Researchers Examine Lyrical Correlation Between Hip-Hop, Criminal Justice

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Doctoral student Kevin Steinmetz (left) and associate professor of criminal justice Howard Henderson spent nine months analyzing the lyrics of the top 100 hip-hop songs over the last 10 years to understand how the genre can be used as a resource for criminology. *—Photo by Brian Blalock*

Out in Bearkat Plaza, hip-hop music regularly blasts, its deep beats pulsating through crowds of students. Campus isn't the only place its influence reaches—it can be heard in cars and through the headphones of passing students around town, on TV and in bars. Its presence is everywhere.

Howard Henderson, associate professor of criminal justice at Sam Houston State University, has seen, as a professor and as a self proclaimed "hip-hop head," that music is a litmus test of the culture of hip-hop. But, he says, as researchers, "we know the music, but we haven't really been listening to it all this time."

What he means is something he has been exploring in a collaborative research project with doctoral candidate Kevin Steinmetz that examines how hip-hop can be used as a resource for criminology.

Their ongoing research has shown hip-hop has strong lyrical messages that can help law enforcement and lawmakers understand why the relationship between criminals and law enforcement is sometimes negative and how it can be improved. In addition, through the lyrics, Henderson and Steinmetz found that rappers tell us certain things about their culture, crime rates, and their relationships with each other. By using this information as a resource, Steinmetz feels that the criminal justice system can ultimately make better policies.

The two have been studying the effects of a specific criminology theory called the legitimacy theory, which posits that people's belief in the legitimacy of the law leads to a greater inclination to obey the law.

"People don't have to agree with the laws but they have to find them to be fair. If criminals are treated with fairness and respect, then the theory finds that they are more likely to give you legitimacy," Steinmetz said. "Thus, if someone is arrested but is treated fairly, they are more likely to cooperate because they feel respected.

"We actually found that the overwhelming message in hip-hop wasn't that the rappers disliked the idea of justice, but they disliked the way it was being implemented."

"Don't ask me what's wrong, ask me what's right, And I'ma tell you what's life..."

When Henderson and Steinmetz began researching hip-hop, they found that no one had ever looked at music as a way to answer those questions in an academic setting.

"We began to read about hip-hop music and crime but we didn't find what we were looking for in the disciplinary journals," Henderson said. "It just wasn't there. The discussion was about musicology and music as a pedagogical tool used to teach people about a culture they don't usually come in contact with. But if any group of students need to know what the music is saying, it's future police officers, law enforcement officers and judges."

For the project, Henderson and Steinmetz conducted a nine-month project, for which they listened to the top 100 hip-hop songs over the last 10 years, noting what they heard. The project was funded as a summer doctoral research fellowship for Steinmetz through the College of Criminal Justice and resulted in an article entitled "Hip-hop and procedural justice: Hip-hop artists' perceptions of criminal justice (http://raj.sagepub.com/content/2/3/155.abstract/) " that was published last year in Race and Justice, the official journal of The American Society of Criminology's Division on People of Color and Crime.

In their work, the two examined the music based on three specific observations and the subsequent questions that arose from them. First, if the street culture of hip-hop is so readily evaluated in criminal justice, what information could be gathered from the music? Second, if hip-hop is an unexplored area of research, why is it important? Third, does the lyrical content match what they know by way of public sentiment surveys?

"What we come away with is that oftentimes the research is behind contemporary society's pace. It is rare that researchers are proactive; we have to see a phenomenon first. The thinking is more along the lines of, 'I saw a murder so now I'll go evaluate why it happened,'" Henderson said. "What we are aiming to do is to find and analyze the relevancy of the content of the music before the crimes happened. With the music, it took someone saying maybe musicians are actually saying something, and it turns out they were. We just weren't listening."

What researchers weren't listening to, Henderson said, is that the music reveals much more about hip-hop culture than the stereotype usually indicates about it.

"Typically, the stereotype is that hip-hop makes a person violent, but a small percentage of people are violent because of hip-hop. A lot of it is very informative, like why the relationship between musicians and the police is a certain way," Henderson said. "We also saw that they used the music to tell the listeners that crime is not the only way to be successful in society, that you actually have to be a mature adult. So in some ways, it was inspirational."

In examining hip-hop in this way, they found the music could be used as a resource to create better laws that are specific to the varying cultural environments of hip-hop.

"In places like New York and Philadelphia, rap looks very different from southern rap from Atlanta and Miami," Henderson said. "There is always a regional flavor to the music. In Miami, the rap always has this party machismo to it, but in Los Angeles, there is a heavy gang emphasis. The more socially conscious rap tends to come from the Midwest, like Chicago, because they tend to have a higher level of education."

Steinmetz noted that he gained a newfound knowledge of what he calls a "myriad of new cultural understandings" about hip-hop—a knowledge that emphasizes that actually listening to the music is one of the most important and revealing aspects of their research.

"Tell the whole world the truth is back, you ain't got to argue about who could rap…"

In listening to the music from an evaluative perspective, two distinct groups emerged.

"The first group is telling us the music is maturing, evolving," Henderson said. "Take Jay-Z for example. If you look at his lyrical content from 1990-2012, you see the evolution from talking about drug selling at the beginning of his career to now talking about meeting with the president, helping withthe campaign. It's a very different conversation. We never saw an artist go backwards. You only saw them mature as they age, and experience and their music changes with them."

Part of this, Henderson said, is because the audience has also changed with the artists.

"Jay-Z's listenership has aged with him," Henderson said. "Part of it is that artists recognize that if they go back and talk about that very animalistic behavior, their listeners are going to say, 'hey listen, this is not what I want to hear,' and they're going to go somewhere else.
"The other thing is that as hip-hop has become more mainstream, it's become less 'gangster-rap, bang-bang-shoot-em-up' music and now it's about peace treaties, and the social, political, economic messages they can send with their music."

The second section of hip-hop is a specific group of newer rappers who have always been socially conscious.

"They rap about education and doing the right thing, and they're separate from the other group who is rapping about these things because they have matured away from drug selling and into social issues," Henderson said. "The hip-hop community is interesting because they are quick to call a sell-out. The gangsters say if you aren't writing about gang activity, then you're not being real.

"But there have always been the Jay-Z types. If you listen to a Jay-Z album in its totality, he addresses both issues—the street life, though it's typically retaliation, but also the fact that he's 40-plus and a dad, and gang life isn't really relevant to him anymore. The first group is always sort of evolving to the level of the second group."

It's a hard knock life?

Henderson said their project aimed to ask if the music is really a reflection of what is going on. As an art form, hip-hop has evolved from neighborhood kids talking about what they see happening at home and in their neighborhoods to a place where now practically everyone—regardless of background or skin color—has listened to hip-hop.

"On the one hand, it is sort of like a dramatized version of the original hip-hop," Henderson said. "Artists know what sells. They talk about spending nights in prison, but then you look at their rap sheet and they haven't even been to prison and they don't have a criminal record. Rapper Lil' John's parents are both NASA engineers. Cultural upbringing can be a factor in the direction of your music because you can't talk about what you don't know, and Lil' John's music was never the gangster-hype type."

On the other hand, Henderson said they wondered why hip-hop is so popular with groups of varying backgrounds across the board. They feel the answer lies with the "drama" aspect of hip-hop.

"If you look at hip-hop by way of sales, it is typically bought by white youth—which is interesting, because you think how many white rappers are there? But they are somehow relating to it," Henderson said. "I look at it like a Superman phenomenon. We know we'll never be like them, and there are aspects of the music we like and respect but we know it's unrealistic."

"So the rappers become sort of like characters. You don't know Snoop Dog as the person he is, but as the person he becomes because of the respect for his music and the persona he has adopted. In reality, he is going to jail all the time and he is a thug, but he'll go to jail and the next day he'll be on an American Express commercial," Henderson said. "I always wonder if he has a great agent, like how does he do that? But it's because he is more like a character who does these supernatural things. Part of the phenomenon is that he can do these criminal things but he's not a bad person. A lot of the kids look like the video idols, but in most cases they are not living the lifestyle at all. It's an act. They are talking the talk but not walking the walk. "

"You tie my hands, what am I gonna be?"

Their study also examined ideas about gender roles, female empowerment, tone of the music, and other culture-specific behaviors—factors that contribute to understanding hip-hop better—which Henderson believes is the first step toward making more effective laws or using the music to fight street crime.

"A lot of the lyrical content had to be interpreted with the intended tone of the music," Henderson said. "A lot of it is actually metaphorical and not from personal experience. If the content was violent, it tended to be retaliation; not inherently violent.

"We also saw that hip-hop is very chauvinistic, but the few female rappers who exist had content that was with a tone of liberation or empowerment—that they felt like equals. Some of the negative

language also was indicative of certain cultural behaviors or language that outsiders interpret as derogatory when they actually aren't."

Henderson said that studying and understanding these things ultimately could change the structure of future laws, as well as the way lawmakers and rappers, whether they are from the streets or not, interact with each other. When the cultural stereotypes and assumptions about a culture are dropped in favor of genuinely trying to understand each other and what is really meant by their music and why it is that way, Henderson said, the disconnect between each is vastly smaller.

"The lyrical content will give us some kind of indication of where they think the problem is coming from and how to solve it," Henderson said. "I think it's a way to figure out how to develop preventative programming. If we make policies and we don't know what their perspective is, we can't guarantee that they will buy into it. Literally listening to the music showed us that the listening has to be a on a greater scale—this is how we solve problems in society."

Steinmetz said they feel their research is so significant that they are working on a second article with an editor from The Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture. Their second article will be based on their original data, but will examine how hip-hop explains the criminality of the music artists or others.

"Instead of just looking at the ways the genre mentions criminal justice, we are also researching how they attempt to explain their actions," Steinmetz said. "I think it is really interesting, because hip-hop artists were found to explain crime just as often and as well as the field of criminology does, and when you pull them all together, it makes a unique portrait of criminal behavior, which I feel has some significant policy implications."

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