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ANT 103

Professor Scarborough

Spring 2014

Ethnography of Parkland Student Life: Final Paper

The project I will describe here is an ethnography of body image and hair-style decisions for Parkland College students. Our group looked at how students in Parkland College take care of their hair and decide how to style it, and asked how their hair defines who they are or their identity. We observed the diversity in hair styling of Parkland students and found an interesting correlation with the student's college major. Looking at how students present themselves relates to the ongoing discussions on diversity at Parkland's campus. For our research method, we observed diversity between hair styling and students majors and asked 4 women and 3 men who attend Parkland College to participate in our interviews by audio recording.

Our course book, *Applying Culture Anthropology* by Aaron Podolsky, defines a ritual as a set of acts, usually involving religion or magic, following a sequence established by tradition (2013: G8). Although most times hair styling does not involve religion, some religions require their members to cover their hair because hair is such an important part of a person's appearance. Our project did not touch on religion but I think that it shows how people are involved in a ritual that sets them apart from others when they take care of their hair every day and rituals are an important part of building an identity.

For our project we did some participant observation in addition to interviews. As I attend classes that are required for all Parkland Students no matter their major, I have observed the

different hair styles of the students in the class. I have noticed that those women who are business and education majors have hair that is straight and neat, or if it's in a ponytail it's a neat and tight ponytail. For men who are business and education majors hair is short and neat. Both women and men of these majors have natural hair colors instead of bright colors that stand out. I observed that women and men who are majoring in nursing, art and music are more bold and carefree with their hair. For example, the women wouldn't have natural color hair or they would have highlights of pink, green, purple or blue in their hair. These students have shaved sides of their hair off and wear messy buns, instead of tight and neat buns. The men who have those majors would have spiky hair, mohawks, and designs in their hair.

When I interviewed the Parkland students who participated in our study I asked them numerous questions about hair styling and body image. I first asked if they style their hair every day, do their daily activities influence their hair styles, and do they value the idea of healthy hair. I also asked other questions that we received as feedback from our preliminary project presentation at the Ethnography Student Conference at the University of Illinois. These additional questions included how much time students spend doing their hair, what would they consider a bad hair day, and would a bad hair day affect their mood at school. If their hair was cut and/or dyed I asked what influenced them to cut and/or dye their hair and did they feel a change in their self-confidence. Lastly, I asked our interviewees if their hair defines who they are and how. I also asked the men we interviewed extra questions regarding their facial hair such as, how much time do they spend grooming their facial hair and how do they feel their facial hair defines them.

I interviewed a student who is a Psychology Major, has her bangs cut and she likes her hair straightened when she's not at work, and values the idea of healthy hair, she believes healthy

hair helps your self-esteem. This student loves to change her hair and she feels better about herself when she changes up her hairstyle. I also interviewed a Biology Chemistry Major and the Student Body President of Parkland College. Due to time constraints and the value of healthy hair she does not style her hair every day. She believes in order to grow her hair out she shouldn't style her hair every day to prevent from damaging it. Since this student is the Student Body President of Parkland, she prefers her hair straight when attending meetings. She thinks hair helps your self-esteem, for example, if someone complements your hair it will brighten your day. For a man's point of view, I interviewed a student majoring in Occupational Therapy Assistance. He has low cut hair and does not style his hair every day and due to it being short he does not really value the idea of his hair being healthy. I found out that this student does value his facial hair and how he feels about his facial hair would affect his mood.

As our group examined what influences Parkland student's hairstyles and how this defines who they are, we discussed our findings through body ideals, a topic we covered in cultural anthropology. An article titled "Measuring up to Barbie: Ideals of the Feminine Body in Popular Culture," by Jacqueline Urla and Alan C. Swedlund speaks about body ideals in our society. It explains how women think highly of their body image and are willing to do whatever it takes to ensure that their beauty shows on the outside. We thought this article was a good example to support our argument because hair is a body feature that can improve your outside image. For instance one of our interviewees stated "if someone complements your hair it will brighten your day," and this ensures your beauty is noticed on the outside. In the article "Measuring up to Barbie," the authors say that women will take care of their appearance "to make themselves look less dull" (2013:122). Our group project responses show that people in

our society use the option to dye their hair, cut, and style it anyway they want to make their image look less dull and this body image also says something about the group they belong to.

I personally value the idea of healthy hair by moisturizing and conditioning my hair frequently. I wear my hair curly or in an afro to save time getting ready for class in the mornings and I believe it makes my appearance beautiful contributing to a positive body image as it does to other Parkland students. After the interviews and observations for this group project we learned how students who attend Parkland College manage and style their hair and from our small sample saw that there is a correlation with occupation or student major. More importantly we were able to see that what these students are communicating with their hairstyles says something not only about their identity in a group but about how important they think the body image they display every day is. Based on what we found with our research methods, some future questions I would have to continue this study would be to research more about the diversity in hair textures and also ask if students found how some hair styles are a distraction in class lectures.

Works Cited

Jacqueline Urla and Alan C. Swedlund. "Measuring up to Barbie: Ideals of the Feminine Body in Popular Culture." In *Applying Cultural Anthropology: An Introductory Reader*. Aaron Podelefsky, Peter Brown and Scott Lacy, eds. New York: McGraw Hill, 2013. Print

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