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Hip-Hop's Criminological Thought: A Content Analysis

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Abstract

Despite recent attempts at using hip-hop as an avenue for understanding crime and justice issues, hip-hop music continues to be understudied within criminal justice and criminology. Considering that the music often represents populations which are disproportionately impacted by issues of crime, justice policy, and victimization, this oversight indicts the discipline. The current study addresses the gap through an inductive content analysis of a random sample of 200 hip-hop songs from platinum-selling albums released between 2000 and 2010. The focus of the study is extracting hip-hop artists' explanations for crime. The results revealed that hip-hop artists portray and explain crime in diverse ways which include crime as a result of: *retribution/retaliation* (47.58%), *environmental conditioning* (24.19%), *strain* (17.74%), *choice* (6.45%), *social learning* (4.84%), *oppression/injustice* (5.65%), *innateness* (4.84%), and *other* (4.84%). This study connects these explanations to larger bodies of criminological scholarship. Suggestions for future research and policy implications are also provided.

HIP-HOP'S CRIMINOLOGICAL THOUGHT: A CONTENT ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION

Research has asserted that African Americans are at a significantly greater likelihood of being processed through the American criminal justice system, even after controlling for socioeconomic status (Stucky, 2012). It is also known that this very same community has the least favorable view of the justice system (Van Craen, 2012). As a means of social, political, and economic expression, hip-hop music emerged as a voice for a group previously limited in such regard (Alridge, 2005). Nonetheless, very few have sought to examine the perspectives of such a community so disproportionately intertwined with what has been termed as a "recasting" of the system of racialized social control (Alexander, 2010). Consistent with the perspective of Friere (2006), who argues the need for dialogue between the subjugated and the powerful, it is our contention that, hip-hop be (1) given due academic respect, worthy of scholarly inquiry and, (2) allowed to voice concern about its own criminological reality. Interestingly, the impact of hip-hop has been widely demonstrated, yet it remains grossly under-examined in the academy for its ability to provide insight into the perspective of those most likely to encounter American criminal justice system's oppressive reality.

Understanding the perspectives on crime causation of those impacted by criminal justice strategies may reveal a disjuncture between the policies and their lived experience. Considering policy is most likely to be viewed as legitimate when it is perceived as adequately addressing the needs of the community, examining the perspectives on crime causation of those most heavily impacted by crime, victimization, and criminal justice approaches may allow policymakers to more adequately tailor policy to the community's needs. Policies, which do so, may find decreased tensions between the criminal justice system and the citizenry among which they are charged with dispensing justice. Therefore, the current study seeks to address this schism by examining the hip-hop community, particularly given that music serves as a key source for the transmission of cultural experiences (Brown, 1995; Persaud, 2011).

For the purposes of this study, hip-hop lyrics are used as a vehicle to ascertain subcultural perspectives on the correlates of crime. Before delving into the thrust of the study, a brief overview of the sparse systematic and empirical literature on hip-hop is provided. Then, the methodological approach adopted by this study—a content analysis of hip-hop songs—is discussed. The results of the study are then presented which demonstrate the hip-hop support for contemporary criminological thought. We conclude with future research and policy implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The current study addresses two yawning gaps within hip-hop scholarship in criminology. To start, this analysis attempts to use hip-hop as a vehicle to ascertain the community's perceptions about crime causation and motivation. Previous literature has examined the behavioral or interpretive relationship between hip-hop and acceptance of violence (Johnson et al., 1995; Johnson, Jackson, & Gatto, 1995), juvenile delinquency (Miranda & Claes, 2004), the possession of negative gender stereotypes (Bogt et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 1995), and youth's assessment

of the music's messages (Mahiri & Connor, 2003). In addition, there have also been examinations of hip-hop lyrics (Armstrong, 2001; Knoblock-Westerwick, Musto, & Shaw, 2008; Kubrin, 2005a, 2005b; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009) and music videos (Conrad, Dixon, & Zhang, 2009) for the prevalence of violence, misogyny, materialism, colorism/afro-centrism, and nihilism. To date, there has been one examination of hip-hop artists' perceptions of the criminal justice system (Steinmetz & Henderson, 2012). Interestingly, no prior research has used the music as a vehicle for understanding explanations of criminal activity—a tremendous oversight considering the saturation of cultural meaning laden within popular music lyrics and their potential value for understanding cultural perceptions of crime.

Previous research has also largely portrayed hip-hop in an unfavorable or negative manner, predominantly focusing on the perceptibly negative aspects of hip-hop music namely through negative behavioral outcomes (Bogt et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 1995; Johnson, Jackson, & Gatto, 1995; Miranda & Claes, 2004) and thematic content (Armstrong, 2001; Conrad, Dixon, & Zhang, 2009; Knoblock-Westerwick, Musto, & Shaw, 2008; Kubrin, 2005a, 2005b; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009; Zhang, Dixon, & Conrad, 2010). Thus, our analysis is the beginning of a *positive* dialog between the criminal justice apparatus, criminology, and the hip-hop community. Consistent with any art form, hip-hop is more than an amalgamation of perceptibly negative qualities. Myopically focusing on these “bad” attributes may have negative results in themselves, such as through procedural or policy outcomes in the administration of justice. For example, hip-hop lyrical content has been pulled from their musical and cultural context (often exaggerated and metaphorical) and used as an aggravating factor in criminal cases against the accused rapper (Dennis, 2007). In addition, within academe a myopic focus of inquiry may distort hip-hop as a phenomenon or provide only a fraction of the entire image. If the ultimate goal of the discipline is to know and understand, then phenomena must be approached from multiple angles rather than merely a few as previous hip-hop research has been.

Focus within research on the negative features of the music may stem from previously established beliefs or social/media hype about hip-hop, which guide the thrust of the research. Indeed, most previous research has been deductive and, thus, sought to account for the negative qualities within the music (Armstrong, 2001; Bogt et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 1995; Conrad, Dixon, & Zhang, 2009; Johnson et al., 1995; Johnson, Jackson, & Gatto, 1995; Knoblock-Westerwick, Musto, & Shaw, 2008; Kubrin, 2005a, 2005b; Miranda & Claes, 2004; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009; Zhang, Dixon, & Conrad, 2010).¹ Rather, the current analysis seeks to inductively uncover the messages within the lyrics which may have implications for further criminological inquiry—a venture which allows hip-hop to speak for itself and contribute potentially useful insights in a discourse which erodes the boundaries between policy, scholarship, and those impacted by the former.

An investigation which examines hip-hop for its explanations of crime through an inductive analytical method is valuable for two reasons. To start, criminal justice policy often makes particular assumptions about the correlates of crime—typically rooted in deterrence theory (e.g. severe sentencing, increasing arrests, etc.). These assumptions may differ from the perceptual explanations of crime held by the community; indeed, the current study demonstrates just that. The resulting disparity may result in decreased perceptions of legitimacy towards the criminal justice system. In other words, if the community does not believe the criminal justice system is adequately addressing the crime problem, they may not view the criminal justice system as effective. Another benefit of our analysis is that often those most heavily impacted by

crime, victimization, and the criminal justice system are also the populations least capable of influencing policy. As such, scholarly attention to their perceptions and experiences serves as, (1) a valuable attempt to integrate these individuals into the crime control dialog and (2) a critical precondition of a functional representative democracy.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The purpose of this study is to examine hip-hop music in search of the artists' explanation for deviant acts. References towards violations of criminal law will be understood as crime. While this definition of crime is problematic because it ignores many social harms not identified by law (see Agnew, 2011 for an overview) it is appropriate for this particular study for two reasons. First, the legal definition of crime is broad enough to encompass many of the harmful behaviors described in these lyrics. Second, the legal definition also captures crimes which some assert are harmless—such as drug use and prostitution—but are continually under scrutiny by both crime control and criminology regardless. As such, using the legal definition allows our analysis to examine a broad range of behaviors considered detrimental and/or impacted by crime control efforts.

Hip-hop lyrics were chosen as the unit of analysis because lyrics offer one avenue into the perceptions of prominent figures in the hip-hop community (i.e. artists). These lyrics are both creations of an influence on the hip-hop community (Alridge, 2005; Clay, 2006; Folami, 2007). As such, lyrics may offer a window into artists' and the greater hip-hop community's perceptions of crime. Lyrics are not only creations of individual artists but are also reflections of the social context in which they are situated (Brown, 1995). As such, lyrics written by hip-hop artists reflect their personal and vicarious experiences with crime and justice. In addition, rap lyrics were used because hip-hop music and artists are often the center of controversies in public discourse. The hypocrisy of which is represented in the recent criticism of President Obama and his use of Jay-Z in a voter registration ad, whereby the artist expresses his support for Obama, the need for voter participation and his life story of success in the midst of insurmountable odds. Criticisms were a result of the rapper's earlier controversial, often misinterpreted metaphorical lyrical content, which overshadow his contemporary state of expressing the "American dream." Hip-hop is a valuable object of inquiry considering its controversial nature, implied message, increasing international popularity, and its representation of a community so heavily intertwined with the criminal justice system, making it pertinent for scholars interested in the intersection of crime, justice, and various other social and cultural processes.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

Similar to the random-platinum sampling approaches adopted by Kubrin (2005a; 2005b), Weitzer and Kubrin (2009), and Steinmetz and Henderson (2012), the lyrics from this sample were derived from 200 hip-hop songs extracted from 1,507 tracks on 87 platinum-selling hip-hop albums released between 2000 and 2010.² Platinum albums (1 million or more sold) were

selected because they possess an increased likelihood of listenership. For this study, a lyric was operationalized as “a single thought expressed through the words of the song” (Steinmetz & Henderson, 2012, p. 161). To avoid redundancy in the sample, “greatest hits” albums and soundtracks were excluded from the sample pool. In addition, because the study is primarily focused on explanations of crime derived from experiences in the American hip-hop community, two platinum-selling European albums were also omitted.

To gather lyrics for the sample, multiples sources were employed. First, platinum status was determined by referring to data from the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA). To gain track listings, Amazon.com was used in conjunction with ARTISTdirect.com. Determining which songs or artists constitute hip-hop was conducted through ARTISTdirect.com—an online resource with information on music artists or groups. Once the random sample was obtained, lyrics were gathered from The Original Hip-Hop/Rap Lyrics Archive (www.ohhla.com). To avoid misinterpreting various slang used in the lyrics, The Rap Dictionary (www.rapdict.org) was consulted.

Plan of Analysis

A latent content analysis comprised the first part of this analysis which allowed for an inductive and systematic examination of the lyrics for the identification of common themes. The second part consisted of a manifest analysis to develop frequencies for the latent themes. These frequencies allow for comparisons to be made between the themes. From the random sample songs were selected for analysis if the artists sought to provide some explanation or justification for their own criminal behavior or that of others. Below is a more detailed description of the coding approach used in this study.

Coding Procedure

The coding approach adopted in this study is based on grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006).³ First, each lyric in which the artist(s) provided an explanation for criminal behavior was isolated and recorded. Then each explanation was translated or described in a manner which sought to capture the meaning packed within the artist's lyric. From each of these descriptions, a single word or phrase was generated for each lyric which sought to best capture how each lyric explained crime or criminality. To ensure the lyric was not divorced of its musical content, each song was listened to at least twice to reduce music misinterpretation.

The second stage of coding involved searching for patterns among the different explanations given within the hip-hop lyrics. Each of the components from the first wave of analysis—the lyric, the description, and the single word or phrase—were consulted when finding commonalities between themes. The patterns which were identified constitute different *explanations* of crime or criminality. Combined together, these explanations serve to create an overall, complex, and nuanced perspective on crime which has many points related to contemporary criminological theory.

RESULTS

Figure 1 demonstrates the explanations hip-hop artists provided for criminal activity. Eight separate types of explanations were uncovered through the content analysis, which will be presented in order of frequency: *retaliation or revenge*, *environmental conditioning*, *strain*, *choice*, *learning*, *response to oppression or injustice*, *inmateness*, and *other insights*. In addition,

we utilize the chi-square statistic to examine the likelihood that the hip-hop criminological mentioning's were not equally distributed across the respective theoretical categorizations (Table 1). The results of the chi-square analyses demonstrate that each of the categories are significantly more likely to be unevenly distributed, with retaliation/revenge exhibiting the greatest likelihood of being theorized by the artists. Due to the exaggerated metaphorical nature of hip-hop music, the reader should remember not to take the explicit acts themselves at face value and, instead, focus on the underlying criminological thought underpinning the lyrics.

Figure 1: Criminological Mentionings

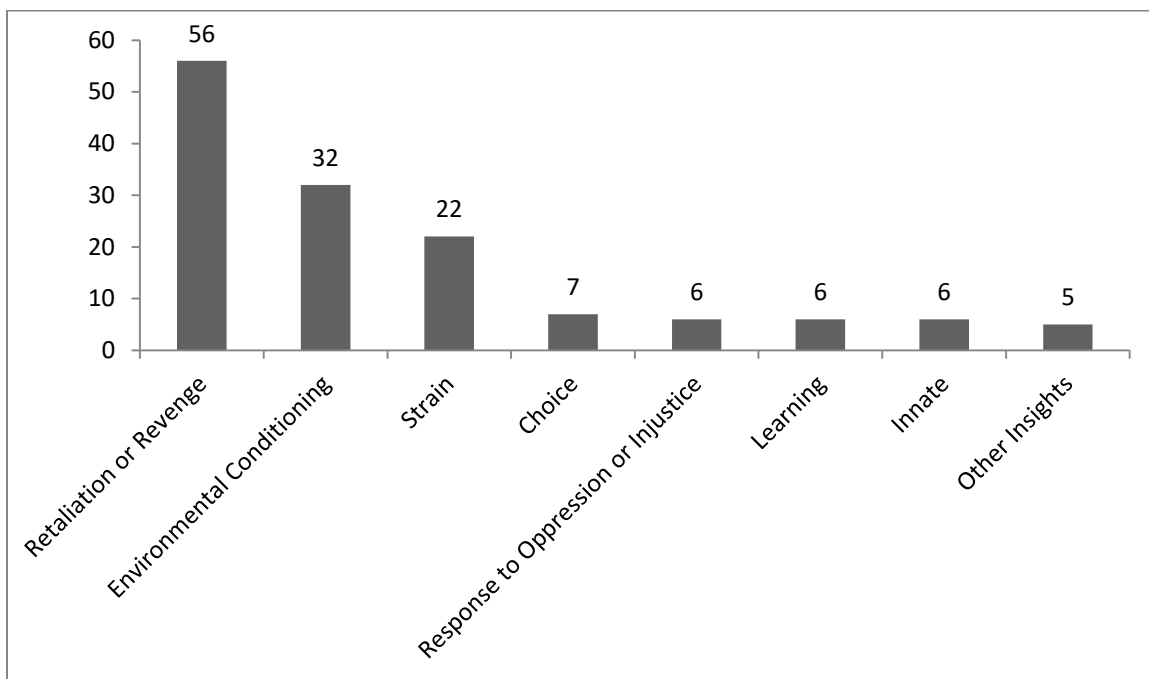


Table 1: Criminological Mentionings

Themes	Frequency (%)	χ^2
Retaliation or Revenge	56 (40%)	10.20***
Environment/Socialization	32 (22.86%)	6.58***
Strain	23 (16.43%)	5.31***
Choice	7 (5.0%)	2.72*
Learning	6 (4.29%)	2.50*
Response to Oppression or Injustice	6 (4.29%)	2.50*
Innate	6 (4.29%)	2.50*
Other Insights	4 (2.86%)	2.03*
Total	140 mentionings	

Results of one-sample t-test: * = $p < .05$; *** = $p < .001$

Retaliation or Revenge

The most prominent explanation given for criminal activity was the result of a desire for retaliation or revenge ($n = 56$; 40.00% of mentioning's; $\chi^2 = 10.20$; $p < .001$). A number of characteristics are important to consider about this explanation. First, claims or assertions of violent retaliation were largely stated as threats. Forty five (80.36%) of lyrics presented in this explanation depict the use of violence as *only a threat*. Second, these threats were largely conducted as a response to disrespect or the potential threat of violence from someone else. For example, Lil' Wayne ("Hit 'Em Up", 2005) threatens violence against those who might do his family harm: "You ever threaten mines I won't resist to put the chrome up. My guns'll be like gang signs (always gettin' thrown up)." In response to numerous instances of disrespect, Snoop Dogg ("Lay Low", 2000) and Nate Dogg offer up a warning of impending violence:

For the nigga who be talkin' loud and holdin' his dick, talkin' shit,
he better lay low! For the bitch that said I shot some shit up out of
my dick, now she sick, she better lay low! For the niggaz who be
claimin' my hood and really ain't from my gang, better lay low! I
hope he don't be thinkin' I'm just talkin' and I won't do a thing,
really hope so!

Here, hip-hop artists seem to project what Anderson (1990; 1999) refers to as the "code of the street"—a finding which has previously been explored in hip-hop lyrics by Kubrin (2005a; 2005b) in her explorations of various manifestations of themes within the code of the street such as *respect, willingness to fight or use violence, material wealth, violent retaliation, objectification of women, and nihilism* (Kubrin, 2005a; 2005b).⁴

It must be noted that, not every threat of violence in the hip-hop is conducted to ward off disrespect or violence. For example, Mystikal (2000) threatens violence towards the person who murdered his sister:

Motherfuckin' Murderer! Bitch, you killed my sister! Bitch, I'm 'bout to get my pistol! Know that I'm comin' and I gotta get him, and I gotta kill him, and cease all his stupid shit, and walk with this venomous shit 'cause she's s'posed to be there for me.

In sum, the most prominent explanation featured in this sample was that crime, particularly violence, results from a stated or threatened intention to inflict harm on those who disrespect or threaten harm onto the artist and/or those in which the artist is affiliated, like friends or family. Largely, these declarations of violence were threats (80.36% of violent lyrics in this category), a finding strikingly similar to theoretical assertions made in Anderson's (1990; 1999) code of the street. In other words, the threat of violence may be functional and serves to provide artists with respect or credibility as well as potentially ward off future instances of violence or disrespect.

Environmental Conditioning

The second most stated explanation of deviancy ($n = 32$; 22.86%; $\chi^2 = 6.58$; $p < .001$) was ascribed to environmental conditioning. Crime was viewed as a result of numerous factors which all have one common thread—they pertained to external forces imposing some level of socialization or conditioning. The reader should keep in mind that this type of explanation differs from the *learning* explanation (discussed later) in one very important respect. Under

environmental conditioning, crime is the perceived result of some outside environmental force(s) at work shaping the behavior of the artist rather than conscious assimilation of knowledge explicitly transferred from person to person (such as with the social learning explanation); this transmission is more tacit. While social learning happens at the individual or group (micro) level, this learning seems to occur at the neighborhood/community (mezzo) level or cultural/institutional/social (macro) level.

Tupac ("Lil' Homies", 2001) provides an example of environmental conditioning when he describes criminal education coming from socialization emerging from the environment referred to as the "cold streets": "You catch him in his G ride, clutchin' his glockscreamin' outlaw (West Side motherfucker) bustin' on my enemy's block educated on these cold streets." Jay-Z ("Pray", 2007) provides yet another example of environmental influence by discussing how witnessing various events in his environment conditioned him: "Everything I seen, made me everything I am. Bad drug dealer or victim, I beg, which came first? Moving chickens or the egg?" Experiences within his environment acted to shape his proclivities toward criminal or deviant behavior.

In short, lyrics within the *environmental conditioning* category concern the artists' immediate social/physical environments and their impact on criminal behavior. These explanations place culpability for criminal behavior on forces or entities existing outside of the artist in the immediate social environment (which includes family, school, and friends, to name a few). The lyrical explanations provided by the artists bear similarities to criminological theories such as social disorganization theory (Shaw & McKay, 1942), social bonding theory (Hirschi, 1969), and various other sociological perspectives, which hold that social environments and our connections to them influence our behavior in various ways (i.e. community bonding increases internal controls, social disorganization impacts likelihood of crime in an area). The artists in this category seemed to support the idea that the physical and social environment can impact individual behavioral tendencies including criminal activity.

Strain

The third most prevalent explanation for criminal behavior was strain ($n = 23$; 16.43%; $\chi^2 = 5.31$; $p < .001$). Here, strain is consistent with criminological strain theory in its various forms which argues that criminal behavior is a result of external pressures on actors psychologically (Agnew, 1992), institutionally (Messner & Rosenfeld, 2007), and/or socio-culturally (Merton, 1938). Hip-hop artists present crime as a result of various psychological tensions—namely financial stress—which propel persons into criminal behavior. As described by the artists, the primary pressure was a perceived need to commit crime to gain money for sustenance. As 50 Cent ("Ski Mask Way", 2005) asserts, "I be schemin' to put a lil' bread on my plate."

Additionally, many of the artists ascribe a sense of strain emerging not from the need for *self*-sustenance but from difficulties in providing for family members. For instance, Ludacris in his appropriately titled "Mouths to Feed" (2006) raps:

Listen, look I gotta feed my family by all means necessary 'cause paychecks are comin' up shorter than February. Can't get a real job, I never finished school, can't get no new clothes, I wore the same tennis shoes. But now the game's changed, I'm all about the hustle, and even Hogan knows best, I'm all about the muscle, I'm all about my team, I'm all about my green, I'm 'bout supply and demand, I'm 'bout to serve the fiends.

In this song, Ludacris notes that he got into drug dealing as a result of an inability to find better employment for the maintenance of his family. Similarly, Juvenile ("Numb Numb", 2003)

describes dealing drugs as a means to provide for his daughter, "I can't get popped, I've been convicted for two felonies, look I'm just tryna put some clothes on my daughter, I hope they ain't riding I need to sell this other quarter." In a Mertonian (1938) sense, to achieve a socially approved goal (providing for family), both of these artists claim to be forced into socially disapproved means (drug dealing). The perception is that they have been forced to *innovate* (alternative means of material acquisition). The implication is that if adequate economic means were made available then crime resulting from strain could be alleviated.

In sum, hip-hop artists propose that deviance as a rationale for deviancy provides when alternative means are unobtainable or, perhaps, unrealistic. This finding is consistent with the assertions made by criminological strain theorists—that crime results from external pressures (financial or otherwise) to engage in crime (Agnew, 1992; Messner & Rosenfeld, 2007; Merton, 1938).

Choice

One of the most recognized controversies over the assumptions of human nature within criminology concerns the battle of free will/agency over determinism (Agnew, 2011). Much like criminology, which has retreated from decades of staunch determinism by asserting the role of agency—that humans can actively choose to engage in crime (Clarke & Cornish, 1985; Ferrell, Hayward, & Young, 2008; Katz, 1988; Paternoster, 1987)—hip-hop artists also acknowledge the role that choice makes in their own criminality in seven of the lyrics (5%; $\chi^2 = 2.72$; $p < .01$). For instance, the St. Lunatics ("Countdown", 2001) assert, "I treat the beats like the streets. I'ma do what I want to. I ain't gotta confront you. I'll kill you if I want to." While certainly a code of the street style of threat may be leveled here (threatening violence to prevent violence of disrespect), the artists are also asserting that the threat of murder may not need provocation but, rather, only a *desire* to commit violence is necessary. In other words, no external prompting or prodding is necessary for the crime to occur—only a will for commission is necessary.⁵ Likewise, Notorious B.I.G. acknowledges a degree of alleged pleasure in committing violence, "Don't you know that a killing is thrilling, all the blood spilling, is all up on the drug dealing." Of course, this statement does reflect a certain Machiavellian or Hobbesian "ends justify the means" mentality. In essence, violence is acceptable because it results in successful drug dealing. The thrill, however, of violence still reflects a degree of hedonism and agency in the act.

In short, while outside forces are implicated by hip-hop artists to explain their criminal behavior, they also acknowledged that criminal behavior can be a choice—typically made because the crime can be pleasurable. Crime can not only be *functional* but it can also be *fun*. Like most behavior, more than one cause or motivation can be ascribed to crime. Much like criminologists are repeatedly confronted with the dynamic nature of criminal behavior, hip-hop artists seemed to recognize that crime is a result of forces *beyond* and *within* their control. The reader should remember that the visceral violence portrayed in the lyrics is more a function of the exaggerated metaphorical nature of hip-hop lyrics rather than the promotion of serious acts of aggression. That said, the idea that crime can be a pleasurable experience remains.

Social Learning

Hip-hop artists also recognized that crime can be learned ($n = 6$; 4.29%; $\chi^2 = 2.50$; $p < .05$). In an example reminiscent of contemporary learning theory in its emphasis on peer

relations (Akers & Jensen, 2006; Burgess & Akers, 1966), Tupac ("Hennessey", 2004) raps: Troubled child comin' up. I had to ride I guess. Tried to apply myself. Them niggaz was ballin'. My mama couldn't tell me shit. The streets was callin'. I was often involved with niggas breakin' the law.

Here, we find Tupac discussing peer associations and how they were connected to his criminal activity. Indeed, criminologists have contended that friends can influence behavior and teach methods, beliefs, and motivations for the commission of crime since the early days of criminology and Edwin Sutherland (1939; 1947). Our findings support the notion that, in this sample, hip-hop artists echo the claims and findings of social learning theorists that peer relations can influence proclivities towards criminality.

Peer relations, however, are not the only way one can learn criminal behavior. Rarely examined in criminological research, it is reasonable to assert that children can also learn criminal activity from older adults (i.e. parents, mentors, and role models). Indeed, hip-hop supports this very idea. Jay-Z ("Never Change", 2003) discusses how he got involved in drug dealing through his education under older drug dealers, "Old heads taught me, yung'un, walk softly, carry a big clip, that'll get niggaz off me, keep coke in coffee, keep money smellin' mothy." Over all, hip-hop artists asserted that criminal behaviors and techniques can be a result of learning through peer relations as well as through adult models, a finding long supported by the criminological literature.

Response to Oppression or Injustice

Counter-colonial criminology asserts that experiences of oppression, primarily in the form of colonialism, engender feelings of alienation and frustration in oppressed populations (Agozino, 2003; Tatum, 1994; Tatum, 2000). These feelings can manifest in various behavioral outcomes: conformity, criminal activity, and protest, of which criminal activity is said to be a mechanism of the impoverished's discontent (Agozino, 2003; Tatum, 1994; Tatum, 2000). Similar to the assertions of counter-colonial criminologists (Agozino, 2003; Tatum, 1994; Tatum, 2000), hip-hop artists also claimed that criminal behavior can be a response to oppression or perceived injustices ($n = 6$; 4.29%; $\chi^2 = 2.50$; $p < .05$). For example, Tupac ("Crooked Nigga Too", 2004) demonstrates the desire to revolt when he raps, "Y'know you really can't say that ya blame niggaz. Fuck bein' tame, set aflame, time to aim triggers. 2Pac'll spark a revolution, fuck the Constitution. I want my bucks for restitution." Here, Tupac points to previous injustices committed by the United States against the African American community including (1) slavery and (2) a failure to provide the promised restitutions to freed slaves. He suggests that violence waged by African Americans, particularly against the police, may be justified in this context. The protest adaptation to oppression described by counter-colonial criminology manifests within Tupac's lyrical message. Drawing from another body of theoretical work, similar to the assertions of procedural justice scholars (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 1984; Tyler 2004; Tyler & Huo, 2002), hip-hop artists indicated that perceptions of unfairness and injustice may be conducive to criminal behavior, an area of research warranting much contemporary inquiry (see also, Steinmetz & Henderson, 2012).

While Tupac ("Crooked Nigga Too", 2004) discussed forms of direct, explicit injustice inflicted on people, sometimes hip-hop artists acknowledge that oppression can be more general, indirect, or widespread—like an environment of oppression. Such is the case when Jay-Z

("American Gangster", 2007) claims that the drug trade is fostered in oppressive conditions: "Geah, anywhere there's oppression the drug profession flourishes like beverages." Here, rather than detailing explicit acts of injustice, the environment is held to be an oppressive milieu itself which is conducive to organized or widespread criminal activity within that setting.

In sum, the hip-hop artists pointed to the idea that perceptions of oppression or injustice may be responsible for engendering criminal activity—a relationship theorized by few and tested by none. These perceptions can result from more explicit slights or through broader lived experiences of oppression and injustice. This conclusion is supported within criminology by two bodies of theory: counter-colonial criminology and, to a lesser extent, procedural justice and legitimacy theory.⁶ Feelings of oppression may engender a type of strain which can manifest as criminal behavior (Agozino, 2003; Tatum, 1994; Tatum, 2000). In addition, the criminal justice system may be unable to control the resulting criminal activity given the perceived illegitimacy of the system. Theoretically, if the system is viewed as unfair by hip-hop artists, less legitimacy is conferred, ultimately lessening the social control capabilities of the institution (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 1984; Tyler 2004; Tyler & Huo, 2002) the results of which are vicariously disseminated to many.

Innate Criminality

Throughout the previous explanations, hip-hop artists had portrayed criminal behavior as a result of forces external to themselves or through agency. However, occasionally discussed is the idea that criminality results from *innate* characteristics ($n = 6$; 4.29%; $\chi^2 = 2.50$; $p < .05$). In short, the tendency or predilection towards deviance was ascribed to some default in their character. For example, 50 Cent ("This is 50", 2005) ascribes the tendency towards violence to some internal murderous characteristic or even alter-ego: "I've got a itchy-itchy trigger finger, nigga it's the killa in me."

In another example, Tupac ("Better Days", 2002) indicates that criminal proclivities can be the result of heredity when he raps, "Guess we was evil since birth, product of cursed semens. Cause even our birthdays is cursed days—a burn thug in the first place, the worst ways." Here, Tupac is suggesting that his group's or community's criminality is the result of problematic heredity. The idea of a heritable tendency towards criminality or "anti-social behavior" is consistent with developmental or bio-social criminologists (Beaver, DeLisi, Wright, & Vaughn, 2009; Moffitt, 1993; Rhee & Waldman, 2002). They argue that anti-social or criminal behavior results from developed or inherited biological or physiological features (i.e. genetics, neural anomalies, early childhood brain development, and neural structures). Hip-hop seems to provide some support for these controversial conclusions and also an interesting contribution—that a person can be self-aware of potential trait-based tendencies towards anti-social, criminal, or deviant behavior.

In short, hip-hop artists described criminal behavior as an outgrowth of an internally-based characteristic. The exact nature of this trait ranges, from inheritance or genes to psychological and moral defects in character. This espoused association builds upon the previous hip-hop explanations of criminal behavior by introducing an innate or internal motivation of deviance rather than resulting from agency and the influence of external forces.

Other Hip-Hop Insights

As the reader has gathered from the previous sections, the ways in which hip-hop artists explain

criminality are diverse, yet consistent with contemporary criminological theory, by utilizing that the motivations for crime range from retaliation in a manner often demonstrative of Anderson's (1990; 1999) "code of the street;" stress and pressure reminiscent of assertions by strain theorists (Agnew, 1992; Merton, 1936; Messner & Rosenfeld, 2007); and even perceptions of oppression and injustice similar to the arguments of counter-colonial criminologists (Agozino, 2003; Tatum, 1994; Tatum, 2000) and procedural justice and legitimacy theorists (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Tyler, 1984; Tyler, 2004; Tyler & Hou, 2002). As such, it may be difficult, if not impossible, to categorize every explanation offered. In this study, those explanations offered within the lyrics which did not readily lend themselves to inclusion in the previously established categories were considered to be an *other insights* explanation ($n = 4$; 3.47 %; $\chi^2 = 2.03$; $p < .05$). For example, Lil Wayne raps in the Notorious B.I.G. Song "I'm With Whateva" (2005), "I'ma shoot it out if I'm facing ail [jail]." Avoiding jail is viewed as a justified reason to engage in violence which is an explanation that, while related to previous points, lacks contextual clues present in other lyrics allowing for proper classification. The explanation offered could be a pleasure versus pain choice, a desire to appear tough, pride, and resistance to authority. The absence of contextual clues, however, makes clean categorization difficult. As such, this lyric was categorized under *insights*.

In short, the inclusion of the *other insights* category supports the notion that hip-hop explanations are nuanced and diverse. Hip-hop artists explain criminal behavior in so many ways that it is difficult to categorize them all without some sort of overflow category. Were a larger sample to be taken, more categories may have been identified, perhaps *ad nauseam*. The utilization of an *other insights* category is important because it highlights the reality that hip-hop artists recognize crime as a multi-faceted and complex concept with a wide array of criminological thought. In other words, that there are so many explanations as to defy simple classification schemes demonstrates that building policies which address only a few causes is bound to be seen as inadequate.

CONCLUSION

The socio-politically marginalized have very few outlets for voicing their discontent. Hip-hop emerged as one of those, yet, very few have intentionally examined it for its ability to inform scholarly inquiry. Our findings represent the inaugural attempt to do such with the intent focus on criminology. It is our contention that this research advances the extant hip-hop literature in criminology by providing a systematic analysis of the criminological theories put forth by the artists. In short, our findings demonstrate that hip-hop artists provide explanations of crime consistent with those espoused in criminology. Interestingly, the most common reason provided for deviancy was a result of retaliation/vengeance in the protection of one's honor. Artists were also very likely to propose that crime resulted from some level of environmental conditioning. We demonstrate that the strain on the individual was also theorized by the artists as an explanation for criminal activity. Though limited in use, choice, social learning, response to oppression/injustice, and innate criminality, were also given as explanations of criminal activity within the lyrical content. Overall, the findings identify that artists' rationales are supported by the criminological literature and subsequently provide an alternative for understanding criminal motivations.

Of primary concern for us was to determine if hip-hop had any positive qualities, beyond the traditionally noted negativity relayed from its content, and if so, what could they inform us of, given the culture's over-exposure to the criminal justice system. After analyzing the music, in the context of metaphorical thought, it became clear that hip-hop is not just an art form that sometimes describes criminal activity but it also provides explicit or implicit *explanations* for such behavior, much of which is consistent with criminological thought. Given the widespread listenership of hip-hop music and its ability to provide an outlet of expression for those who feel traditionally exiled; this was a surprising finding, never before highlighted in any previous works. While hip-hop has often been derided for its perceptibly negative qualities like misogyny and violence, it is important to remember that hip-hop contains insights and reflections worthy of consideration—particularly as so much of its content seems to roughly parallel academic thought.

Despite this study's obvious merging of hip-hop and criminological thought, there are several issues of refinement that warrant mentioning. It should not be assumed that there are similarities between mainstream hip-hop artists endorsed by the RIAA and underground artists. Therefore, it is possible that underground artists may have greater freedom to express differing or more radical explanations of crime than mainstream artists do, considering that popular rap music must be palatable to a wider audience. Consequently, this study falls victim to the commonly held challenges of music research in that it only used the top-selling mainstream albums to draw the sample. Future research should seek to include underground hip-hop artists in their analyses, so as to determine the level of consistency with the extant literature.

Another challenge presented to this study is the sample size ($n = 200$). A larger sample may have provided more detailed or robust findings. That said, this limitation was common within hip-hop research. In addition, qualitative inductive studies are often more time and labor intensive than many quantitative approaches and concessions must be made to increase the manageability of the research, including reductions in sample size. Regardless, future research may benefit from increased sample sizes because larger samples make (1) extracting and isolating themes easier as well as (2) increases confidence in the validity of those themes. As such, the *other* category included in the results may have yielded more categories to be discussed in isolation. Third, hip-hop lyrics present only one source of data to obtain the hip-hop community's perspectives on crime and delinquency. Interviews, surveys, participant observation, and other forms of data may provide confirming, rebutting, or expanding results than those which were found in this paper. Future research could benefit from including these other forms of data.

Regarding policy born of our findings, we feel it is ever more important that hip-hop research turn to the consortium-benchmarking model, which is a scholar-practitioner collaborative case study approach focusing on rigor and relevance in applied research (Schiele & Krummaker, 2011). Consistent with our findings, prior research has demonstrated that hip-hop has the potential to provide a unique perspective, yet most of the policy recommendations center around suggestions for other academics. It is our argument that the greatest challenge to hip-hop researchers is to find an avenue through which policy makers, researchers and hip-hop artists collaboratively provide critical input from a multi-positioned perspective. Research has demonstrated that the more stakeholders allowed to reside over solutions, the greater the likelihood that legitimacy will be afforded (Tyler, 2010). Therefore, we propose that not only should our findings suggest further scholarly inquiry, but also dismantle

the traditionally upheld barriers between the academy and the communities we often objectively examine.

Endnotes

¹ Kubrin (2005b) did not define nihilism. Most perspectives on nihilism, however, identify it as a bleak and futilistic perspective marred by a moral perspective which holds actions are useless due to either the inevitability of death or the inability to make a difference. As such, identifying hip-hop artists as expressing nihilism is connecting them with a negative mental and philosophical state

² There are many problems which confront the random-platinum method of sampling which should be noted. First, there is no guarantee that platinum-selling songs are the most influential or respected songs in the hip-hop community. Second, it serves as only a crude proxy to listenership. Considering the many ways music can be consumed—legal or otherwise—album sales can only capture one narrow sliver of potential listenership for a song. Third, this method does not pick up influential underground or non-mainstream artists. In short, this method only guarantees that we are selecting songs which have been heavily purchased. That said, this method has become standard in hip-hop studies because of the difficulty inherent in systematically and randomly sampling any other way. In other words, we are confronted with the challenge of theoretical objectivity mired by the subjective reality of research.

³ The data for this study were analyzed and coded by the first author. The practice of using one coder to analyze lyrics has been engaged in by other hip-hop scholars (Armstrong, 2001; Kubrin, 2005a; Kubrin, 2005b).

⁴ In his examinations of urban life in Philadelphia, Anderson (1990; 1999) discussed a system for maintaining relative peace which involved the threat of violence to prevent violence and disrespect—the “code of the street.” While hip-hop is often connected in popular consciousness with violence, it may be deceptive to think that hip-hop outright *endorses* violent behavior. Rather, the threat of violence may have a more nuanced function in hip-hop music, much like it does in the code of the street. First, it is possibly a mechanism for generating respect. Second, it may act to insulate the artists or others in the hip-hop community from future acts of violence, or more directly, the appearance of weakness. In this sense, hip-hop music is both violent in theory and non-violent in reality.

⁵ The reader should keep in mind the metaphorical nature of hip-hop lyrics. In this case these lyrics are allegorical for the tenacity with which the artist will seek to become the best rapper of the day

⁶ The authors would like to emphasize the relevance of counter-colonial criminology to the discipline as the theory bears similarities to previously established criminological theories—

namely strain—but situates itself within a broader social, cultural, and historical context of colonial and internal-colonial structural relations of power. As such, this theory was designed from the ground up with African American offending in mind which makes it particularly valuable in the study of hip-hop.

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