

2013

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Recommended Citation

King, Vanessa and Niabaly, Dieynaba (2013) "The Politics of Black Womens' Hair," *Journal of Undergraduate Research at Minnesota State University, Mankato*: Vol. 13, Article 4.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56816/2378-6949.1003>

Available at: <https://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/jur/vol13/iss1/4>

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The Politics of Black Women's Hair

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This paper was prepared for Gender and Women's Studies 330, taught by Dr. Shannon Miller

Abstract

Historically, black women's image has been subjected to high scrutinization that rendered every choice they made for their body and hair important. Black women have undergone many pressures that shaped their hair choices in various ways. However, there is a general tendency in the literature to homogenize all black women's experiences and disregard their ethnic diversity. In this study, we explored both African and African American college women's feelings about the motivations to straighten (relax) or wear their hair without chemical treatment (natural). For this qualitative approach, we utilized a cross-cultural approach and interviewed 12 African and African American college women with relaxed (chemically treated) or natural (chemically untreated) hair to understand the motivations for their various hair choices. Findings reveal that African and African American women with relaxed hair are influenced by different factors; African women with relaxed hair reported being influenced by community and media while African American women reported family as the most influential factor regarding their hair decisions. Both African and African American women with natural hair viewed their hair as a personal choice rather than a political statement. In general, African American women reported more exposure to natural hair than African women who, for the most part, went natural when they came to the United States. Although, black women seem to have similar experiences about their hair cross-culturally, there are relevant particularities in each group's experiences that are worth taking into account for a more precise knowledge of these groups.

Introduction

The current study explored both African and African American college women's feelings about the motivations to chemically straighten (relax) or wear their hair without chemical treatment (natural) as well as how their ethnicity influences those choices. The following research questions guided our study: what factors motivate African and African American college women to have natural or relaxed hair? How do African and African American college women feel about natural and relaxed hair? How do African and African American women think their ethnicity influences their hair choices? This study allows us to voice the experiences of women from two oppressed groups in order to add to the existing body of knowledge about them.

Literature Review

Throughout history, women have been pressured to subject themselves to Eurocentric beauty standards that are for the most part defined and reinforced by a dominant culture and affect all women regardless of race (Patton, 2006; White, 2005; Thompson, 2009). While this is true for all women, it is even more persistent in black women's lives (White, 2005). Black women have constantly been compared to white women as the latter is considered to be the ideal of beauty. For this very reason, there is an incredible amount of pressure for black women to conform to the dominant Eurocentric beauty standards (White, 2005; Patton, 2006; Tate, 2007).

Often times, media portray white women with straight hair as the beauty ideal. The few black women who are featured usually have Caucasian traits such as light skin and straight hair (White, 2005; Patton, 2006; Lester, 2000). Thompson (2009) added that even in media directed to black people, most ads are about relaxers and the products women with relaxed hair use. Relaxers are chemicals used to permanently straighten curly hair. Lester (2000) explained that

the process of chemically straightening hair is potentially dangerous as it can cause skin and scalp burns, hair breakage and loss, and eye injury. Hence, hair is a serious issue in black women's lives, especially because it can have implications beyond the aesthetic level. Largely, within the African American community, black hair choices are not often discussed (Thompson, 2009) despite its importance. However, it is also noteworthy to say that body image and hair have always held a crucial importance in black people's lives that can be traced back to pre-slavery times in Africa.

Byrd and Tharps (2001) noted that hair was very important in Africa and was, in many tribes, a way to show one's status, identity, religion, and ancestry. The importance of hair in determining one's status became even more apparent during slavery in the United States as black women with a kinky hair texture had to work in the fields while those with a more Caucasian-like hair texture were house slaves (Robinson, 2011; Lester, 2000). However, despite their looser hair texture, house enslaved Africans still had to take a step further in order to be presentable as white masters had control over them and forced them to have an image as close to white as possible (Thompson, 2008).

Therefore, emulating white standards of beauty for body image and particularly for hair meant having more status, the possibility to pass as white, become free and even survival in some instances (Patton, 2006). The mixed children from slave masters had looser, straighter and softer hair considered "good hair", which added to the pressure African Americans experienced to appear as white as they could (Tate, 2007). That helps understand how black people's need to alter their natural hair came about and still persists in our times.

Often times hair-relaxing starts at an early age among African American women as their hair is chemically straightened starting around six years old (Bellinger, 2007). This shows that

most often than not, it is not the child's choice. Hair relaxing can inform one's socioeconomic status as African American women who are of upper-class status often wear their hair straightened (Bellinger, 2007, Thompson, 2008). Over the course of years, women with straight hair have been viewed as the beauty norm both in Northern America and within the African and the African American communities (Tate, 2007; Patton, 2006; Etemesi, 2007; Robinson 2011). Black women are taught that their natural hair is not good and black girls are raised to understand that their natural hair is wrong compared to white girls' (Banks, 2000; Thompson, 2009) as their mothers often alter it chemically or with hot combs when they have to go to church or for holidays (White, 2005).

Eurocentric beauty standards seem to be so ingrained in Western societies that they are, in various instances, institutionalized to the point where the way a black woman wears her hair can determine what kind of job she can have and whether or not she can keep the job. Indeed, in most enterprises in the Western world, straight hair is considered more professional and presentable while natural hair is considered unkempt (Thompson, 2009).

For this reason, Patton (2006) insisted that it has been even harder for black women with natural hair to secure jobs as their hair often does not conform to "corporate grooming policies" that deem afros, dreadlocks, braids and such styles as unprofessional, radical and subversive. Women who wear their hair natural also face the risk of being labeled as masculine or not straight. White (2005), Thompson (2009), Bellinger (2007) and Etemesi (2007) pointed out that some ways black women with natural hair are perceived by other races as well as by African Americans include being considered of lower-class status, childish, Afrocentric and outspoken. Wearing one's natural hair is considered a strategy of resistance to white beauty standards and also a connection to African roots and heritage (Banks, 2000).

White's (2005) research relevantly exposes some of the motivations for women's hair choices. She found that, for many women, the decision to wear their hair in its natural state is a process of change in the way they define themselves and also a journey to "self-discovery" that gives a sense of pride and strength. However, it is important not to fall in the stereotypical idea that all women who have natural hair are trying to make a political statement. Some women she interviewed claimed that their natural hair did not affect how they felt about themselves. Some women decided to go natural as a matter of personal preference or an expression of their creativity.

The same is true for women with relaxed hair because their choice is often assumed to mean self-hatred and loss of identity when in fact it is a matter of convenience as relaxed hair is often considered to be more manageable and less time-consuming (Etemesi, 2007; Banks, 2000). Not every woman who relaxes her hair is trying to emulate white beauty standard (Lester, 2000; Thompson, 2008). Due to the context of oppression in which it was created and promoted, it is understandable to view hair relaxers as alienating black women. However, relaxers have evolved to be part of black culture and do not necessarily equal self-hatred anymore, rather they can also "serve to counterpoliticize the signifier of ethnic and racial devalorization and challenge definitions of blackness as defined by hegemonic culture" (Thompson, 2008, p.847).

The existing literature shows that different hair choices can be motivated by different factors and "it is difficult to conclude that wearing one's hair straightened or natural is a polarized act of either embracing ethnic pride or demonstrative of a poor self-image (White, 2005, p. 298). Our research is thus very important, as it will help better understand the motivations behind black women hair choices.

Methodology

Participants

Study participants were 12 African and African American college women between the ages of 18 and 25, and who have natural (unprocessed) or relaxed (chemically treated) hair. Our research was advertised via a flyer that stated specific participation criteria such as race, ethnicity, age and type of hair (natural or relaxed). Prospective participants who identified in accordance with our inclusion criteria were selected for interview. This included 3 African women with relaxed hair, 3 African women with natural hair, 3 African American women with relaxed hair and 3 African American women with natural hair.

Procedure

To effectively carry out our research, we decided to use the method of interviewing, as Hesse-Biber (2007) explains that “interviewing is a particular research method feminist researchers can use to gain insight into the world of their respondents” (p. 114). We chose a small sample size to be able to have an in-depth understanding of our participants as it is often recommended in qualitative research (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 119). We used structured interviewing for all participants and we asked specific open-ended questions in relation to their hair choices and decisions. We asked the same set of questions to all participants in a predetermined order.

We categorized the interview questions in three main objectives: to learn about the factors that motivated African and African American college women to have natural or relaxed hair, to understand how they feel about their hair and finally to find out how ethnicity plays a role in their hair choices. Some of the questions we asked in each category were as follows: would you say the current state of your hair is solely your choice, meaning what/who would you consider to have influenced your current hair choices? Do you feel that your hair choices play a

role in how people perceive you? If so, please explain. Do you think that the racially/ethnically discriminatory history of black people has affected black women's hair?

We recruited prospective participants on campus and all interviews were done face to face, in a private location on campus. All data was recorded and transcribed before being thoroughly analyzed.

Researchers' Identities

In qualitative research, it is important that the researcher practice reflexivity, which means to "recognize, examine, and understand how his or her own social background and assumptions can intervene in the research process" (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p.129). Since our knowledge is usually shaped through socialization, our environment and our different identities, it is important for us to examine all the factors that can help or hinder our research.

One researcher identifies as an African American woman who has chemically altered (relaxed) hair and has struggled with her hair choices throughout her life. She interviewed both African and African American women with relaxed hair and her background allowed her to relate to the participants she interviewed. The fact that she is in the same racial group as the participants made her an insider and made it easier for her to establish trust with the participants and collect more spontaneous narratives.

Another researcher identifies as a black African college woman who has natural hair. She interviewed African and African American college women with natural hair and her background allowed her to easily recruit women with natural hair because they were opened to talk to a fellow "natural sister". Being natural and having knowledge about natural hair helped her carry out the interviews, as she could easily understand the concepts the participants were referring to.

Looking at their positionalities, prior to the research, allowed both researchers to face their potential biases and acknowledge the differences and similarities between their backgrounds and the participants'.

Results

The purpose of this study was to understand the feelings and motivations for African and African American college women's hair choices. This study also explored the influence of ethnicity on these choices. Based on data collected from 12 semi-structured interviews, we organized this section into four categories: the factors that motivate hair choices, the feelings about relaxed and natural hair, the influences of ethnicity on hair choices and lastly African and African American women's perceptions of relaxed hair and natural hair. Within each category, we separately present the findings for the participants with relaxed hair and the findings for the participants with natural hair.

Factors that Motivate Hair Choices

Relaxed. Women with relaxed (chemically treated) hair had very similar motives when it came to their hair choices. Both African and African American college women had very similar motivations when it came to the way they wore their hair. Black college women with relaxed hair felt that their first influences for their hair choice were female figures in their lives including mothers, aunts, grandmothers, and even female friends. They wanted to relax their hair because the female figures and peers in their lives were getting relaxers and trying different hairstyles.

There were both similarities and differences between African and African American college women with relaxers. African college women felt that, as they were getting older, their choice was based on finding another way to do their hair, especially on their own.

Natural. All women shared the fact that they had chemically straightened hair before and the goal to have healthier hair was the primary reason they chose to have natural hair. Five of the six participants with natural hair reported that they decided to go natural when they learned about the chemicals in relaxers and the side effects that some of them already experienced, including pain and scalp burns. In addition, two African participants said that media influenced their decision to go natural because they either watched a documentary that revealed the dangers of relaxers or they saw black women proudly and easily take care of their natural hair on alternative media such as blogs. One African participant said that her mother encouraged her to have natural hair by always telling her how beautiful it is.

African American participants all said that they had at least one close friend who had natural hair and encouraged them to go natural as well. Having close friends with natural hair allowed them to understand that natural hair is not as hard to take care of as they thought. They also mentioned exercise as an influence for their hair choice. Indeed, one participant is in track and field and said that she “was sick and tired of constantly sweating [her] relaxer out and having to make it look decent again after every practice”. Two African American participants said that going natural was part of a bigger process of connecting back to their roots and embracing their black heritage. All women emphasized that despite the influences of media, family or friends, it was still their conscious choice to go natural.

Feelings about Relaxed and Natural Hair

Relaxed. Participants varied in their feelings regarding relaxed hair. African college women with relaxed hair felt that their hair did not define who they were. Their hair choice was solely based on finding an alternative way to manage their hair.

When it came to African American college women with relaxed hair, there was a complete difference. These women felt that their relaxed hair defined who they are as a person. They felt that without their relaxed hair, they would not be able to show their true personality. Although African American women felt that their hair was an important part of their identity, there were women who felt that it was important to be able to maintain their hair and tame the natural hair they were born with.

Natural. Five out of the six participants said that since they started wearing their hair natural, they experience pressure from peers, friends and/or family to relax their hair. Two African women said that they experienced more pressure to relax their hair from their families when they went back to their home countries. African American women said that they experience more pressure to straighten their hair for special occasions or family members tell them that their hair is not presentable for when they have to go to church. One participant expressed her frustration about this when she stated: “It’s incredible to be told that my natural hair is not good enough for church, I mean, it’s like saying God made a mistake [by making] my hair kinky and I should be ashamed of it”.

Both African and African American women noted that people perceive them differently with their natural hair. Two African women said that in their respective home countries, people consider them to be childish because relaxers are culturally a symbol of transition to adulthood. African American said that they sometimes receive neutral or positive comments when they do “mainstream hairstyles” with their natural hair but when they wear their natural hair in an afro, people express more reluctance. All participants said that most people would be happy if they relax their hair because it is considered the norm.

When it comes to how men perceive them with their natural hair, two African women said that many men find them more attractive and beautiful and also show more respect and pride. It is quite the opposite for African American participants as they all experienced more negative comments from men, which ranged from simple jokes to serious attacks like: “If you can’t afford to do your hair, at least try to hide it” or “[...] we are not in the African jungle anymore”. For this reason, African American women concluded that men like women with relaxed hair or with a weave more than women with natural hair.

All participants with natural hair said that natural hair contributes to defining who they are because it reflects their personality and also shows that they are proud of who they are naturally. One participant stated: “I see it as a way to take back my dignity as a black woman, to show that I am not an object that will change to please men or anyone else for that matter”.

Influence of Ethnicity on Hair Choices

Relaxed. Ethnicity is a large influence when it comes to the choice of the way African and African American women wear their hair. African college women felt that their ethnicity influenced their choice to relax their hair because within their ethnicity, many women were getting relaxers and trying out different hairstyles. Many of these women felt that if this was not happening within their ethnicity, they would have never thought of getting a relaxer and trying out these styles.

African American college women had similar feelings on how their ethnicity influenced their choice to relax their hair. Many of their peers and family members were getting their hair relaxed, which made them feel they needed to get that done to their own hair. African American women also felt the influence of Madam C.J. Walker. She created products that were meant for

African and African American women to use on their hair to help them maintain it, which influenced many women to try these products.

Natural. African women believed that the discrimination against black people, in this case colonization, has impacted the hair choices they can make because it changed the beauty standards in Africa. One of the participants clearly articulated this idea when she said:

[...] I feel like if we go back in history before Europeans visited Africa, Africans were totally cool with their hair and knew how to take care of it and Europeans came and made [black Africans] feel inferior to white people. We accepted that and work tirelessly to try to be like them [...] that represents a whole spectrum of things like talking like them, dressing like them and trying to have their skin complexion and hair texture. [...]

Colonization has ended but this mindset still goes on.

They added that an important part of the knowledge of natural hair their ancestors had, has been lost because of colonization. However, they believe that, as Africans, they still have more knowledge of traditional hairstyles for natural hair than African American women.

African American women said that slavery affected and still affects how black women can wear their hair because white people stigmatized natural hair during slavery by labeling it “nappy”. Another fact two African American women noted was that living in a predominantly white setting dictates their beauty image and affects how their hair choices are perceived. They feel that they would face less discrimination and negative reactions against their natural hair if they lived in a predominantly black setting, which African women’s responses showed is not the case.

African and African American Women’s Perceptions of Relaxed Hair and Natural Hair

Relaxed. Both African and African American college women thought that relaxed hair

was not a form of conforming to white beauty standards. They felt that this is far from the truth because relaxing their hair had nothing to do with living up to white beauty standards. They disagreed with that statement and felt that even white people have different hair textures. These women felt that time has changed and that many black women do not feel this way anymore. Women's hair choices are personal rather than an attempt to conform to white beauty standards.

African American college women felt that going natural is a personal choice rather than a political statement or a rebellion against white beauty standards. They felt that women who wear their hair natural may be showing a desire to go against Eurocentric beauty standards, but ultimately it's not a political statement. These women still felt that society has progressed and women are trying to find other ways to challenge white beauty standards. African women had similar thoughts and felt hair is not that important because it is just a part of them.

Natural. Two African women and one African American woman said that many women who still relax their hair do it because they unconsciously attempt to conform to the idea that straight hair is more desirable. However, all participants insisted that most women relax their hair because they have a misconception that relaxed hair is easier to take care of than natural hair. One African participant insisted that relaxers were a way to imitate white people before but now "women reclaimed the relaxers and the weaves and make a statement by showing that they can be versatile and look good in anything they do".

Five participants said that natural hair might be a political statement for some women although it was not their case but rather a personal choice. One African woman strongly believed that natural hair is a political statement because it shows that she embraces her uniqueness and that she is bold enough to challenge society's standards. Although five women said that wearing their hair natural is not a political statement, it is worth noting that they all declared that natural

hair shows racial pride.

Implications

Our results show the urgent need for media to present diverse and accurate images of black women. In media and in our society, women are influenced to think that their hair is a part of their identity and should be presented in a certain way at all times. This may have influenced many women to chemically treat their hair. The lack of a positive space for varying black hair in media fosters the ignorance black women have of their hair as well as the misconceptions other races have on black women's hair. Knowledge about black hair care should be rendered mainstream and made readily available to black women starting at a young age so that they know about the different options available and the risks involved in some practices. This will allow them to make conscious hair choices and feel comfortable to wear their hair however they want to without fearing to be stigmatized.

It is essential that black people unlearn the preconceived beauty ideals and the internalized racism Eurocentric societies instilled in them in order to form a strong collective and support each other against discrimination and oppression. Women with natural hair should not have to deal with negativity from their family and friend circles or from black men. All the participants to this research appeared to be very family-oriented and some replicated their mothers' hair choices while others faced their mothers' disapproval and lamented it. Therefore, mothers of both African and African American women need to be more aware of the important role they play in their daughters' lives and act accordingly to provide a supporting and empowering environment to their daughters.

Race is not the only factor that determines one's experiences as other factors such as ethnicity also play an important role. African and African American women's differing

responses to our interview questions show that their experiences are not homogeneous. This emphasizes the need to recognize African and African American ethnicities as distinct groups that have different cultural practices, different history and thus different factors that shape their experiences. These differences are relevant to investigate and scholars should do more cross-cultural studies of the African and African American communities to uncover the similarities but also the differences between the two communities for a more accurate and diverse representation.

Finally, white supremacy and racism should be eradicated to allow the celebration of differences rather than the representation of one group as the ideal. Difference is something positive and does not have to involve a relation of superiority and inferiority because everybody has something unique to them that constitutes a treasure for society.

Limitations and Future Research

Our results could vary if a different sample population is used because the narratives were personal experiences and participants may not be fully representative of targeted populations. We recruited all our participants in Minnesota State University Mankato and the results could vary depending on the location.

The limitations of our research indicate the need to further investigate this issue in various settings. Future research should explore the hair choices of African and African American women in the workplace and what motivates these choices. Recognizing that African women may have different experiences with their hair depending on their country of origin, it would be important to do a cross-national study of African heritage ethnicities' hair politics. For example, it would be very enriching to replicate our study with a focus on Afro-Latina and Afro-Caribbean women.

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Professional Biography of the Students

Vanessa King

Vanessa King is originally from Richfield, Minnesota. She is a Psychology and Gender and Women's Studies major at Minnesota State University, Mankato. She plans to graduate in the fall of 2013 and go on to get her Master's degree in either Gender and Women's Studies or Counseling and Student Personal. She is very interested in working for a nonprofit organization and pursuing a career where she can help others.

Dieynaba Niabaly

Dieynaba Niabaly is from Senegal, West Africa. She is majoring in International Relations, Gender and Women's Studies and Spanish. After her graduation in spring 2014, she will pursue her Master's degree in International Development and Women's Studies. Her main professional goal is to work in an International nonprofit organization with a focus on improving social infrastructures in poor countries and empowering women and children.

Professional Biography of the Mentor

Shannon J. Miller is an Assistant Professor of Gender and Women's Studies at Minnesota State University, Mankato. She received her doctorate in Child and Family Development with a concentration in women's studies from the University of Georgia. Her research interests are in the combined effects of race, gender, and sexuality on southern black queer women's experiences, particularly resilient responses to discrimination. Dr. Miller has presented numerous papers at international, national, and regional meetings and has published manuscripts in peer-reviewed journals. She is the co-founder of All My Children Project, an organization promoting the health and wellbeing of Black LGBTQQ persons, their families, and communities through social justice research. As recognition of her activism in the south, she is the current president of the Southeastern Women's Studies Association (SEWSA).