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‘Indigenous Youth Rhyme About Crime: Hip Hop as
qualitative methodology in criminology’

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Indigenous Youth Rhyme About Crime: Hip Hop as qualitative methodology in criminology

- An abstract of 100-200 words

This paper explores the potential of Hip Hop as a qualitative methodology for garnering youth perspectives of crime, with particular reference to Indigenous youth living in Western Sydney. We describe a research method designed to create space for Indigenous people to control the epistemological direction, and action outcomes of a research project. Hip Hop as a qualitative methodology is utilised here by a collaborative team to find out about Aboriginal youth strengths and ‘protective factors’ which mitigate criminal behaviour. We will discuss the way in which this project differs from other pieces of criminological research which has sought to answer similar questions, and why Hip Hop in this particular case offers a complex, yet safe, platform for young Indigenous people to express themselves for the purposes of research.

The Paper:

This paper describes the methodology of a collaborative research project in the Hawkesbury region of northwest Sydney, focusing on Aboriginal youth perspectives and understandings of crime. The partners in this project are a non-Indigenous researcher, and Merana Aboriginal Community Association for the Hawkesbury. We would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the places where we meet, the Dharug nation, and Eora. The methodology we describe in this paper exemplifies a way of undertaking academic research with Indigenous communities which privileges multiple epistemologies, and seeks to generate multiple outcomes: of new knowledge recognised by the academy; of new knowledge that is useful to a community; and positive experiences for the participants in the research. All of this we hope, will support humble yet valuable social change.

Most research undertaken with Indigenous communities on the topic of criminal justice and crime prevention is dominated by a deficits-based vocabulary, which describes prolific amount of historical, social and economic disadvantage. An extensive amount of research has been undertaken to determine why such a huge proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experience high-levels of crime in their lives, and are vastly over-represented in Australia's criminal justice system. For example, recent statistics from the Australian Institute for Health and Welfare (AIHW) show the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in juvenile detention is even greater than the adult prisons; over 30 per cent of young people in juvenile detention centres identify as Indigenous, and the percentage rises to over 50 per cent for those aged 13 years or younger (AIHW 2006:xv). Evidence suggests that formal contact with the criminal justice system at a young age precludes incarceration as an adult. A survey of Aboriginal women in NSW prisons revealed that at least 36 per cent had received their first conviction between 11 and 12 years of age, and 60 per cent had been previously incarcerated as a juvenile (Lawrie 2002:4). There is therefore a need for research which not only describes the 'risk factors' of Aboriginal youth exposure to the criminal justice system, but also generates knowledge around preventive strategies and 'protective factors'. There are several key pieces of literature which have sought to address this issue (Homel et al. 1999; Samuelson and Robertson 2002; Zubrick and Robson 2003). Homel et al. (1999) developed a theoretical model of developmental pathways to delineate culturally specific risk and protective factors for Aboriginal youth. These factors included social contexts as well as individual mitigating factors against criminal activity. Risk factors listed include forced removals, welfare dependence, institutionalised racism, cultural factors (such as congregating in open spaces), and alcohol use. Protective factors include 'cultural resilience' (which is yet to be defined), personal controls, and family controls. Much of the argument for this approach was based on literature from communities overseas, particularly New Zealand and the United States of America, complemented with interviews of Aboriginal community workers from one location, and some data from a complementary 'sibling study'. Homel et al. prescribe a broad need for qualitative, and localised research, which should be controlled and undertaken by Aboriginal people (1999:192):

[F]eatures unique to [I]ndigenous culture that may promote resilience in the face of overwhelming adversity, requires that investigation go beyond traditional longitudinal or intervention studies and draw on ethnographic and other qualitative research that explores the major differences in history, local condition, social structures and culture between indigenous communities and the rest of the Australian population (Langton 1991). This literature suggests that even such basic concepts such as the nature and meaning of crime and violence may be different in Aboriginal communities. (Homel et al. 1999:184)

Samuel and Robertson's (2002) study surveyed 20 Indigenous tertiary students about alcohol and substance use and pre-categorised their responses. The qualitative survey tool used the categories of personal controls, family, school, community, and justice system 'action' to prevent misuse of alcohol and drugs, violence and crime in general (2002:40-53). While this study incorporated Aboriginal researchers into the interview process, there was little evidence that the design of the questionnaire integrated Indigenous epistemological perspectives. The sampling was also limited; while the respondents were comprised of equal numbers of males and female, the total number (n=20) was a limited sample size for a structured survey of this kind. As the respondents were all tertiary students, this may have skewed the results of questions around 'school' as a protective factor, given that the respondents must have met with academic success in the school environment. As only 3 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have acquired formal education equivalent to a Bachelor degree or above (ABS 2004), the sample group cannot be representative of all Indigenous experiences of school, or other 'protective' factors considered in the study. The survey design and analysis conflating 'resistance to drugs and alcohol' with 'resistance to crime' is an over-simplification of a complex series of social factors, given the legislative history of Indigenous peoples and alcohol use in Australia (Brady 2004:19). Zubrick and Robson's (2003) paper uses an eco-systems theoretical approach, and integrates 'distal exposures' (such as socio-economic inequality, market deregulation, mobility) and 'proximal exposures' (biological dysmaturational, poor quality parenting, family conflict and violence, drug and alcohol abuse and eroding social capital) into a 'developmental research agenda' (2003:6).

This brief literature review demonstrates the need for a different way of approaching the question of understanding a Indigenous youth perspectives of 'protective' factors.

This meant two things: the inquiry needed to focus on localised perspectives of young people themselves (but could also be potentially replicated for broader general implications), and needed to generate rich qualitative data, rather than ‘yes/no’ answers. We chose to focus our inquiry on the strengths of the research participants, using the logic of appreciative research. If we ask questions about what is wrong, we will know more about problems, but if we ask questions about positives we will begin to find answers (Ludema et al. 2006). Appreciative research is not new to criminology, and has been used to undertake ethnographic work with ‘deviant subcultures’ for decades (Jupp 2006:17); however, the use of the strengths-based approach provides a twist, which researchers in other disciplines such as health promotion have found incredibly cogent when working with Indigenous communities (Brady 1993; Brough et al. 2004; Murphy et al. 2004).

Our collaborative team decided to use Hip Hop as a creative ethnographic technique to garner qualitative data from Koori youth in the Hawkesbury. Hip Hop is a global form (Mitchell 2001) of youth culture (Perkins 1996:258). It has global influences in its elements, but emerged as praxis by African-American artists from the streets of New York in the late 1970s (Bennett 2000:59; Green 2003:17; Iveson 1997:40). Hip Hop comprises four creative elements; writing (graffiti), dancing (breaking), rhyming (rap) and disk-jockeying (scratching and sampling music from vinyl records). Graffiti is a form of art, using aerosol spray paint and generally exhibited in civic space (legally and illegally). Colourful and incorporating words and messages, as a mode of ‘territorial marking’, it has been described as “DIY impressionism, or guerrilla art” (Ogg and Upshal 2003:45). Graffiti is often associated with vandalism, and ‘crime prevention’ initiatives have poured thousands of dollars into graffiti removal from public view (AIC 2003). The vast majority of material destroyed is known as ‘tagging’: a stylised signature quickly drawn using aerosol or indelible marker; writing over walls, signs, train interiors, and other public spaces. Theorists such as Glissant refer to this practice as youth engaging in a global struggle to empower themselves “by writing their name, their world into existence” (ABC Radio National 2006).

Break dancing draws on a variety of styles with African diasporic or slave-based genealogies, such as capoeira; as well as West Indian influences. Hazzard-Donald describes this form of dance as ‘masculine’, rejecting the need for a female partner, and competitive in nature (1996: 225). Dancers propel themselves in horizontal and vertical circular sweeps, using hands, shoulders and head as balance points. Back flips are not uncommon. The hands, arms, shoulders and neck also perform stylised moves reflecting the beat of the music through the dancers, known as ‘b-boys’ and ‘b-girls’. Dancing as a form of competition has extended into new styles, such as ‘krumping’ (Lachappelle, 2005), a physical projection of self, used as an alternative to gang violence in the suburbs of Los Angeles. Scratching and sampling is performed by a disk-jockey (known as a ‘DJ’). The DJ provides the samples of music which gives a song or dance a particular character. Sampling draws from music disciplines as wide as jazz, popular television theme songs, pop, even can folk music. Samples of singers and spoken voice are often integrated into the song to complement the rhyming element.

Rhyming is known popularly as ‘rap’. Rap uses spoken voice, and focuses on word-play, using poetic devices such as alliteration, consonance, assonance, synecdoche, allegory, repetition, genre, and stylised modifications of words: neologisms and double meanings specific to Hip Hop (Gates Jr. 2003:101). Rap in written form displays distinct abrogations from ‘proper English’, reflecting accents and intonations of the performers. Words are shortened to become terms of ‘lingua franca’; and often convey pithy, localised meaning. This is not dissimilar to the etymology of Aboriginal English vocabularies, such as ‘deadly’ (meaning ‘good’). Rap is sometimes used as a form of competition or ‘lyrical battle’. Performances vary between raps that have been learnt, and improvised rhymes, which employ techniques of traditional oral story-telling and folk tales (Ong 1982). Some argue that Hip Hop comprises a fifth element; known as ‘beat boxing’ (Stavrias 2005:45); the creation of a beat using human voice, rather than machine. Daniel Banks describes this as ‘the essence of Hip Hop’: “the experience of creating something from your own body, from your own experience without material or physical resources” (ABC Radio National 2006).

Hip Hop has become increasingly popularised in the last 20 years. While ‘underground’ artists continue in a spirit of resistance to social control of youth and

minority groups, it has also become a part of popular culture synonymous with what could be described as a 'social construction' (Hacking 1999) of 'youth'. The politics of Hip Hop are diffuse. It has become commodified in the popular music scene as misogynist, violent and racialised within the context of American racial politics of African-American, Hispanic and White identities. However, this is only one aspect of this global, diverse movement, ideology and culture. Daniel Banks argues for the following definition:

For many people, hip hop is synonymous with rap music, not knowing that hip hop is a global, multi-ethnic, grassroots culture committed to social change, social justice and self-expression through certain specific modes of performance. Rap is a part of hip hop and in addition to the commercial rap music that the record industry promotes, there are many, many deeply thoughtful, political, poetic and socially conscious recording and live performance artists using the mode of rap to communicate a progressive counter-hegemonic message. The music of these artists unites people by questioning some of the very circumstances that have led other artists to choose to use rap music to express themselves in other ways. First we take a look at Edouard Glissant's quote, he's a theorist from the Caribbean:

'Hip hop is about youth reasserting themselves into the public sphere. It's about global struggle and local politics, the way in which local governments have historically disempowered and continued to disempower youth. Hip hop is an opportunity for people to declare their identity by writing their world into existence.'

Similarly, it's a process of reclaiming your own history; writing it, performing it and keeping it alive. (ABC Radio National 2006)

A dual modality of Hip Hop emerges: while burgeoning as a global youth movement, its strength lies in its ability to create space for the otherwise unheard, in a very local context (Iveson 1997:42). Stavrias refers to this as "an internal logic" which results in a process of "globalisation" (2005:44). Maxwell's (2003) ethnography of Hip Hop in Sydney's Western suburbs, aptly titled *Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes*, exemplifies the meaningfulness of Hip Hop culture to those located outside the racialised and ghettoised climate of North American popular rap music: "Hip Hop operates epistemologically: it is a way of knowing. Through Hip Hop one can find truth. Hip Hop, coming from "the streets" – that is, drawing on an unmediated, empirical

experience of the world – is free from the cluttering ideologies of the mainstream” (Maxwell 2003: 164). Maxwell’s fieldwork focused on the meaning of Hip Hop to Caucasian males living in Sydney during the 1990s. *Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes* contextualises what Hip Hop is (and is not) within the broader understanding of Australian Hip Hop practice; its politics are distinct from American violent gang rivalry. Instead, the Australian focus seeks recognition through ‘authenticity’ which rejects affected American accents and valorises the ontologies of those living in (sub)urban Australia (Iveson 1997: 43) - most famously perhaps the stigmatised suburbs of Western Sydney (Collins et al. 2002; Powell 1993; Symonds 1993). Maxwell’s study demonstrates the meaning of Hip Hop to *some* Australian practitioners is removed from the politics of “being black”. What is important in this context is that Hip Hop in Australia is not necessarily viewed as an exclusively ‘black’ practice: it possesses a global diasporic appeal because of the politics of colour (Iveson 1997:41), as well as the politics of opposition and resistance which make it globally transferable (Stavrias 2005:46). This is particularly cogent, when considering that not all people who identify as Aboriginal display physical features of ‘blackness’. Many parts of Australia have endured a long and pervasive experience of colonisation, such as Western Sydney, where Dharug people were institutionalised in Parramatta from 1814, and ‘re-settled’ in the Black Town from 1821 (Brook 1999:2).

Hip Hop has come to have particular currency for culturally diverse and marginalised youth. Whether this is to function as a point of hegemonic resistance or simply because of the sheer pleasure of making music, and dancing, is perhaps not the core concern of this argument. What is of interest, is that Hip Hop has broad appeal in Indigenous Australia, (McKinnon 2005; Saunders 2005; Stavrias 2005). Hip Hop has been integrated into various community development (ABC Radio National 2006; Hunter 2005) and health promotion activities (McLeod 2005). In these events, teams of Hip Hop artists (musicians and dancers) travel to regional and remote locations, and run dance and rap competitions that focus on a positive health promotion messages. Dr Joel Wenitong, academic and Aboriginal Hip Hop artist with the group ‘Local Knowledge’ says: “the success of the [youth specific health] forums lies with the style of music and the verbal and visual style of storytelling” (McLeod 2005:20). A simple correlation can be made between traditional aspects of Indigenous culture focusing on oral history and oral modes of learning, story-telling and sharing

information, with the privileged place the spoken voice has in Hip Hop. There may be some cogent links between this mode of self-expression through voice and dance with traditional dance and story-telling. But it must also be remembered that Hip Hop holds a special appeal to youth, to young people moulding and playing with esoteric practices and meanings. These modalities are a part of Hip Hop, and not specific to any particular localised group; it is the conventions, of “sampling, representin’ and flow” (Stavrias 2005:46), which meld performers together under the umbrella of ‘Hip Hop’. Here is the voice of MC Bec, an Aboriginal Hip Hop artist recorded recently in Brisbane. She elucidates what Hip Hop means to her:

I think it’s just there’s no other form of music that you can express yourself the way you can with Hip Hop. Because with Hip Hop you can just flow and just keep going and express so much; because a song in Hip Hop has so much more lyrics than just an R’n’B song, or something just about partying, or shallow stuff like that, ‘cos with Hip Hop you can express like really deep stuff; like philosophy and your own beliefs and you can tell a story; and you can just spit it, and just let it out. It’s like The Dreaming; like the Aboriginal belief, you sort of in The Dreaming, in the zone, and that’s like Hip Hop for me. I’m like in The Dreaming when I’m rapping or dancing when I’m up there, and there’s nothing else like it. (ABC Radio National 2006).

How then, is our collaborative project utilising this global form of youth culture? We are currently running a series of Hip Hop workshops for Koori youth in the Hawkesbury. These workshops are being facilitated by Aboriginal Hip Hop artists, who guide the workshop participants in the creation of rap performances which focus on the participants’ strengths in avoiding involvement in crime. The participants also discuss their ideas for their raps with Aboriginal co-researchers, in the form of recorded, informal interviews during the workshops. The data is completely generated by and guided by Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies. This should not be confused with an essentialised or homogenous definition of Aboriginality, but as a design element which seeks to limit the neo-colonial/imperial aspects of research (Tuhiwai Smith 1999). The non-Indigenous researcher is removed by a degree, in order to create the space for genuine Indigenous control of the data.

Each workshop involves approximately 20 young people at a time, and a total of 60 Koori youth will participate in the project. Over a period of three hours the participants work with the facilitator to create a song, which they perform to the group at the end of the workshop. The raps are audio recorded, and transcribed for the purpose of discourse analysis. Rather than focusing on semiotics and content analysis, a critical, intertextual, approach (Fairclough 1995; 2001) will be used to identify power, discursive formations, and challenge particular truths (Waitt 2005: 176), which have become naturalised in criminological and law enforcement ways of viewing Aboriginal communities. Coding of the data will focus on vocabulary; the experiential, relational and expressive value of the words, and the way in which metaphor is used (Fairclough 2001:92). Textual structures that denote interaction between texts and the wider context (Fairclough 2001:93) will also be sought. Fairclough defines these features of critical discourse analysis as follows: “experiential value is a trace of and a cue to the way in which the text producer’s experience of the natural or social world is represented ... relational value is to do with relations and social relationships ... and the expressive value is to do with subjects and social identities” (2001:93).

The transcriptions of the raps and complementary interviews will be used to produce a draft community report, which will then be presented to a focus group of workshop participants for critique. This will be an opportunity to ensure fair and accurate representation of their material. We are running a poster competition to design the cover design, and the report will receive a public launch during Youth Week 2007. In theory, this particular format could be used to answer any broad number of questions, but this research project has a particular focus on crime, and it is here where the complexities of Hip Hop’s own identity crisis may be a strength more than a hindrance. Green elucidates this complexity:

Do expressions of violence or depictions of drug use and sexual promiscuity in rap lyrics encourage these same behaviours, or do they simply report on unpleasant and customarily underrepresented realities? ... The line that divides truthful representation from exploitation is not always entirely clear, and although some artists rap about ... the desperation that leads to crime in order to critique such conditions, others use the same material to spin fantasies about the dark glamour of criminal life. (Green 2003:20)

The most pertinent aspect of using Hip Hop in the context of research around crime, is that popular rap music follows a trope of *talking about* criminal behaviour. This generates a creative platform for sharing personal information, contrasting with modes of inquiry which rely on in-depth interviews and potential psychological harm to participants. Hip Hop is a safe space for articulating issues of violence, substance misuse, and experiences of witnessing criminal activity, as the material is ‘wrapped’ or ‘packaged’ in genre. This is not without analytical challenges as we seek to negotiate “the slipperiness of constructs such as genre and discourse, and the difficulty of sometimes keeping them apart” (Fairclough 1995:212). However, as Forman argues, “While rap songs which veer towards vengeance undoubtedly exist, there are also many which seek to examine society’s structural problems. In these songs, the emphasis on educational, anti-drug, anti-gang themes prevail, taking a positive and rational stand on the crises facing black youth” (2003:128). Hip Hop therefore offers a conduit to assemble rich qualitative data from young people, which celebrates their epistemological input. As Hip Hop is practiced by young people from a wide variety of backgrounds and with different educational attainment and economic status, the methodology accounts for the involvement of young people with a diverse range of experiences, and critical perspectives to offer. We are hopeful that this methodology will generate a research project that elicits social change at a local level, and more insightful theoretical perspectives for social models of crime prevention in Aboriginal communities in the future.

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