

Discovering the Theorist in Tupac: How to Engage Your Students with Popular Music

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This paper introduces creative pedagogical techniques for exploring theory in the undergraduate classroom. Using criminal justice and criminological theories as a primary example, it describes a technique that professors from any theory-driven discipline can use to engage students through popular music, from hip-hop to musical theater in order to strengthen their grasp of the basic theoretical foundations of their field. By introducing music as a forum for understanding theory, we can both peak the interest of our students and demonstrate to them that theory is present in our everyday lives. Here we will consider the importance of integrating popular culture and technology in our classrooms, the ways pop music espouses the major assumptions of theory, and creative approaches we can use to make criminal justice, criminology, and other theory-driven disciplines even more exciting to our students.

Like others, I have found that sociological theories in general, and criminological theories in particular, are some of the most difficult concepts for my students to grasp in a way that allows them to apply what they have learned (e.g., Ahlkvist, 2001; Levy & Merestein, 2005). This is not because the material is particularly difficult as, even though the theories themselves are quite complex, nearly all have been boiled down to their basics in most undergraduate textbooks and readers. Despite the simplified manner with which theories are usually presented, however, “students often have difficulty distinguishing among theories and detecting the subtle differences among them” (West, 2005, p. 341). This inability may very well be due to the simplified way that theories have been presented and, therefore, the key to effectively teaching theory is not necessarily making the theories even less multifaceted, but revising the manner in which we teach them. This need for change has been embraced across many theory-driven disciplines, and the result is a slowly but surely growing body of literature focusing on creative pedagogical techniques, such as Fields’ (2007) use of the *Harry Potter* series to illuminate the nuances of the sociological imagination, or West’s (2005) use of the film *Horton Hears A Who* to teach critical theories. As West (2005) points out,

[A]ny concrete exercise that places the theoretical in a context that students can understand is useful. Moreover, it may start students on a path of trying to apply theoretical concepts to behaviors and events they witness in their everyday lives. (p. 341)

In the spirit of Fields’ (2007) and West’s (2005) work, the activity discussed here is a creative pedagogical technique designed to do just that. Not only does this activity work in the criminal justice classroom, it can easily be adapted to teaching theories in any social science discipline.

Music as Cultural Influence

Of course, even for criminal justice majors, most of their beliefs about crime and justice issues come from the media, which in and of itself speaks to the power of mass communication. Most crime dramas, for example, rely on plots that place all blame for crime on the perpetrators (Surette, 2011) – which is perhaps why nearly all of my students choose rational choice theory to explain crime when given the opportunity to choose from many theories. Just because certain ideas about crime dominate the media, however, does not mean that one cannot find a multitude of assumptions on the Internet, in television, film, books, and music.

Given the immense influence of the media on constructing our opinions about crime and social issues in general, a logical step for teachers to take is to exploit that influence to our own benefit – to teach our students about those concepts that are most important to our discipline, such as theories of crime or social behavior. The challenge, then, is to highlight for our students how we can recognize theory in our everyday life – including in the music that we listen to. The purpose of this paper is to provide criminal justice and social science professors with a creative pedagogical technique for exploring criminological and social theories in the undergraduate classroom by introducing music as a forum for understanding theory. Beginning with a discussion of music’s pervasive influence and, hence, relevance, I then share what has been a successful activity in my own class by incorporating music into classroom lecture, discussion, activities, and take-home assignments.

Within the criminological literature, media has often been studied for its effects on individual behavior or beliefs about crime, and, on occasion, music has been the focus of research (e.g., Ferrell & Hamm, 1994; Hollywood, 1997; Muzzatti, 2004). It is not uncommon to question whether or not, for example, rap music

causes violence against women or if rock music increases aggression in teenagers. Though all of these studies are based upon the common presumption that music is highly influential, criminologists rarely, if ever, question how music contributes to the social construction of shared attitudes regarding crime and criminality – in fact, only a few have even bothered to explore popular lyrics for their relevance to criminology (e.g., Tunnell & Hamm, 2009) or to teaching related concepts (e.g., Finley, 2002; Nisker, 2007). To me, this seems odd in a field that is increasingly recognizing the fact that media constructs social opinions about crime and the criminal justice system and thus has political significance (Ferrell, 1999). Indeed, “In examining the mediated networks and discursive connections,” found in music and other media, we are able to “trace the manifold interactions through which criminals, control agents, media producers, and others collectively attempt to construct the meaning of crime” (Ferrell, 1999, p. 398).

Music and musicians have undeniable social influence, not just in shaping attitudes, but in influencing social change as it relates to crime and justice (Tunnell & Hamm, 2009). Even in the age of musical piracy, music sales reached \$8.4 billion in 2008 (Recording Industry Association of America, 2008). If we consider that these sales are only a small representation of the music that our students consume, given the popularity of MTV, the radio, and music on the Internet, then we cannot deny the influence it has in their lives. Indeed, music touches all of us and has a profound effect on how we interpret and enjoy the world around us.

Music as a Learning Tool

Throughout my teaching career many students have shared with me the music that reminds them of the concepts we cover in my courses. Tupac in particular has a number of songs that speak to the issues of poverty and racism, social problems that I often teach students are inherently connected to crime and our perceptions of it. In his popular song *Changes* (Shakur, Evans, & Hornsby, 1998, track 5), for example, Tupac raps:

I'm tired of bein' poor & even worse I'm black
 my stomach hurts so I'm lookin' for a purse to snatch
 Cops give a damn about a negro
 pull the trigger kill a nigga he's a hero
 Give the crack to the kids who the hell cares
 one less hungry mouth on the welfare
 First ship 'em dope & let 'em deal the brothers
 give 'em guns step back watch 'em kill each other

Since many of my students consider Tupac to be a “pop culture intellect” of sorts, they somehow consider my lectures to be more valid and in line with their own

world views when they can see the similarities between Tupac’s words and my own. Students connect these lyrics to the critical perspective I try to offer in my courses, particularly when I am trying to convince them that crime must be understood within a larger sociological context that includes multiple levels of inquiry, understanding and analysis. Their own informal interpretations of the lyrics (evidenced by my discussions with them) convinced me that perhaps music was a useful tool for teaching the multi-layered nuances of theory.

As I began compiling a small archive of the music students had shared with me, I decided to develop a learning activity that would not only incorporate their interest in music, but encourage them to think even more deeply about the lyrics that they often take for granted. I wanted to see if they could use it to identify the assumptions inherent in theory in “everyday” pop culture discourse. Previously I had found that students could only connect a phrase or statement to theory if the connection was blatantly obvious, or if the statement was made specifically by the original theorist. For example, I asked students in a Media & Crime course this question:

On her prime time television show, a popular legal commentator said that Casey Anthony (accused of murdering her daughter) “knew exactly what she was doing,” and only murdered her daughter Caylie because the benefit of living a kid-free life outweighed the possible punishment. What criminological theory is she relying on in her statement?

The correct answer would be rational choice theory, which assumes that deterrence is most likely when the punishment for one’s actions outweighs the benefit of committing the crime. However, even though my students had read about rational choice theory (and they frequently used it in their own arguments about crime), many could not identify the assumptions of rational choice in the statement because it wasn’t explicit. Despite being criminal justice majors, most students had rarely practiced applying what they learned in class to the media that they are consumed by on a daily basis. Since criminal justice policy is often born out of rhetoric in the media, this seems to be an obviously necessary skill for our students to learn. Hence, this realization became the inspiration for the activity described below.

Setting the Stage

Before beginning this activity it is necessary to teach your students the basic assumptions and implication of the theories you are interested in them

learning. The depth with which you cover these assumptions and implications will depend on the course. When I use this activity for my Media & Crime course, for example, my explanations are rather basic because my primary goal is to help those who have taken a theory course to connect it to the current content, as well as to introduce theory to those who have yet to take such a class. I give them the most fundamental theoretical assumptions about crime as they relate to its causes, consequences, and possible solutions. The more integral theory is to the course, the more information I provide.

I recommend beginning with some assigned reading that explains the theories you are interested in and spending at minimum one class period reviewing the concepts. Though it may seem redundant to you, covering the theories through text and lecture helps to address multiple learning styles. I like to assign the readings over the weekend and have my students take a related quiz on Blackboard (this can also be done on other online learning systems, such as WebCT or Moodle, or in a class session), which I grade prior to our next class period and use to determine what I should focus on in lecture. If you are covering rational choice theories, the question about the “popular legal commentator” is a useful way to gauge your student’s application skills. Once you “set the stage” in regards to understanding the basics of theory, the fun can begin, either at the end of your lecture or a second class period (depending on the length of your class).

The “MUY” Method

Over the years I have developed a teaching method that my colleague has playfully dubbed the “MUY” method, because after evaluating one of my class periods she declared that this particular style is *muy eficaz* (i.e., “very effective”). MUY stands for “Me, Us, You,” and is a technique I use whenever I want students to master a task. Basically, I demonstrate the task first (Me), then we do it as a group (Us) and, finally, I require them to do it on their own (You).

I begin this particular activity by passing out the lyrics to and playing a clip of the song *Gee, Officer Krupke* (1957) from the film *West Side Story*, which I found on YouTube. Then I point out to the students where I see the assumptions of criminological theory throughout the song. For example, consider the first verse:

Dear kindly Sergeant Krupke,
You gotta understand,
It’s just our bringin’ up-ke
That gets us out of hand.
Our mothers all are junkies,
Our fathers all are drunks.
Golly Moses, natcherly we’re punks!

These lyrics provide an opportunity to show how, even in one small verse, we can see the primary assumptions found in social learning theory and social bonding/control theory. Then we move on to subsequent verses, where I point out the song’s reliance on biological theories, psychological theories, and anomie/strain theories. The assigned readings, lecture, and discussion address identification and description, key components to attaining knowledge and comprehension (Bloom, 1956). Inevitably this process leads to a discussion about how these lyrics may influence the listeners own thoughts on crime and criminality.

Next, in keeping with the MUY method, we analyze several songs together (Us), deconstructing the song’s meaning as we read the lyrics and watch video clips from YouTube when available. Pairing the lyrics with video clips addresses multiple styles of learning, engages students on multiple levels, and highlight social and political messages not inherent to the lyrics (see Berk, 2009 for a detailed discussion on the benefits of using video clips in the classroom). Songs that I have found particularly useful are *In the Ghetto* (Davis, 1969) by Elvis, *Stan* (Armstrong, Herman, & Eminem, 2000, track 3) by Eminem, *The Message* (Fletcher, Mel, & Robinson, 1982, track 7) by Grandmaster Flash, *Goodbye Earl* (Linde, 2000, track 5) by the Dixie Chicks, *Changes* (Shakur et al., 1998, track 5) or *I Wonder if Heaven Got A Ghetto* (Shakur, McDowell, Troutman, Goodman, & Troutman, 1997, track 7) by Tupac, *Jeremy* (Vedder & Ament, 1992, track 6) by Pearl Jam, and *Wake Up* (de la Rocha, 1992, track 7) by Rage Against the Machine. *Wake Up* (de la Rocha, 1992, track 7), for example, provides an opportunity to discuss political (e.g., Marxist) and sociological theories (e.g., labeling), such as found in this verse:

Movements come and movements go
Leaders speak, movements cease
When their heads are flown
Cause all these punks
Got bullets in their heads
Departments of police, the judges, the feds
Networks at work, keepin’ people calm
You know they went after king
When he spoke out on Vietnam
He turned the power to the have-nots
And then came the shot

When students hear these lyrics on their own, they recognize the anger that Rage Against the Machine is conveying, but they admit to rarely giving them a second thought. Given the opportunity to reflect on what the artist is actually saying, however, students begin to appreciate the actual message of oppression and government control. More importantly, they start to

see the relationship between events seemingly unrelated to the CJS (e.g., the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.) and how in fact they are integral to understanding the complex relationship between politics, social “isms,” and criminal justice.

The Pearl Jam song *Jeremy* (Vedder & Ament, 1992, track 6), which is about a boy who opens fire on his classmates, provides an opportunity to explore social bonding/control theories and psychological theories:

At home, drawing pictures of mountain tops
 With him on top lemon yellow sun, arms raised in a V
 And the dead lay in pools of maroon below
 Daddy didn't give attention
 Oh, to the fact that mommy didn't care
 King jeremy the wicked...oh, ruled his world . . .
 Jeremy spoke in class today . . . (2x)

Clearly I remember pickin on the boy
 Seemed a harmless little fuck
 Ooh, but we unleashed a lion . . .
 Gnashed his teeth and bit the recess ladys breast . . .
 How can I forget?
 And he hit me with a surprise left
 My jaw left hurtin...ooh, dropped wide open
 Just like the day...oh, like the day I heard

Daddy didn't give affection, no . . .
 And the boy was something that mommy wouldn't wear
 King jeremy the wicked . . . oh, ruled his world
 Jeremy spoke in class today . . . (3x)

Not only do these songs get our students discussing the theories that are obviously presumed by the artists to be valid explanations of criminal behavior, it gets them discussing the theories that are not so clearly presented and allows an opportunity to differentiate between theories that have subtle differences. Whenever I have done this activity, our conversation inevitably leads to what assumptions about crime and justice dominate the media, which do not, and why. From there we can talk about how music and other forms of pop culture can shape our ideas about these issues and, in turn, shape the way the larger society views crime, criminals, criminal justice professionals, and responses to crime. In a very real sense, this exercise can teach students that what appears to be innocuous entertainment is actually highly influential and of real consequence. Moreover, the process of deconstructing assumptions about crime and social behavior and differentiating between various theories fosters application and analysis (Bloom, 1956).

Depending on the number of songs you choose, this portion of the activity could take an entire class period. At the end of the class period I give students a “homework” assignment, requiring them to identify

their own song that they feel “demonstrates the assumptions found in criminological theory.” Of course you can assign specific theories, designate particular genres, or give minimal instruction and allow the students to determine the direction of the activity. Once they settle on a song, they are instructed to find the lyrics on the web and make three copies of them to bring to the next class period.

Finally, it is time to complete the final component of the “MUY” method – “You.” In the last class period dedicated to the activity students are divided into groups of three, in which they share the lyrics they brought and work together to analyze the three songs. I instruct them that as they discuss the theories found in the lyrics, they should write notes in the margin that indicate their findings. It usually takes the students half or more of the class period to analyze the songs without my help, as well as to “haggle” over what assumptions are truly found in certain lyrics. I find that the discussions generated during this portion of the activity are candid, and I am always pleased with the level of critical thinking my students begin to demonstrate. On a related note, students have found that it is very useful if you can find a way for them to listen to the songs that their classmates choose, especially if they have never heard them before. If you are able, you may consider finding the time to let each group share and discuss one of their songs with the rest of the class. The Internet has made it incredibly easy to find music videos quickly, and you might think about showing the video that accompanies the song.

It is one thing to be able to discuss complex topics but, as every teacher who requires writing assignments knows, it entails an entirely different skill set for students to be able to take their thoughts (particularly those that are analytical) and put them into writing in a clear and coherent manner. Thus, once it is clear that student conversations have diminished, I send students back to their desks to practice synthesizing what they have learned (Bloom, 1956). I instruct them to pick one of the three songs that they now have and write an essay summarizing how the lyrics relate to theory. I inform them that their reader will have no knowledge of criminological theory, so they must first describe the assumptions and implications of each theory that is relevant to the song and then provide lyrical examples to support their discussion. The last few minutes of class are used to discuss the activity and how they can apply what they learned in the future. This final stage of the activity requires students to draw upon their knowledge base to create an original essay that draws upon the previously learned skills of comprehension, application, and analysis (Bloom, 1956). By addressing the lower levels of learning in previous steps of this activity, students are equipped to synthesize the material independently, as evidenced by their final essays (Bloom, 1956).

Adaptations

There are multiple ways to adapt this activity to suit your specific needs. One way is to vary the presentation of songs and organize them by genre or decade, as previously suggested. By looking at music throughout time you can demonstrate to your students how assumptions about crime have historical significance and how those assumptions may reflect major events in history. Looking at songs released immediately after the Rodney King beating (e.g., 1992's *Cop Killer* by Ice-T's former band Body Count), for example, can show how significant events in criminal justice can influence popular culture, which influences public opinion which, in return, affects the administration of justice (or lack thereof) in the United States. *Cop Killer* (Ice-T & Emie, 1992), which was in part inspired by and specifically mentions the King beating, was released shortly before the officers charged with beating King were acquitted. Police officers, law enforcement organizations, and politicians (most notably Dan Quayle and former President George Bush) publicly denounced Warner Brothers Records and demanded the album be taken off the shelves (which, in many stores, it was). The primary argument against the song was that it would invoke violence against police officers, particularly by young African American men. Using *Cop Killer* (Ice-T & Emie, 1992) as the cornerstone of a larger discussion about significant events in history not only allows students to recognize opposing theories of crime causation in social discourse, but also it illuminates the ideological nature of and relationship between popular culture, politics, and social institutions such as the criminal justice system.

It may also be a good idea to analyze music by genre. Not only will this show that assumptions about crime vary by artist and audience, but also it will force students to look at genres they may not otherwise explore. I find that when I ask students to return with their own songs that they rely heavily on rap music. While certainly rap music has a heavy focus on relevant issues, our students are usually deceived into believing that other genres rarely focus on crime and justice issues (at least not in a way that they see as relevant). My own students were flabbergasted when I played *In the Ghetto* (Davis, 1969) by Elvis and they realized that his lyrics were substantively similar to those of Tupac Shakur three decades later (1997, 1998). It is definitely beneficial to challenge students to explore country, rock, pop, blues, jazz, and even show tunes when doing this activity.

As online education is becoming more pervasive, finding activities that can translate to the online classroom are especially useful. As you can see from the discussion board instructions below, you can adapt

this activity to the online environment so long as you continue to convey the information and expectations in multiple ways:

In order to complete this DB, it is essential that you have first read Ch. 3, viewed the PowerPoint *and* completed the "practice" activity at the end of the PowerPoint. Once you have done those things, identify a song that you feel contains assumptions found in one or more of the criminological theories outlined in the PowerPoint. Provide your classmates with the lyrics to the song (either by copying and pasting them into your post or attaching them in a word document) and, if one is available, a link to the song's video. Then, describe in detail how the song makes assumptions/assertions similar to criminological theory, what assumptions the artist makes about crime and criminality, and what stereotypes the artist may be relying on.

To my surprise, students in my online class were able to navigate this activity very well, and they even provided a wider variety of music (and, consequently, theoretical applications) than the students in my face-to-face classes.

Finally, it should be recognized that this activity can be applied to any number of media types. As long as you stick to the MUY method, you can have students complete a similar analysis of television shows or films, for example. Obviously these would take much more time to watch and analyze than song lyrics, so you would need to adjust in-class and out-of-class time appropriately.

The Rewards of Using Music to Teach Theory

Each time I have used this activity in my classes I have asked students to reflect on it and provide me with some feedback on their experience. The comments I receive are always positive, and several themes consistently emerge from their evaluations of the activity. First and most importantly, students report a greater understanding of the theories and an improved ability to remember the primary assumptions that underlie them. Each semester I see this confirmed in their improved ability to recall, analyze and apply them in future assignments. Many students report that, well beyond the end of the semester, they are doing this activity on their own whenever they listen to music at home or in the car. Indeed, former students of mine continue to email me lyrics to songs, urging me to share the song with current classes.

Second, students report that this activity has encouraged them to apply criminological theories to their everyday experiences. Not only do they start to

critically consume various forms of media, but they begin to see the theories as ideas that they can actually use to explain or understand the real-world events that are presented in the media or are happening in their own lives. This is especially important if we want students to take what they have learned in our classes and apply it in future classes or, better yet, in life after college.

Last, but not least, students report that they have fun when doing this activity. Creating learning experiences that students enjoy should not be underestimated – without a doubt, boredom is fruitless. While to us taking the time to develop and execute an activity such as this may seem like jumping through proverbial hoops, so to speak, just to get students engaged, it certainly has its rewards. The truth is that students, their attention spans, and their learning styles are changing, and we must change with them if our ultimate goal is to foster learning. Fink (2003) reminds us that in order to create significant learning experiences, what we really need is “not to make a change but to *continually change*” (p. 174). Hopefully this activity will be one of many changes you can make to improve your teaching and, more importantly, your students’ learning.

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