Article

The Influence of Colorism on the Hair Experiences of African American Female Adolescents

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Abstract: This article addresses the prevalence of colorism among the hair care narratives of African American female adolescents. Eleven interviews were conducted to explore the connection between hair and sense of self and self-esteem. During data collection and analysis, the theme surrounding colorism emerged, as many participants discussed its influence on hair, recalling traumatic hair and colorist experiences. This article focuses on the analysis of these narratives using the colorist-historical trauma framework. Three themes emerged: (1) colorist experiences; (2) perceptions of good hair; and (3) the influence of White beauty standards. These themes reflect how participants conceptualized the implications of colorism and its impact on their psychosocial and emotional well-being. The article highlights how colorism is embedded in their lived experiences and how participants combated the presence of colorism perpetuated by family, peers, and society, to embrace their identities. The article outlines the implications of collective efforts to decolonize hair and promote healing and liberation through actions such as the natural hair movement, legal efforts to protect hairstyle preferences in schools and the workplace, and overall awareness of the perception of Black women in media. It also discusses shifts in attitudes, perspectives, and beliefs regarding hair among younger generations.

Keywords: colorism; skin tone bias; Black girls; African Americans; Black hair

1. Introduction

African American girls experience racial socialization and are conditioned to view the world through a particular lens. According to Lesane-Brown (2006), racial socialization is defined as specific verbal and nonverbal messages passed down to younger generations about personal and group identity. These messages speak to values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors regarding the meaning and significance of race. As Robinson (2011) notes, racialized beauty standards combined with the color complex make hair an essential component of Black female identity. From a cultural perspective, African American girls typically embrace a relational and communal worldview (Belgrave 2009), which assumes that others are important to sense of self and well-being and that attitudes and behaviors are influenced by others. How African American girls view themselves impacts other aspects of their lives, including self-esteem, body image, and sexual identity (Abrams et al. 2020; Belgrave 2009). The complexities of colorism are embedded in the experiences of African American girls and impact identity development and sense of self. Hunter (2007) suggests that one's ethnic legitimacy or authenticity may be questioned depending on skin tone. In this case, having lighter skin may be viewed as a disadvantage. Abrams et al. (2020) note how messages regarding personal and behavioral traits of those with darker skin may be perceived as ghetto or bad. Adolescence is a stage where adolescents are exploring who they are. Some adolescents may feel the need to prove themselves and validate their ethnic identity, wanting to appear and be accepted as Black (Abrams et al. 2020).

Colorist acts are often perpetuated by someone from the same racial/ethnic background and even within family systems. Research notes that color consciousness usually begins in the family (Wilder and Cain 2011). Adolescents are influenced by cultural norms established within a family system. If a family embraces colorist attitudes, this can significantly impact access to opportunities and the trajectory of an adolescent's life. Ryabov

(2013) highlights how, following the completion of high school, families may be more inclined to support light-skinned adolescents in pursuing college opportunities, while promoting employment for dark-skinned adolescents. This is also consistent with findings from a study conducted by Hall (2017) that explored the impact of skin color stratification on the psychosocial welfare of Black women, and found that participants reported varying familial expectations regarding intelligence based on skin tone. This is an example of how colorism can be deeply ingrained in a family system that may espouse white supremacist beliefs about access to opportunities based on skin tone.

Hunter (2007) addresses how peer relationships, perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs can be shaped by colorism. Adolescents may be more inclined to develop relationships with those who look like them or may feel threatened by those who do not. This level of oppression can be deeply internalized by girls who may not be exposed to affirming messages about skin tone. During this stage, girls are more susceptible to messages that affirm and negate who they are as African American females and how they view themselves and are viewed by others. These challenges can be exacerbated for African Americans given the social structures that exist in American society. For example, "good and bad hair perceptions illustrate Black female's internalization of white supremacy and their everyday struggles to fit Black hair into White beauty standards" (Robinson 2011, p. 360). This is evident in a study conducted by Abrams et al. (2020) that explored African American girls' understanding of colorism and skin tone. They found that similar to African American women, biases exist. The majority of participants reported the belief that lighter skin people were more beautiful, and that light skin was perceived as prettiness and handsomeness, while dark skin was perceived as ugliness and defectiveness. It is important to note that despite these perceptions, African American girls overall tend to have a positive self-concept (Belgrave 2009; Jacobs 2020). In assessing self-concept among African American girls, Belgrave (2009) found positive aspects across domains such as appearance, getting along with others, doing well in school, and in physical and athletic achievements. Many factors contribute to the development of a positive or negative sense of self, such as messages received from family members and external messages from peers, the media, and society.

The Importance of Hair

Racism is a major problem that plagues the lives of many African Americans on a daily basis, yet society continues to grapple with how to eradicate racism. Colorism, as a byproduct of racism, is a concept less familiar and has similar adverse effects as racism. There are some African Americans who are less inclined to discuss colorism as they believe that the dialogue distracts from the more significant problem of racism (Hunter 2007) and exposes internalized racism and intrapersonal challenges within the Black community. The reality is we must engage in dialogue about historical trauma, which is cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations (Brave Heart et al. 2011), and its impact, otherwise we will continue to pass down behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes to younger generations and perpetuate the same oppressive and traumatic experiences. Much of the literature about colorism centers on adults and college students (Harrison and Thomas 2009; Hunter 2005; Wilder 2010; Wilder and Cain 2011), and scant research exists that addresses the impact of colorism on adolescents. This article provides insight into how colorism manifests in the lives of African American female adolescents by exploring the hair care experiences of African American female adolescents in foster care.

Hair is a salient cultural factor to consider when discussing adolescent identity development, particularly for African American females. Scholars have discussed the correlation between identity development and hair (Banks 2000; Belgrave 2009; Thompson 2009), particularly for African American girls. From a cultural perspective inherent knowledge exists regarding the importance of hair, and African American females are socialized to view hair as an extension of themselves (Banks 2000). Through the analysis of interviews with African American females, many participants discussed the prevalence of colorism as they

shared their hair narratives. The colorist-historical trauma framework is used to examine the intersection of colorism and Black hair and how this shows up in the experiences of African American girls. Participants were African American female adolescents involved in the child welfare system and at greater risk of disconnection from family and racial socialization processes pertinent to adolescent and ethnic identity development. Although an extensive review of colorism and the culture of Black hair in America is beyond the scope of this article, there are several sources that provide in depth analysis of colorism and how it impacts the lives of African Americans (Hunter 2005; Norwood 2014) and the history of Black hair in America (Banks 2000; Byrd and Tharps 2014; Rooks 1996). Scholars have discussed the interconnectedness of colorism and Black hair and the cultural implications of this connection (Hunter 2007; Thompson 2009). Colorism has historical roots in the establishment of the US and a hierarchy based on color stratification. This article explores the various ways in which colorism is engrained in the fabric of society, from family and peer relationships, to mainstream media and the perpetuation of White beauty standards. Throughout the article, Black and African American are used interchangeably and refer to individuals who identify as US-born African Americans.

This study includes the analysis of hair narratives of eleven African American females who ranged in age from 13 to 17. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2014 and each interview lasted an hour. Thematic analysis was used to examine the connection between colorism and hair. This study explores colorism and hair in the context of the emergence of colorism, the significance of Black hair, colorism in the media, and the colorist-historical framework.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Emergence of Colorism among African Americans

According to Abrams et al. (2020), colorism is defined as a system of inequality that occurs within and across groups, and is based on skin tone, hair texture, and/or facial features. Colorism is often broadly used to refer to how individuals are treated differently based on skin tone, with light-skinned individuals with Eurocentric features considered preferable compared to dark-skinned individuals (Hunter 2005). Colorism is also discussed in terms of privileges afforded to those with light skin compared to dark skin (Hunter 2007). Colorism is not specific to a particular race or ethnicity and can be found in all races/ethnicities when there are variations in skin tones. For example, colorism is also prevalent among Latinx and Asian ethnic groups with the same notion of light-skinned individuals receiving preferential treatment compared to dark-skinned individuals (Norwood 2014). For the purpose of this article, colorism will be discussed in the context of how it functions among Black people in the United States.

Colorism is embedded in the historical trauma that African Americans have endured since arriving in America. Racial miscegenation and the raping of enslaved Black women by White men created a racial and social stratification that exists today. There were deliberate acts, such as breeding Black women for the benefit of slavery, that supported this structure and benefited those with lighter skin and Eurocentric features (Hunter 2007). Mixed race individuals who physically looked White, or known as White passing, were afforded opportunities and privileges not extended to dark-skinned individuals based on a hierarchy that values Whiteness. According to Hunter (2007), all Black people are susceptible to discrimination, and the intensity, frequency, and outcomes of discrimination will differ based on skin tone. It should be noted that highlighting the ways in which colorism adversely impacts the lives of dark-skinned individuals does not negate the experiences of light-skinned individuals. However, it acknowledges the ways in which colorism further divides and traumatizes African Americans despite skin tone.

Colorism is a by-product of racism and stems from white supremacist ideologies that idealize white standards. Colorism among African Americans stems from slavery in the Americas (Hunter 2007). It has contributed to the creation of a hierarchy, and perpetuates division by enforcing a rating system that values White/European features

and disvalues Black/African features. Consistent with the premise of white supremacy, an infatuation with Eurocentric hair and beauty standards was established in America. The worshipping of White features was pervasive and permeated throughout the hair care industry worldwide (Thompson 2009). Following the period of enslavement, Black people found liberation in the authentic expression of themselves (see Byrd and Tharps 2014). One form of artistic expression was through hair and the appreciation of its aesthetics, and efforts were made to reclaim the essence of Black hair. This is particularly evident during the 1960s and 1970s in conjunction with the Civil Rights Movement and emergence of the Black Power and Black Feminist Movements (Rooks 1996). This historical perspective is critical as it provides a foundation for understanding the presence of colorism in the experiences of African American female adolescents and the relationship to their hair. Black hair in America has a history of being weaponized and can contribute to internalized racism. This is also Black hair trauma that is in need of decolonization and liberation.

Attempts to regulate the Black female body, and hair as an extension of the body, are prevalent throughout the world (Byrd and Tharps 2014). Many scholars have discussed the world's obsession with the degradation and oppression of the Black female (Collins 2009; Hooks 1992; Roberts 1997). One of the most egregious examples of degradation is the inhumane treatment of Sara Baartman (see Crais and Scully 2009), a Black woman who was put on display and ostracized for her full hips and protruding buttocks, African features that have been mocked and ridiculed for centuries. Although the discussion of hair may appear subtle, as the statement of "it's just hair" is often wielded, the impact is still as powerful, nonetheless. Today, we continue to fight for the liberation of Black hair. What is often targeted are those hairstyles that represent Afrocentricity—afros, braids, and locs. The blatant attack on Black hair is interconnected with the dominant culture's view of beauty standards and what is considered acceptable in terms of physical appearance. What is often missing from the discussion is the role that colorism plays in how hair is discussed and can become an issue based on style preference and skin tone.

2.2. Significance of Black Hair

Throughout the history of colonization within the US, conscious efforts to decolonize the perceptions of Black hair have occurred, evidenced by various sociopolitical movements, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s. More recently, there has been a focus on destigmatizing Black hair (Johnson and Bankhead 2014) through the natural hair movement, and specifically in the workplace and mainstream media (Dawson et al. 2019). In turn, there has been an increase in scholarly literature and public attention focused on the decolonization of Black hair through research and legislative acts (Dawson et al. 2019; Norwood 2018; The Joy Collective 2019). Since 2016, there has been a 34% decrease in the market value of products that relax and chemically straighten hair (McGill Johnson et al. 2017), suggesting a major shift in the hair care attitudes and practices of African American women. The Perception Institute conducted the "good hair" study in 2016 that investigated attitudes toward Black women's hair and created the first Hair Implicit Association Test (HAT) to measure implicit bias against textured hair and gauge explicit attitudes about how natural textured hair is perceived. They defined textured hair based on hairstyles such as Afro, dreadlocks, twist out, and braids, and found that the majority of participants regardless of race showed implicit bias against textured hair. Findings also indicated that Black women perceive a level of social stigma against textured hair, and this perception is substantiated by White women's devaluation of natural hairstyles. Black women in the natural hair community have significantly more positive attitudes toward textured hair than other women, including Black women in the national sample. In addition, the study addressed hair anxiety and found that Black women experience higher levels of anxiety compared to White women, impacting their decisions about hair styling, maintenance, exercise, and other activities.

Variations exist when defining the term "good hair". It is commonly understood among African Americans that good hair is straight, wavy, and typically long hair that does

not require manipulation. Good hair is akin to Eurocentric hair based on texture and length. It also implies hair that is desirable, and although bad hair is not commonly named, it is implicitly understood that bad hair is coarse, kinky, and short/tightly coiled hair. Robinson (2011) introduced the term hair hierarchy which outlines variations in hair texture and length on a continuum from good to bad, with good hair being at the top of the hierarchy. Some people believe that Afrocentric hair is undesirable based on the dominant culture's beauty standards. However, participants in a study highlighted that "it is the kinkiness that allows the creative diversity of popular Black hairstyles that ironically makes bad hair particularly good for unstraightened styles" (Robinson 2011, p. 372). When discussing good hair, this perspective is often omitted from the discourse. It is equally important to understand the challenges of those who consider themselves to have good hair and the limitations they face when trying to achieve Afrocentric hairstyles.

Black hair in America continues to be highly politicized. As a distinct characteristic, hair is a source of discrimination toward African American women in the workforce (Dawson et al. 2019). This is particularly significant depending on how a woman chooses to wear her hair and may influence whether she subscribes to Eurocentric hairstyles for economic reasons, potentially creating an internal moral dilemma. Research suggests that Black women's selection of Eurocentric hairstyles is not always reflective of self-hatred or internalized racism, but can be based on other factors (McGill Johnson et al. 2017). Despite this, African American women are often scrutinized for their decision to wear their natural hair. In 2019, The Crown Research Study explored the degree of racial discrimination experienced by women in the workplace based on their natural hairstyles. The study focused on corporate grooming policies and found that Black women are socialized to be more aware of these policies than White women. Differences were found from the start of the application process, during orientation, and on the first day of employment. Overall, Black women are 30% more likely to be made aware of a formal workplace appearance policy. They also found that bias exists regarding Black women's job performance based on hairstyle, demonstrating bias towards hairstyles considered professional, which often translates to less Afrocentric and more European. Given policies are often written to suit dominant culture standards, Orey and Zhang (2019) suggest that these stringent policies were in response to the Black Power Movement and an attempt to silence Black liberation.

2.3. Colorism in Media

Race as a social construct creates division among and within groups of people. However, what has not been as widely discussed is how colorism as a by-product of racism impacts the lives of African Americans. Although various socialization agents contribute to this bias, these beliefs have been primarily manufactured through the media (Orey and Zhang 2019). Colorism essentially operates along the same metrics as race. There are racial and color disparities based on social systems (Ortega-Williams et al. 2019). For example, when discussing the presence of Black women in media, there is also a discussion of who is represented and how they look based on skin tone. A preference for women who are light-skinned with straight hair often exists. More specifically within hip-hop culture, the discussion of representation is ongoing, and much debate about the lack of representation of dark-skinned women continues (Maxwell et al. 2016). Maxwell et al. (2016) conducted a study that examined the implicit and explicit messages of colorism in rap lyrics. They found that African American girls observed a preference for light-skinned girls and unfavorable messages about dark-skinned girls. Observations of preferences are also present in social media. Abrams et al. (2020) analyzed the use of hashtags based on skin tone and found that #darkskin was tagged to over 2.2 million Instagram posts and #lightskin was tagged to over 1.1 million posts. This supports the notion that colorism is an intergenerational phenomenon that impacts younger generations that are primary users of such platforms as Instagram, and a problem that persists across generations.

Historically, the depiction of Black people in mainstream media was rare. This platform was largely dominated by Whites and portrayed the White experience as normal.

Over the past few decades, there has been an increase in Black representation in the media and inclusion of the Black experience. As a result, the focus on Black people has increased, and more Black women are being shown on television. Intentional efforts have been made to address critical issues, such as colorism, that are not widely discussed, but can have a significant impact on the psychosocial and emotional well-being of African Americans. Black film directors and actors/actresses have been instrumental in illuminating this concern on screen. In the film School Daze (Lee 1988), colorism is portrayed through the experiences of light-skinned and dark-skinned women on a college campus. There is an iconic scene where the two groups of women re-enact these experiences through a choreographed routine, depicting pejorative terms often ascribed to light- and dark-skinned females. Terms such as good hair, light bright, and darky. Good Hair (Stilson 2009) is another film that addresses hair and colorism. The film is inspired by Chris Rock's conversations with his daughter regarding her hair and explores the complexity of hair in America, discussing the implications of the dominant culture's beauty standards on the experiences of African American girls and women. It also highlights how lucrative Black hair is as a multi-billion dollar industry. Nappily Ever After (Al-Mansour 2018) depicts a Black woman's journey as she appears to experience an existential crisis. Through a journey of self-discovery, she cuts off all of her hair and reclaims who she is as a Black woman. Her journey addresses a sense of self and self-esteem, and the perceptions of others in response to her decision to cut her hair. Through the process she feels liberated. These are all examples of the struggles of African American women who are also marred by the experiences of colorism. Black media specifically has been intentional about addressing the importance of the sensitivity of this topic, particularly as it relates to Black women. In addition, a recent documentary highlights the historical context of hair prior to enslavement and the arrival of Africans in the US and pinpoints why hair became a focal point and why it still matters today (Scott-Ward 2019). There has been a surge in the positive depiction of Black women with natural hairstyles in media. This is a critical shift in the support of Black women and girls embracing their natural hair. Oscar-winning short film Hair Love (Cherry and Smith 2019) tells the story of a Black father caring for his daughter's hair. It is important to understand the influence of media on African American female adolescents, as they are bombarded by messages through media and socialized to formulate ideas about themselves and how they are represented based on these depictions.

2.4. The Colorist-Historical Framework

Scholars Ortega-Williams et al. (2019) developed the colorist-historical trauma framework to address the historical nature of colorism and how colorist acts perpetuate trauma among individuals. They note that colorism is a function of racism and plays a role in the transmission of historical trauma among African Americans. Building on the work of historical trauma scholars (Brave Heart 1998; DeGruy 2005; Sotero 2006) that explores how trauma is transmitted intergenerationally and can impact generations never exposed to the initial trauma of enslavement, Ortega-Williams et al. (2019) introduces a framework for viewing historical trauma through the lens of colorism and the implications that colorism has on the lives of African Americans. They established domains to outline how colorism functions. These domains include the following categories: physiological, environmental, psychosocial, socioeconomic and political, and legal. They purport that through these domains, colorism initiates and maintains a historical trauma response. This article focuses on the physiological and psychosocial domains of the framework. Ortega-Williams et al. (2019) identify the original collective trauma within the context of the psychosocial domain as the disruption of cultural norms and practices. This is perpetuated by enhanced cultural discord based on color: creations of color stratification between newly enslaved Africans resulting in varying skin colors; and the desecration of cultural and ancestral practices. The physiological domain identifies collective trauma as chattel slavery, deprivations, and physical torture. This is enacted by physiological longevity based on color: darker skin color signifying "other than White" and solidifying the status as one who is enslaved, while

lighter skin and more Eurocentric phenotypic features have the potential to give pause to this deprivation. Although all of the domains outlined explain the experiences of colorism, when analyzing experiences in the context of hair, physiological and psychosocial domains are most consistent with examples from the hair narratives of African American female adolescents. Despite collective efforts to normalize and affirm natural hair and eliminate stigma, colorism persists. Within the natural hair movement, there is evidence of bias against tightly coiled hair types and debates about what natural hair styles are considered "professional" (McGill Johnson et al. 2017). In light of this, research indicates a potential generational shift among millennials (Orey and Zhang 2019), which suggests a trend of embracing natural hair and moving away from a hair hierarchy and texture rating system that perpetuates white supremacy. Researchers propose that with a heightened emphasis on oppression experienced by African Americans and coming of age during the natural hair movement, millennials may be less likely to internalize the negative messages and effects of colorism that have plagued generations before them (Orey and Zhang 2019).

There are few studies that address colorism among African American adolescents, and fewer that explore the influence of colorism on hair. As previously noted, phenotypic characteristics have been used for racial and social stratification for centuries. Hair as a phenotypic characteristic is no different. As an extension of physical appearance, it is often a prominent feature highlighted when attempting to categorize based on race. The discussion of hair texture often occurs in the context of skin tone. There are implicit assumptions made about an individual's skin tone based on the description of their hair texture. These experiences will be explored by analyzing the hair narratives of African American female adolescents to understand how they view the presence and function of colorism and hair.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data Collection

The original study (Mitchell Dove and Powers 2018) explored the hair care experiences and perceptions of African American female adolescents in foster care. The aim of the study was to establish a connection between hair and sense of self and self-esteem. Purposive sampling was used to identify and recruit female adolescents who met the following eligibility criteria: (1) each participant between the ages of 13 and 17; (2) each participant self-identified as African American; (3) each participant was under the guardianship of the Department of Human Services (DHS) for at least one year. This age group was selected due to the emergence of identity during this developmental period (Belgrave 2009). Eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants who were recruited through emails and flyers sent to caseworkers. Demographic information such as race/ethnicity, age, and hair care experiences (e.g., type/style of hair, products, and hair care) was collected. During the interviews, all of the participants were asked to describe their hair texture. None of the participants identified their texture as naturally straight, but used words such as curly, thick, soft, course, nappy, and spongy to describe their hair texture. There seemed to be a relationship between those who identified as having "curly hair" and being easy to manage, compared to those who identified as having "coarse or nappy hair" and difficulty with combing their hair. Interviews were conducted by the researcher in a private location based on the participant's preference, such as a quiet room in the home, library, or another community location. The interview guide protocol included questions regarding identity, ethnicity, hair, and socialization. Some of the questions included: (1) How do you typically style/wear your hair? (2) How important is your hair and how it looks? (3) How do you feel when your hair looks/doesn't look the way you want? (4) Tell me about a hair experience that you remember most; and (5) What do other people like your friends, family, teachers say about your hair? Each interview lasted for an hour and was audio taped and transcribed verbatim. Participants received USD 25 for their participation.

3.2. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used as an approach to analyze the data. This approach is useful when exploring a participant's psychological world of beliefs, constructs, identity development, and emotional experiences (Saldaña 2016). The researcher observed references to colorism in the context of hair and hair care experiences when analyzing the hair narratives of participants. According to Saldaña (2016), thematic analysis is a strategic choice as a part of the research design that includes the primary questions, goals, conceptual framework, and literature review. All of these aspects were considered during data analysis. The colorist historical-trauma framework was used as the guiding framework to analyze the narratives with the intent of extracting themes based on participants' responses regarding colorism and that reflected characteristics described within the physiological and psychosocial domains of the framework and indicative of colorist acts, attitudes, and beliefs. Each interview was reviewed using the guidelines of the physiological and psychosocial domains of the framework, and thematic codes were develop based on commonality of the emergent themes. Three themes emerged: (1) colorist experiences; (2) perceptions of good hair; and (3) the influence of White beauty standards. The researcher was involved in the coding process. Member checking was used to ensure the accuracy of the interpretation of the participants' narratives. Participants were contacted to review excerpts of their transcripts and to confirm the meaning and intent of their statements and descriptions.

The researcher identified as a dark-skinned African American woman. The positioning of the researcher appeared to facilitate comfort and sharing of information by the participants, especially when considering sensitive topics such as experiences of racism and complexities of colorism within the African American community. The researcher attempted to not assume shared knowledge of common terms based on similar racial/ethnic identification of participants. Participants were asked to clarify terms introduced during the interviews and describe their understanding of terms in an effort to capture how participants made meaning of their experiences.

4. Results

4.1. Colorist Experiences

This theme is related to colorist statements that were made during interviews, reflecting participants' experiences that address the influence of colorism on hair. Some participants made statements that revealed skin tone bias, indicative of the divide that exists based on skin color. For example, one participant said, "the only thing they [girls] could say is I am prettier, because they are light skinned." Another participant noted, "they say light skin is prettier. I said, I guess you can say that, call it how you see it. I could care less." These statements are examples of how colorism manifests among African Americans and perpetuates the narrative about light-skinned girls and perceptions of beauty based on skin tone. One complexity that emerged is how African American girls navigated the dialogue about colorism among their peers and family, particularly messages they received from peers and family members about their perceived Blackness and underlying messages regarding skin tone and hair. One participant explained, "a lot of people have told me they like my hair, and I just think a lot of people ask me what am I mixed with because of the texture of my hair . . . what does that have to do with my hair." When asked about the association between her racial background and hair, the participant responded, "I kind of find it weird because I don't think your nationality really goes with what type of hair you have." Another participant recalled responses she received from family members regarding her decision to wear an afro. She noted, "they just take care of it after seeing me looking like a hot mess with an afro. Then they will take me to get my hair done . . . they like it, but they say they just get tired of seeing it every day." These are both subtle messages communicated to girls who are trying to navigate their identity, yet are receiving what could be perceived as negative messages about their hair preferences and whether their choices have implications for who they are based on their skin color. One participant discussed the impact of these conversations as a dark-skinned girl. She stated,

"They will be like, you are too dark and I'm light. I am, ok, that's fine. They think light skins have better hair, because they are light. You know how light skins have long hair. I was like, no, some light skins have no hair and dark skins have better hair, I think, than light skins."

When asked how this impacted her, the participant responded, "I feel callous. I have been told this so many times that it is crazy." She recalled hearing these statements since she was a little kid and noted, "I used to be like shy, I've always been dark my whole life." This is a poignant example of the psychosocial and emotional impact that these experiences can have over time. African American girls also receive explicit messages about hair based on skin tone. One participant said, "one of my friends said, you have Black people hair, and I was like, okay . . . she is more of the I have good hair type of person, and I am just the kind of person that my hair is how it is. I just have to deal with it. She said you are not mixed, because you don't have hair like me, and if you were mixed, you would have hair like me . . . the way my hair is doesn't mean if I am mixed or not. It doesn't depend on my nationality."

4.2. Perceptions of Good Hair

Throughout review of the narratives, the term "good hair" was mentioned on several occasions. The definition and understanding of this term varied among the participants. One participant noted, "all African Americans have good hair," while another participant stated, "yeah, the Black people have the worst hair and White people have good hair. Mexicans have good hair because it grows longer than ours." A third participant indicated, "I think good hair is White hair, the less coarse it is, the better it is." These statements reflect a broad definition and understanding of good hair regarding African Americans, with various implications. One statement counteracts internalized racist beliefs by proclaiming all African American hair is good hair, while the other ascribes to white supremacist beliefs that good hair equates to Eurocentric hair. There were other participants who spoke specifically about references of good hair made by others. For instance, one participant recalled hearing the term from family members, but never fully understanding what they meant when they used it. She reported, "I keep asking and she [grandmother] says I have good hair, because her hair is stiff, kind of, but I don't know what she means when she says good hair, but I never asked." Some participants discussed receiving comments about their hair from people they did not know, based on that person's perception of their hair texture. One participant described an encounter while out in public and noted, "I was out and I had my hair big, and this Black lady came up and she touched it and stuff and said it was good. Then one of my friend's mom did that, and all of them, both of them said it was good hair." These examples highlight messages African American girls receive from family members and others about perceptions of their hair and how these messages can be interpreted. One participant said, "it is something I can't do [wearing natural hair] . . . I don't know, I guess my family has a lot of impact on it. Because I am so light skinned, they don't think I'm acting Black enough. That is just ignorance." When asked to clarify a statement regarding good hair, another participant indicated,

"the parents, if they have weaves and stuff, their kids usually get it, so the idea of having good hair, like a weave is more in the African American community because their parents grow up like that and they pass it on to their kids."

These statements demonstrate how messages regarding hair and what is considered "good" are passed down generationally and highlight the importance of understanding that African American girls are looking to their grandmothers, mothers, aunts, cousins, and peers as role models about the value of Black hair. They also illuminate how skin tone is intertwined with what is considered "good", as participants who appeared light-skinned were recipients of messages of good hair.

4.3. Influence of White Beauty Standards

Many participants emphasized having long hair, straightening their hair, or wearing a weave to achieve long hair. One interesting phrase that emerged was the idealization of hair that flows in the wind. This was discussed by three participants, all desiring long and straight hair. The first participant said, "when it flows in the wind . . . that is when I have my real hair. That blows with the wind as well." The second participant reported,

> "it is kind of thin once I flat iron it, so it kind of gives me the feeling as if I was Latina or something. Every girl wants that pretty flowing hair and that is how I feel when I flat iron my hair."

The third participant noted, "I just wish it was longer. Sometimes I don't like how it is so thick. In a convertible your hair doesn't flow, like you see in other people. They have fine hair, thin hair . . . it just slaps you in the face." Some participants discussed the undesirability of their hair based primarily on texture and the difficulty they encountered with managing their hair. One participant said, "you really don't want my hair. It is not fun to comb out, it hurts when you comb it out. When you comb it out, all you see in the bathroom is baby hairs." Another participant explained differences in hair for African Americans compared to other racial/ethnic groups. She noted,

> "I feel for people in general, but for African Americans, it is kind of more [important], because our hair is thicker and takes a little bit more time for us to kind of calm it down, put it in a ponytail and slick it back rather than White people and Hispanics."

When asked to elaborate on her statement, the participant further stated, "I think people think nowadays that [straight hair] is beautiful, other than curly hair, they are like, oh, her hair is nappy or something else. Where if the hair is straight, she has beautiful hair." Another participant reported, "our hair can be nappy. Caucasian people, their hair doesn't really get nappy that much. But they have silky hair. They don't have Black people's hair, but I still like our hair. They can't do Black people hair styles." Another example of differences was stated by this participant,

> "it is different for them, because some African Americans have hair that is hard to comb out. It is nappy and in the roots and the edges are, just not straight. Other ethnicities' hair are slick, and curly, like they don't really have to do anything with their hair, but brush it."

Although differences were noted, often emphasizing fewer desirable aspects of Afro-centric hair texture, this same participant also elaborated on positive aspects and stated, "my thoughts are that people who are African American should love their hair because it is not the same as everybody else's. You can have your own styles and do what you want to do with it."

Another participant discussed responses she received from peers when wearing an Afro. She noted, "kids at school, they will comment about your hair, but they will be looking way worse. It is a weird thing and I don't have time for that. I don't care what they think about my hair. Sometimes I wear it like that [Afro], but it is really rare." She also noted apprehension about wearing an Afro, stating "I just don't look right." One participant discussed difficulty with engaging in certain activities, such as swimming, due to the impact of swimming on hair. "I don't like getting in water, because when I get up out of the water, my hair is not the same way it was when I went in, like other girls, like White girls and stuff. When I come out, I am a totally different head. I don't like the fact that water is an issue to my hair." Some participants discussed their experiences with the "natural look" and the benefits and drawbacks of wearing natural hair. One noted, "I like the natural, the look of mixed girls' hair . . . I would wear my hair natural, but it is not as long." Another participant stated, "almost all the mixed girls I know wear their natural hair, but it is always straightened. It is never curly." Another participant discussed general observations and noted, "I feel like a lot of people, African American women are ashamed

of their hair and that is why they wear weaves. They don't really embrace their natural look." Participants also addressed their observations of peers and other African American women wearing weaves. One participant said, "every Black girl I know my age wears weaves. I don't know anybody that wears their natural hair." This participant also alluded to a possible explanation for why African American girls may choose to wear weaves. She stated, "I think that people want curly hair either curly hair or straight hair, and it is kind of like the grass is greener on the other side thing, where if you have straight hair, you want curly hair. If you have curly hair, you want straight hair."

5. Discussion

The findings from this analysis suggest that characteristics identified within the colorist historical-trauma framework are consistent with the hair experiences of African American female adolescents. Although none of the participants explicitly named colorism, they were able to describe colorist acts that they observed or experienced themselves. They articulated how colorism is prevalent in their interactions with family, peers, and society. Participants discussed experiences consistent with the function of the physiological domain of the framework, as they were able to describe how their phenotypic features of skin color and hair texture impacted their experiences. They also discussed experiences consistent with the psychosocial domain of the framework. Participants were most observant of how the color stratification created division among light- and dark-skinned girls, influencing perceptions and creating bias based on skin tone. Others discussed how these experiences impacted their psychosocial and emotional well-being. The results speak to the powerful influence of socialization and conditioning. They also confirm that many are aware of differences based on color stratification, even if they do not completely understand their implications. Colorist acts were very prominent when discussing peer relationships. Participants appeared to make the connection about the implications of colorism through conversations with peers, which often included comparisons based on skin tone.

One participant emphasized having "African hair" and stated that her father is African. She implied the need to have a perm based on her African hair, which could be interpreted as her assumption that African hair needs to be tamed. There were terms used such as taming and calming hair, which suggests unconscious messaging about the importance of hair that is presentable based on White beauty standards. This language also implies hair that is typically Afrocentric. Hair is often a factor when discussing identity and presentability, which is consistent with African American women's experiences in the workplace (Dawson et al. 2019; McGill Johnson et al. 2017). Participants discussed the importance of looking good and how hair is a reflection of how they look.

In reviewing narratives, it was apparent that colorism continues to influence the hair experiences of African American girls, contributing to traumatic hair experiences. Participants described how they attempted to manipulate their hair to make it more desirable, presentable, and appealing to White beauty standards. There were also sentiments of wanting to deviate from the standards imposed by the dominant culture and embrace natural hair. Findings from this study warrant additional exploration of how colorism impacts perception of hair and the hair care experiences of African American girls and how much emphasis is placed on hair through the lens of white supremacy. Decolonization occurs through the process of awareness and understanding of unhealthy patterns and behaviors that exist within the African American community and have been passed down through generations. Based on participants' statements, African American girls continue to receive messages from family members, peers, and society that contribute to traumatic hair experiences and further perpetuate internalized racism based on the dominant culture's beauty standards and skin tone bias. However, as noted by (Orey and Zhang 2019), millennials are embracing natural hair and choosing to wear Afrocentric hairstyles. It is also worth exploring the experiences of the African diaspora outside of the US. These practices are pervasive and there is evidence within Afro-Latinx communities, African communities,

and other communities of the African diaspora that colorism influence hair and hair care experiences.

6. Conclusions

As society continues to grapple with how to best eradicate racism, we must continue to engage in dialogue about the effects of colorism. We must dismantle the idea that by not discussing painful and traumatic experiences within our community, such as colorism, that somehow, they will just disappear. We have to be courageous in our pursuit of healing and addressing intergenerational wounds that continue to impact us. There is hope as we are benefiting from current movements dedicated to shifting the narrative of the experiences of Black people in America. As a result, the liberation of Black hair and skin color stratification are two critical elements that are being highlighted. We must also continue to educate African American girls about the implications of colorism and equip them with tools to develop a positive identity and healthy sense of self. We must support them in engaging in practices that do not perpetuate harm among themselves or others, but rather contribute to the collective healing of historical trauma and restoration of the beauty and diversity in skin color and hair among African American female adolescents.

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