

WHY AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN TRY TO OBTAIN 'GOOD HAIR'

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the definition of "good hair" according to African American women in order to understand the reasons young African American women choose to change their hair from its supposed "natural" state. The data was collected by participant observation and open-ended interviews with fifteen African American young women. The respondents indicated that younger African American women say they no longer follow historical norms of wanting to appear White in appearance, but claim that they change their hair's chemical make-up for time, ease of styling, and the creation and perpetuation of healthy hair. Other respondents choose to not change their hair based on racial pride taught to them by their mothers.

INTRODUCTION

This research was conducted to understand why African American women feel the need to *not* wear their hair naturally. The question I began with is: Why are African American women raised to change their hair from its natural state? As the research progressed the question of what is natural and what is not natural arose. I found that a distinct minority of women do not consider braids nor afros natural. The women's reasoning for this is that they must still care for their hair, oiling it, shaping it, and detangling it. Even when they wear braids the hair must be manipulated into a complicated arrangement that looks semi-natural. Natural hair can be defined as hair having been unaltered by chemicals and therefore does not have a straight look but is tightly coiled or kinky in nature and appearance (White 2005). Generally, African American women have had their hair chemically altered from its natural state starting around six to eight years old, and braiding begins at the age of six months or occasionally younger.

A HISTORY OF BLACK HAIR STYLES

I want to know my hair again, the way I knew it before I knew that my hair is me, before I lost the right to me, before I knew that the burden of beauty – or lack of it – for an entire race of people could be tied up with my air and me.

– Paulette Caldwell, "A Hair Piece" (2000: 275)

Traditionally, African American hair has been viewed in a number of contradictory ways. In past and present African nations, hair is considered a symbol of status, identity, and ancestry. Women who specialize in hairdressing are held in high regard by the communities around them. Young girls are instructed in how to braid and those who show skill are encouraged to specialize in that field. People who let their hair grow wild or messily, or do not take proper care of it are considered loose women having little or no morals, or crazy (Patton 2006). A Black person's hair is a symbol to all, although the specific hairstyle and the message conveyed sometimes fluctuates in different nations. The principle of the importance of one's hair is common in some northern African nations.

When the slave trade first emerged, slavers collected an average of 300 Africans at a time and, before they set sail, every slave's hair was shaved off. However, the slave owners did not do this to undermine the slaves' identities, rather, they did this for sanitary reasons. Whatever the reasoning, shaving the slaves' heads was the first step of stripping new slaves of their identity and lowering their status (Byrd and Tharps 2001; White 2005).

In addition, slave masters and mistresses often told slave children to refer to their hair as wool and encouraged young slaves not to like their own hair; in the 1850s a scientist, Peter A. Browne, claimed that African Americans and White men must be from two differing species because White men have hair while African Americans have wool and not hair on their heads (Sieber and Herreman 2000). Hair was a source of pride and house slaves were forced to look "decent" as they were in their master and his guests company for extended periods of time during which their appearance was not allowed to offend any person of White breeding. With pride being a factor as well as needing to not offend White people, house slaves were often given time for grooming and slave women were encouraged to iron their hair straight in the manner of their White counterparts (Byrd and Tharps 2001). Field slaves were given little (if any) time to work on their hair. They were often forced to wear their hair wrapped in a scarf hiding the offensive "wool" from Whites around them or masters and jealous mistresses would force slave women to keep their hair unkempt humiliating the women because of ensuring disease, baldness or hair breakage (Byrd and Tharps 2001). Soon enough, masters were viewing one another's slaves and judging the master by the condition of *all* his slaves, not just the house slaves who were required to look as White in appearance as possible. Many masters began

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allowing all their slaves Sundays off for personal usage and proper grooming (Byrd & Tharps 2001).

On Sundays, women would gather and braid everyone’s hair; on this day everyone “let their hair out” without wearing scarves. After everyone’s hair was done, the women would attend church where everyone could view one another’s hair. All the women’s hair would be braided in elaborate patterns and designs which would remain in for the rest of the week but once again hidden under a scarf to keep it nice; thus began the ritual and importance of hair in the African American culture (Byrd & Tharps 2001).

Eventually, miscegenation produced women whose hair was considered “good” as it was straighter and softer in nature and appearance. The addition of good hair and lighter skin added to the pressure African American women experienced from themselves and others to look as white as possible in appearance. However, even those with good hair were penalized if it was not “good” enough: “Even though some slaves... had skin as light as many Whites, the rule of thumb was that if the hair showed just a little bit of kinkiness, a person would be unable to pass as White. Essentially, the hair acted as the true test of blackness, which is why some male slaves opted to shave their heads to try to get rid of the genetic evidence of their ancestry when attempting to escape to freedom” (Byrd and Tharps 2001: 18).

More recently, however, some African American women have considered changing their hair from its natural state to be an act of self-hatred. Others, especially in the 1960s began viewing hair as a political statement and a symbol of the Black power movement. Hair was used as a resistant strategy of White beauty standards (White 2005) and women such as Angela Davis became emblems of power and the struggle to overcome racism and challenge White supremacy. People showed their racial pride by wearing thick tall afros on their heads to attempt to alter racist stereotypes insisting lack people are monstrously ugly, undesirable, or even evil (hooks 1995). Hair became a symbol of power and recognition. In the 1990s, however, instead of being a symbol of power, afro hairstyles have to an extent become a symbol of delinquency for males and once again of lower status for females.

Straight hair is still the North American norm and is often needed to secure employment for African American women. Some women will go as far as to get micros (micro-braids) which, due to their diminutive size give the appearance of long straight hair. The reason why women do this can depend on the generation you ask.

According to theorists, hair has always been an important factor in defining one’s identity (Brownmiller 1984; White 2005; Byrd and Tharps 2001; Patton 2006). For African Americans this is doubly true. During the 1800s, hair was an indicator of one’s slave status; today hair is a marker of beauty, economical status, power, and beliefs. Women with straightened hair are still considered the beauty norm in African American society today. Women of power and upper-class status often wear

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their hair straightened, and usually not in a natural style. Women with good paying or middle class jobs wear their hair sometimes short, sometimes longer, and some even wear braids (Patton 2006). Women who are lower-class wear their hair most often in braids, which is interesting because braids are more expensive than having one's hair chemically straightened and can be more time consuming. Essentially to African Americans hair defines one's race, one's heritage and also who one is. Women with "good" hair tend to do more with their hair and are often envied for it by other women. According to Dione-Rosado (2004), relaxed hair, braids, weaves, and shortly cropped hair are considered more professional in nature, hence they are adopted by middle class women more often. Contrarily, supposed natural hairstyles (i.e. dreadlocks and twists) are viewed as more radical hairstyles in the professional world. Therefore, hair can be seen as an indicator of gender, social class, sexual orientation, political views, religion and even age (Dione-Rosado 2004). Even around three or four years old African American children understand what "good" hair means for themselves (Lake 2003) and the social hierarchy it can create (White 2005). White tells a story of having her hair pressed each Saturday for Sunday worship services, after which her mother would tell her not to play hard so her hair would not "go back (to its natural state)." She continues on to say that "at an early age, I internalized that my natural born hair was not good enough; it was not acceptable enough to make me worthy of being presentable" (White 2005: 301). This is common among some young girls, to feel inadequate because their hair is not the way others want it to be.

"Black women are taught that nappy hair is a badge of shame" (Banks 2000: 72) and considering the amount of shame African American women have already suffered, no African American woman wants more. Many African American women still think that the natural state of their hair is cumbersome, unsavory, or even disgusting. These women find little power in their hair. "The possibility that hairstyling practices, in whatever form, serve as a challenge to mainstream notions of beauty or that they allow black women to embrace a positive identity is important for two reasons: voice and empowerment" (Banks 2000: 69).

While looking through previously done research, the idea that hair is a medium through which one can voice one's power and the control over others one might have is predominant: "there is power associated with it and I think when people look at like 'locks and braids, the image that brings up for us as Africans are things associated with power, like kings and queens and beauty and grace" (Banks 2000:71). Another theory is that how a woman wears her hair can tell one about what might be going on in a woman's life or about her personality (Banks 2000). Among teenage girls especially, parents, friends, boys, and lack of personal finances influence one's hairstyle.

According to a respondent interviewed by Banks (2001:101): "because you mama has to pay for the hair, so she is an important factor because we as black young women do not have jobs. So her money, basically, is very important because

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if she doesn't like it, you're not getting it, you know what I'm sayin'". Another idea among teenagers is that they want to be able to "get up and go", not having to do a laborious process on their hair everyday. One respondent I interviewed elaborated on this by saying, "[Women] just want their hair to look nice with the least effort (many hours at one time that will last for weeks or months)". For the younger generations of African American women, chemically altering their hair seems to be a matter of fitting in, convenience, and available funds.

RESEARCH METHODS

I used open-ended interviews with fifteen young African American women aged 16-18. In addition to surveying African Americans, I also interviewed a variety of women of other races, one Philipino, one Indian, and one Chinese girl, to understand their opinions on why African American women change their hair. The sample of young women chosen was composed of friends and peers at different universities. For six of the participants, online interviews were conducted through instant messenger. Additionally, my lifelong and personal experiences were included as participant and observer. All names have been changed.

DEFINING GOOD HAIR

According to data collected, the primary reason African American teenage girls chemically change their hair is to make it "good hair". Good hair, as previously stated, refers to hair which is long, straight, and has a silky feeling or when one has seemingly Caucasian hair. One respondent, Jamie, said:

I guess anyone with 'good hair' has a White or Hispanic family member in their ancestry.

Another respondent, Lisa, took this idea a step further, she said:

Good hair is dictated by society. It seems right now that 'good hair' is typically associated with non-black hair.

When asked why she relaxes her hair Amy said:

I think it looks better, but reflecting on my decision, I guess I have learned that ideal of beauty from the Whites which I interact with so frequently.

Additionally Amy continued saying:

Most [black women] are raised this way, even though African Americans have a somewhat separated culture from Whites, their ideas of beauty have influenced us greatly. I think that you will

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undoubtedly see less straightening of hair the further away you move from interaction with whites, say in rural parts of the country where there isn’t much integration.

As I live in Washington D.C. I have observed that the further you move from Northwest D.C. the fewer long, straightened, silky looking haired people I see and the more afro-centric and more eccentric hairstyles I can find.

NOT JUST WHITE HAIR

Another point that several respondents make is the fact that they do not buy into the “good hair” is white hair myth. Jamie said:

I really dislike the idea that ‘good hair’ is hair that is as close as possible to Caucasian hair. You could compliment a woman on the fact that her hair is so easily managed or looks good long but hair is not good based on texture alone.

The idea that good hair does not have to be “straight, easily manageable, and healthy (having little breakage) hair” or “long with a silky feel” was also stated by Laurie. She says good hair can be:

thick healthy hair which resists breakage even when given harsh treatments.

Olive said that:

The standard of beauty in our society is straight hair, and anything that deviates is considered ‘ugly.’ To conform to this, many African American women will straighten their hair and learn to dislike its natural state.

These three, as did other respondents explained that their version of good hair was not just Caucasian hair.

MATERNAL SOCIALIZATION AND RACIAL PRIDE

It rained & thundered just beautiful. I got soaked, but I love to walk and play in the rain, except my hair doesn’t. I wish it would be alright for us Negro[e]s to wear out hair natural. I think it looks good but it’s not [ac]cepted by society. Any way I got soaked anyway, hair & all and mommy nearly had a white child (Valeria Turner [Valerie Jean], June 12, 1968, age fourteen)

– Valeria Turner, “Part Two: Searching for Self” (1994: 77)

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Two respondents wore their hair in what might be considered a natural hairstyle. Erin said:

If you're wondering why I don't straighten my hair chemically, it's because my mom never has (halfway out of health concerns, halfway out of racial pride). I think others leave their hair natural for the two reasons listed above also.

When asked what she thinks about the concept of "good hair" she declared:

I think it's complete bullshit. Um, yeah. It's sad the way that white people have caused us to degrade ourselves as a people. I say, make sure that you feel comfortable with your hair.

Additionally, Fran stated:

It's an opinionated thought. 'Good hair' to one person, might not be good hair for someone else.

Other respondents also implied that there is no set definition for "good hair." Olive did not wear her hair naturally simply for manageability:

I would not let my hair go natural for the sole reason that it is very thick and I, as of yet, do not know how to deal with that.

When my own mother did not take "proper" care of my hair, a Black neighbor took me from her and, around six months of age, I began having my hair corn-rowed because my mother and neighbor were convinced was best for my hair.

Jamie, when asked why she started relaxing her hair, assumed that:

I was raised to get relaxers because that's what my mother does.

Mari believed:

Because of this much stronger influence in the past, many women's older relatives went through the hair situation, and they follow in their mother's footsteps, because that is what little girls do.

Erin, as previously quoted, always wears her hair natural because that's what her mother does and approves of. Fran also wears her hair natural because:

That's what my mom taught me to do.

All of the respondents say African American girls are socialized on what to do with their hair from a young age.

EQUAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Another incentive for African American women to chemically alter their hair is employment. Erin said employment is the reason so many African American women will spend so much money on their hairstyles, so frequently:

I think it has to do with the fact that the people in America who do the hiring aren't always racially sensitive. In order to be promoted in the workplace, African American women feel that they have to adopt a certain look. Looking 'neat' means either a very short afro, or flat, expensive, permed hair.

Lisa agreed:

Looks are important and our hair is different. If left in a natural state and/or left wild, I think that the White society would look at it weird.

And Olive claimed:

It says, look how well I take care of myself. I am willing to spend this much on just hair. Who knows how much I will spend on other things?

In other words, a woman's hair is a way to show a potential employer that one will work hard and do what needs to be done no matter what.

THE MYTH OF GOOD HAIR

One respondent interviewed, Mari, brought up the idea that "good hair" for Black women is a myth:

Good hair or naturally soft and wavy hair that does not necessarily need to be treated is a myth. All hair is good in its natural state, until a bad relaxer or over-treatment, or not taking care of it turns it dry, crackling, and oily in a bad way.

Throughout my research, the fact that "good hair" was a myth was stated numerous times and all the respondents agreed with the idea that "good hair" is "hair that you like and are comfortable with."

CONCLUSION

My respondents agree that "good hair" for Black men and women is an unattainable myth perpetuated by generations of (mostly) Black women. Nevertheless African American women still continue to try to attain this ideal. Moreover, the reason so many younger African American women in the study change their hair is because their mothers did it, and when they are young their

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mothers do it to them as well. They say that additional incentive to alter their hair might be the ability to give a better impression of having Caucasian hair, therefore giving one better opportunities for new jobs or promotions. But, the downside to changing their hair is that to others it appears you have lost your racial pride.

Another reason my respondents gave is that chemically enhanced hair is easier to manage. For teens, this is important with their constant activity, the need for more sleep, and lack of time management skills. Throughout the years, the importance of African American hairstyles has remained a way of letting one’s social class status be known to others around them. However, in younger generations, the hairstyles seem to focus on convenience and manageability. No longer is hair only a marker of what status one has, it is now a marker of individual personality, and a matter of convenience.

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