
Theses, Dissertations, and Projects

2012

The natural hair transformation : a journey of resilience and resistance

Melissa H. Cranston-Bates
Smith College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.smith.edu/theses>



Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cranston-Bates, Melissa H., "The natural hair transformation : a journey of resilience and resistance" (2012). Masters Thesis, Smith College, Northampton, MA.
<https://scholarworks.smith.edu/theses/902>

This Masters Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in Theses, Dissertations, and Projects by an authorized administrator of Smith ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@smith.edu.

Melissa Cranston-Bates
The Natural Hair Transformation: A
Journey of Resilience and Resistance

ABSTRACT

The study sought to explore the self-identity motives, challenges, and rewards of the natural hair transformation experienced by Black women college students. Women in this study made the decision to stop the use of chemicals that alter the natural state of their hair. The study found that while many participants faced resistance and negative reactions from their families and individuals in their social circles, most described the natural hair transformation as one that was ultimately empowering across several categories of identity. At the same time, participants described immediate and lasting injuries, both physical and psychological, resulting from the use of chemical relaxers before the initiation of the natural hair transformation, as well as from the negative reactions they received once they had begun the transformation. Many women found support with other natural haired women. From this support they have been able to work towards healing and repairing the psychological injuries and scars. Implications for social work practice and recommendations for future research are discussed.

**THE NATURAL HAIR TRANSFORMATION: A JOURNEY OF RESILIENCE AND
RESISTANCE**

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Masters of Social Work.

Melissa Cranston-Bates
Smith College School For Social Work
Northampton, Massachusetts, 01063

2012

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis journey has been a challenging and rewarding venture. I would like to thank the many people who helped me accomplish this goal.

I would like to express my deepest and warmest gratitude to my two mothers. Mildred and Cathy, you have paved the way for me in the field of social work. It is your love, support, and encouragement that has helped me achieve this goal. I would also like to thank others in my family circle who have been a constant support in my life and throughout this process: Kayla and Becky, Grady and Cecelia, Carla, Gigi, Zoe, and Francesca.

Good friends have provided me comfort and moral support. Thank you, to my best friend Hilton for being there every step of the way. Thank you to all my Smith School for Social Work friends and colleagues, for your moral support.

I am grateful for my partner, Mahajoy. You have showed me love, encouragement, and humor throughout this thesis journey. I feel fortunate to arrive at this place with you and beside you.

I would like to express my appreciation to my thesis advisor, Starr Wood, for your support, knowledge, and guidance throughout this thesis process. Thank you to my research professor, Joanne Corbin, for sharing your passion in this field and for being an exceptional teacher.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the courageous women who participated in this study. Thank you for sharing your pain, your strength, your humor, and your truth. Thank you for shedding light on the importance of hair in Black women's lives. The power of your voices and the richness of your stories affirm the importance of this topic.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | ii |
| TABLE OF CONTENTS..... | iii |
| CHAPTER | |
| I INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| II LITERATURE REVIEW..... | 4 |
| III METHODOLOGY | 17 |
| IV FINDINGS | 24 |
| V DISCUSSION..... | 49 |
| REFERENCES..... | 67 |
| APPENDICES | |
| Appendix A: Consent Form..... | 71 |
| Appendix B: Type 4 Hair Guide..... | 75 |
| Appendix C: Interview Questions | 76 |
| Appendix D: Flier | 78 |
| Appendix E: Human Subjects Review Approval Letter | 79 |

CHAPTER I

Introduction

There is limited literature, including a small body of exploratory research, available on Black self-identity, particularly in regard to Black natural hair. Current theoretical literature addresses hair in relation to internalized racism in which Black women have internalized negative messages about their own hair while simultaneously valuing white beauty standards and hair. There is evidence that Black women tend to chemically straighten their hair because they perceive that the natural style will limit employment, negatively impact courtship opportunities and even lead to questions concerning their sexuality (Thompson, 2002).

The deep roots and realities of the natural hair journey as experienced by Black college women will be the main focus of this study. The overarching question for this study is, what are the self-identity motives, challenges, and rewards for Black college women who choose to stop the use of chemicals that alter the natural state of their hair? The purpose of this study was to advance a better understanding of the natural hair journey experienced by Black college women and the impact it has on identity development. Black college women were sampled for this study due to the identity formation, and learning processes which occur throughout the college experience. These processes and education alone often lead college students to embrace new ways of living, thinking, and appearing.

This study begins with an overview of theoretical and empirical literature which focuses on how hair is experienced by women, within various social contexts, and group belongings. Also explored is, Black female identity, the impact that racism has on that identity, and how various forms of racism influence Black women's hair choices. A methods chapter follows the literature review chapter. A qualitative study using content analysis was conducted. The design for this study employed individual face- to-face interviews consisting of structured, semi-structured and open-ended questions. Content analysis was used to examine the data. The findings of this study document aspects of the natural hair journeys experienced by 12, undergraduate, Black women attending colleges in Western Massachusetts. It was found that the natural hair journey expresses the following themes: reasons and motivations, various categories of identity, injury, and family upbringing.

For the purpose of this study, the term "natural hair" is used to describe hair in its natural texture, which has not had any texture-altering chemicals applied to it for at least one year. The term "kinky hair" or "type 4 hair" is used to describe hair that has tight curls and is afro-textured. The term, "journey" may be used interchangeably with the word "transformation" or "going natural" in which these terms describe the changeover from their past use of chemical relaxers, to their current state of having natural hair. The terms "chemical relaxer" or "perm" or "processer" all refer to the chemical straightening product itself, or the result of hair which has had straightening chemicals applied to it, to manipulate its natural texture by elongating the curl. The term "big chop" describes one way of going natural which involves shaving off all relaxed hair down to its new growth. Finally, the term "transition" describes a slower process in which women go natural by letting the chemical relaxer grow out of their hair.

Mental health professionals can enhance their cultural competency by understanding the powerful role the natural hair journey has in the lives of Black women. This study can help social workers view the natural hair journey as an identity-transformative experience that involves both personal and political motivations. Mental health professionals can also learn the importance of allowing their clients the freedom to explore the motivations and meanings of their own natural hair journeys, so that they can define their own identities. Mental health professionals can help their clients recognize that the natural hair journey is one of resilience.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

Hair is an important piece of identity for all women. “Historically hair has been fashioned to exhibit beauty, removed to cause humiliation, and interpreted as a sign of strength, power, or powerlessness” (Koppelman, 1996, p. 1). Women’s hair has many implications, such as socioeconomic class, religious affiliation, culture, health, intellectual status, age, and marital status (Koppelman, 1996).

Koppelman observes that hair can “symbolize conformity, monastic celibacy, rebellion or any group-determined aesthetic” (p. 1). Weitz (2004) notes, that hair means different things for women in different cultural contexts. She examines the sociology, psychology, and history of hair and its influence in women’s lives. She “conducts [qualitative] interviews with seventy four girls and women ranging from age 10 to 83 to examine how their hair affects their lives,” and finds that “three quarters of the girls and women [she] interviewed answered yes, when asked if their hair was a part of their identity” (p. 64). Thus, she notes, “changing our hair, then, changes our identity because our hair and our appearance are central to how we see ourselves and how we are seen by others” (p. 64).

Social Implications of Hair in the Dominican Republic

Badillo (2001) uses qualitative interviews to explore the social stigma associated with hair that is not straight. She finds that in the Dominican Republic to “show Blackness is to give in to being oppressed and exploited” (p. 2). Her research shows it is a common belief in the

Dominican Republic that only through hair straightening—mirroring whiteness—can women achieve beauty. She interviews several working-class Dominican women, including hairstylists, in Santiago, Dominican Republic. Her participants voice their beliefs that “bad hair” (hair that is not straight) is “worse than AIDS” (p. 1). Other women detail childhood hair traumas in which they were ridiculed and mistreated by their own families for growing “difficult” (kinky) hair (p.1). Badillo also draws attention to the idea that straight hair allows working-class people to appear higher class. In general, Badillo suggests, hair of others textures is seen as unkempt and associated with poverty. One participant says, “A woman’s elegance shows through her shoes and her hair.” (p. 1) Badillo states:

In order to find a job and acceptance in social circles, circles that in some manner exert authoritarian control, women need to show their submission and acceptance.

Straightening one’s hair becomes a survival strategy. For a poor, black woman, adding an element of confrontation and challenge goes against her in a society dominated by men and by authoritarian structures of power. In a society where the poor face serious obstacles and social insecurity, defiance [such as not straightening hair] can turn out to be expensive (p. 2).

White Women’s Hair a Beauty Standard for Women of Color

The white-enforced standard of beauty in Badillo’s study holds similar truths for many women of color. For example, through her interviews, Weitz observes that some Asian women perm their naturally straight hair to appear less Asian. They do this to downplay their ethnic features (Weitz, 2004). Natalie Weathers (1991) observes that after years of young Black girls wearing braids and cornrows, the beauty of this hair style was not noticed until it was “re-

appropriated” (p. 59) as part of white culture, representing “available sexuality or ethno funk” (p. 59).

Native American women have a long history of forced assimilation to white culture as conveyed through the tribal hairstyles they were forced to give up (Weitz, 2004). Even today this race of people has faced institutional racism for wearing long hair (Celeste, 2010). This discrimination has been influenced by white standards of beauty, in which long hair for women is preferred, but the really long hair that Native Americans link to their culture goes too far. Celeste (2010) talks about the spiritual significance of hair length as part of her Native American culture:

Just after Great Spirit whispered in my ear, why don't you grow you hair back out? I remember sitting with Patti telling her that I was now going to let my hair grow back out. She looked at me and said that it is believed that the memories are in the hair. It is the Indian way that in times of great grief we would symbolize it by cutting all our hair off. I thought it was also a trigger for healing... as our hair grew back out, so too had our hearts healed and we would find ourselves upon a new path. Our hair is very sacred to us (p.1).

Women's Hair as a Tool for Passing or Coming Out

Weitz (2004) explores how lesbian women can use their hair to stay in the closet or to come out of the closet. She finds that some girls and women are either uninterested or cannot afford to make their lesbianism visible, while others take advantage of the opportunity to do so. Here is what one of her participants, who was wearing a “Dutch-boy bowl” haircut, said:

I used to go to this Catholic school, where they thought lesbians were totally evil. So I would rather die than look gay, and have long hair and skirts and everything. But it just got old

after a while. I just wanted to be myself. And that meant cutting my hair, and looking the way I do now (p. 88).

Women's Hair as Mental Status

Denise Winterman of BBC news writes about Britney Spears, the popular American pop star, who has struggled with her fame. Winterman (2007) observes America's "shock" when Britney (who had a full head of long hair) shaved her head. For America this act was confirmation that Britney Spears was indeed mentally unstable. Winterman poses an important question: "Why is shaving her locks equated to losing her mind, and why does it have such a power to shock?" (p. 7). In her research to answer this question, Winterman finds that women often use their hair to make a statement. She supports Weitz (2004) and Koppelman (1996) stating, "Whatever we do with it [hair], it is very much a part of our identity" (p. 2). She observes that for women, "long hair has been linked to good health, femininity, grace, movement, and youth. A women's head that is shaven defies social norms and has been linked to illness, punishment, rebellion, and instability" (p. 2). Winterman concludes, "Maybe [Britney shaving her head is not] a sign of losing control. Maybe it is an attempt to empower herself. Hair is often used as a prop to declare a change and the start of a new chapter in life. [Maybe] this was Britney's extreme way of doing it" (Winterman, 2007, p. 3)

Hair, Religion, and Spirituality

Women's hair is tied to many religious practices and spiritual beliefs. The Sikh practice forbids women to remove hair from their bodies. In this practice it is believed that Sikh women and men are God's property and removing hair would mar the perfection of God's creation (Kopenkoskey, 2011). Christian beliefs about women's hair can be observed in the New Testament, where women's hair, when free (not covered or pulled back), has sexual connotations

and is linked to promiscuity. Thus First Corinthians instructs women to cover their heads when praying (Kopenkoskey, 2011). For Muslim women, hair presentation varies depending on “culture” and location. Today some modern Muslim women do not cover their heads. Those who do, do so for reasons of modesty and Kopenkoskey (2011) states:

Some options [for Muslim women] include hijab, modest, loose clothing and a scarf over the head and under the chin, while others wear burqa, a more complete covering of the head, face, and body. Others wear scarves over their heads or veils but no face covering (p. 4).

Wigington (2009) explores how religions often have standards that exclude women whose physical features do not fit the religious standards. She writes about one woman who was rejected from a Wicca coven due to her short hair. This woman was encouraged to come back after growing her hair out. The “High Priestesses” explained that in order to “pay tribute to the goddess and embrace the sacred feminine” a woman must have long hair. This was an issue for this woman because she had to keep her hair short due to “safety issues” at her job (Wigington, 2009, p. 1).

Black Women in America and Hair

Thompson (2009) stated, “For the vast majority of Black women, hair is not just hair; it contains emotive qualities that are linked to one’s lived experience” (p. 1). The choice that Black women make in which they stop the use of relaxers, and return to natural hair will be better understood by social workers who are informed about the impact that hair has on a Black woman’s sense of identity. In order to understand hair in relation to identity for Black women in America we must examine the history of its stigma. It is also important to observe how hair is seen within the Black family. Thus, the concepts of internalized racism, colorism and multi-

generational transmission will be explored within the context of the Black American family. This literature will also explore issues that pertain to Black women making the choice to straighten their hair. The practical and political reasons Black women make this choice will be looked at against the backdrop of social comparison theory. Ethnic Identity theory will be employed to better understand a Black woman's sense of self in relation to hair choices. Finally, the rewards and liberating factors of the natural-hair transformation will be examined.

The historical stigma of kinky hair

Bird and Tharps (2001), Banks (2000), and Peterson (1982) detail the history and stigma of Black hair that started during slavery in America. Banks writes, "Whereas curly and kinky hair was glorified in West African societies, it became a symbol of inferiority once enslaved Africans reached American shores" (p. 7). The lighter skin-toned and straighter-haired female slaves were more valued and sold at nearly five times the price of darker-skinned slaves. Slaves with straighter hair as well as slaves with lighter skin worked in the household, while kinkier-haired and darker-skinned women were forced to work in the fields (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). Peterson argues that throughout American slavery, hair texture even over skin color was the most powerful symbol of slavery. Byrd and Tharps support this argument by discussing the notion of passing, in which "hair was the 'true test of blackness' for light skinned slaves or mulatto slaves." (p.18) that is, even if they had white skin, if their "hair had just a little bit of kink, a person would be unable to pass as white and forced into slavery" (p. 18). Hence the reason many Black slaves shaved their heads when escaping to freedom. However, Mercer (1990) would challenge Peterson, Byrd and Tharps, arguing that hair texture was the second most prominent signifier in regards to slave treatment, and that skin color was the first.

Even after emancipation, Black people who did not have straight hair and light skin struggled to gain employment, to marry, and to obtain membership in churches, schools and other institutions. They were rejected by both Black people with light skin and straight hair as well as by white people. In order to gain resources they would have to pass a paper bag test and comb test, in which they were required to have skin lighter than a paper bag and hair that could be combed through smoothly (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). Meeting these standards became obsessive for Black Americans. Hot combs emerged in the late 1800s, and by the mid 1900s the first chemical relaxers were created. Advertisements by both Black and White people encouraged African Americans to use these straightening agents (Byrd & Tharp, 2001). Rooks (1998) states, “these advertisements conveyed that for Blacks only through changing their physical features will persons of African descent be afforded class mobility within the African-American communities and social acceptance by the dominant culture” (p. 108). Byrd and Tharps (2001) state:

In the mid-sixties, Black hair underwent its biggest change since Africans arrived in America. The very perception of hair shifted from one of style to statement. And right or wrong, Blacks and Whites came to believe that the way Black people wore their hair said something about their politics (p. 60).

Bell (2008) elaborates:

For Black women to give up the wigs, pressing combs, and hair relaxers that allowed them social acceptance and prosperity was a form of retaliation against White Beauty Standards. That is, Afros were a radical way of rejecting oppression from white people. With the 1960s afros came a sense of Black pride and a rejection of white influences (p. 8).

These are the historical factors that have led to Black hair texture and skin shade hierarchy, Black hair hate, hair hate internalization among Black people themselves, and Black people conforming to white standards of beauty—all contemporary issues rooted in slavery. Despite all of these issues Black people face, they show resilience in the face of intolerable oppression and exploitation. Byrd (2001) writes, “even though slave masters did their best to break the spirit of Black people and their hair, some slaves consciously chose not to hide it” (p.14).

Contemporary hair issues for black women

In the next sections I will talk about present-day issues regarding Black hair that derive from the history I have already discussed. Tatum (1997) addresses issues of internalized racism that are projected on young children through messages of Black hair hate. Parmer (2004) echoes Tatum’s observations and uses Bowen’s concept of multigenerational transmission to argue that internalized racism, which often includes rejection of natural kinky hair, is a generational theme passed down from one family to the next (Parmer, 2004) Thompson’s (2009) use of social comparison theory explains why Black women conform to white beauty standards. Wilder and Cain (2010) explore the factors that lead to colorism—a preference for lighter skin and straighter hair—that is taught to children in Black families. Yeh and Hwang (2000) urge that identity-development frameworks be looked at not only from an inward perspective, but also from an outward perspective; thus, they would argue that black hair rejection be explored through many societal facets. Thompson (2009) observes Yeh’s argument as she discusses natural hair and its influence on both interpersonal and institutional facets.

Black hair: An outcast of the family

Weathers (1991) discusses the terms good hair and bad hair and the color caste system these terms derive from:

Good hair is supposedly that texture of hair which is straight or wavy and not so tightly curled, it is also usually long hair. Often a person with good hair is also a light-brown skin color. Bad hair is supposedly that texture of hair which is very tightly curled (also called coarse, kinky, or nappy). It is also usually short hair (p. 60).

The concept of multigenerational transmission in which behaviors and patterns are passed down through generations is presented by Parmer (2004). Parmer explains internalized racism as a multigenerational theme. Parmer uses Bowen's family theory to explain how multigenerational themes work in relation to race. Parmer states:

Absent the prevailing attractiveness stereotype relative to hair, skin color, and body size, the emotional systems of families subsequently leads to internalized behaviors which become an integral part of the identity of African American families across generations [where] the child accepts the socially enforced notion of her inferiority (p. 235).

The author also states:

The beginning in childhood indicates the development of a positive racial formation and identity based on hair rituals and, whether consciously or unconsciously, an African American mother who has had negative childhood hair experiences is likely to project similar attitudes to her daughter(s) (p. 235).

Bellinger (2007) uses a qualitative research method in which she uses open-ended interviews with fifteen young African American women ages 16-18 to understand "why African American women relax their hair" (p. 2). Bellinger observes family-system issues in her

research. She finds that African American women change their hair because afro hair was always rejected within their families. For this reason, hair-straightening practices were passed down within their families throughout generations.

Tatum (1997) discusses the concept of internalized racism and its relation to contemporary identity development in young Black children. She argues that lighter skin and straighter hair often continue to be privileged. This teaches a young child that being closer to white is best. Tatum states:

Even when our clear desire is to reflect positive images of blackness to young black children, our habit of speech may undermine our efforts unless we are intentional about examining the color coded message of our language (p. 47).

She also discusses her own personal identity development and how her family and school teachers reinforced white standards of beauty by their negative talk about Blackness. According to Tatum, “chemically relaxed hair is not always, but can be a sign of internalized oppression” (p. 45). She explains that later in life she went natural to retaliate against her own internalized racism and notes, “For me [having natural hair] has sent an important message to my sons about how I feel about myself as a black woman, and by extension how I feel about them” (p. 45).

Wilder and Cain (2009) conducted a qualitative methods study in which they co-facilitate five focus-group interviews, with 26 self-identified black women between the ages of 18 and 40. The purpose of their study is to:

Examine black families and their relation to colorism. [They] found acts of colorism are deeply rooted within families. Even Black [women] who were raised in families that held a deep sense of ethnic pride and worked to buffer black children from the external forces of racism [still rejected] darkness and kinky hair (p. 44).

Identity theory and hair

Yeh and Hwang (2000) would argue that identity theories, such as Miller and Garran's (2008) ethnic identity theory are too focused on the internal world of developmental stages. Yeh and Hwang argue that:

More emphasis [should be placed on] how minorities are contextually bound to social, historical, cultural, and institutional factors such as social roles, relationships, geographic location, and interpersonal situations (p. 8).

The ideas of Racial and ethnic identity theory in which racial groups move from a negative view of the race they belong to, to a more positive one (Miller & Garran, 2008) has been used to explain the process that leads many Black women to embrace their natural hair and have an Afro-centric sense of pride. Perhaps the final stage of identity theory in which, Black people incorporate a positive Black racial identity into their self-concepts (Miller & Garran, 2008) is illustrated by the natural hair journey that many women embark on for personal reasons, political reasons, and collective reasons.

These studies speak to the many external and internal challenges that Black women face in relation to their hair. The following sections will discuss how internal and external factors dictate how Black women choose to wear their hair.

Hair, external forces, and straightening as a practical choice

According to Evans (2003), “Social comparison theory would predict that women may compare themselves to societal standards of beauty in order to assess their own level of attractiveness [and power]” (p. 184). Thompson (2009) uses a flexible qualitative method in which she uses a social comparison theory as a framework to argue that a “Eurocentric beauty standard of straight, long and flowing hair has a sociocultural effect on Black women’s notions” (p. 820). This theory helps her understand “the intersection of social comparison and hair, and why black women find it difficult to resist aligning their hair choices with that of the dominant beauty ideal” (p. 839). Thompson (2009) found from the eight women she interviewed:

They have shown us that Black subjectivity has no existence without comparison to White (mainstream) culture. Natural Black hair remains misunderstood, villainized, and eroticized in virtually every facet of society. It is not simply a matter of assuming that Black women who relax, weave or braid their hair do not want to, or have not considered going natural, but fear of societal reprisal—i.e., limited employment opportunities; lack of male interest (courtship); and, the possibility of their sexuality being questioned—is the overwhelming reason why hair continues to hold such immense political power (p.27).

Weathers (2001) states, “if biases [and stigma] about [Black] hair are to change, then African American women must challenge themselves to think about how they might be condoning those biases” (p. 61). She does note, however, that hair straightening continues to be a practical choice used to “manipulate power structures that keep Black women from being oppressed” (p. 60). Black women in America are subjected to institutional racism in the work place, in which they receive inequitable salaries, assignments, benefits, and promotion

opportunities. Also, there are the subtle forms of discrimination they experience, as seen through interpersonal exchanges, differential treatment, stereotyping, and being made to feel uncomfortable by their white coworkers and supervisors (Hughes & Dodge, 1997). Thus, making hair choices that highlight their difference from the dominant culture is not something that every Black woman wants to do. Other practical reasons for Black women to straighten their hair involve issues of time and manageability. Natural Black hair is hard to take care of, difficult to manage, and requires a lot of time that not all women have. Weathers (2001) suggests:

Black women who wear their hair natural should not be looked down upon by women who choose not to. Nor should they assume that all women who straighten their hair do it because they are rejecting their Black identity. Thompson (2009) points out that “other [not Black] women wear their hair in various hairstyles, short, long, shaven, dyed, spiked, wigs, weaves, and no one attributes their hairstyling choices to self-hatred” (p. 3).

Weathers (2001) points out,

It cannot be assumed that a Black woman hates herself and her heritage based on the fact that she perms her hair. If we were in the habit of doing that, look at how much would be lost in the messages from the lives of women like Billie Holiday, Ruby Dee, Maya Angelou, or Shirley Chisholm. Both natural hair and hair straightening practices are a part of hair culture for African American women (p. 59).

CHAPTER III

Methodology

Purpose and Question

The purpose of this study is to advance a better understanding of the natural hair journey experienced by Black college women and the impact it has on identity development. Mental health professionals can enhance their competence by understanding the powerful role the natural hair journey has in the lives of Black women. This study will also encourage social work clinicians to recognize the natural journey as an identity transformative process.

The overarching question for this study is: What are the self-identity motives, challenges, and rewards for Black college women who choose to stop the use of chemicals that alter the natural state of their hair?

Method and Design

I will be conducting a qualitative study using content analysis. The design for this study will employ individual face-to-face interviews of approximately 50 minutes to one hour in length. The interview will consist of structured, semi-structured and open-ended questions, as well as probes to derive demographics and rich narrative data from my participants. Content analysis will be employed to examine the data.

Ethical Concerns

All participants involved in this study will be provided informed-consent letters. These letters will be provided prior to the interview. The letters will detail the study itself, the purpose of the study, and the criteria that one must meet to be a part of the study. These letters will also address ethical concerns by explaining participants' rights and by detailing both the benefits and risks of being a participant. For example, one risk is recalling memories that might be psychologically painful. The benefits are that this study will help professionals better understand a facet of Black female identity. These letters must be signed and returned before the interview takes place.

Sources of Bias and Omissions

Bias is introduced by the small sample size of my study. Due to this, my research will not be generalizable to the larger population. Non-English speakers will be omitted from this study because I'm fluent only in English. My own personal connection with, and preference for, natural hair is also an issue of potential bias.

Strengths

The strengths of this research include its homogeneous aspect. That is, potential commonalities and trends will emerge due to the fact that all of my participants are Black college women living in Western Massachusetts/New England. Therefore, I may be able to generalize my research for New England based social workers working with natural-haired Black women attending college. Also, the guiding questions will ensure that I am covering similar aspects of theoretical literature. Collecting qualitative data will allow me to hear the voices of the women in my study. This will allow for depth and richness that is unobtainable in quantitative data.

Recruitment Inclusion and Exclusion Characteristics

In order to provide diversity within the sample, I will recruit undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral students who attend college in Western Massachusetts.

My study population will be natural haired Black women. Specifically, in order to meet the criteria for this study, each participant must identify both as a woman and as Black or mixed race including Black. She must have (previously) chemically straightened her natural hair through the use of a chemical relaxer for at least one year. She must currently be natural and have had natural hair for at least one year (that is, she has completely stopped the use of hair relaxers at least two years prior to interview date). She must have afro kinky hair that is classified as type 4 (defined in chart attached). She must be at least 18 or older. She must be a volunteer for this un-paid study. She must be fluent in the English language.

People who do not self identify as Black, mixed race with Black, or women, and people who do not currently have natural hair and or have not been natural for at least two years cannot be included in this study. People who do not have type 4 hair will be excluded. Other exclusion criteria include students who have never chemically altered the natural state of their hair, or who have chemically processed their hair for less than a year. Also, participants who are under the age of 18 cannot be included in this study. Unfortunately, participants who are not fluent in English cannot participate in this study. My sample size will consist of 12 to 14 participants.

Representativeness of Sample and Diversity

This will be a nonprobability study. The sample will be a convenience sample, homogenous with respect to certain characteristics, and will use deviant case sampling. I will use

the college students in Western Massachusetts because it's convenient for me (within close distance to my residence and therefore inexpensive).

Recruitment and Sampling Technique

I will put up attractive flyers in the local businesses of college neighborhoods. I will do this only after getting permission from these businesses. My e-mail address will be provided on all flyers. The flyers will announce the criteria for my study. I will use snowball sampling in which I ask the people I interview, as well as people I know to help me recruit other potential participants. Once I am contacted by a potential participant, she will be sent an informed-consent letter discussing the purpose of the study, and she will have to e-mail me back saying that she has read the letter. We will then schedule an interview. The letter will be signed when we meet in person, before the interview begins.

Data

I will be using qualitative data, because unlike quantitative data, this type of data will allow me to collect the rich narrative stories of my participants through interviews. I will also collect demographic data. The variables will include, race, age, sex, and socioeconomic upbringing, the college the participant is attending, and the year of study she is in. Observations on these characteristics will help me find themes in my data analysis. The interview will be unstructured. That is, once the question is posed, the participant will be free to answer it in the way that makes sense to her. Also, if the participant answers a question out of the order I asked it, she will be free to go on without being re-directed. The questions for this study are as follows:

1. What do you think has led you to stop using chemicals that alter their natural hair texture?
2. Who or what inspired you to start the natural hair transformation?

3. How does returning to your natural hair affect you?
4. Do you think your natural hair transformation has impacted your self-identity? If you feel it has, how so? If you feel it has not, explain why not.
5. Please tell me more about what the process was like for you. (If prompts are needed: How long did it take you? What were your frustrations? What were your feelings? What have you learned? How did others perceive this process? Where are you in your process at this time?)
6. How have those in your family and social circles reacted to your natural hair transformation?
7. If you could say anything to your hair, what would it be?

Nature of Study

The participants in this study will be asked to review the purpose of this study prior to the interview as defined in the letter, which will state the overarching question: “What are the self-identity motives, challenges, and rewards for Black college women who choose to stop the use of chemicals that alter the natural state of their hair?” The participants will also be asked to review the informed-consent letter, which will be e-mailed to them. Next, the participant and I will schedule an in-person interview. These interviews will be conducted in a safe, mutually agreed upon place that provides adequate privacy. Prior to starting the interview I will review the risks and benefits of the study, the purpose, and the informed-consent letter. After reviewing the informed-consent letter again and providing the participant with her own copy of the letter, I will begin the interview where I will ask my 7 questions. The interview will be unstructured. That is, once the question is posed the participant will be free to answer in the way that makes sense to her. Also, if the participant answers a question out of the order I asked it, she will be free to go

on without being re-directed. I will record the interview with a tape recorder. I will also take written notes. I will later transcribe and analyze the data. Demographic data such as age, gender, sex, race, and the college she attends will be collected in the interview. These questions will be asked at the end of the interview. My reason for doing this is so the participant will stay focused on the 7 questions during the interview.

Feasibility

This research project is feasible for many reasons. Specifically, I will be living in close proximity to the six colleges and therefore I can conduct my interviews in person. I will travel to local college neighborhoods to put up fliers. I plan to have a sample size of 12 to 14 participants. I don't think recruiting will be a challenge since I have six local colleges with undergraduate and graduate schools to recruit from. In addition, being a student at Smith might work to my advantage since I have a personal connection to the school and college scene in Western Massachusetts. My own personal passion speaks to the feasibility of this study. That is, in order for this study to be feasible, I have to be motivated to do it. My (so far) seven year natural journey is meaningful to me.

Data and Content Analysis

I will transcribe my interviews in full to get all of the data. Specifically, I will play the interviews on tape, and type them out. Afterwards, I will upload my interviews and demographics into Dedoose, which is a computer coding program that helps researchers visually manage and organize their data, and draw statistics from their data. Both content analysis and thematic analysis will be employed. In terms of content analysis, I will closely examine what is being said by the participant, why it is being said, what led her to say what she is saying, how she responded to each question, and any underlying meaning of what the participant is saying. I

will use thematic analysis to encode my qualitative data. Again, I will closely examine my data. I will take notes, find commonalities within the interviews, and organize the data into categories. Each category will have a name or label. Broader and more complex categories will have sub categories. This analysis will allow me to find themes throughout the content of all my interviews. I will also look to my literature review to incorporate the topics I covered in that chapter. I will use descriptive analysis with the demographic data.

I will glean qualitative data and turn it into quantitative data. For example, I might use content analysis to see how many participants felt they did not get a job due to having natural hair, or how many participants went natural to retaliate against white standards of beauty.

Statement of Personal Perspectives

My own personal passion speaks to this study. It is this passion that motivates me to conduct this study, but it is this same passion that threatens certain biases. My own natural journey is meaningful to me. The tangle resulting in: liberation, oppression, racism, retaliation, rejection, resilience, struggle, deconstruction, reconstruction, breakage and growth, the un-learning and re-learning, the ugliness, the beauty, the hard work, the history, the redefinition of self, feeling the coils and knowing myself, are all part of my personal hair narrative. Thus, I have a deep and intimate connection to this study. More importantly, I have a genuine interest to hear the stories of Black women who are simultaneously experiencing this struggle in their own unique way.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

This chapter details the findings, which derive from qualitative interviews with 12 self-identified Black women college students attending institutes of higher education in Western Massachusetts. This study explored the experience of the natural hair transformation and its relationship to self-identity. All of the participants in this study once used chemical hair relaxers and stopped the use of relaxers at least one year prior to the time of the interview for this study. The most significant findings resulting from these qualitative interviews reflect four major themes: reasons and motivations, categories of identity, injury, and family upbringing. While many participants faced resistance and negative feedback from their families and individuals in their social circles, most described the natural hair transformation as one that was ultimately empowering across several categories of identity. At the same time, participants described immediate and lasting injuries, both physical and psychological, resulting from the use of chemical relaxers before the initiation of the natural hair transformation, as well as from the negative feedback they received once they had begun the transformation. Many women found support with other women who had natural hair. From this support they have been able to work towards healing and repairing the psychological injuries and scars.

The first theme, *reasons and motivations*, was used to understand what each woman wanted from her natural hair journey. Women went natural for many reasons. These reasons

involve: letting go of certain lifestyles, embracing new ones, becoming healthier, and establishing a sense of wholeness.

The second theme, *identity*, was used to describe various dimensions of self and self-in relation to other. Thus race identity, cultural identity, class identity, gender identity and social identity or group belonging were all considered aspects of identity that relate to hair for Black women. For the purpose of this thesis, identity was also understood to encompass other areas of self, such as coming out with natural hair, degrees of self-confidence and self-reliance, self-love and acceptance, life transitions and lifestyle choices. Many of these aspects of identity overlap, are at times intertwined, and are unavoidably interrelated.

The third theme, *family*, focuses on how hair was seen by the significant figures within the family context, the messages participants received from their self-identified families about their hair throughout their upbringings, the hair practices (ways of doing, styling, and wearing hair) existing within their families, and the families' reactions and attitudes toward the participants' hair choices.

The fourth theme, *injury*, describes two different experiences faced by participants in this study. There were physical injuries in which participants recalled physical pain, health issues, and damage to the body from hair experiences. But injuries in this study also reflect hurtful psychological experiences, racism, traumatic past events, and attacks on the ego.

The findings for this study are presented as follows: demographic data of the participants, followed by findings on identity, family upbringing, and injury.

The sample for this study consisted of 12 women who identified themselves as Black or mixed race with Black. In terms of ethnicity, there was one Nigerian woman, one Somali woman, one woman who was half Puerto Rican and half African American, one Rwandan woman, one woman who identified as mixed race with Black and seven women who were African American. To be in this study, women had to have very kinky hair in the type 4 range. The women were between the ages of 18 and 40. At the time of their interview all of the women in the study attended a higher education program in Western Mass. The schools they attended were Smith College, Greenfield Community College, Mount Holyoke College, Holyoke Community College, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and Hampshire College. In terms of sexual orientation, one woman identified as queer, two women identified as bisexual, and eight women identified as heterosexual. The women's socioeconomic upbringing ranged from lower class to upper middle class.

Reasons and Motivations

Eight of 12 women addressed what their natural journey meant to them. One woman in the study went natural right before she transferred to a different college. Her hair served as a transitional object during the adjustment:

It was also a way of coping for me. How can I say it? It was like having something that was personal to me that I could hold on to. It made me feel comfortable and it was something I could have control of, wherever I was going. Because at the time I didn't have friends, I wasn't use to being in a big school, I didn't know people, I never had a lecture, you know?

One woman talked about making new and different lifestyle choices around the time she went natural:

Well God I just feel like my whole life shifted. I became a more holistic person. I just started seeking different ways of being. Like around food choices and friend choices, you know? It was like the beginning of this crazy, crazy, transformational time in my life. I think I was 22 when I stopped relaxing my hair. Um I used to be all about cooking up pork chops in the kitchen. I love to cook and then when I went natural I stopped eating meat, and was vegan for ten years. But the things I was attracted to changed. I've always been artistic and crafty. But I wasn't really attracted to people who were like that. So I think for me the shift was going from my childhood friends to my adult-like friends. So food and choices of clothes all followed the hair, and even the type of men I dated.

Another woman explained going natural as a way of letting go:

The last person who relaxed my hair was my mother and she passed away a week after my 19th birthday. I was toying with the idea of going natural before but she was not supportive. I always thought my mom was this really out there and well-rounded individual. But she would say, 'You can't get away with that [natural hair] because we are living in the south.' We went to school in Alabama on a scholarship. I don't know, something about her being the last person to touch my hair made me want a clean break.

Findings on Identity

Participants were asked: Do you think your natural hair transformation has impacted your self-identity? If you feel it has, how so? If you feel it has not, explain why not. All 12 participants answered yes to this question. The ways in which the women spoke about self-identity shifted from one participant to the next. The theme of identity also came up throughout other parts of the interview as well. The following paragraphs present findings on the subgroups chosen for identity in this thesis.

Self-confidence and self-reliance

Eight of the 12 participants mentioned self-identity in terms of self-confidence and self-reliance. The participants suggested that the natural journey has empowered them in ways that have made them more self-dependent, and that this had led to increased confidence.

One participant reported:

Yes, it has impacted my identity. I mean since I went natural people have said ‘you seem really confident and strong.’ And I feel like those are never words that were used to describe me. And two years ago they would have never said that about me. Before I went natural I seemed to be the one who was always shy and hunched over in the corner. I guess I gained confidence because I put so much hard work into my hair, and um how I take care of it, and how it looks. I am proud of myself for doing it.

When asked the same question, another participant also spoke about confidence and self-reliance as part of identity formation resulting from her natural hair:

I feel like I’ve gained more self-confidence and a better grasp on the things that I can do. There is nothing that anyone could say like, *oh it’s fake*. Because it is me, it is my hair, and it is healthy and growing.

Self-love and acceptance

Seven out of 12 of the participants acknowledged self love and acceptance in their responses to questions related to identity. Eight out of twelve women linked their natural-hair journey to self acceptance and the journey to work towards it. The self love and acceptance theme also came up when participants were asked the question, “If you could say anything to your hair what would you say?” Half of the women in this study answered this question by saying that they would say, “I love you.” There was a range in how the women discussed this

theme. The women talked about self love in terms of: body politics; not conforming to societal norms of what is considered beautiful for Black women; choosing beauty standards that fit their own individual needs; and the struggle that emerges from the need to feel accepted and supported by others. One participant said:

I now have this aura about me. I don't care what you think and I do not care what guys think, 'Like oh she has natural hair, why is she doing that?' Like my body is for me and not for you! That is what natural hair means for me. I am going to express who I am fully and I am not trying to change because society or people will tease me less. I don't have time for that. I am not living for you. It is like this is me and just accept me.

Another participant felt her self-love and acceptance revealed when another person commented on her hair after she cut it to go natural. She reported, "My friend from high school was like, 'Why did you cut your hair!? I don't like it.' But I didn't give a damn if he accepted it. It is like, I didn't do it for you... I did it for me."

Another woman described the need for acceptance from a family member who didn't agree with her hair choice. She said, "my cousin always offered to put on the chemical. She would just say, 'If you ever want it I'm here for you.' So I said, 'I don't ever want it, can you still be here for me?'" (Laughs)

Race identity

All 12 of the women in this study at some point linked their natural hair journey to their racial identity. Black visibility, retaliating against oppressive structures as a black woman, and Black pride were all discussed. The women in this study all had very kinky hair, and for some, hair texture spoke to racial identity in terms of the way they saw themselves in relation to other Black women. Five out of 12 of the women expressed having a deep sense of envy towards

Black women who have looser and less kinky curl patterns and hair texture, such as women with curls in the type 3 hair type range. One woman specifically acknowledged this study against the backdrop of racial identity:

It is really necessary for you to be doing this research. To have someone do a study of Black women and natural hair can really show that natural hair is not some random thing that is happening with black people. It actually means something in terms of identity and how we view ourselves in the world.

So what has the natural transformation meant for Black Women in terms of racial identity? One participant talked about how she saw herself since going natural and how this differed from how she saw herself when she was a woman with relaxed hair she said, “I saw myself as an African woman, a Black woman, and as who I am. I saw myself as someone who was not trying to look like a puppet of white westernized women.”

Another participant talked about having chemical relaxers applied to her hair so she could appear less visible as a Black person.

Growing up I had to move around a lot. I have been to a lot of different places and types of schools. Most of them were predominately white. Especially in high school, I was one of seven Black kids in the entire school. So I didn't really want to stand out that much. So anything that drew attention to my ethnicity made me uncomfortable. So even like my hair which is essentially a part of being Black [pause] I wanted to deny it a little. So luckily, my friend was able to put a relaxer in. Thank God! (Laughs)

Another woman talked about visibility and race as well:

So now [since going natural] it is just like, I am Black and nobody has to question. I use to wear the long wigs or relaxed hair and people would question. I mean I have Native

American in me, but this lady had given me every ethnicity in the book. And when I told her I was Black she was like, ‘no really what are you?’ Now people are like yeah she came from Africa somewhere down the line; her ancestors must have come from Africa. And I’m proud of that.

In her answer to the question, has the natural journey impacted your-self identity? One participant talked about having a deepened sense of racial pride:

Absolutely and I have to check myself and make sure that I don’t get into that, ‘I’m natural, I’m proud, and that makes me more Black.’ It can be easy to slide away from that subconsciously, but there is no need to play a game like, I’m more righteous than thee. That is counterproductive; you don’t know why someone has their hair permed.

Cultural identity

Half the participants discussed cultural identity in relation to hair. Of the four women who discussed culture the most, three were African. The cultural identity theme overlapped with other identity themes such as race, class, and gender. However, the findings below were the most salient in terms of cultural identity.

One Rwandan woman discussed hair history in Rwanda:

We have big influence from France ...But before colonization women had natural hair, they knew how to braid it, and they liked their hair. They took really good care of their hair. After the Europeans invaded Rwanda back in [pause] I’m not sure [pause] that’s when our culture changed and we started wearing our hair like white women.

Two African participants discussed the cultural beauty practices for young girls within African culture. The Nigerian woman stated the following:

All my cousins back in Nigeria have natural hair. My cousins are younger and in Nigeria it is a tradition for girls to wear their natural hair until they get to high school, they grow up with short natural hair. Once they get out of high school they get to straighten their hair to look “presentable.” Well that’s pretty much the norm, and American TV shows have a lot to do with it.

An African American woman discussed the Southern culture she grew up in:

My sister and the women I grew up with are all about long straight weaves, face full of makeup, and high heels[pause] you know that is the Black church scene in the South.

Another participant discussed hair relaxing and its impact on Black culture:

I think that Black is not just a race, but it has a culture attached to it. You can tell this by a lot of Black people who try to run away from themselves. They are also running from their culture. I feel like changing our outward appearance, like relaxing our hair, is the first step to stepping away from Black culture.

Class identity

Seven out of twelve of the women discussed issues related to class throughout their interview. Two out of 12 of the women reported that they might one day need to straighten their hair with either chemicals or heat for career purposes, and although they saw this as an unfortunate reality they were willing to do it if it meant “moving up” in the world. One woman felt that she was not hired for a job at Abercrombie and Fitch because she was wearing an afro and the job description wanted people to have “beach hair.” Half of the women mentioned that one of their reasons for going natural was because it is a less costly way to wear their hair. Many participants said something similar to what this participant said, “It costs 65 dollars a month to

go to the saloon and get a decent perm. It is too much money. I am a broke college student. So one of my reasons for going natural involves saving dough.”

Two out of 12 of the women talked about the impact that education and traveling (which are both class privileges) have on the natural-hair transformation. One participant voiced her opinion about women in her family who are not natural:

I do feel like more travel and education would allow them to broaden their thoughts around their hair choices. I feel like if you are around the same people all the time then that's what you're doing. So I feel like the women in my family could benefit from education. I feel like education allows people to look at what they are doing and why they are doing it [pause] Like in the[inner city] there is more rejection of natural hair because of the whole educational background thing.

Another participant who identified as a “poor Black Woman” offered many perspectives on the relationship between hair and class for Black women. This woman described growing up in a low income neighborhood and talked about how people within her neighborhood viewed her natural-hair transformation.

People were like, ‘whoa she’s got an afro in her hair, God!’ It was just really interesting because people in high school and on the street, for some reason when you wear your hair naturally they look at you different. They would be like, ‘you are trying to be a Black Panther’ Or they think I’m too poor to get it done. I think that is a dilemma with poor people and especially poor people of color. Like if you don’t have any money then why are you buying weave? Some people try to create this outward appearance as being different from their socioeconomic class. So some people may think that I’m embracing my class. And yes, I’m too poor to get my hair done every two weeks. I am not going to

pretend I'm something that I'm not you know. I have a lot of family members who don't have a job, they have a child, and they still getting a weave. It is like, you have a child, you have bills that you haven't paid, and you are getting a 100 dollar weave? I mean not even the seven dollar pack of weave that I get. But you are so worried about your looks that you can't even prioritize your money in the right way.

An African woman who moved to Massachusetts from Rwanda last year stated, "When I cut my hair to go natural I took a picture and sent it to my sister. And she said, 'Oh my god! What happened? You must be very poor and struggling in America.'"

Gender identity

All 12 women in this study discussed gender issues in relation to hair at least once. The most common gender issue discussed was the demand placed on Black woman to have long hair. In this study eight out of ten women went natural by cutting the relaxed hair off their head. Thus, they experienced having short hair and challenging gender norms. Gender also came up when women talked about their intimate relationships and attracting men. One woman shared her experience after going natural by cutting her hair:

At first it was hard. I didn't like it because I was so used to seeing my hair a certain way and I missed the length. I think most of it was the length. I had to cut all the relaxer out of my hair and that left me with two inches of hair. Some people in my life weren't supportive of the decision. My dad always told me growing up that all little girls should have long hair. So I don't know[pause] you know those little comments from men in my life or women in my life really got to me. Now I look back and wish I didn't let it affect me.

Another participant talked about an experience she had with an ex boyfriend in regards to hair length:

So I told him I was going to cut my hair. So the first thing he said was, 'you know it is a sin to cut your hair?' I was so mad and I never wanted to prove a point more. So I was like, are you serious? Weren't you the one who told me I looked beautiful with my natural hair? But it was like, only if it is not short? So um I got on Google and looked up the bible scripture and passages and called every person I know who were church goers, and they pretty much said it was okay to do what I want with my hair. So I really tried to prove this point and say, 'What about women who have cancer and lose their hair?' And I said 'You cut your hair; is that a sin?' He was like, 'It only applies to females.' It really showed me a lot about him, and how length obsessed guys are. You know it hurt a lot to have him say that. I've been with you this long, and you've been there for me through this natural journey, but yet when I say I want to cut it you don't support me. It is weird because he sees me now, and sees how much it has grown. And I'm like yeah, 'deuces you only wish you could run your fingers through this!' (laughs) So yeah that was another pivotal moment in my hair journey.

A Somali woman in this study discussed beauty expectations as a Muslim woman:

As my hair grew thicker the head scarf would look bushier and my aunt would say, 'The head scarf is not falling right and it does not look womanly, it does not look feminine.'

You know the scarves are supposed to fall and look pretty. Even when I was home two weeks ago she was still saying these things.

The participant also stated:

I went to Seattle and my childhood friend lives there who are half Somali and half Indian. Her mother tells her that she is lucky because she has the Indian hair. So her mother who is Indian told me, 'You need to put a relaxer on. I really mean well for you. You won't find a guy or be able to get married if you don't.' She has that concept engrained in her that darker women with kinky hair won't be able to marry the men they want to marry. So I'm like, 'I'm not trying to marry an Indian guy.' And she says 'well you know a lot of Somali men and Black men in general like women with straighter hair.'

Another participant stated

Today I saw my friend who is also African and she was like, 'You are not a guy, you should do something with your hair, and put makeup on. You should do something with yourself.' And I'm like 'no; I should wake up, take a shower, comb my hair, and go to school.' She said, 'If you eat meat without spices it is very plain. But if you add spices to it tastes good. That is the same thing with your hair.' I said, 'That is not true' I thought to myself, we have a long way to go in educating Black women.

Social identity

Half of the women talked about using social media to establish their social identity within supportive online natural-hair communities. The most-visited natural hair websites were Urban Bush Babies, Napturality, CurlyNikki, Black Girls with Long Hair, and Tyte curl. Through blogs on these sites, group chats, facebook groups, and YouTube videos many women learned how to take care of their hair. These sites allowed women to connect with other natural-haired women, to gain inspiration, support, and mirroring. These six women said that resources on the internet were helpful because they were not raised to take care of natural hair. One woman said,

“It is kind of sad, but a lot of Black women don’t know what their natural hair looks like or how to take care of it.”

Ten out of twelve women described aspects of their social identity when discussing their natural-hair journey. For these women establishing a sense of community or group belonging with other natural-haired women inspired women to go natural, motivated them to stay natural, and allowed them to value their natural-hair journey and simultaneously voice their frustrations. When asked the question, who inspired you to go natural? One participant said:

The women in the organization that I was in. It was run by black and Mexican women. My personal mentor was a Mexican woman [pause] she was saying that as a Mexican woman there is only so far I can go in overseeing your development as a Black woman. She said, ‘It is important for you to see who you are as a Black woman in this society.’ So she really pushed me to begin to engage in conversations with other Black women in the organization. So those were Black women with the big hair. So I realize that now when people see me they see someone intimidating, and that is exactly what I saw in those women. They are intimidating...they don’t comb their hair and that takes courage! That is what I used to think (laughs)—it takes courage to walk down the street and not comb your hair. So I began interacting with them, and we had these Black studies conversations, and interactions, and I began to see how much of their power is connected to their hair, and them really not caring what other people thought of them. I learned about Black movements. These women were wearing huge afros as a symbol of power and I was like yeah okay I can do this.

Another woman described facing a lot of rejection about her natural hair from those in her family and community. Thus, finding a supportive community of natural-haired women was

important to her. In response to the question, so what was it like to find this community of naturals here at school? She stated:

It was really beautiful and inspiring. I think it encouraged me to keep on being natural and not to relax my hair. ...It helped me seeing other sisters on campus who were very proud of their decision and had given much thought about it. So when I went home it wasn't that constant torture. I didn't know anyone in Maryland who was natural. But I knew that I had support here. So it did inspire me to actually keep on.

One woman described feeling socially isolated throughout her natural journey:

I feel like when you have natural hair and you hang out with other Black women who don't and they try to convince you to go back to chemicals. I feel alone in doing this. I'm the only person in my life that is supporting the idea of going natural. So sometimes when people say, 'you must get your hair straightened.' I feel like they are kind of getting me. I feel like giving up.

Coming out as a natural

When asked the question, Please describe what the process was like for you, and the follow up prompt, Please talk about the very beginning and how it felt to be natural in public, six out of 12 of the women discussed a particular moment in their past in which they revealed their natural hair to others or in public. One woman stated:

I made a statement on facebook and posted pictures. Everybody was like 'Wow you look so beautiful' usually people get likes for posting half-naked pictures, but I got likes for having natural hair. That was good affirmation. Also, New Years Eve that was the first time I went *out out* with my natural hair. It was in Boston and I was all dressed up with my natural hair. I was nervous, but it came out poppin'.

Another woman stated:

Well I went back to Rwanda with my hair natural, but I planned to wear a wig and makeup in the airport. But then I was like ugh like why do I have to do it? So I decided not to wear anything. But when my sister saw me she was like, 'you look so terrible!' Well I should explain first, that in my culture they don't want women to be fat, but they don't want them to be skinny either. So last year I did a lot of exercise, I lost weight and was very skinny. So my sister said to me, 'you look so terrible, you are so skinny, and your hair looks so bad!'

One participant recalled the fear she had surrounding her visibility as a woman with natural hair:

At the beginning it was very very scary. So it wasn't until my cousin came out to visit me and was asking to see my hair. And I was like, 'you don't want to see my hair it is too scary under there.' And she was like, 'no I really want to see it...I want to see it.' So when we were at my house and out of the public eye I finally took the scarf off my head. I was like, 'You asked for this!' and she looked at it and said, ' Girl, there is nothing wrong with your hair.' And I said, 'Yes there is!' and she said, 'No there isn't it is really cute.' And I thought she was just saying that... I remember my brother graduated from high school and it was the first time that I didn't have the scarf out in public. And it felt good at the time. Now I look at pictures and can see that I didn't know what I was doing with my hair. (Laughs)

Family Upbringing

Participants were asked the question, how has your family reacted to your natural hair? When answering this question, participants often revealed how hair was seen by the significant figures within their family context, the messages the participant received from her self-identified

family about her hair throughout her upbringing, the hair practices (ways of doing, styling, and wearing hair) existing within the family, and the families' reactions and attitude to the participant's hair choices. Eight of the 12 women had family members that reacted negatively to their hair. One woman stated:

I was inspired by my mom because she never put any chemicals in her hair. She would just braid it, and wash it with avocado, oil, eggs. So when I called her and told her the condition of my hair she was just like 'you should cut it and go natural.' She is very proud of being an African woman. I get annoyed, frustrated, and disappointed when my friends tell me I should perm my hair. But when I hear it from my family like my sisters I get so mad. Because my mom gave us the benefit of teaching us that our natural hair is beautiful. My mom [has since passed away] so I don't have her support...I feel like wearing my hair like this connects me to my mom. But whenever my family makes me mad about my hair, I'm like my mom wherever she is, is proud of my hair. It is really hard to block out the voices of those who don't like my hair, and remember to listen to what my mom said.

Another participant stated

I can tell you the way my family sees me is different. It is like I'm the first one to go to college and the second one in my family to move from Oakland. So the fact that only 1 percent of students graduate and go to college from Oakland there is a lot of tension. It is like; 'oh you think you are better than us?' So they think that me wearing my natural hair is like oh I am trying to be different. They call me Assata Shakur in my house. I'm fine with that...I'm good, but they are really trying to say you are trying to be different. They did that whole thing where they are like, 'remember when you used to wear weaves, or I

remember when you used to have your hair straight.’ My mom was just upset. She was like, ‘I like long straight hair. I don’t know what is going on with your hair, but you need to get that done.’ But by that time I was learning where that stuff, hating our hair, comes from. I was like, ‘your comments are some major internalized oppression.’ And now she is learning more about Black history. It is pretty amazing. Now she stopped wearing perms, I mean she still straightens with heat, but that’s a step. And I made sure she does not perm my sister’s hair. So we are slowly getting there you know?

Another participant explained that

I just shaved my hair with scissors and then I used small razors and it looked really funny because there were parts that were shaved and parts that weren’t. When my sister saw it she said, ‘Why did you cut your hair? You should have just gotten another perm at the Saloon to tame it.’ She was always using the word *tame*. I mean my family constantly tortured me about going natural. My aunt called my mother and was like, ‘your daughter went crazy! She cut off all her hair.’ My mom was just like, ‘Why did you do that? You should have just put a relaxer in it!’ and I was like, ‘No I don’t want to do that.’ And she said, ‘there is nothing bad to it...it just makes your hair more manageable.’

Four out of 12 of the women found their families supportive after they started the natural transformation. One of the 12 women grew up in a family of women who wore their hair natural. This participant stated:

I mean by the time I decided to go natural and commit to being natural, they were just like, ‘I don’t know what took you so long.’ I always feel lucky that my family is the way they are about everything. I mean they have been supportive about pretty much everything and this is just another example.

Another participant stated

My mom actually does not like the fact that I do not comb my hair, that I don't comb the curls out. My parents actually both thought it looked horrible; because in the 70's you picked you're fro out. My mom had a fro in high school and would brag that her fro was perfect, and even, and gorgeous. So I didn't really think she would have a problem with it, but she was always saying that it does not look combed. So I started to question it. When I was home she said, 'I like natural hair, but you should comb it out.' And I was like, 'Mom, curly is the style I wear it in. People don't wear it combed out. Most women today wear their natural hair in ways that they can show their texture.' I explained that natural hair has styles that change over generations. My grandmother liked it though. She has always been kind of a rebel. She is just her own person and she enjoys watching me grow into myself. I also have two older cousins, they are 40, and were screaming when they saw my hair, they love it.

Another participant stated:

Last time I was home I went to my dad's and grandmother's house and they are Puerto Rican. They loved it they were like 'you look beautiful.' My dad was excited because he wanted me to do this for so long.

Injury

All 12 women experienced some form of physical injury as a result of the chemical relaxer. All 12 women experienced psychological injuries as well. The ways that both physical and psychological injuries were experienced varied from one participant to the next.

Physical injury

When asked the question, what has led you to stop the use of chemical relaxers that alter the natural state of your hair? Many women reported the pain of getting their hair chemically relaxed. One said:

One time I got burned really badly by a perm at the hair salon. I wore a hat before and nobody told me that I couldn't do that [pause] the burn hurt so much that they had to pour coke on my head to stop the burn. I guess it serves as a chemical neutralizer and got it to stop burning so badly. But of course I had scabs from the chemicals. Even when I switched hair stylists and had my cousin who was a hair care specialist [pause] even then I would end up with scabs on my scalp after I got my hair relaxed. So I wondered why I am doing this to myself.

Another participant also commented on physical injuries resulting from the chemical relaxers. In response to the question, do you think you will have natural hair for the rest of your life? She said:

I started getting perms when I was 15 and continued that until I was 30 years old. I am 35 now and still am going through the side effects of pain because my scalp is still traumatized from so many years of getting relaxers. I mean I've had to get medication from the dermatologist. So the answer is yes. I'm never hurting myself again.

Many women commented on the memory of a hair related injury. One said:

I got my first relaxer when I was 11 and I had a horrible experience with it and the woman pretty much... she was perming my hair, and blow drying it, and flat ironing and pressing it. She must of used like five different kinds of heat to make my hair straight.

My hair was so kinky that the perm she was using wasn't strong enough. Like my hair stayed the same. But then all of my hair fell out in the back and I was bald.

One woman made a comparison between hair relaxers and crack cocaine. This comparison suggests that both of these substances are addictive yet physically harmful. She stated:

Well you see my hair was playing tricks on me and trying to take revenge. I have been getting relaxers since I was five. I told you relaxers are like crack right? So when I started wearing my hair natural I thought it looked nasty. But I knew I had to stick through it because there had to be something better at the end of the road.

Psychological injury

Eleven out of 12 women in this study described psychological injuries resulting from experiences related to wearing their hair natural. Eight out of 12 women felt that they received the most criticism and questioning about their natural hair from other Black people. One woman stated, "I've gotten more racism from my own Black family and other Black people more than anyone else." One participant talked about hair touching and how it led her to feel violated and dehumanized:

I have also been touched more than ever since I went natural. Ugh, I am not a damn poodle! I am not wearing a sign that says pet the Negro! It is also hard knowing when to speak against that [pause] So figuring out how to confront that person in a way that you don't fit the angry Black woman stereotype [pause] like just think about how you are doing this and how you are eroticizing me [pause] So I have wrestle with how to call people out on it. And most of the time I haven't done it. The last time that I didn't call anyone out on it, I remember being really upset. Because with a micro aggression you can call it out, but most people think you are weird. Also, trying to decide when is it safe

for you to call it out because you are still trying to advance, trying to get recommendations, keep a good social standing, you have a career to think about. You know some of these people who have touched my hair were professors. It seems fine for me when Black people do it through. You know? I guess it's because Black people have the same thing on their head, even if they haven't seen it since they were a little kid. But White people should ask [pause] it is more humanizing when they ask.

Many participants shared hair memories that left psychological scars. One woman had tears in her eyes as she shared this experience:

I asked my brother's barber to just cut off the relaxed ends ... because I wanted to get the straight ends cut off. The stylist cut it so short! And this was against my wishes. I had given clear instructions....I went in my room and I just started crying, and screaming, and cursing. I tied it up with a head wrap. I feel like it is common for hairstylist's to disrespect their customers. The person tells you specifically what they want done to their hair, and [they] in cooperate [their] own ideas and keep going, when [they] should not have. I'm the one who has to wear it and not you [pause] I think it is common in our community to disregard someone's feelings, desires, and declarations because of their age, and say they are just young and don't know anything. I yelled and cried for like a good two or three hours in my mother's lap. I couldn't look at myself for two or three days in the mirror. One thing that I remembered was that I had been proud of my transition that I made, and that was a big step for me, I was preparing to continue that pride and not feel ashamed or care if people looked at me funny and didn't like my hair. And then [the hairstylist] did that, and that was devastating.

Another participant recalled a hurtful childhood hair memory that took place years before her first relaxer.

I have a memory of being in third grade at this wealthy girl's birthday party and it was at a pool. My hair was doing crazy things. All of the girls wanted to stick my hair straight up, the swim instructor went somewhere, and I lied down, and all these white girls stood my hair up. And basically they were like 'this is so funny,' and they instructed me to entertain them. I don't know I think that Black hair confuses and entertains white people.

Summary

This chapter has presented findings on the four most significant themes. They are personal reasons and motivations, self-identity, family upbringing, and injury. All twelve of the women related their natural-hair transformation to various categories of identity. These identity categories often overlapped with one another.

Summary of personal reasons and motivations

Eight out of 12 of the women spoke about having personal reasons and motivations for going natural. Women connected their natural hair journey to various lifestyle changes. For some women the natural journey led them to change what they ate, who they loved, and how they spent their time. One woman used her natural hair as transitional object -- another woman used her transformative hair process, as a way to start a new life chapter.

Summary of self-identity findings

Eight out of twelve women felt that their natural hair journey increased their self confidence and self reliance in ways that led them to feel more secure with themselves and less insecure and shy. The self reliance that they gained from having natural hair derived from being self dependent, educating themselves on natural-hair care, and relying on themselves to do their

hair as opposed to relying on chemicals that made their hair more manageable. Seven out of 12 of the women linked their natural-hair transformation to a journey of self love and acceptance. Many women talked about their interactions with people who did not accept their hair.

All twelve women linked their natural hair journey to their racial identity. Many women felt it made them more proud of their racial identity. Others felt it was a step towards freeing themselves from white oppressive structures. Some women expressed feeling that it increased their sense of racial pride due to their Black visibility. On this same note, one woman asserted the importance of not making harmful generalizations and judgments about how Black women who choose to relax their hair see themselves. Half of the women linked cultural identity to their natural hair transformation. The three women who discussed culture the most were the African women in this study. Cultural practices that were discussed in relation to hair were: defying cultural norms, and how different cultural lifestyles influenced hair choices within African American communities. Class was discussed by seven out of 12 of the women in this study. Many women acknowledged that one of the reasons that they went natural was due to the expense of hair relaxers. Other women discussed how their natural-hair choice reflects class privileges such as travel and education. Attitudes, assumptions, and choices about hair in relation to socioeconomic class were also discussed.

All 12 women discussed hair in relation to their gender identity. Most commonly discussed was the hair length beauty standard for Black women. Women also discussed how their hair choices influenced how they saw their intimate relationships. Natural hair and intimate-partner desirability and attraction were also discussed. The social-identity theme was discussed throughout the interview. Half of the women used social media on the internet to establish a sense of community with other natural-haired women. Ten out of 12 women

discussed the importance of finding belonging within natural haired communities. One woman in this study spoke about feeling alone as a woman with natural hair. Six out of 12 women shared stories about coming out as a natural-haired woman. These stories discussed taking off the wig or the scarves and being visibly natural, which for some participants meant being visibly Black.

Summary on family upbringing findings

More than half of the women in this study got their first relaxer before the age of 8. Eight of the 12 women in this study had family members who at some point acted negatively towards the participant's natural hair. This negativity was rooted in comments and glances. Only one woman in this study came from a family who had natural hair. However, some family members did experiment with natural hair in their past and particularly in the 1970s. One participant inspired members in her family to go natural. Four of the women in this study had family members who reacted positively to their natural hair, and expressed support, and excitement about the participant's transformation.

Summary on injury findings

All 12 women in this study experienced some form of physical injury from the application of the chemical relaxer. Injuries ranged from scabs on the scalp to hair loss, to hair breakage, to lifelong scalp dermatological issues. All but one participant described psychological injuries they have experienced when wearing their hair natural. These injuries ranged from teasing, to feeling violated, to racism, to having their hair be made into amusement for others.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

This study aimed to advance a better understanding of the natural-hair journey experienced by Black college women and the impact it has on identity. The overarching question for this study is: What are the self-identity motives, challenges, and rewards for Black college women who choose to stop the use of chemicals that alter the natural state of their hair? In the following paragraphs, I will present a discussion on the major findings of this study. These findings reflect 4 themes, each of which addresses an aspect of identity. These themes include: personal reasons and motivations, categories of identity, injury, and family upbringing. I will discuss each of these themes, and attempt to fill a gap in the literature on Black women's hair experiences, much of which does not explore both societal influence and identity development. In discussing both social context and individual experience, I hope to shed light on political and personal aspects of the natural hair journey, an understanding of which will help social work clinicians provide culturally competent and empathic mental health care. These themes will be discussed in greater detail and in relation to prior research and other scholarly works. Clinical implications for social work professionals working with Black natural-haired college women will also be discussed. The weaknesses of this study will be explored, as well as recommendations for continued research on this topic.

Personal Reasons and Motivations

Women in this study had various reasons and motivations for starting the natural hair journey. For some women in this study, education led them to unpack the politics of Black hair. Other women went natural to free themselves from years of physical trauma from chemical relaxers: hair breakage, scalp burning, scabs, hair loss, and lifelong dermatological issues. Many women went natural because they could no longer afford to maintain relaxed hair. Other women wanted to find a way to connect to Black communities. Some women went natural so that their hair could keep up with their athletic lifestyles. Some wanted to fulfill their curiosity about their hair, after years of forgetting what it looked and felt like. One woman did it simply because she liked the way it looked, and the styling versatility it offered her.

Regardless of the reason or combination of reasons that led women to go natural, every woman's natural journey, while unique, was also similar in the way that it "declare[d] a change and the [start] of a new life chapter" (Winterman, 2007, p. 3). For women in this study the most common method of transitioning to natural hair was by doing a big chop. This left women with about two inches of hair. Another way that some of the women transitioned was by stopping the use of chemical relaxers, growing out the relaxer, and cutting the relaxed ends. Regardless of the method chosen, the transition in itself is a courageous step in which "[the] changing [of] hair [leads to] changing identity, because... hair and...appearance are central to how [women see themselves] and how [they are seen by others]" (Weitz, 2004. p. 64).

Most of the women in this study wanted the natural journey to change their lives in some way. These personal motivations are factors that are often overlooked in the literature about natural hair. Some of the women could voice exactly what it was they were looking to change in their lives, before starting the journey. For example, one woman wanted to use her hair as a way

to embrace a more “holistic” identity for herself and for her children. Another woman planned to use her natural hair as a transitional object, and a way to hold onto her recently deceased mother who had worn her hair natural. And one woman used her natural journey as a way to let go of her mother’s passing. But none of the women knew how the identity change would be experienced. In terms of the big chop, some women took years of mustering up courage and planning before they transitioned. Others women did it on an impulsive whim, and before they could change their mind.

The transition from relaxed to natural hair changed the way woman saw themselves. On a personal level, it was experienced as the letting go of an identity, which often led to feelings of sadness and loss. One woman described missing the way she used to look with long straight hair, and having a hard time recognizing herself and who she was, while another woman felt immediately content. She reported, “I was ready to do it...I saw myself as an African woman, a Black woman, and as who I am.” For her, the transformation seemed to be more about gaining a new identity rather than losing an old one. It is important to recognize that women in this study experienced different feelings at different times in their process. Some women who felt pride after their big chop would later experience feelings of loss; some who initially felt great loss would at some point experience a sense of satisfaction and liberation. This mix of complicated emotions was experienced publicly by Zina Saro-Wiwa (2012), who captured her big chop through a video installation on the New York Times online opinion pages. Watching this video, we sense her sadness as she has her last moments with her hair before shaving her head and beginning the transformative process. She says, “I am going to miss this. I can suddenly think of all these things I want to do [with my hair].” After the hairstylist shaves her hair she says, “This isn’t attractive....I feel ugly.” Flash forward to seven months later, and she is glowing with

pride, announcing her obsession with curls, and acknowledging, “Transitioning my hair has changed my entire relationship to my body.”

Many women had a hard time making their new natural hair identity visible. For women in this study, it seemed as though the fear was rooted in the question, how will people see me? Will they still find me attractive? Perhaps it was these questions that kept many women hiding under wigs and scarves for months after their natural hair transformative process. One woman described wearing a head scarf for a long time, until her cousin encouraged her to reveal her natural hair. For her, revealing her natural hair to others and in public was a lengthy and vulnerable process.

Categories of Identity

Racial identity

All of the women in this study had very kinky hair, a physical attribute that has highlighted their Black visibility. Byrd and Tharps (2001), Banks (2000) Peterson (1982), and Mercer (1990), all discuss the history of Black hair. The rejection of kinky hair is rooted in slavery and handed down from one generation to the next. Black women with looser curl patterns and lighter skin tones received “better” treatment and endured less physical labor. Even today, as evidenced by some of the women in this study, Black woman with kinky hair express a deep envy towards Black women with looser curls. Perhaps this envy is rooted in the fact that hair that is less kinky is easier to manage, is considered more attractive and desirable, and does not carry the same stigma that kinky hair does. Thus, this is called “good hair” and it implies that kinkier textures are considered “worse hair” or “bad hair.”

Post slavery, women used hair relaxers not only to manipulate their hair textures, but to manipulate oppressive structures that prevented them from achieving class mobility, success, and

acceptance (Thompson, 2009). Today, in the year 2012, women are relaxing their hair for the same reasons. Those who choose to go natural are often compared to the Black activists of the 70's, who used their hair as a form of resistance and as a symbol of political power (Koppleman, 1996). In this study, and as previously mentioned, many women's motivations for going natural did not include political reasons. Regardless of their intentions, however, it seems as though wearing Black hair in its very kinky-natural state is inevitably interpreted as a sign of anger and resistance. One reason for this may be that it satisfies the angry-Black-woman stereotype. This stereotype is often used as a way to minimize Black women's feelings and experiences. It is much easier to say, "Oh those Black women...they are always mad at something" than to have empathy, compassion, and understanding for their daily struggles. Since the mid-sixties, there has been a widespread perception that the way Black people wear their hair is not a style, but a statement (www.nytimes.com) related to their political outlook (Byrd & Tharps, 2001).

One woman in this study described her reason for going natural as having nothing to do with politics. When she left college and returned to her home community, however, she was often teased and asked if she was trying to be a "black panther." Perhaps, then, resistance to white-imposed appearance norms is one answer to the question, what are Black natural haired women bringing out of the closet when they out themselves?

Of course there are many Black women who make the conscious decision to go natural for political reasons. Internet blogs have information, videos, and controversy on what has been called the natural-hair movement. Many women on these sites articulate the issues of what the natural journey has become. It is on these social-media sites that we learn that the natural journey does not always unite Black women. In fact, and unfortunately, it has caused many ruptures.

One common assumption among supporters of natural hair is that those who choose not to be natural are engaging in an act of self-hate and have accepted their Black inferiority. But it is important to not assume that all women who choose to straighten their hair are self-hating. One participant worded it best, “I often have to check myself and make sure that I don’t go into that, I’m natural and that makes me more Black. There is no need to play a game like I’m more righteous than thee. That is counterproductive; you don’t know why someone has their hair permed.” One anonymous blogger (2011) argues that Black naturals have assumed an elitist stance: “[There is an] elitist feeling that is growing with the Natural Hair Movement. It is just another way for us to divide. It smacks of all the superficial marks of superiority we have lived by for so long. Light skin, dark skin, good hair, bad hair and now natural or relaxed hair. Enough already we need to stop finding ways to exclude each other and work to be a stronger more prosperous Black community no matter how we look.” (www.naturalhaircommunity.com)

One Black woman in this study felt she was always at odds with her friends who relaxed their hair. She acknowledged how frustrated she felt that they could not accept her hair and always tried to convince her to return to chemical relaxers. In fact, the inclusion and exclusion criteria for this study is a prime example of the controversy that leads to many political debates about hair. To be in this study women had to self identify as Black, or mixed race with Black, and have extremely kinky hair in the type 4 range. Women with kinky hair were chosen because it is the most stigmatized hair type and yields a different kind of experience than woman with looser curls. Black or mixed race identified women with all different skin shades could participate in this study. The purpose was not to devalue the natural hair stories of women with looser curl patterns or minimize their personal and political challenges. However, it is important to recognize the voices of Black natural haired women who might have felt excluded from this

particular study and other aspects of the natural hair journey as well. There are many political hair bloggers who voice concerns about the movement. They feel it is problematic to exclude women from the natural movement, who have made the natural-hair transformation based on their skin shades (colorism) or curl texture (curlism). They argue that this is a form of racism that reinforces an inferiority complex that white people have put us in, and divides the Black community. Thus the question is: how can we value each woman's natural hair experience without minimizing it?

Gender and cultural identity

Natural hair not only defies what is considered beautiful in terms of texture, but also what is considered beautiful in terms of hair length. For women in general, short hair challenges feminine beauty standards. As Winterman (2007) noted, “a shaved head defies social norms and is linked to illness, punishment, rebellion, and instability” (p. 3). This helps explain why one woman was called, “crazy” by her aunt after she did her big chop. Another participant questioned how her boyfriend could be supportive of her going natural, but not supportive of her doing the big chop. Instead, he wanted her to grow her hair out of the relaxer, which would allow her to keep her length. Although, this example is personal, it is also involves identity politics, and reveals the complexity of Black women's multiple identities in which one identity can be accepted, while others are not. Looking back on the relationship, she realized that it was a “pivotal moment in [her] natural hair journey.”

By going natural, many women in this study challenged gender norms existing within the religions, groups, and cultures to which they belonged. Weitz (2004) notes that hair means various different things for women in different cultural contexts: One woman's natural hair made her stand out among those in her church community where women, “wore long straight hair,

faces full of makeup, and high heels.” She described this as the “church culture in the South.” For another woman, going natural meant challenging Muslim gender norms, in which the thickness of kinky hair prevents the hijab from falling in the feminine way that it must fall if it is to attract men. These women’s experiences convey gender expectations which are experienced differently within each culture.

Another gender-related issue centers on appearance and health. Women on online blogs are arguing that natural hair allows women to live more active lifestyles. Women who are natural no longer have to worry about sweating the style out. Thus, the natural hair choice is sweat resilient. Many online bloggers are saying wearing hair in its natural texture decreases obesity for Black women.

Class identity

In a political conversation about hair, Black political commenter and Princeton professor Melissa Harris (2011) observed that much of the natural-hair movement has to do with women saving money. Nikki Walton (2011) of CurlyNikki.com pointed out the way Black women wear their hair “determines how and where they spend their money” (<http://video.msnbc.msn.com>). Many Black women are selling homemade products for natural hair on the Web. Thus, the natural hair journey has helped some women move toward economic self reliance. Women in Black hair forums argue that the natural journey is a cost-effective choice for Black women.

The recruitment process for this study illustrates a relation between hair and class. Specifically, recruitment was less successful at community colleges in Western Massachusetts than at private colleges in the same region. Although the community college communities included many Black women, all of these women seemed to have relaxed hair. It is interesting that although the urban schools were more racially diverse, natural-haired women were fewer,

nonexistent, or more difficult to locate. A Greenfield Community College student participant expressed feeling alone in having natural hair at her school. So why is it that the private and predominately white institutions had more Black women who had gone natural, as well as more Black women who felt driven by the politics of the movement?

One participant suggested that, “in Springfield and Holyoke there is more rejection of natural hair because of educational background.” By this she meant that many low-income Black women in these cities have parents with less educational experience. This participant also suggested that other class privileges, such as education and traveling, lead people to question societal norms. She felt that these privileges are what led her to be natural, and she felt that not having these privileges might explain the reason why Black women in her family, who are working class, continue to chemically relax their hair. Another participant, who identified herself as “poor,” felt that her family’s rejection of natural hair involved attitudes indicative of their class. When she came home from school, her family interpreted her afro as a way of saying “you think you are better than us.” She also said that wearing relaxed hair and weaves was her family’s way of hiding their poverty. She explained that women would get their hair done even if it meant not paying their utility bills. One woman from Rwanda went natural around the time she started school in Western Mass. She emailed her sister a picture of herself after she made the transformation. Her sister wrote back saying, “What happened? You must very poor and struggling in America!”

These findings reflect an array of themes, each of which addresses an aspect of identity. These themes include: politics, race, class, gender and culture, physical injury and family upbringing. Some interpret Black natural hair as a symbol of power and education. Others, however, interpret it as a sign of unkemptness and poverty. One woman observed that more

middle class people are going natural because they do not feel the need to wear wealth on their heads. Thus, the reason why many lower-class Black women may be straightening their hair is because it is a way to make their poverty less visible. On the other hand, education can lead Black people to be proud of who they are, and to question and resist societal norms. Perhaps this is why so many women went natural in college. But some of the women contemplated whether they would be able to stay natural once they were out of college and assumed a professional identity. One woman discussed how much she loved her natural hair and the rewards of the natural journey, but also admitted that she would be willing to return to relaxing her hair if she felt she had to “advance in the world.” And because her natural journey spoke so much to other parts of her personal identity—such as a new sense of self love and self confidence—we must wonder if other parts of her identity would have to be compromised if she wished to advance in the world.

If we look at Black women leaders in the United States we do not see them embracing their natural hair. Most likely, they could never climb the social ladders they have if they wore their natural hair. In terms of social status mirroring for Black people, Melissa Harris Perry (2011) stated, “The physical body of the president matters, the hair of the president and the first lady matters (<http://video.msnbc.msn.com>).

Injury

The natural journey is one of resilience. This is evidenced by the multiple injuries that women face. Participants in this study experienced a range of physical injuries, specifically, the chemical relaxers which resulted in: hair breakage, scalp burning, scabs, hair loss, and lifelong dermatological issues. There were also institutional injuries which, for one woman, resulted in her not getting a job because her hair opposed the “beach hair” look that Abercrombie and Fitch

wanted their employees to have. Injuries were also found in the rejection that women experienced from their communities and cultural groups. But the most significant injuries seem to be rooted in body objectification and violation, as well as familial attitudes and rejection.

One participant articulated her feelings about having her hair touched. She spoke about the fascination that white people have with Black people's natural hair. She expressed how dehumanizing it was to have her hair touched by white people. She explained that most of the time they don't ask before they do it. She stated "I am not a damn poodle [and] I am not wearing a sign that says pet the Negro." This woman described an internal struggle in which she wanted to assert herself when people reached out to touch her hair, but she feared that saying something would injure her social standing because many of the people who touched her hair also played powerful roles in her life, and in her future. She feared the consequences of confronting a professor from whom she gets good grades and recommendations.

Renee Martin a race and cultural commenter who created the website, Womanist Musings, wrote an article titled, "Can I touch your hair? Black Women and the Petting Zoo" (2008) which deconstructs why white people feel it is okay to touch Black women's hair. Her observations speak to the deeper issues rooted in hair touching:

The idea that white people have the right to possess Black women and they will take any excuse they can to jump over the border, whether it is policing our behavior or policing our hair. I think it is about ownership of Black bodies more than it actually has to do with hair (<http://www.womanist-musings.com>).

Another woman recalled a childhood memory where she was the only Black girl at a pool party and all of the white girls, fascinated with the texture of her hair, began touching it and

instructing her to do things for their amusement. As she was cast in the roles they were giving her, she can still recall feeling humiliated and powerless.

Black girls and Black women experience hair injuries, which stem from objectification and attitudes towards Black women's hair. This contributes to the way we see Black women in America. Perhaps this hair touching phenomenon indicates that Black women are still looked at as property, as erotica, and as amusement for white people. There are many white people who may feel that this interpretation is dramatic. They might go so far as to defend themselves, saying "I just wanted to see what it felt like." But part of their privilege is to overlook the effects of their actions. It is important to recognize that hair touching forces Black women into uncomfortable and submissive roles. Black women don't speak up because they feel they will be ridiculed for being too sensitive, and don't want to be looked at as the "angry Black woman." At times it is because they don't want to risk their social standing or aspects of their future. This causes repressed emotions and psychological injuries. This phenomenon of white people touching Black bodies without permission is reminiscent of the objectification that Black slaves once endured from their white masters. It is unfortunate that many Black women grin and bear it so that their futures will not be compromised.

Family Upbringing

Many women in this study described injuries which stem from internalized racism and hair hate that exist within their Black families. Nearly all of the women in this study felt they received more criticism and questioning about their natural hair from their own Black family and from other Black people than anyone else. Some of the women in this study described encountering negative attitudes about their hair from their mothers, as well as their grandmothers. These participants' experiences confirmed Parmer's (2004) observation that hate

of kinky hair within the Black family is passed down from one generation to the next. Parmer also observed that this hair hate is internalized by the children in the family. There are some Black women today who are trying very hard to teach their daughters to internalize positive messages about their natural hair. Actress Tracey Thomas discussed going natural so that she could mirror a positive hair image to her daughter. She felt that teaching her daughter to love her hair would also teach her daughter to love herself (<http://leanforward.msnbc.msn.com>).

There were a few women who felt that their families supported their natural journey. One of these women grew up in a family of women with natural hair. She was the last one in her immediate family to go natural. She described her family's support as just another example of the support they showed her throughout her major life decisions. Her experience suggests that family culture can play a significant role not only in discouraging but also in encouraging and affirming the natural hair journey for Black women.

A woman from Rwanda acknowledged that her mother had natural hair and encouraged her to go natural so that she could resist assimilation and hold onto her African identity. This participant went natural, and continued to be natural after her mother's death. She described being ridiculed about her natural hair decision by her sisters. They frequently told her to get a relaxer. This was hard for her because she felt that by rejecting her hair they were also rejecting their mother, and the sense of pride she so strongly tried to instill in them, in regards to their hair.

One Somali woman was told that men, including Black men, would not want to marry her if she continued to wear her hair natural. She also reported that her family, "constantly tortured" her about her natural hair. For other women their families rejected their natural hair in more subtle ways. This was found in statements like, "remember when you used to straighten your hair."

Personal injuries derive from the political aspects of natural hair discussed earlier. For instance, the Somali participant who is Muslim was told by her family that her natural hair is too bushy and causes her hijab to fall in a way that is not feminine, and in a way that does not make her desirable. So she is told that men, including Black men, will not want to marry her. This injury centers on hair, and emerges from a political context which involves the intersectionality of culture, religion, gender, and race. It even touches on class, because marriage often allows woman to obtain a higher class status. These words, muttered to her by her family, are hurtful; they cause tears, and psychological scars. It is possible, however, that these words are not intended to hurt, and instead are the words of concerned people who are trying to protect their loved ones from other scars.

Many of the women in this study who felt a lack of support from their families were able to find online natural communities where they could access appropriate products and get advice about how to treat their hair, and what products to use. Online, they found places to voice their injuries and frustrations, and to find inspiration and guidance. Other women found natural hair communities within their neighborhoods or at their colleges. One woman expressed great gratitude towards the natural women at her college. She felt that her ability to stay natural was because of them. She recognized that having a natural community at school made her feel less bothered by the “torture” she received at home. Unfortunately, there was one woman in this study who has not been able to find a supportive natural hair community. She reported

I feel alone in doing this. I am the only person in my life that is supporting the idea of going natural....so sometimes when people say ‘you must get your hair straightened,’ I feel like they are kind of getting me. I feel like giving up.

This woman's loneliness implies that feeling a sense of belonging within a natural-haired community can be the difference between feeling inspired to stay natural, and feeling discouraged or wanting to "give up."

Implications for Social Work Practice

Clients who have made the natural hair transformation need culturally competent clinicians, who can work from a Black feminist intersectional theoretical framework to understand the multiple identities that contribute to the individual's natural hair journey. Hair is an extremely significant aspect of Black women's lives, and one that is often overlooked by white clinical social workers. The natural journey in particular is an identity-transformative experience usually rife with very personal meanings, and yet it is usually seen merely as a political movement. While it is important for clinicians to educate themselves on the politics and history behind the natural hair movement, it is equally or perhaps more important that clinicians do not make assumptions about the meaning of the natural hair journey in relation to the clients they serve. Instead, they must let each client explore the meanings and experiences of her own natural-hair process so she can define her own identity.

Due to the many societal and personal injuries that Black women confront in relation to their hair, it is important for clinicians to be aware of what they say to the clients about their hair and appearance. Certain comments can be triggering, and can lead to regressions in the client identity process as well as ruptures within the therapeutic alliance. It is also important for clinicians to listen for narrative themes that involve feelings of identity crisis, family tensions, body objectification, intimate relationship issues, and discrimination across race, class, and gender lines. Clinicians should be able to direct their clients to helpful resources that provide clients with the support and mirroring they need. Clinicians should always work from a strength-

based perspective, recognizing that the natural journey can be a journey of both resilience and resistance.

Limitations

Bias is introduced by the small sample size of my study, and the fact that all the participants were from the same geographical area. Therefore, while this study is highly suggestive about the need for better clinical awareness, it will not be generalizable to the larger population. There were only two participants who attended a school in an urban setting, and only three students who attended community colleges. Thus, there is also an imbalance in demographics related to socioeconomic class and type of institution. This can be seen by the fact that most of the participants attended private school. The fact that all of the participants were college students biases the study and reinforces an attitude of elitism which has been problematic in the Black community.

This study only interviewed women who had made the natural transformation. Thus, it is limited in that it excluded Black woman who are not natural. It also excluded Black women with hair textures that were not extremely kinky and in the type four range. The fact that women had to be natural for one year excluded women who were in varying stages of their natural journey.

Finally, there were only a few women who did not identify as heterosexual. Thus, this study is limited in its exploration of hair in relation to non-conforming gender identities (LGBTQ populations).

Recommendations

Researchers should broaden their exploration on the relationship between societal influences and identity development for Black natural-haired women. This can be done by interviewing a larger sample size, and by interviewing women who reside in different

geographical locations. Interviews should be done with women who belong to varying socioeconomic classes. The sample should extend to women who are in different stages of their natural journey and women who do not wear their hair natural. Further study should not be limited to students, but should reach across class lines to women who have been denied access to, or who have chosen not to access, educational opportunities.

Conclusion

In a CNN special on Black hair, Black actress Tamara Winfrey Harris remarked, “I went natural to be more real to myself and be more real to the world” (-www.cnn.com). This comment confirms the main finding of this study, which is that the natural hair journey has deep roots and realities in the lived experience of Black women in the United States. In this way, the natural hair journey bears a resemblance to other coming-out journeys, in which people feel a mix of conflicting feelings that range from fear to elation, from excitement to shyness, from sadness to relief, from shame to pride and happiness. Of course, coming out as a Black women with natural hair is different than other coming out identity stories. But all self-identity journeys carry risks, and it is these risks that make the natural hair decision difficult. This study reveals the difficulty of this journey, and some of the specifics of what exactly is being brought out of the closet. Examining both the personal and the social factors at work in the natural hair journey reveals a complex array of choices, relationships, and influences. By contrast, literature that focuses only on the social context minimizes the individual woman’s personal motivations and simultaneously disempowers her as a unique individual, while literature that focuses only on identity minimizes social context and the constraints of oppression.

The women who participated in this study described self-identity strengths that emerged from their natural hair journey. One woman acknowledged that others now see her as “strong”

and “confident,” whereas before her natural hair transformation she described feeling “shy” and “always hunched in the corner.” These self-identity strengths, such as confidence, self-love, self-acceptance, and self-reliance, unfolded slowly. As women transitioned their hair, they also transitioned into new ways of thinking, living, and caring for their Black bodies. For many women, these self-identity strengths came from the realization that their bodies do not need hiding or altering, and the notion that they have the power to redefine beauty standards for themselves. They came from the hard work and time they had to put into taking care of their hair, and the realization that their hair was in every way their own, and no longer a result of a chemical reaction. Instead it was the result of hard work, new knowledge, and the strength of their own hands. This resulted in a self-power which was illustrated in different ways for different participants. For one woman it allowed her the ability to weed out harmful relationships and embrace supportive ones. For another woman, her hair offered her a sense of stability and a reminder of who she was during a challenging transition to college. Another participant felt that her natural journey led her to have a healthier lifestyle in which she became a vegan for many years. Many women learned how to assert themselves when they felt their identity threatened or ridiculed.

Despite arriving at this place of self power and strength, nearly all the woman in this study have confronted and continue to confront issues of identity politics and personal injuries. To provide competent and empathetic mental health care, clinicians should be aware of the complex web of factors that make up the experience of the natural hair journey.

References

- “Guest Blogger” (Anonymous) (2011). I hate the natural hair movement. *Natural Hair Community*. Retrieved from <http://www.naturalhaircommunity.com/i-hate-the-natural-hair-movement>.
- Badillo, C. (2001). Only my hairdresser knows for sure: Stories of race, hair and gender. *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 34(6), 35-37. Retrieved from EBSCOhost.
- Banks, I. (2000). *Hair matters: Beauty, power, and Black women's consciousness*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Bell, M. K. (2008). Getting hair “fixed”: Black power, transvaluation, and hair politics (Master’s thesis, Auburn University). Retrieved from <http://etd.auburn.edu/etd/handle/10415/1082>
- Bellinger, W. (2007). Why African American women try to obtain “good hair”. *Sociological Viewpoints*, 23, 63-72. Retrieved from EBSCOhost.
- Byrd, A. D. & Tharps, L. L. (2001). *Hair story: Untangling the roots of Black hair in America*. New York: St. Martin’s Press.
- Celeste_. (2010, January 21). Native American spirituality, understanding how we feel about our hair [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://www.evolver.net/evolver-blogs/14966?page=1>
- France, L. R. (2011). ‘Can I touch it?’ The fascination with natural, African-American hair. *CNN Living*. Retrieved from <http://www.cnn.com/2011/LIVING/07/25/touching.natural.black.hair/index.html?iphoneemail>

- Gaines, P. (n.d.). Nappturality beginnings. Retrieved from http://www.nappturality.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=81&Itemid=2
- Hughes, D. & Dodge, M. A. (1997). African American women in the workplace: Relationships between job conditions, racial bias at work, and perceived job quality. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 25(5), 581-599. Retrieved from EBSCOhost.
- Kopenkoskey, P. R. (2011). Theology of hair: how many world religions see it as sacred part of identity. *Michigan Live*. Retrieved from http://www.mlive.com/living/grand-rapids/index.ssf/2011/11/theology_of_hair_how_many_worl.html
- Koppelman, C. (1996). The politics of hair. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 17(2), 87-137. Retrieved from EBSCOhost.
- Martin, R. (2008). Can I touch your hair? Black women and the petting zoo [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://www.womanist-musings.com/2008/09/can-i-touch-your-hair-black-women-and.html>
- Mercer, K. (1990). Black hair-style politics. In R. Ferguson, M. Gever (Eds.), *Out there: Marginalization and contemporary cultures* (pp. 247-264). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Miller, J. & Garran, A. M. (2008). *Racism in the United States: Implications for the helping professions*. Belmont, CA: Thomson Brooks/Cole.
- Parmer, T., Arnold, M., Natt, T., & Janson, C. (2004). Physical attractiveness as a process of internalized oppression and multigenerational transmission in African American Families. *The Family Journal*, 12(3), 230-242. doi: 10.1177/1066480704264931

- Patterson, O. (1982). *Slavery and social death: A comparative study*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Perry, M. H. (2012). How black hair matters. *MSNBC Video*. Retrieved from <http://video.msnbc.msn.com/melissa-harris-perry/47755433#47755433>.
- Rooks, N. (1996). *Hair raising: Beauty, culture, and African American women*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Saro-Wiwa, Z. (2012). Black women's transitions to natural hair. *The New York Times Online*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/01/opinion/black-women-and-natural-hair.html?_r=4&smid=fb-share&fb_source=message%29
- Singleton, J. (2009). Chemical relaxers: The facts might not be so relaxing. *The Defenders Online*. Retrieved from <http://www.thedefendersonline.com/2009/12/18/chemical-relaxers-the-facts-might-not-be-so-relaxing/>
- Tatum, B. D. (1997). The early years. In "Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?" *And other conversations about race* (pp. 31-47). New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Thompson, C. (2009). Black women, beauty, and hair as a matter of being. *Women's Studies*, 38(8), 831-856. doi: 10.1080/00497870903238463
- Weathers, N. R. (1991). Braided sculptures and smokin' combs: African-American women's hair-culture. *Sage*, 8(1) 58-61. Retrieved from Smith Network Database.
- Weitz, R. (2004). *Rapunzel's daughters: What women's hair tells us about women's lives*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Wigington, P. (n.d.). Hair length and religion. Retrieved from

<http://paganwiccan.about.com/od/faq/f/Hair-Length-and-Religion.htm>

Wilder, J. and Cain, C. (2010). Teaching and learning color consciousness in Black families:

Exploring family processes and women's experiences with colorism. *Journal of Family Issues*, 32(5), 577-604. Retrieved from Smith Network Database.

Winterman, D. (2007, February 20). Mark of a woman. *BBC News Magazine*. Retrieved from

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/6375683.stm.

Yeh, C. J., & Hwang, M. Y. (2000). Interdependence in ethnic identity and self: Implications for theory and practice. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 78(4), 420-429. Retrieved from EBSCOhost.

Appendix A

Consent Form

Dear Participant,

I am a Black woman obtaining my masters degree in clinical Social Work at Smith College School for Social Work. The research in this study will be used for my master's thesis. My thesis will explore the natural hair transformation experienced by Black college women and the impact it has on identity development.

I am interested in learning the reasons Black college women choose to stop the use of chemicals that alter the natural texture of their hair and the challenges and rewards they experience. The overarching question for this study is, what is the self-identity motive, challenges, and rewards for Black college women who choose to stop the use of chemicals that alter the natural texture of their hair? This study is needed so that social workers can enhance their competence by understanding the role the natural journey has in the lives of Black women.

You are being asked to participate in a face to face interview, in which you discuss your natural hair experience. The interview will be approximately 50 minutes to one hour in the length. There are certain criteria you must meet in order to be in this study. You must be an undergraduate, graduate, or doctoral student at one of the following Western Massachusetts schools: Springfield Community College, Smith College, Hampshire College, Holyoke Community College, University of Massachusetts Amherst, or Greenfield Community College. In order to be a participant in this study you must self-identify as a woman, you must self-

identify as Black or mixed race Black, you must have previously chemically straightened your natural hair texture through use of a relaxer for at least one year, your hair must be at least ½ inch in length, you must currently have natural hair and have been natural for at least one year at the date of the interview (that is, you have completely stopped the use of hair relaxers that alter the natural texture of your hair), you must have afro kinky or tightly coiled hair that falls in the type 4 range (please refer to attached sheet defining type 4 hair), you must be at least 18 years of age, and you must be able to speak fluent English. Please contact me by email to let me know if you would like to participate in this study or if you have any questions about whether you are eligible to participate. If you do fit the criteria, and would like to be interviewed we will schedule an interview at a mutually agreed upon place that provides you with adequate privacy. Prior to starting the interview we will review the risks and benefits of the study, the purpose, and this letter. You will be asked to sign a copy of this informed consent letter and I will provide you with your own copy. We will then start the interview where I will ask you seven questions. You will be free to answer the questions in any way that makes sense to you. That is, there is no wrong way to answer the questions! This interview will be recorded with a tape recorder. I will also be taking some written notes. After the interview, I will transcribe and analyze your responses

I will take extra precautions to ensure your identifying information remains confidential. The audio tapes will be listened to and transcribed by myself or by a transcriber who signs a confidentiality statement. My research advisor will be the only other person who will have access to my data, only after all identifying information has been removed. In publications or presentations I will present all data as a whole, and when brief illustrative quotes or vignettes are used, your information will be carefully disguised. I will keep all of your paperwork, audiotapes,

and other information in a locked file cabinet at a secure place for a time period of three years (as required by Federal regulations). In addition, all electronically stored data containing your material will be password protected. After three years, I will either continue to keep the information in a secure place or destroy it if my use of the research is complete.

You have right to refuse any question that you don't want to answer. Should you have any concerns about your rights in this study please don't hesitate to email me at mcraanst@smith.edu. You can also contact the Chair of Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at 413.585.7974. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw prior to the start of the interview, during the interview, and after the interview as long as it is before **April 1st, 2012**. You can notify me via email about your decision to withdraw. Once I have received this request form you, I will email you to confirm I received your request. I will immediately destroy all material that identifies you in my study.

Best Regards,

Melissa Cranston-Bates

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Signature of Participant _____ Date: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____ Date: _____

Thank you for your participation!

Melissa Cranston-Bates

mcranst@smith.edu

Appendix B

Hair Type

The following numbers refer to the amount of curl or wave in hair. Type 1 hair is always straight. It has no curl pattern at all. The Type 2 hair indicates a slight or faint wave to the hair. The Type 3 hair begins the plunge into curly hair and the Type 4 indicates extremely kinky hair or tightly coiled hair. People in this study must have hair in the type 4 range. Below are some pictures of type 4 hair. As you can see hair type 4 can range in curl pattern/ curl definition.



Appendix C

Interview Questions

Natural Hair Transformation Study

Demographic Questions

What is your sex?

What is your gender?

What is your socioeconomic class?

What is your ethnicity?

What college do you attend?

What is your year and program of study?

Interview Questions

1. What has led you to stop using chemicals that alter your natural hair texture?
2. Who or what inspired you to start the natural hair transformation?
3. How does returning to your natural hair affect you?
4. Do you think your natural hair transformation has impacted your self-identity? If you feel it has, how so? If you feel it has not, explain why not.
5. Please tell me more about what the process was like for you? (If prompts are needed: How long did it take you? What were your frustrations? What were your feelings? What have you learned? Where are you in your process at this time?)
6. How have those in your family, social circles, school, place of employment etc. reacted to your decision to have natural hair? (If prompt is needed: Please talk about what they said to you about your decision and about your appearance)

7. Do you think you will continue to have natural hair for the rest of your life? If yes, please explain why? If you feel you will go back to chemically relaxing your hair please explain why.

Appendix D

Natural Hair Flier

Are you interested in sharing the challenges and rewards of your natural hair journey?

Become a Participant in a Study for Black Women Who Have Made the Natural Hair Transformation



I am conducting A Smith College School for Social Work research study and looking for volunteers who:

- Are undergraduate, graduate, or doctoral students who attend school in Western Massachusetts
- Who are ages 18 and up
- Self identify as both woman and as Black or mixed race including Black
- Has (previously) chemically straightened her natural hair through use of a relaxer for at least one year prior to making the decision to have natural
- Is currently natural and has had natural hair for at least one year (that is, she has completely stopped the use of hair relaxers at least two years prior to interview date).
- Has afro kinky type 4 hair (I can explain this more if you don't understand)
- Has hair that is no shorter than $\frac{1}{2}$ inch in length

*If you are interested please contact me: mcranst@smith.edu

Appendix E

Human Subjects Review Approval Letter



School for Social Work
Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

February 13, 2012

Melissa Cranston-Bates

Dear Melissa,

Your project is approved. You have done a nice job with responses and changes. Thank you.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

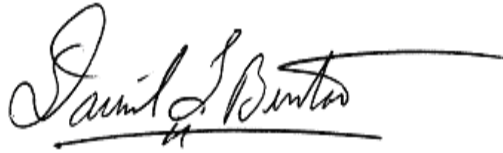
Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "David L. Burton". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

David L. Burton, M.S.W., Ph.D.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee