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Natural vs. relaxed: How African American women believe they are perceived in the workplace

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For most professional working women, the choice of hairstyle includes length, color, cut, and style. Unfortunately, this is not the case for African American women. They are typically the racial minority in a professional setting and are constrained to conform to the norms and expectations of their white colleagues. There has been a growing phenomenon of discrimination that African American women have encountered in the workplace due to their choice of hairstyle and appearance, including cases where African American women have been fired for wearing braids, dreadlocks, or finger waves in their hair. These cases of discrimination have contributed to negative experiences in the black community and in the lives of working African American women (Rosette & Dumas, 2007).

The decision for African American women to chair their hairs natural texture has both historical and psychological significance. Some attribute changes in hairstyle to slavery, when hair signified the labor in which they were forced to do (Thompson, 2009). Others attribute relaxed hairstyles to assimilation to current standards of beauty (Desmond-Harris, 2012). Some suggest the 70 – 80% of African American women who use chemicals to straighten their hair today are doing so for the personal aesthetic (Thompson, 2009).

The purpose of this study was to examine the perception of African American hair in the workplace, and specifically to discover how African American women believed they are perceived in the workplace as a result of their hairstyle. We additionally wanted to identify the relationship between hairstyle preference and perceptions of professionalism in the workplace.

Despite the growing movement of African American women adorning natural hair (i.e. – hair whose texture has not been altered by chemical straighteners including relaxers) in the workplace, reports from employers indicate many believe natural hair looks “unkempt and unprofessional” (Hill, 2013). African American women consistently face subtle discrimination in the workplace because of the hairstyles they choose to adorn; often, the decision to wear hair natural or relaxed (i.e. – a chemical treatment designed to permanently alter hairs natural texture) can be one of the most crucial appearance decisions an African American woman can make in her professional setting. Minority women are often at a disadvantage in creating their professional image compared to their white counterparts, as African American women must often counter negative stereotypes associated with their race and attempt to render themselves professional and credible (Rosette & Dumas, 2007). African American women who do choose to wear relaxed hairstyles may be conforming to a standard of professionalism

and Eurocentric beauty in an effort to be accepted in the workplace (Opie & Phillips, 2015).

For this study, the researchers used a self-designed quantitative survey designed to collect demographic and psychographic information using a five-point Likert scale that ranked participants' feelings and/or experiences about their hair. Participants were chosen using a stratified random sample and consisted of forty African American women aged 18 – 65.

The majority of respondents (93%) reported spending upwards of \$250 per month on hair products, purchasing them two (68%) or up to five times per month (32%); many of these purchased products were for the purpose of straightening hair. Of the forty African American women who participated in the survey, 80% indicated they currently had relaxed hair as opposed to natural hair.

In the second section of the survey, participants were asked to rank their feeling and/or opinion towards several statements about hair on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree. A mean score was then calculated for each statement.

Statements favoring the disagree scale included *It is a constant battle between wearing my hair natural or relaxed* (M = 2.65), *I straighten my hair before important meetings* (M = 2.9), and *I feel accepted in society if I have straight hair* (M = 2.68). Statements favoring the agree scale included *I often feel judged because of my hair* (M = 4.35), *I consistently encounter people asking me questions about my hair* (M = 4.1), and *It is important to me how people view me and my hair* (M = 4.03). Participants neither agreed or disagreed with the statements *My hair defines who I am* (M = 3.35), *I follow hair trends* (M = 3.38), *I have been criticized / stereotyped because of my hair* (M = 3.58), and *I feel that my talent, skills, and intelligence is overshadowed by my hairstyle* (M = 3.73).

Results from the study indicate that hairstyle is important to African American women in the workplace. It was particularly interesting that for the majority of those surveyed, they did not feel accepted in society if they had straight hair, yet many African American women in this sample chose to straighten their hair. Results from the survey additionally indicate that not all African American women perceive to face discrimination in the workplace due to their choice of a natural versus relaxed hairstyle; some participants felt they were judged in the workplace due to hairstyle preferences, while other participants disagreed. Our second research objective was to identify the relationship between hairstyle preference and perceptions of professionalism in the workplace. Results from the study indicate that many women (M = 3.73) felt their talents, skills, and intelligence were overshadowed by their hairstyle preference.

Our research transcends the topic of relaxed versus natural hair, to standards of beauty, workplace acceptance, and perceptions of the self. This study provides insight into how a specific minority population recognizes and responds to many of these issues, while making decisions on personal appearance.

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