The Hip-Hop club scene: Gender, grinding and sex

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Abstract

Hip-Hop culture is a key social medium through which many young men and women from communities of colour in the USA construct their gender. In this study, we focused on the Hip-Hop club scene in New York City with the intention of unpacking narratives of gender dynamics from the perspective of young men and women, and how these relate to their sexual experiences. We conducted a three-year ethnographic study that included ethnographic observations of Hip-Hop clubs and their social scene, and in-depth interviews with young men and young women aged 15–21. This paper describes how young people negotiate gender relations on the dance floor of Hip-Hop clubs. The Hip-Hop club scene represents a context or setting where young men’s masculinities are contested by the social environment, where women challenge hypermasculine privilege and where young people can set the stage for what happens next in their sexual and emotional interactions. Hip-Hop culture therefore provides a window into the gender and sexual scripts of many urban minority youth. A fuller understanding of these patterns can offer key insights into the social construction of sexual risk, as well as the possibilities for sexual health promotion, among young people in urban minority populations.

Résumé

La culture hip hop est un médium social clé dans lequel beaucoup de jeunes hommes et de jeunes femmes issus des communautés de couleur aux USA construisent leur genre. Dans cette étude, nous nous sommes concentrés sur le milieu des clubs hip hop à New York, avec l’intention d’explorer des récits de dynamiques de genre, telles que perçues par ces jeunes, et la manière dont ces récits se rapportent à leurs expériences sexuelles. Nous avons mené une étude ethnographique de trois ans comprenant des observations ethnographiques des clubs et de l’environnement social hip hop, et des entretiens en profondeur avec des jeunes hommes et des jeunes femmes âgés de 15 à 21 ans. Cet article décrit comment les jeunes négocient les relations de genre sur les pistes de danse des clubs hip hop. Le milieu des clubs hip hop représente un contexte dans lequel les masculinités des jeunes hommes sont disputées par l’environnement social, les femmes questionnent le privilège hypermasculin, et les jeunes peuvent préparer le terrain pour les événements à venir dans leurs interactions sexuelles et émotionnelles. Ainsi la culture hip hop offre-t-elle une ouverture dans les scripts de genre et les scripts sexuels de nombreux jeunes des minorités urbaines. Une compréhension approfondie de ces modèles peut donner un très bon aperçu de la construction sociale du risque sexuel et des possibilités de promotion de la santé sexuelle chez les jeunes des minorités urbaines.

Resumen

La cultura del Hip-Hop es uno de los medios sociales básicos en el que chicas y chicos de comunidades de color en los Estados Unidos construyen su identidad sexual. En este estudio nos centramos en el ambiente de los clubs de Hip-Hop en Nueva York con la finalidad de analizar las historias de las dinámicas sexuales desde la perspectiva de los jóvenes de ambos sexos y cómo se...
identifican con respecto a sus experiencias sexuales. Realizamos un estudio etnográfico de tres años de duración que incluia: observaciones etnográficas de los clubs de Hip-Hop y el ambiente social, y entrevistas exhaustivas con chicos y chicas con edades comprendidas entre los 15 y 21 años. En este artículo describimos cómo negocian los jóvenes las relaciones sexuales en la pista de baile en los clubs de Hip-Hop. El ambiente Hip-Hop representa un contexto o ambiente en el que la masculinidad de los jóvenes es cuestionada por el ambiente social en el que las mujeres desafían el privilegio hipermasculino y donde los jóvenes pueden preparar el camino para lo que ocurra a continuación en sus interacciones sexuales y emocionales. Por tanto la cultura del Hip-Hop ofrece una perspectiva en los guiones sexuales y de género de muchas minorías urbanas de jóvenes. Si se entienden totalmente estos modelos podemos analizar mejor la construcción social del riesgo sexual así como las posibilidades del fomento de la salud sexual entre los jóvenes de las poblaciones de minorías urbanas.

**Keywords:** Hip-Hop, youth culture, ethnic minorities, gender dynamics, youth, sexual risk

**Introduction**

In countries around the world, the growing impact of HIV and AIDS among young people has focused research attention on the sexualities and sexual health of youth, particularly in situations of heightened vulnerability (Aggleton, Chase and Rivers, 2004). While much of this work has been heavily epidemiological, seeking to empirically document patterns of risk behaviour among different populations of youth (e.g. Ostaszewski and Zimmerman 2006), an important line of work has also emerged that focuses on the examination of sexual meanings and sexual cultures of young people (Paiva 2000, Asencio 2002, Tolman 2002). In seeking to move beyond correlational studies of behavioural risk, work on sexual meanings and cultures has sought to provide fuller understanding of the diverse social contexts in which the sexual experience of young people is constituted and constructed and, through such understanding, to offer insights that might help to build a foundation for more effective sexual health promotion for youth in situations of increased vulnerability (Ingham and Aggleton 2006).

The urgent need for nuanced social research on the sexualities and sexual cultures of young people is clearly evident in societies around the world, but is perhaps especially urgent in the USA where not only HIV and AIDS but also a range of other sexual health risks have been clearly documented, particularly in communities of colour and among inner city minority youth (US CDC 2006), but where careful empirical research on sexual meanings and sexual cultures among young people in these communities has been highly limited (Asencio 2002). There is little doubt, based on epidemiological research, of the sexual-health risks faced by youth in urban minority youth (see Whitehead 1997, Lewis 2004, Lewis and Kertzner 2003). Remarkably few studies have sought to explore the specific mechanisms through which the social and cultural construction of gender and sexuality might provide a meaningful context for the fuller understanding of vulnerability to HIV, STIs and other sexual health risks.

These risks faced by young people in inner city minority communities in the USA take on special importance precisely because of the ways in which they appear to be constituted through a complex sex/gender system (Rubin 2007) and because of patterns of racial and ethnic discrimination and economic exclusion (Wilson 1997). But they also face increased vulnerability because the cultural construction of gender and of gender power relations, structures sexual risk along gendered lines in ways that create barriers for them to protect themselves. Surprisingly, however, these relations have received little research attention in light of the serious health problems they have been associated with in both the social and behavioural research literature and in public health discourse (Lewis 2003).
For young people, engagement in, or disengagement from, cultural narratives of masculinity and femininity form an important backdrop for their own constructions of the meanings of sexuality and sexual behaviour. These narratives of masculinity and femininity vary from parental instruction about responsible behaviour to presentations of ‘hypermasculinity’ in popular culture. The extent to which these narratives are adhered to, discarded or transformed within individual lives, and their effects on behaviour, with few exceptions, have not been examined in literature on minority ethnic youth.

Hip-Hop culture is one key social medium in which many young men and women of colour (particularly in the USA but also increasingly in other societies) construct their gender (Kitwana 2002, Collins 2005, Watkins 2005). While it is certainly not the only important medium in this regard, it has nonetheless taken on increasing salience in recent years as it has been taken up and reproduced through the mass communications, fashion and cultural entertainment industries. Sexism, homophobia and violence are among the popular (adult-imposed) traits commonly associated with Hip-Hop. Thus, it is not surprising to find an emerging research literature that has begun to identify relationships between listening to Hip-Hop modalities and increments in health-risk behaviour among youth (Martino et al. 2006).

On the other hand, some scholars have deconstructed societal beliefs about Hip-Hop and have pointed out how many of these ‘facts about Hip-Hop’ are heavily influenced by the positions of those in social power to make such claims (Rivera 2003).

From a cultural perspective, we can observe that Hip-Hop culture is a complex system of icons and symbols, driven by music culture, youth cultural production, reflections of social realities in the US inner city and the music industry (Kitwana 2002). Hip-Hop culture is configured as a system in which cultural narratives of masculinity and femininity are constantly produced, resisted, dismantled or reproduced. Therefore, understanding cultural narratives of sex and gender within Hip-Hop culture is critical in order to advance a social agenda that promotes gender equity and more effective health-promotion strategies for young people.

In this study, we focused on the Hip-Hop club scene with the intention of unpacking narratives of gender and gender dynamics from the perspective of young men and women, and how these relate to their sexual experiences. Our approach focused on ‘listening’ to young people’s perceptions, and interpretations of the ways in which the social structures of the Hip-Hop club scene intersects with the realm of sexual intimacy. Specifically, in this paper we will describe how young men and women negotiate gender relations on the dance floor of Hip-Hop clubs, the boundaries that govern such relations, and how these dance encounters translate or not into sexual encounters. To explore these issues, we conducted a three-year ethnographic study. The information gathered from this study will help us in developing sexual-health programme initiatives that are grounded in the social context of urban youth of colour.

**Methods**

*Research design*

Hip-Hop is a performance form to be studied in the contexts of its presentation and consumption. This project drew from the methodologies in cultural studies and ethnography to develop specific case examples of how sexuality and gender ideologies were constructed within the Hip-Hop scene. This study was designed as a multi-dimensional ethnographic investigation — a systematic approach that allowed us to study
experience and its interpretation (Bernard 1998). To unpack narratives of gender and sexuality within Hip-Hop culture, we decided to focus specifically in the cultural space of the Hip-Hop dancing nightclub. This manuscript draws primarily on the research findings from the in-depth interviews carried out during our ethnographic fieldwork. Ethnographic observations were used in this manuscript to contextualize the analysis; however, specific observational findings are not presented.

**In-depth interviews**

In-depth interviews were open-ended, semi-structured interviews. In contrast to closed ended interviews and focus groups, the open-ended format is ideal for the detailed exploration of each of the domains of this research study. In our experience, utilizing in-depth interviews allows for a systematic exploration of our operational variables while at the same time capturing the nuances and perspectives that respondents may have regarding the variables themselves. In other words, even after piloting interview guides, inevitably during the interviewing process informal questions of respondents to interview guide questions often emerge. These were captured systematically in the interviewer debriefing notes and discussed on a weekly basis. If new conceptually and theoretically relevant questions emerged from our research informants, these were incorporated into the new interviews.

Hearing young people’s perspectives in their own language on issues relating to the cultural narratives governing gender relations in the Hip-Hop club scene was central to this research study and we needed a systematic methodology to capture this. The interview was developed using terms and concepts relevant to the interviewee’s life. The interviews were conducted in the preferred language of the research participant (85% English and 15% Spanish). The interviews were audio taped with the authorization of participants and took place in a location selected by the participant. The transcriptions of the interviews were entered into ATLAS, the management text data software. Using ATLAS, narratives were coded based on a scheme derived from the main domains of exploration.

**Recruitment**

This study focuses on examining gender relations from a framework of masculinity. We recruited 35 young men and ten young women into the project. Study participants were recruited through ethnographic fieldwork to participate in our in-depth interviews. To qualify for the study, young people had to be residents of the selected neighbourhoods and within the target age for in-depth interviews (15–21 years old). Parental authorization was required for participants younger than 18 years old. Our original intended sample for the in-depth interviews with young men was 40, however at 35 we have obtained theoretical saturation on the semantic analysis (see analytical strategy below) (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

**Sample characteristics**

Seventy-four percent of the young men and 80% of the women were 18 and under. The mean ages were 17.9 and 15.3 for young men and women, respectively. Most of the young men were of Latino descent (65%), 22% were African American and 13% identified as mixed. The large majority were born in New York City (74.1% for men and 80% for
women), followed by the Caribbean (22.2% for men and 10% for women) and two young people (one man and one woman) were born in the US, but outside New York. Given the ages of participants in the sample, it is not surprising that the large majority of individuals were in high school (88.9%). Only one young man had completed his General Education Development test. Two of the young men and two of the young women were in college.

Analysis

We conducted a semantic analysis of the narratives from the in-depth interviews. The focus was on systematically identifying the terms, symbols and patterns that individuals use in reference to the Hip-Hop club scene. The research questions to be explored in this analysis were: (1) what were young men and women’s perspectives of the Hip-Hop club scene?; (2) what kinds of erotic, sexual and non-sexual interactions took place in the Hip-Hop club scene?; (3) how were these interactions between young men and women negotiated?; and (4) how did these interactions in the dance encounters influence the likelihood of sexual encounters? The above analytical foci served as the general structure for a codebook of meanings, which was developed prior to data collection and was used to catalogue the data in semantic open codes. This primary level of coding by topics was done as soon as the interviews were transcribed and transferred into ATLAS. A second level of coding of the different meanings within each question was conducted in three steps: (1) a sample of ten interviews were coded collectively by a small group of data analysts of the research team to agree on the emerging meanings according to the above analytical tasks; (2) from this coding exercise a semantic matrix was developed by the data analysts; (3) using the semantic matrix, data analysts coded 25% of the interviews independently and adjusted codes to reflect inconsistencies across data analysts; and (4) using the semantic code matrix, two data analysts coded the remaining 75% of the interviews. Once the semantic codes were applied to the narrative data, the senior data analyst generated a report answering the general analytical tasks. This was presented to the research team who collectively discussed each of the analytical questions to assess the accuracy of the report and generate interpretations regarding the semantic codes of the data. After coding the initial group of narratives, it became clear that the analytical codes could be categorized in relation to the performance of gender and sexuality in social spaces (on the broader issue of performance in relation to gender and sexuality, see Butler 1993). This paper will focus on presenting five analytical codes that describe interactions as performance of social actors’ notions of their gender and sexuality. Finally, to assist readers in understanding the accounts of youth, we have included, next to pseudonyms, the age of the participant and his or her self-identification in relation to ethnicity and sexuality. ²

Results

Performing on the dance floor

Dancing in Hip-Hop clubs presented an opportunity for young men and young women to perform gender roles, sexual assertiveness and sexual appeal. The context of dancing to Hip-Hop, reggae, rap and reggaeton provided an opportunity for young men and women to get physically close to friends or other youth with whom they have not previously interacted. Thus, the dance floors of Hip-Hop clubs turned into a competitive space where getting attention and being close to women was the goal for young men. For both boys and
girls, the key aspect to competing in this space is dancing ability. John cautions of the danger of not knowing how to ask a girl to dance:

‘In a club or something with the right song on, you go up to them behind them or you’re just like “can I dance?” most of the time you just got move up to them and do it a little smooth, because if you go up to a girl and she sees you and don’t know how to step she’s not going to want to dance with you.’ (John, African American, straight, 18 years old)

From John’s perspective, men have to be smooth and show both confidence and competence in dancing to avoid rejection. As a consequence of rejection, young men cannot get physically close to women on the dance floor. The norm in these social spaces demanded that men dance with women. Since ‘there’s only one way to dance reggaeton and Hip-Hop, you have to dance close’ (Tony, Hispanic, straight, 20 years old), dancing close and the performance aspect of dancing acquire relevant value for gender relations in the space of clubs.

Getting closer and grinding were consistent motivations when dancing with girls for almost all the young men. From the young women’s perspectives, dancing in Hip-Hop clubs to Hip-Hop music styles was about having fun. A group of the women, however, equated dancing to Hip-Hop, reggae, etc. to sexual performance and sexual appeal. Jenn for example saw dancing and sex as similar behaviours:

It’s all the same thing, it’s all dancing. When you listen to the music you dance, and when you have sex it’s dancing in a different way...When I was dancing before I had sex I would dance all the stuff and be like whatever, and everybody would say sex is like dancing. If you know how to grind you’ll know how to ride. I never thought it was true but when I did it I was like “oh, I get it”.’ (Jenn, Dominican-Cuban, straight, 16 years old)

Jenn’s experience thus provided her with ‘proof’ of the fact that this type of dancing served as a kind of simulation of sex. The phrase, ‘if you know how to grind, you know how to ride’ refers to the ability of moving the hips while performing vaginal (or anal) intercourse on top of a sexual partner. This captures the essence of the erotic value that showing sexual appeal on the dance floor has for these young women. Although most times the ability to grind did not translate directly into the sexual encounters in the lives of the young women, it is the ability to grind that is key component of competition on the floor. Maria, for example, says:

‘...it is competition because you’re dancing with a boy and the other girl is dancing with a boy and the boy is like “she’s doing that” so the girl is like “if she’s doing that I can do it better” so there can be competition.’ (Maria, Black, straight, 15 years of age)

This created pressures for the young women in the study to demonstrate their sexual womanhood through dancing. Similarly, young men were under constant pressure to present themselves as good dancers as a way of asserting their masculinities. Daniel was at a party last year where three young women were pressuring him to dance. He responded to them: ‘No I’m shy, I’m good’. Daniel was very self-conscious of his dancing because he was afraid of embarrassing himself. He only dances when he drinks, which is how one of the girls got him to dance, but still he felt uncomfortable:

‘And then one of them said, “Why you look stiff? Loosen up”. She said, “Come on” and grabbed me by the arm and we started dancing, and as soon as I got on the dance floor I still got shy. I
didn’t want to continue dancing. I feel like so many people, it’s like going on a talent show.’
(Daniel, Black, ‘sexaholic’, 16 years old)

Young men in the study felt pressured from other people and the structure of the club environment where people from the sides were constantly observing what the people dancing do. Competing in a talent show is an accurate account of this pressure to excel in the dance floor, particularly among those who do not know how to dance.

The courtship of dancing

The performance of gender and sexuality that takes place on the dance floors of the Hip-Hop clubs is enmeshed within the context of an elaborate set of cultural rules — a veritable etiquette of gendered scripts for appropriate male and female conduct. Within this etiquette, special emphasis is given to what might be described as ‘the courtship of dancing’. Yet anyone expecting to find traditional courtship etiquette of old (or of some sectors of white, middle-class US society even today) will undoubtedly be surprised to encounter the rules of courtship operating in the Hip-Hop club scene. Asking girls to dance is not the ‘correct’ strategy in the Hip-Hop club. As Priscilla points out: ‘at parties these days, they don’t ask to dance they just grab you up and dance.’ (Priscilla, Puerto Rican, heterosexual, 20 years old)

‘Cutting in’, not asking and simply starting to dance was a consistent strategy among the men in the study and was confirmed by young women in the study. However, some young men complemented this dominant strategy with additional approaches that they believe made them more appealing to women on the dance floor including: playing ‘hard to get’ (ignoring and treating young women with indifference and disinterest until they approach them), being funny and smooth, or calling attention (through teasing or dancing). These are not unique strategies to the Hip-Hop scene and reflect more common strategies of heterosexual men to get women’s attentions in the US context (e.g. Seal and Ehrhardt 2003). Regardless of the strategy, peers monitor the success of the young man’s actions on the dance floor in terms of his ability to get girls to dance with him. This requires young men to also have a basic understanding of the boundaries on the dance floor.

Dancing boundaries and transgressions

Another social trait of the courtship of dancing in the Hip-Hop scene is the establishment of boundaries while dancing — together with various, culturally defined, modes of transgressing these boundaries. Young women are the gatekeepers of dancing boundaries in the Hip-Hop scene. Even though most dances in Hip-Hop clubs involve grinding, particularly those derivatives from reggae, there are levels of physical closeness that young men cannot cross. Young women’s accounts on dancing boundaries reflect the control that they try to exert while dancing. Some women feel that they are in control of the level of physical closeness and that they can simply walk away if the dancing partner does not respect their boundaries. One way of avoiding problems with men on the dance floor is through ‘a level of understanding’ with respect to boundaries while dancing. Developing this level of understanding is something that some young men like Adrian are aware of. He labelled this understanding as an issue of women’s comfort. Since getting physically close to women is perceived as a natural positive outcome for young men, this notion of comfort presumes that young men’s comfort while dancing is a non-issue:
'You have to make sure you're dancing with someone who is comfortable dancing the way you dance. If you’re used to dancing with a girl and feeling up all over her and you’re dancing with a girl who’s not like that you could really offend somebody and then you have a problem...Use your better judgment. Wherever you would feel a person wouldn’t be uncomfortable with. Like if you’re dancing with a girl and you don’t know her and she’s not your girlfriend you can’t put your hands on her chest and expect she’ll be ok with it—that’s unacceptable. Don’t get too touchy feely if they’re not being touchy feely. If they are trying to maintain a distance while dancing with you don’t push it.' (Adrian, Black, heterosexual, 17 years old)

Adrian’s account is consistent with many of the men in the study, for whom young women control the boundaries and males have to be aware of the signs to not ‘cross the lines’. And yet their roles as men are to skillfully push the boundaries while on the dance floor. As most of the young men also pointed out, balancing dancing boundaries becomes complicated if the dancers are drinking or getting high and ‘people’s judgment gets clouded’.

There is a specific type of man in the club scenes with whom young women maintain their vigilance. These are men whose sexual interest is clear and goes beyond the erotic aspect of dancing. Jessica captures this concern in the following quote:

‘Touching your butt is normal in Hip-Hop, that’s like reggae. That’s normal, because you’re grinding against the guys so what did you expect would happen? But everything else there’s no need for that...you know who to dance with; you know who’s really a pervert and who’s not...There was this guy who had this little crush on me, we was dancing and it felt kind of weird like he was getting really into it. So I was like, “Uh, I’m thirsty, how about you?”’ (Jessica, Dominican, straight, 16 year old)

Aware that this man had a crush on her, Jessica was able to exert control over the situation by shifting from dancing to getting something to drink. Jessica characterized certain types of men as ‘perverts’. Jessica and other young women in the study define ‘perverts’ as those men who are too focused on getting or maintaining erections while dancing or too eager to grind on young women.

Young women in the Hip-Hop scene expressed being ‘turned off’ by such male advances. In the study, young women were consistently vigilant about maintaining control over their bodies and space. Men’s physical impositions on the dance floor often led to negative feelings among young women. Eva expressed that when men come behind her she sometimes feels ‘violated because they don’t ask for my permission...I tell them, “get the fuck off my ass”’. (Eva, Black, straight, 15 years old) In the context of the clubs, many young women blame other women or themselves for the verbal attacks that they receive from men on the dance floor as a result of trying to protect their boundaries. Nancy’s analysis of the following situation demonstrates this:

‘One night a girl had a skirt and she was dancing with a boy and he was rubbing her legs and she told him to stop and he cussed her out. But she shouldn’t have worn a skirt to a party anyway because you know you’re dancing with a boy anyway. It still wasn’t right for him to put his hands on her but she asked for it if she wore a skirt...It’s easy for him to pull her skirt up and do what he has to do or wants to do.’ (Nancy, African American, heterosexual, 15 years old)

As many of the young women expressed their vigilance to preserve these boundaries, their ability to control was also viewed as a source of power. For some, being able to control the grinding and getting young men erect was viewed as a ‘fun’ thing to do, simply as a part of dancing to this type of music. Martha is one of the young women who expressed this position:
Martha’s perspective on grinding illustrates a larger position among the young women in the study: the reversal of who has control over courtship in the Hip-Hop scene. Some young women go beyond grinding to be the ‘aggressor’ in seeking men’s attention. A few months prior to the interview, Linda made a bet with her girlfriends about playing ‘the more dominant role, acting how guys act towards females in the club.’ Now, when Linda and her friends go to the club and see a guy they like walk by, they grab his arms. This ‘is very shocking to them, its like “why you touching me, you’re a lady, guys are supposed to do that”.’ Reversing expected roles of men in the dance floor and taking the aggressive performance becomes a source of enjoyment for Linda and her girlfriends. Through this form of transgression, Linda becomes closer to her peers while collectively realizing the actual flexibility of apparent normative gender roles on the dance floor.

Dancing and transitions to sex

As mentioned earlier, getting physically close to girls is a strong motivation for young men to dance at Hip-Hop clubs. Additional expectations are also constantly present on the dance floor, including: (1) whether or not the other person likes you, (2) will there be ‘making out’ or heavy petting after dancing, (3) will dancing in the club lead to continuing the making out somewhere else; (4) will they meet again socially after dancing tonight, or (5) will there be sex?

Young men consistently pointed to the ‘fact’ that girls show whether they like them or not through their expressions while dancing, which can be very confusing at times given that grinding is one of the key and most common moves in dancing reggae-type songs. However, men see the number of songs danced to together as a better indicator of a girl’s interest in a boy. For example:

‘You can tell if the girl really likes you if they dance with you through like five songs, and so, the songs are long. And after you dance you try to pull her to the side you know. Like me sometimes I’m dancing with a girl I kind of like her body, because I kind of like her butt, so I try to pull her to the wall and try to talk to her and dance and stuff...’ (Brian, Black, straight, 18 years old)

Between two and five songs were common points that young men mentioned as indicators of young women liking them. All the study participants had experienced going beyond dancing and transitioning from the dance floor to an intimate sexual encounter with a dance partner they liked at least once in their lives. When we asked the reasons for this, both the young men and women stressed the erotic value and sexually charged environment of dancing in the Hip-Hop scene. ‘Dancing is like dry sex’ says Kenneth (Black, heterosexual, 16 years old). Raymond expands on this point:

‘If you’re watching it, if you learn it from an outsider’s perspective, it’s like sex with clothes on. Doing girls in front of him, bent over, guys behind her, going at it. Back and forth, back and forth, grinding on each other...’(Raymond, Hispanic Puerto Rican, straight, 19 years old)

Raymond’s definition focuses on grinding as a symbol of the value of sex in the Hip-Hop scene. Young women in the study agree with this position. Diana, and most of the young women in the study, tells us that dancing to Hip-Hop and reggae songs is about sex:
Sometimes a boy is standing on the wall and a girl is in front of him with her back to him and she grinds on him.’ (Diana, African American, straight, 16 years old)

Eric (Black African American, straight, 18 years old) met his last girlfriend in school, but it was through dancing that they got to know how much they like each other. Eric said that when he danced with his girlfriend they kissed and while dancing she ‘played with [his] dick around or something, they [girls] always like that stuff.’ Eric’s perspective reminds us of the young women’s earlier discussions about the tensions between having dancing boundaries and transgressing those boundaries. Do young men like Eric expect to have sex after dancing? Most have the expectation or the illusion that this is a possibility.

Luis explains to us the transitioning property of grinding. In his account, sex is a direct outcome of grinding. He explains:

‘It’s called grinding, like when a man grinds on a woman, or a woman grinds on a man, the body and even though the pants are on or the skirt is on, but the hormones the man and the female hormones are arose me, not arose me, but it will come up. And that’s where the sex comes in because when I was at the party and I was dancing with a female she got me hard…because when you and your partner are dancing and boom boom boom, and the woman perhaps feels it and she’s feeling him, and I say I need that tonight. Because when I was at the party I was dancing, and the girl was dancing on me and I caught a woody, and I am like, in my mind, she do got a phat ass. I should do that number or something.’ (Luis, Dominican, straight, 16 years old)

Luis illustrates his sexual response to dancing and the development of the expectation of having sex with the young woman with whom he dances. Furthermore, Jose gives us a vivid account of this transitioning process:

‘Everything that happens in the club sets the stage. If you gonna take advantage of that or go that route its setting the stage. It’s setting the stage for people to meet each other, get lose to each other, get drunk, get high or whatever people do and hook up.’ (Jose, Dominican Puerto Rican, straight, 17 years old)

Jose’s main idea is that it is at a club where young people can set the stage for what happens next. Thus, if thought through carefully, there are constant opportunities for transitioning from the club to a sexual scene. In fact, this is a sexually active sample of young men and women whose sexual networks have been deeply embedded in the social spaces of the Hip-Hop club scene. Among the young men and women that we have presented in this component of the study (n=45; 35 males and ten females), 84% of the males and 50% of the females have had oral sex, 84% of the males and 100% of the females have had vaginal intercourse and 31% of the males and 10% of the female have had anal intercourse. Fifty-six percent of the males and 90% of the females had had between one and nine partners with whom they had vaginal intercourse. Although grinding and dancing did not always lead to sex, the young men felt the pressures of the sexualized dance floor environment and of the current Hip-Hop ‘hook up’ scene. This is illustrated in Mario’s comment:

‘…on the first night people say now it’s all good but then again what if you don’t have a condom…I don’t want to do it.’ (Mario, Puerto Rican African American, straight, 16 years old)

Although in the previous two months 23.8% of respondents had not had sexual intercourse, 11.9% had had at least one sexual encounter and 64.3% had had two or more sexual encounters. Mario’s account points to the pressures of having sex that many young people confront nowadays in multiple social environments (including the Hip-Hop club scene).
Fears of not having condoms at the moment of having sex or simply the fear of admitting not wanting to have (unprotected) sex are real concerns for young men in the Hip-Hop club scene.

Discussion

In 1999, Janis Hutchinson published a study on African American male-female relationships in a nightclub in Houston, Texas. Similar to our findings, Hutchinson documents how Hip-Hop dancing mimics the act of sex, where the man either stands against the wall or lays down on the ground and the women dance on top of him. This is particularly true in the reggaeton modality of Hip-Hop where ‘the one thing every rising Reggaeton star must have to be noticed is a troupe of toned, hot and barely dressed female dancers gyrating behind them’ (Chaplin 2006).

Yet precisely because the relationship between Hip-Hop genres and sexual relations is so clear, both to participants in Hip-Hop culture as well as to a wide range of outside observers, it is also imperative to avoid unintentionally demonizing such cultural forms as somehow responsible for sexual risk. Pressures to sexualized interactions with other young people on the Hip-Hop dance floor may well be present in the interpretations that young people make of the visual imagery of the people dancing in the club, of Hip-Hop music videos and their lyrics, and so on. But not all young people have sex in their minds as the outcome of going to the clubs — most are just thinking about ‘having a good time’, or about ‘having fun’ in the midst of social and economic circumstances which permit all too little relaxation, pleasure and enjoyment in their lives.

Our argument is that Hip-Hop club cultures, and the interpretations that young men and women involved in them make of their meanings, and of the gendered and sexual scripts that they produce and reproduce, must be investigated and understood precisely because they open up a crucial window on the experience of many urban minority youth in the USA (and, increasingly, in major urban centres around the world [Kitwana 2002, Collins 2005, Watkins 2005]). Rather than approaching Hip-Hop culture as a behavioural risk factor, we argue that, like other cultural forms, Hip-Hop can better be understood as a complex social phenomenon, as one of multiple cultural contexts in which the world of sexual meanings of many urban youths is constituted and constructed and that, as such, it can offer useful insights into the interpretations and experience of the young people who are engaged in it (whether sporadically or intensively). Too much of the research on sexual cultures that has been carried out, particularly in the wake of HIV and AIDS, has focused narrowly on the identification of sexual risk and vulnerability rather than on the insights that cultural systems might offer as a kind of road map for understanding the complex and often contradictory meanings and experience through which sexual life is lived by real people. This seems to be especially true in relation to young people (and especially poor and marginalized young people), who are typically treated as a source of risk or a kind of hazard to others rather than a legitimate population in its own right in need of appropriate services and respectful health promotion.

In few contexts is the need for more nuanced, culturally-sensitive readings more evident than in relation to the sexual meanings that are produced and reproduced in the world of Hip-Hop cultures. It is precisely because of their apparent contradictory quality—at once reproducing highly traditional and even reactionary sexual styles, while at the same time offering a space for deeply rooted cultural critiques which call these traditional styles into question—that the world of Hip-Hop escapes easy readings or superficial interpretations.
On the one hand, Hip-Hop club dancing is intrinsically a gendered experience that, as our research demonstrates, reproduces gender power inequalities and unequal gender identities in systematic and predictable ways. Young men in this study, for example, experienced their masculinities through the ways of dancing with women and the game in the dance floor. Grinding and perreo (a term invented in reggaeton that refers to the main mode of dancing, i.e. doggie style) consists of men's mimicking of penetrating a woman or a woman thrusting or ‘riding’ a man. In this sense, our findings seem to reproduce those of writers such as Joseph Pereira, who has documented how sex in reggaeton is often portrayed as ‘hammering’ (martillando) and the man’s penis as a hammer (martillo), reinforcing that only vigorous and violent movement satisfies the young women (Pereira 1998), and of Wayne Marshall, who has described the rise of reggaeton as a new modality in Hip-Hop styles that has taken the oppression of women to a new level, with a strong focus on male domination and control of women (Marshall 2006, see also Totten 2003).

Our findings are consistent with other studies that document how young women rarely appear as anything other than objects of the male gaze in the Hip-Hop club scene (Marshall 2006). Young women in the study were aware of this and presented little resistance in their narratives. Objectification of women is a powerful element that goes beyond interpersonal dynamics. Monique Ward and colleagues (2005) found that as a result of the objectification of women in music videos, women are not only portrayed as sexual objects, but they grow to accept themselves and portray themselves as such. Yet an interesting finding in our study, which simultaneously contradicts any simplistic reading of Hip-Hop cultures as nothing other than a space for the exaggerated reproduction of gendered inequalities, was how women frequently transgressed gender role boundaries in order to ‘turn’ this objectification towards the young men themselves, as a way of obtaining control over their social situation and their own bodies.

Unspoken boundaries, as well as verbal and physical warnings when these boundaries are crossed, represent the social order of a social setting that at first may seem chaotic and disorganized. Furthermore, the Hip-Hop club scene represents a setting in which young people can set the stage for what happens next in their sexual and emotional interactions. In this sense, it is critical that we take the Hip-Hop club scene as part of our mapping of youth sexualities in sexual-health programming. It would be conceptually wrong to say that Hip-Hop music styles cause sexual risk behaviour among youth. It is rather the club setting — i.e. drinking, drug use, pressures to demonstrate masculinity in the public space and pressures to date and have sex as ways of demonstrating manhood while maintaining a cool pose in combination with sexualized dancing — that are likely factors to produce sexual risk among young people of colour in places like New York City. Indeed, what any thoughtful engagement with the world of Hip-Hop pushes us to acknowledge and confront is in fact the intersection of cultural and structural factors, and the importance of this intersection, not only in shaping patterns of sexual risk and vulnerability, but also in seeking to address risk and vulnerability through meaningful sexual health-promotion programmes. Precisely because culture and structure intersect and interact, programmes designed to meet the needs of urban minority youth will necessarily need to address these points of interaction or they will run the risk of irrelevance in a rapidly changing social context that is not simply being reproduced through the mechanized capitalist system of cultural production, but simultaneously transformed by young people’s own exercise of subjective agency.

Indeed, it is also particularly relevant to understand that rap, reggaeton and other Hip-Hop lyrics contain an archive of cultural and historical references that provide, through their multiple resonances, an oral history of contemporary African American and Latino
experience. It is essential to acknowledge that this history is present not only in the explicit narratives of the lyrics but also in the highly textured form of their constructions and in the manner of their performance. That is, certain Hip-Hop recordings are both a representation of experience as well as an interpretative reading of that experience, a form of critique. They function, like other cultural formations and systems, both as ‘models of’ and ‘models for’ reality — like cultural ‘blueprints’ that the young women and men invested and engaged in Hip-Hop culture use to make sense of their realities (see Geertz 1973). The complex nature of the form led Cornel West (1999) to argue that ‘black rap music is primarily the musical expression of the paradoxical cry of desperation and celebration of the black underclass and poor working class, a cry that openly acknowledges and confronts the wave of personal cold-heartedness, criminal cruelty and existential hopelessness in the black ghettos of Afro-America’ (West 1999, 482). The interweaving of despair and celebration remains characteristic of the Hip-Hop cultures being produced by youth in the inner cities of the US.

Notes
1. Hip-Hop culture (which encompasses a constellation of related urban cultural forms, such as break dancing, graffiti, clothing style and rap music) emerged in the late 1960s in New York City’s inner city neighbourhoods and has developed into one of the world’s most influential cultural movements (Rivera, 2003).
2. Study participants used self-identifying terms (e.g. Black or African American) have been maintained in our presentation of the data.
3. Reggaeton is a type of music that integrates reggae music with mixing and rap lyrics.
4. Grinding is a type of dance move that resembles sexual acts that involve thrusting. Usually one partner is behind the other while grinding.
5. Some of the terms of self-identification were idiosyncratic, like this informant’s use of ‘sexaholic’ as an alternative sexual identity.

References


