

**Episode 53 - Dr. Raphael Travis, Jr. and Dr. Anne Deepak: Empowerment in Context: Lessons from Hip Hop Culture for Social Work Practice**

[00:00:08] Welcome to LIVING PROOF A podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at [www.socialwork.buffalo.edu](http://www.socialwork.buffalo.edu). We're glad you could join us today. The series Living Proof examines social work research and practice that makes a difference in people's lives. The University at Buffalo School of Social Work is making a difference every day through the generation and transmission of knowledge. Promotion of social justice and service to humanity we offer MSW and PHD programs continuing education programs and credits online courses licensor exam preparation professional seminars and certificates and much much more. To learn more about the UB School of Social Work please visit [www.socialwork.buffalo.edu](http://www.socialwork.buffalo.edu). Hip-hop is it merely a gangsta music genre that sells massage training drugs and violence and toxic to youth development. Is it a pathway towards individual and collective empowerment or is it an innovative teaching tool useful for helping social work students understand future clients in a deeper way. Today's guest addressed these questions. Dr. Raphael Travis and Dr. Anne Deepak are assistant professors of Social Work at Texas State University San Marcos as a clinician Dr. Raphael Travis provided direct services and supervision and residential programs serve in court adjudicated youth and adolescents with mental health needs. His current research interests include examining the principles of positive youth development as they relate to out of school time programs. Juvenile Justice and re-entry and hip hop culture from a social work and public health perspective.

[00:02:03] Dr. Anne Deepak's years of practice and teaching experience have contributed to her expertise in cross cultural mental health issues post-colonial feminist theory and practice diversity and social justice and the use of popular culture and social work education and practice. Peter Sobota clinical assistant professor at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work spoke with doctors Travis and Deepak by telephone. Hi this is your host Peter Sobota. We'd like to mention that this episode contains some background distortion that is due to technical problems we experienced while recording. Thanks and we hope you like the podcast. Hi and welcome to LIVING PROOF. This is Peter Sobota and today I'm talking with Dr. Raphael Travis and Dr. Anne Deepak from Texas State University at San Marcos. Welcome. The title of our podcast empowerment and context lessons from hip hop culture for social work practice. It obviously reflects your current research. Would you be willing to begin by describing what you're studying and what or how you hope it will be used. One of the projects that we're concentrating on is how hip hop can be used as an educational tool. With social work students both at the bachelor level and at the master's level and we're looking both in a micro practice context as well as the macro practice context and we're hoping that it enables students to better understand or we're hoping to provide a bridge to better understanding the populations that they're working with. We believe that hip hop provides an in-depth opportunity to really find out what young people are thinking. We believe it has national applications international application and really provides significant cultural breadth with which students can draw from their efforts to move forward as professionals.

[00:04:14] And this is under the category of making no assumptions but for our listeners who maybe don't have a lot of familiarity with hip hop culture and music what is it at this point. Do you think we would need to know to better understand the genre. Well I think one of the main things that we tried to get across is that even though we emphasize the music component for a lot of people know as rap music is that the culture itself is much more broad than the music itself. There are several different aspects to the art form. The most commonly referred to as Bicks or emceeing or rapping which is what people are most familiar with then there's deejaying which is the use of turntables to play music. There is mural art which people refer to as graffiti. Then there's also breakdancing. And so the culture itself is a lot broader than just what you hear on the radio and it's

with that understanding that it is a broad culture as we bring the music. It's really important to really take time to understand explore. Be curious about what you see and hear within hip hop. Would you care to comment any more on that. Maybe what you consider to be some common misperceptions about hip hop culture and even more specifically the music. I think the biggest misconception is that it is only what is stereotypically referred to in the media. The most common is that it's gangsta music only about violence drugs and that it has no artistic merit whatsoever. It's toxic. It is something that will demonize youth forever something that adults couldn't possibly embrace as no redeeming value generally categorize it in a very negative capacity.

[00:06:23] And then if there is a contrast the only contrast is the complete sort of polar opposite of that stereotype. So either this you know gangsta hip hop or it's conscious and you know there's those two poles and that's it and an artificial dichotomy that's created. It does seem at least to me like the kind of conventional wisdom is amongst many people at least is that hip hop has this really negative influence. But really that's not the thrust of your paper and where you really build a rationale for how this can be really helpful. Right. And that's what we try to do in the classroom. In particular we try to bring out these empowerment themes help students to understand that really build their awareness about the different cultural realities that are portrayed within the music. We look at it from a global perspective we look at it even within the United States the cross cultural aspects of the music and really try to introduce students to the strong social justice elements that are raised within the music. I had a chance to read the manuscript of the paper that you and Anne wrote and you get into more detail in there. And you talk about you propose a framework for not only educators but practitioners to utilize. Could you describe that. Sure. As I mentioned earlier we really started this in the classroom and we attempted to really lay out for students the fact that this could be used with individuals that could be used as far as understanding individuals as well as understanding communities from a social justice standpoint.

[00:08:17] And then as we continue to explore this as well as referencing the existing research and literature we felt that operationalizing some of these concepts within a framework could really help bring some teeth to what we offer in the classroom as well as as what we hope to arm practitioners with as they move into the community. And so the framework essentially is divided up into two larger empowerment domains individual empowerment as well as collective empowerment domains and in the individual and we look at three subcategories we look at this idea of self esteem. We look at resilience and we look at personal growth and youth development and then when we move to the collective empowerment domains we look at sort of a move from positive youth development to more of a community youth development theme and then to a more social change or social action. We believe that those five areas really comprise the essential empowerment aspects that are in the music that are important for social workers to pay attention to. How do you think or how would you say that that this framework is unique from for example the other uses of hip hop by social workers or even what's been you know written about by scholars about hip hop. I think overall each of the themes that are discussed within the framework are not necessarily unique. I think those are all themes that have been referenced by other researchers such as Tyson pombe and Lily Allen Hicks Harper and some of the rows and some of the other more well-known writings about hip hop. I think what's unique is the effort to provide a concrete structure that people can use a way to organize these concepts in a way that can make it easier to discuss to process.

[00:10:32] To use an assessment developing goals and objectives around either individual change or community change. And so I think it's something that practitioners educators can really use and run with as well as integrate a lot of the previously written about information. Why do you think hip hop is uniquely positioned to address some of the challenges of young people and adolescents. I think it's uniquely positioned because it is an art form that has been used by marginalized youth globally to express their feelings and express their political critique of the situation that they're in. And it's really powerful for students. Some of the associate research I was doing on multimedia

instruction that includes hip hop in it is that students find this enormous emotional impact from the sounds and images conveyed in hip hop especially and they're disturbing and when they're presented in the authentic manner which you do find in hip hop that it has a lot of the students that we're teaching right now that are coming from the millennial generation this is how they learn is through their emotions. And so it's a really unique way to convey whatever the topic is that we're trying to talk to them about. I noticed from some information on your background that one of your academic interests is I believe using popular culture and applying popular culture ideas in the classroom. Would you say a little bit more about that. I see hip hop as one one form of popular culture that is absolutely global and is growing more and more. And I think it's really important.

[00:12:25] What I try to convey to students is that popular culture is one way of entering the life world of the clients or communities that they're working with. So as they're preparing to enter whatever community because remember Hip Hop is produced by people from all different racial backgrounds and from many different countries wherever they're preparing to start their work. It's really important for them to be familiar with the popular culture of that group that they are working with. Yeah. Oh good old fashioned social work values of kind of client self-determination and empowerment and starting where the client is. It's a very good fit. A slightly different question. Raphael earlier referred to positive youth development and I guess I don't want to make the assumption that when we say that we're all talking about the same thing. So I would ask you to describe what you mean when you talk about positive youth development especially in this context. Well from its most basic assumption it's essentially what are the desired outcomes that we want for young people. And there's a body of literature that I draw from to help explain that and it describes positive youth development in five c's. The first is comp confidence that confidence and connection and character and then caring in those five c's believe to facilitate a 6V contribution. And those are all really important within the framework that we talk about particularly that sixth C of contribution. It's believed that the young people are able to meet their own developmental needs. In partnership with the proper environmental supports the more likely they are to contribute or be of service to the surrounding community or context. And that's where that bridge to giving service.

[00:14:42] Being a role model a mentor to others comes in and that's the bridge also the bridge between individual empowerment and collective empowerment. And so we talk about how the youth of the continent were moving that way. And this idea that we need to only focus on preventing bad things from young people that we're focusing only on drug use Prevention and violence prevention and only on the prevention. And instead we're trying to facilitate those competencies and those connections that we know are critical for young people. And when those happen in sufficient numbers those young people will be even more likely to be resources for their compute for their communities and the groups and social networks that they belong to. And that's what I really like about what you're saying and you know some of those other more traditional methods that you just described they don't exactly have the best track records in terms of changing the exact thing that they propose to change. And even there are some successes that people point to and you know there is research that says you know if you have a specific focused intervention for prevention that that you can achieve success is that even if there are successes in those areas that that still doesn't offer additional resources for the larger context within which they are a part of. And I think that a lot of the current youth development initiatives really place an emphasis on that person Environment Link and that we can't look at one without the other. Exactly. And that's a point you made in your paper as well as how important it is to understand context when you're using the framework that you propose. Correct. Correct. Young people are shaped not in a one way direction but the nature that occurs.

[00:16:45] And it is what seems to be really important for young people and we try to address that headline in our work with students. Part of what your paper addressed was not only a kind of a description of your rationale but you also got very practical in terms of strategies. Could you talk a

little bit about what you believe are the kind of practical strategic implications for not only social work education but also social work practice. Sure. One of the things that we really wanted to make sure stems from our classroom work is that this is something that people could pick up and run with. And so we wanted to be as specific as possible with some of the potential practice implications and from because the primary issue would be for practitioners to enhance their own understanding of the culture and specifically music as a tool. And so by providing these concepts the first step is for practitioners to listen to listen to the music try on some of these framework themes the same way basically that we do with students. Do you hear resilience themes do you hear growth and development themes do you hear social change themes. And I think for me that's one of the biggest ways to overcome that initial barrier or stereotype that people have about the music if you are given a language if they're given a framework for understanding then say oh well you know wait a minute I never heard that. OK. And then the music can potentially become more familiar more inviting more engaging for the practitioner themselves.

[00:18:45] But moving beyond that then you can get to the nuts and bolts of the therapeutic relationship. So in the ever important rapport building part it will be that much easier to say what you know what's your favorite song let's let's put on a song let's listen to the songs. What do you think about about that and it won't be you know that initial turn off and it will potentially be a great rapport building tool something that I do workshops. Instantly there is a connection. Kids will always want to know what their favorite song. Yes I noticed in your bio that you spent a part of your career at least as a practitioner. I think I know the answer to this but I'm going to ask it anyway in terms of applications for the classroom. How would you say in your experience the strategy in this framework is received in the classroom. The framework is actually a newer piece to the classroom. The first were exercises generally providing some sort of inductor. Well I'll let Dr. Deepak talk about how she is in the classroom but for me I would use songs play songs and then ask students to tell me if they saw the presence of certain concepts that they see resilience did they see instances of risk. Did they see instances of empathy they see instances of aspirations for growth and development. And then they would respond to it and actually their responses helped to basically validate some of these ideas within the framework and they took to it very well. It was more fun than traditional. It's really powerful the students really respond well to it.

[00:20:47] I think you know most hip hop songs that we choose to use in the classroom are not about things related to what the students are interested in which is helping people. And I used that presentation was in an introductory macro practice class where I first start off and just talk about history of social work and the conflict that we've had in the past between the Social Action perspective and the you know the and the micro and how we have come together you know find a way to work that out by incorporating the empowerment perspective as well as a generalist practice. And so in this course they're learning about general practice and then I show this extremely powerful video called Runaway Love which is by Ludicrous who people don't associate with. I don't think social or political actions. It's an incredible thing and I actually just heard it on the radio. And I would hope on the verge of tears every time I heard it. But then once I saw the video it's so interesting is it three different scenarios runaway girls. And it's completely different scenario. And one is white or possibly Hispanic one is white and one is black one. It's a situation of sexual abuse. And she runs away and her mother is on crack. One is she gets pregnant teen pregnancy and she can't tell her mom she take an abortion she can't tell her mother. She feels that her mother will kick her out. And one third scenario and so ask them to watch this you know and many of our students do come in hoping to be clinician you know through their MSW degree and ask them to apply a general lesson empowerment perspective.

[00:22:39] To coming up with some interventions to address the problem the social problem of runaway girls. It really sounds you know as I listened to you talk about it I can I can see something like that happen happening in a classroom and I see you know people engaged and what a great

approach to teaching. I think that you know starts where they are. It really is because you know they are coming in with this you know their genuine desire to help people. And I mean what I'm trying to do when I use it at all is because I do teach the macro courses I'm trying to bring it to the bigger picture. So this has to always start with some very moving personal story. But the great thing about the videos too is that they're really incorporating all these different layers that easily brings the political and social level to in that video. We can talk about pulling out those girls. Interpersonally the last scene of the video is really powerful because it's all these women they go to Central Park and they're all we can assume runaway girls and there's missing flyers all over the place and ludicrous ask them to you know they're all holding a candle. It's like a vigil and then all the fires blow away.

[00:23:56] To me that scene what we talk about in class after they do this exercise is going from the empowered perspective of actually working with these girls or young women who are former runaway youth and asking them what do they think is one of the ways to address this problem which is not their first thought because they want to treat them and they want to be therapeutic with them so they never think that the right of way good of themselves may have some good idea. But then another piece of it is in those three little scenarios one of them where the girl be physically abused by her stepfather. She had this one friend who is her one connection who she really loves and she gets killed in a drive by shooting. So it's just such a rich opportunity to talk about you know what kind of connections are going on in neighborhoods. You know this is happening is there an anti neighbor to even talk to about it is their teacher it just captured so much and it's such a little amount of time. Well I think you know you're presenting a common experience for your students and music is one thing but music with images. I think you're just upping the ante. So I think this is this is really wonderful. You know for those of us who who really are not as kind of connected or even teaching in these creative ways for example is where would you find videos like this. Are these available on YouTube or on their television do you go to YouTube and you don't have to have an account and you can just take a search term for anything. So this is what I often do when I'm preparing for a class is I'll type in. Well I do one with Hurricane Katrina about racism and anti-racism so for that I might type in Hurricane Katrina and see what video come up. And inevitably there will be within the many video there will be some hip hop videos that come up as well. But what happens.

[00:25:48] What I've noticed is as I started to do this that students will recommend videos to me to use. And that is really amazing too as you start to do it more. The students kind of see that that's an interest and now hook you up with different videos that maybe never thought of. Terrific. So there is I mean obviously lots of advantages to using a framework like this and some of these strategies. So here here's a question then what do I do if I'm a social work educator or a practitioner and I don't like this music. Will I tell my students you know you don't have to let this music but you have to listen to it. It's like you know you may have clients that you actually don't really like or you like the language they use or you don't like the way they dress or they've made different decisions in their life that you would never take. But you always have to listen. And that's kind of how I introduce it because some of the videos I show do have that language in them and so I say that beforehand and I think there is something so I have used music in the past with out using video. When you had a music video it is 500 times more powerful because you have those images that are playing with. The song is at least maybe some risk of that being kind of traumatizing for an audience or a class that maybe hasn't seen or wasn't prepared for some of those images. I tried to do that you know for the ones that are disturbing Runaway Love.

[00:27:23] I find it really disturbing but I tell people beforehand but again placed it in the context of working with clients and they will tell you disturbing things you need to be prepared. But this is part of what you're doing. I was reading something the other day in preparing to talk with the two of you. The kind of argument was that hip hop music is they turned it in for a politics where

indifference where oppositional transcripts and unofficial truths are developed and refined and it sounded to me a little bit like another clinical motto like narrative therapy. I was wondering if you had any thoughts about that. I actually think that's a great way to look at it. I mean I think hip hop generally overall is the form of reason that's cultural reasons you know the power inequities and whether people are talking about their personal stories which they usually are almost always contextualized within the political context. So I would think it's very similar to narrative therapy. But Dr. Travis I think that's dead on a couple of capacities both in terms of the methods that are created by an artist because we don't know the extent that that reflects them as an individual or are they commenting on what they see that others are experiencing. But to the extent that the listener identifies with that message then that becomes potentially their story and that's what we're hoping to tap into for working with a client. So example when I give my assignment I don't tell students that it's a hip hop song. So what I laid out is in the scenario that a young man has come to you after being referred by his probation officer or if his family constellation his circumstances.

[00:29:29] And I say that you asked him to you know he doesn't want to communicate with you and so you say OK why don't you go home and just journal journal. The thoughts that come to mind. And I say this is when he comes to see the next stop. This is the journal that he gives you and it's the text the song. And so the way the song lays out it lay out as a personal reflection someone I have journaled The Roots song What's Going On. And a lot of their songs take on this format and a lot of hip hop songs take on that format. It goes into his exploration of the circumstances things that are going on for him. Lima as issues of oppression. Desired avenues for success. Anyway I think that those types of you know basically if you were to intervene in this person's life which asked us to do a lot of what they say is what he talks about his hope to do better. He talked about his desire and his aspirations to be a better person. How hard it is for those that are pulling that that desire aspiration. But if we build on those strengths and we build on some of these other strengths that he's reflected on then perhaps he you know we could increase the likelihood that he'll be able to step into that new reality that desired change either at the individual level or the community level. If he talked about his own issues but to me he also has those messages right.

[00:31:14] Those things that are talking about the sort of collective struggles and I bring to them one parking about narrative therapy and I think it dovetails nicely with that that whole idea. And that's essentially what we're asking students to step into Bulut themselves in terms of understanding these these various realities that people experience. Also if they're going to step into the change agent role that they can use these themes in their assessment process in developing goals and in developing interventions and evaluating whether or not that change actually takes place of the individual or community level. Well the you know the the passion and enthusiasm for the topic and how you talk about it is really coming through and we're kind of at the end here unfortunately so I guess I'm going to ask the question what's next related to this topic or your your other work. Well I'll let both of us talk. I think we have some collective next steps and we asked them individual next steps. Personally there are several sort of integrated projects going on related to this. First is we've had one wave of research with young people trying to better understand their perspectives on hip hop and some of their attitudes around it to the extent that some of these are paramount themes surface as well as some of the more commonly addressed risk themes. You know besides violence substance abuse. So we've we've had one wave of data collection hoping to do another soon in the clash will continue to use this as a teaching tool not just the sort of open narrative but also integrating the framework a little bit more into the classroom and then in terms of dissemination to practitioners. I've done a couple of workshops already.

[00:33:23] I hope to continue doing workshops with both youth and researchers and social workers to collaborate on the framework and particularly at futility. There's an assessment circles that we developed that practitioners can use and just helping people to better understand the framework and some of the themes that we talk about and I'll let it continue. I think Raphael really covered the stuff

that we're working on together. One. One thing I'm working on separately which is connected to incorporate hip hop but not to the hip hop and that's on the youth internet knowledge capital which includes hip hop but also other you know vlog from YouTube video logs. Just like a blog. But their face is they are they're talking. I don't know if you've seen her before. I think so. I think so. But just the same idea of incorporating hip hop along with other forms of technology in teaching and how that has impact on students. I've done research on that thing. And that Tyree has a lesson plan using this forms including hip hop and I'm planning to do more research that. I'd like to thank you doctor Anne Deepak and Dr. Raphael Travis both of you for spending time with us today. Thanks a lot. Thank you. Thank you. You've been listening to doctors Rafael Travis and Anne Deepak discuss lessons from hip hop culture. Thanks for listening. And join us again next time for more lectures and conversations on social work practice and research. Hi I'm Nancy Smith professor and dean at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast.

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