



The ‘natural’: African American women’s perspective on the historic vs. contemporary natural hair style

Ashely R. Garrin and Sara B. Marcketti, Iowa State University, Ames, IA, USA

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African American hair has come to symbolize many elements of the African American culture and lived-experience. For this racial and ethnic group, hair has a long history and significance, as well as many meanings, assumptions, and stereotypes associated with its presence. African American hair has been used to express individual style, political stance, and assimilation to White beauty standards. Reasoning for hair styles are specific to the individual, but influenced by the society and time period in which the individual lived (Rooks, 1996).

During the years of 1954 to 1965, the Civil Rights Movement achieved many milestones and influenced the activism of what became the Black Power Movement, 1966 to 1974 (Wilson, 2013). The pro-Black stance offered a new visualization, a Black aesthetic, where African language, history and cultural elements of food, music, and dress styles were adopted and embraced. Options apart from White beauty styles allowed hairstyles such as afros, braids, cornrows, and the wearing of African prints on headscarves and wraps. These visuals symbolized changing ideological, aesthetic, and political stances. Ultimately, the afro or “natural” as it was originally called, and other unaltered, unprocessed styles provided an alternative to straight hair for African American women and the opportunity to embrace a different beauty aesthetic (Byrd & Tharps, 2014)

After a return to straightened hairstyles of the 1980s and 1990s, the 2000s brought forth a “new” natural movement, which continues to promote self- acceptance, expression, and political values of the wearer, similar to the ideological basis of natural styles of the 1960s and 1970s. The reasons for wearing a particular style remain individual, but continue to be influenced by the cultural changes and social implications of the time. For example, the Internet and its open platform for discussing hair styles and trends did not exist during the Civil Rights Movement and has added complexity to the conversation regarding African American women’s hair in its so-called “natural” state (Byrd & Tharps, 2014).

This study focused on the lived experiences of African American women who were emerging adults, ages 18 to 25, during the Civil Rights Movement period of 1960 to 1974. The purpose of this study was to discover how becoming an adult during the time of the Civil Rights Movement impacted the life-long hair decisions of these African American women’s lives. Data were collected from seven participants through a three-part series of audiotaped and transcribed

interviews. Participants ranged in age from 59 to 76 years old and were from a variety of geographical locations throughout the United States, but had each settled in a university community in the Midwest. In-depth interviews comprised of three, one to one and a half hour conversations focused on participants' hair history throughout their lives. Open-ended questions covered topics related to how their hair changed over time and its relationship with time, their race, gender, professional positions held and personal lives. The transcripts were then coded and analyzed using the constant comparative method to thematically organize the data.

As many of the participants discussed their hair history, they also explained their perspectives and thoughts about the current status of African American hair. Specifically, they described their feelings about the current trend or new movement for natural hair worn by African American women, its appropriateness, and how it compared to or differed from their natural hairstyles worn during the 1960s and 1970s. Six of the seven participants currently wear their hair naturally, without chemical processing, and offered that they had an appreciation for African American women who wear their hair in natural styles today.

When discussing the contemporary natural styles that mimic the afros of the 60s and '70s, participants explained they did not understand the specific styles or methods of styling. One participant exclaimed, "it's a deliberate style, but it's more like you get up [and go]. Maybe that isn't true, but it doesn't look like it has a style or conscious...not symmetrical. It's just there." Other participants agreed that the current natural looks lacked the styling and effort that was put into their natural, whether it was through product use, haircuts to achieve a certain shape, or the popular afro pick to maintain their look.

Overall, all of the participants felt that African American women today should have the freedom to wear their hair in any manner that they please, the right to be comfortable, and be taken serious professionally. One participant explained, "I would say just embrace it. Find your own style. I think it's good that you find a style that you like looking at." The participants experienced value in being able to wear their hair in its natural manner without conforming to dominant beauty standards, both during the Civil Rights Movement and today.

References

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