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Hair Harassment in Urban Schools and How It Shapes the Physical Activity of Black Adolescent Girls

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Abstract

Hair harassment can be defined as the direct or indirect unwanted, unwelcomed, and offensive behavior made either explicitly or implicitly typically towards women or girls of African descent, based on the texture, look, or subjective assumptions of their hair. The purpose of this investigation is to explore the hair experiences of adolescent girls of African descent in physical education class, and how these experiences shape their decision to participate in physical education class. Thirty-seven adolescent girls of African descent attending school in an urban, low-income community participated in focus groups and follow-up interviews relating to hair experiences. Strong themes of hair harassment emerged occurring socially via peers, physical touching of hair, and verbal comments regarding their hair during physical education class, and society-imposed harassment stemming from pressures to constantly have straight or neatly styled, non-sweaty hair. During the stage of adolescence, girls are exploring their identity and making decisions about who they will be, how they should look, and behave. Findings from this study suggests harassment and bullying policies in schools should extend to include hair harassment for its propensity to influence the self-image of girls and their decisions to participate in physical education class.

Keywords Hair · Harassment · African–American · Girls · Physical activity

Introduction

African–American¹ women and girls have the highest rate of physical inactivity and sedentary lifestyles among U.S. women regardless of the influence of outside factors such as socioeconomics (Agemang and Powell-Wiley 2013; Levi et al. 2013). Since

¹ The terms African–American, Black, and African descent will be used interchangeably throughout this paper.

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high quality affordable physical activity programs are out of reach for many low-income urban families, schools are often the only place students in urban communities can reliably come into contact with safe, high quality physical activity, physical education and instruction (Duncan et al. 2015). Data from several studies have identified hair management as a barrier to physical activity among Black women (Browne 2006; Huebschmann et al. 2016; Versey 2014) however, this research has not been sufficiently extended to include adolescent girls of African descent, nor their subjective experiences of hair harassment (Bowen and O'Brien-Richardson 2017).

Although hair was considered a cultural marker and used to indicate age, marital status, wealth, rank, and tribal affiliation in early African civilizations (White and White 1995) in America, hair has historically been utilized as a tool of systemic violence and harassment against Black people, in particular Black women, who have been socially penalized and stigmatized for their hair (Robinson 2011). When Africans were brought to the United States during the slave trade, their heads were shaved by slave traders erasing their identity and connection to Africa (Byrd and Tharps 2014, p. 10). During slavery, hairstyles for field slaves differed from those of house slaves (Qureshi 2004). Hairstyles of house slaves were required to resemble that of the White² women in the house and was characterized as straight and smooth, while the hair of field slaves remained uncombed, was considered an after-thought, and needed to be practical in order to withstand hours in the hot sun picking cotton or other forms of hard, excessive labor. Post slavery, movies like the 1915 silent epic drama, "*Birth of a Nation*," originally entitled "*The Clansman*", portrayed emancipated slaves as lazy and wayward, with disorderly, unkempt hairstyles and uncontrollable behavior (Griffith 1915). Similarly, the 1934 popular television show "*The Little Rascals*" (Maltin 1980) featured one of the few Black children on television at the time, Buckwheat, the humorous child depicted as a runaway slave with a head full of unruly hair which was constantly in knots, uncombed, and full of white, loose ribbons. America took note of this characterization of Blacks and Black hair which continued to permeate American society and culture as White actors dressed in Black theatrical make up, known as "blackface," and wore wigs with knotty, dirty hair as they portrayed Blacks as "coons", freed slaves, and "pickanninies" with bulging eyes and unkempt hair (Griffith 1915). Such images accompanied negative terminology which was used to describe hair that was not neat, or attractive, and indicative of slave culture. As a result, words such as kinky, rough, hard, bad, ugly and nappy became embedded in the history and vernacular of America.

The stigmatization and harassment of Black hair continued throughout the decades to present day. In the 1960's, during the civil rights movement and the Black power movement, a time of racial and social inequality and widespread discrimination against Black people, Afros became symbols of renewed pride in African culture. Groups such as the Black Panthers further solidified the symbol of the Afro as many of their male and female members proudly donned Afros to show solidarity. For White America, the Afro became synonymous with Black power politics,

² The terms White and Caucasian will be used interchangeably throughout this paper.

militancy, and terrorism. Later, during the 1980's and 90's, Black women were stigmatized and penalized for wearing braids or non-straight hairstyles in the workplace, as they were seen as unprofessional and unkempt, words used over the years to vilify Black hairstyles. Straight hair and those of European culture, were held up as the standard of beauty in American society, while curly, kinky, or natural (without chemical straighteners) Black hairstyles were frowned upon and considered unattractive and unacceptable (Robinson 2011; Rudman and McLean 2015). Penalties for Black hairstyles in the workplace were captured in the 2016 “Good Hair” Survey (Johnson et al. 2017). Researchers set out to explore whether Americans generally showed implicit or explicit bias toward natural hair worn by Black women, and whether Black women shared this bias. The study included 4163 respondents: a national sample of 3475 Black and White men and women, and a sample of 688 “naturalista”, women with natural chemical-free treated hair, from an online natural hair community. Researchers found on average White women showed explicit bias toward Black women's textured hair rating it less beautiful, less sexy/attractive, and less professional than smooth hair, and that one in five Black women felt social pressure to straighten their hair for work, twice as many as White women.

Black women and girls have also experienced hair harassment through cultural appropriation (Thompson 2009). When Afrocentric hairstyles such as the Afro or braids are penalized when worn by African–American women and girls (Lazar 2017), yet are socially accepted when the name and origin of the hairstyle is removed or replaced, the wound of stigmatization of Black hair deepens. The communicated message to Black women and girls is: acceptance depends more on who wears it than where it originates (Navarro 2016; Opie and Phillips 2015).

The deeply entrenched bias against Black hair continues to influence teenagers of today, as they've watched the continual stigmatization of Black hair in American society among their own age group. At the 2015 Oscars, pop singer and Disney Channel actress, Zendaya Coleman's locs hairstyle was attacked by Fashion Police host Guiliana Rancic saying, “I feel that she smells like patchouli oil... or weed. Yeah, maybe weed” (Phillip 2015). Coleman responded on Twitter, saying, “There's a fine line between what is funny and disrespectful... it is not only a large stereotype but outrageously offensive” and included, “My wearing my hair in locs on an Oscar red carpet was to showcase them in a positive light, to remind people of color that our hair is good enough.” Rancic responded on Twitter with an apology stating, “I'm sorry I offended you and others.... Had nothing to do with race and never would!” (Phillip 2015). Likewise, in the 2012 Olympics, although teen gymnast Gabby Douglas won an individual gold medal in the all-around event and helped the United States win the teams' competition, its first gold since 1996, her excitement was diminished as many people complained about her hairstyle on Twitter and Facebook (Hill 2012). African–American women were among the critics, a reaction argued as a symbol of self-hate and remnant of the historic denigration of Black hair and Black women in America (Ellis-Hervey et al. 2016; Muhammad and McArthur 2015).

Adolescents have also watched the rejection of Black hair in the United States military. As recent as 2014, the military banned several hairstyles commonly worn by African–American women (Terkel 2014). The banned hairstyles, which applied

only to women, did not include straight hairstyles. Instead they included “twists, locs, and multiple cornrows,” hairstyles commonly worn by women of African descent who chose to wear their hair naturally. Essentially, the way hair grew naturally out of the scalp of African–American women was deemed “unacceptable” and “disorderly” by the United States military. This further extended the history of macro-aggressions and structural violence against Black women and Black hair that has existed all along the fabric of America’s history. This stance by the United States military sent a message to Black adolescent girls seeking to enter the military and Black women that something was essentially wrong with their hair and needed to be changed in order for them to be accepted. As a result of social pressure and push-back regarding what many considered racist hair policies, the military reversed its decision regarding acceptable hairstyles in 2017 (Bates 2014; Mele 2017).

In school settings, where adolescents spend most of their waking hours, the harassment of Black hair continued through school policies and teachers. A teacher at a Georgia elementary school referred to the former first lady of the United States Michelle Obama as a “poor gorilla” stating, “She needs to focus on getting a total make-over, especially the hair” (Abrahamson 2016). Likewise, Black girls and boys across the country and internationally have had similar comments said of them and their hair by teachers, and have been sent home, expelled, and penalized due to school policies relating to school dress for wearing their hair the way it grows (Hobdy 2013; Lazar 2017; Mahr 2016). Some reasons for this stigmatization could include the fact that there is minimal reference to Africa and African cultures in school curriculum as well as instances of misrepresentation of these cultures producing a dearth of information, appreciation, and understanding of African and African–American experiences (Harushimana and Awokoya 2011).

Socially, students of color experience fashion, body, and hair harassment among their peers as many schools in metropolitan areas often reflect a microcosm of the African diaspora (Awokoya 2012). The social adjustment of students descending from these countries include enduring the social ostracism and stigmas often associated with immigrants as students try to fit in and “pass” as African–American in order to avoid such social penalties (Richards 2014). The pressure to be accepted among peers and assimilate, while embracing their national values and cultures create social spaces for conflict which are ripe for teasing, ridicule, and social harassment as these adjustments are made.

Research on hair as a barrier to physical activity among Black adolescent girls has not been widely researched and the exploration of hair harassment and how it shapes physical activity among this population, a relatively new phenomenon, is even less researched in the literature. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the hair experiences of girls in physical education class, a common venue for school physical activity, and to investigate how these hair experiences influence their decision to be physically active in physical education class.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics for demographics. Age and grade (n = 37)

Age and grade	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Age	14	19	17
Grade	9	12	12

Table 2 Self-reported race/ethnicity (n = 37)

Race/ethnicity	Frequency	Percent
Bi-racial	2	5.4
Bi-racial: Jamaican–American	1	2.7
Hispanic/Black	1	2.7
Non-hispanic African–American	18	48.6
Non-hispanic black	8	21.6
Non-hispanic black/African American	1	2.7
Non-hispanic black/other	2	5.4
Other: African	1	2.7
Other: Caribbean-Afro-Latina	1	2.7
Other: Haitian	1	2.7
Other: Indian, Guyanese, Trinidad	1	2.7
Total	37	100.0

Methods

Using a qualitative research design, thirty-seven high school girls in 9th–12th grade of African descent attending school in an urban, low-income community participated in seven focus groups and three follow up interviews relating to hair experiences in physical education class. Low-income was defined by free or reduced lunch programs, a common proxy for poverty.

Inclusion criteria included self-identified race of African descent, female gender, enrollment as a high school student from the site school, the willingness and ability to read and speak English, consent, and participation in the focus group. The willingness of the parent/guardian to read and consent to the subject's participation if they were less than 18 years old was also an eligibility criterion.

After the Rutgers University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study, students were recruited via flyers and word of mouth in their school. Data collection was conducted in a common, natural setting of the respondents, a classroom in their school, offered by their principal. Focus groups took place during non-instructional hours. On average, each focus group lasted no longer than 60 min. During the focus groups, healthy food and snacks were provided. Respondents were asked to fill out a demographic form and instructed to omit their names. Demographic questions included items such as their age, grade, self-reported race/ethnicity, and self-reported hair type based on images of four hair types ranging from (1) straight, (2) wavy-curly, (3) curly-kinky, and (4) kinky-coily as listed in Tables 1, 2

Table 3 Self-reported hair type

Hair type	Frequency
Type 1: Straight	0
Type 2: Wavy	1
Type 3: Curly-Kinky	7
Type 4: Kinky-Coily	29
Total	37

and 3. At the completion of the focus group, respondents were given a \$25.00 gift certificate in appreciation for their time and effort.

Focus group recordings (audio and video) were transcribed, re-read for accuracy, then coded using content analysis (Lincoln and Guba 1985). During the coding, a close line-by-line analysis of respondents' experiences and concerns were conducted during an initial review, and then repeated multiple times while listening and viewing the videotapes to ensure accuracy. NVIVO, version 10.2.2, a qualitative analysis software package was utilized to analyze frequency of codes/nodes and any outstanding outliers or linguistic occurrences.

Results

Hair harassment was a shared, deeply felt concern, occurring directly and indirectly creating a hostile environment for the respondents and their cultural hair practices and influencing their decision to be physically active in physical education class. Direct hair harassment, which I refer to as social hair harassment, was characterized as hair harassment the girls felt they received verbally, emotionally, or physically often on a daily basis in physical education class as a result of their hair. Indirect (non-verbal) hair harassment, which I refer to as societal hair harassment, was described by respondents as ways they felt indirectly offended and harassed by society at large due to their hair texture or hair type.

Social Hair Harassment

The theme of Social Hair Harassment consisted of codes which captured the direct verbal, emotional, and physical assault the respondents experienced in physical education class regarding their hair. Social hair harassment included being referred to as a "hot mess" by both boys and girls based on their hair, and having hair that was characterized as messy, frizzy, puffy, or smelling of sweat after physical education class.

Respondents believed sweating, the byproduct of physical activity, disrupted their desired straight and styled hair. Sweaty hair resulting in messy, frizzy, or puffy hair proved to be detractors of physical activity during physical education class and was

Table 4 Excerpts of social hair harassment

They just feel as though they want to mess my bun up. They just take their hands and run it through it like that

Boys, they play around too much. Because they either want to play fight with you or take something of yours, so then you'll have to chase them down. It's too much

I just fix it and fix it. Especially when I just fixed it, and then somebody else comes and just messes it up

Some girls just don't want to do gym because the boys are going to be looking at them. Because they comment on your body

I'm not going to even lie, like summertime, I don't really like playing gym because if I get a doobie^a, and I've got gym, sometimes I don't be feeling like playing because I'm like dang, I just got this doobie. I don't want to sweat it out. So, I just be like I'm just not going to play today

Because say you're running around a lot and then your hair gets sweaty and frizzy, like you straightened your hair and then you run around and it gets hot then your hair starts to get frizzy, and then for the rest of the day you're going to be looking like a mess and you're going to be mad, and that's how I feel

^aDoobie—A commonly worn hairstyle among black and Hispanic women and girls after hair is washed and dried straight with high heat to maintain its straightness. Hair is combed in one direction until all of it wraps around the head and is secured by pins

avoided at all cost. The respondents expressed having non-sweaty hair was a priority. Sweaty or messy hair caused a range of social stressors including harassment by fellow students, staring, inferior status in their social community, and social exclusion.

The respondents also expressed frustration being physically harassed by boys as they touched or handled their hair during physical education class. Hair touching, which I define as the unwelcome and unwanted touching of one's hair, a form of hair harassment, was a deterrent to physical activity. Physical harassment also included boys taking the respondents' personal items such as hair accessories in order for girls to chase after them. Excerpts of social hair harassment taken directly from the respondents are listed in Table 4.

Societal Hair Harassment

The theme of Societal Hair Harassment was composed of codes which captured the ways in which respondents experienced indirect harassment from the society at large due to their hair. Societal hair harassment was characterized as harassment the respondents indirectly experienced yet were nonetheless impacted by. Examples of societal hair harassment included societal pressure to have straight hair, hearing of cases of hair penalties in the workplace for wearing natural hairstyles, feeling pressure from television shows or famous celebrities to have their hair type or hair texture, and feeling their hair was constantly being compared to Caucasian or Hispanic hair in society.

The respondents admitted to wearing tight braids, enduring long hours in the hair salon, and spending hundreds of dollars to maintain hair that was neat and straight, a pressure they believed was superimposed by society. Respondents connected the painful experience of societal hair harassment to the historical latent trauma of having hair that is neat, clean, tidy, and often times straight. Consequently, many

Table 5 Excerpts of societal hair harassment

I feel like TV and then our culture also pushes this idea that your hair should be always straight. And if it's not straight, it's not cute, which isn't true
I feel like I fell into that trap because I was like, oh, straight, straight, straight, perm, perm, perm, and now it's like I just want to cut it off, start all over. I regret perms with a passion
I don't feel like waking up every morning having to gel my hair up in a ponytail...
You do it (physical education class) during the second period, you've got to wait the whole day. Then you've got to be seen walking around with some messed up hair. That's just not right
You're feeling ugly when you don't have your hair done and fixed up
Because if I get my hair done (braided) and it's like really tight, I'm not going to be able to do anything
Because my head going to be hurting or something (because of braids). Or it'll just be pulling my forehead, and I'll be worried about trying to get it loose instead of worrying about participating in gym. I wouldn't do it
Say if you just got your hair done (braids), and in gym you don't want to do much because it's hurting. It's a little painful, and you don't even want to get it messed up or anything. So, yeah, you don't do that much

respondents reported having headaches after the installation of new braids and refraining from moving in physical education class due to pain induced by new braids. This indirect societal pressure influenced respondents to avoid physical activity of any kind for fear of messing up their hair and not meeting societal hair and beauty standards.

Respondents reported experiencing societal hair harassment on a consistent basis through social media by celebrities with straight hair, colored hair, and when hearing of the rejection of natural hairstyles in the workplace. Such factors influenced their decision to have straight edges (small hairs grown close to the temples), straight hair, and endure high levels of heat during blow-outs (using a blow dryer on high heat to blow curly hair straight), cultural hair practices and hairstyles which were easily disrupted during physical activity. Excerpts relating to societal hair harassment are listed in Table 5.

Discussion

Findings from this research suggest girls are less likely to participate in physical education class when subjected to hair harassment and will avoid gym class to prevent being harassed. Verbal and physical forms of harassment influenced the respondents' behavior in physical education class leading them to not participate, move, or be physically active, a concern for a population already at risk for physical inactivity.

The societal pressure to have straight hair that is neat, tidy, and clean made it essentially impossible to maintain this high standard of ideal hair when exerting vigorous physical activity, which involves sweating and the disruption of straight and styled hairstyles. Essentially, girls in this sample described feeling socially penalized

and harassed for sweating because of the impact it had on their hair, in particular straight hair, an already expensive and time consuming socially-induced burden.

Despite the wave of influence stemming from the media, movies, and music embracing natural hairstyles, young people today are still influenced by the historical and generational narrative of rejection and harassment of Black hair. Urban adolescents, in particular, identify with the words “messy” or “a hot mess” which are often used to describe the antithesis of ideal hair, hair that is acceptable for one’s given social community or habitus. The social rejection, exclusion, and shame from their peers and social networks experienced in physical education class influenced the respondents’ attitudes and behavior towards physical activity.

Limitations of the Study

Respondents described some aspects of hair harassment as daily and present, while others were described as latent or historical. The finding of hair harassment, both socially and imposed by society suggests much work still needs to be done in the area of harassment aimed at girls, particularly as girls are still developing physically and emotionally at this vulnerable, growing stage of their lives.

Implications for Theory, Policy, and Practice

Although schools are mandated to seek out and report bullying behaviors, hair harassment, to my knowledge, has not been figured into the equation. School policy makers should consider extending school harassment to include that of hair harassment adding it to the portfolio of bullying with consequences and protocols for those who partake in such behavior, particularly as it was found to be a perceived barrier to physical activity in physical education class. Unfortunately, we live in a world where young girls are bullied socially and by society every day because of body image and looks driving some to suicide. The harassment of hair should be taken seriously by school administrators and policy makers.

African–American women and adolescent girls are disproportionately affected by obesity, overweight, and the chronic diseases that accompany them such as high blood pressure, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and asthma. In response to this, school administrators and policy makers should focus on increasing physical activity among black adolescent girls through all forms of physical exercise particularly in light of the attenuation of physical activity for this group as they advance in school. As found in this study and several others exploring physical activity among black adolescent girls, social support, where girls are made to feel valued, cared for, and supported by their social network, the antithesis of an environment of harassment, should be embedded into school culture, policies, and norms in hopes of increasing physical activity and a culture of health in schools.

Findings from this study contribute to the findings of research studying the impact of societal beauty standards on adolescent girls. Girls at this vulnerable, developing stage are influenced by what others think, feel, and say about them,

their bodies, and their looks. Self-image is of extreme importance to adolescents, particularly in this age of “selfie culture”, taking countless pictures of themselves and posting them on popular social media websites. When others find the picture attractive, they show approval by “liking” it pressing a thumbs up or heart shaped button, driving this culture of peer-approval based on appearance. The selfie culture promotes a perfect body, hair, skin etc. for this age group. Social rejection, social exclusion, and harassment from peers for not having the perfect image is a real concern for adolescents, as evidenced from this exploration. Interventions aimed at addressing harassment of hair socially and from society should include self-esteem building elements in hopes of inoculating adolescent girls from hair harassment while empowering them to develop character building traits.

Lastly, since many school dress policies exclude Black hairstyles, penalizing and expelling students who wear them, school policy makers should explore their policies through a culturally competent lens. Schools should assess how their policies affect all members and future members of their student body. School administrators should critically evaluate the propensity for their own policies to be discriminatory forms of hair harassment.

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