolescence

to adulthood. Hip Hop Psych is providing a way to expand her research interests.

An early idea she had was to scan the brains of ‘freestyle rappers’ – performers who make up lyrics on the hoof, often in response to words thrown at them from the audience. In 2012, just such a study was reported, revealing characteristic patterns of brain activity associated with freestyle rapping. “It’s mind-blowing how people will throw a word at someone and they’ll just rap to it,” says Becky. “Now there’s neural circuitry proof that they are different.”



Top: Akeem Sule and Becky Inkster. Centre and bottom: Performing at the 2015 World Congress of Psychiatric Genetics, Toronto, Canada.

Hip Hop Psych videos: <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=5dcjV3QX6U0>, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ggCw7Y_Mq6k
A longer version this article can be found on the BNA website.

Liu S *et al.* Neural correlates of lyrical improvisation: an fMRI study of freestyle rap. *Sci Rep.* 2012;2:834