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Why Policies about Hair Matter for Educational Equality

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My research explores how women of color make decisions about hair styling. Across countries and societies, legacies of slavery, colonialism, and the Civil Rights movement continue to influence the perception of afro-textured hair. Moreover, prejudicial views can adversely influence the social positions of African-American women in areas such as income, housing or employment markets . Schools have a special responsibility to actively address these issues, I argue, because racial biases are often rooted in reactions to people's appearance.

What Explains Reactions to Afro-Textured Hair?

For African American women, stereotypes about "good hair" versus "bad hair" can be traced all the way back to distinctions between house slaves with relatively higher social stature and field slaves with low social stature. To this day, the social status of women can be influenced by whether they are perceived to have "good hair," that is, sleek or wavy hair that falls and "flows in the wind." "Bad hair," in contrast, can be a source of shame and frustration. Many women experience social pressure from their family and peers to adhere to the dominant beauty ideal of long, straight hair -- either by chemically relaxing their own hair or by wearing weaves or wigs that hide their hair's natural texture.

Across countries and societies, women of color attest to the prejudice and stereotypes associated with particular hairstyles. The meaning of the Afro, for instance, is inextricably linked to the Civil Rights Movement and the iconic image of civil rights activist Angela Davis. The Afro is thus seen as the assertion of a strong Black identity, sometimes evoking the stereotype of the "angry-radical-revolutionary-Black woman." In contrast, dreadlocks are at times associated with crime and deviance, and evoking the stereotype of the weed-smoking Rastafari. To avoid negative stereotyping and social exclusion, many women refrain from wearing hairstyles suitable to the texture of their hair, even if such styles feel rooted in their cultural and ethnic heritage.

Adopting straight hairstyles, whether they feel comfortable or not, may be seen as a way to improve women's chances in the job and dating market. In fact, research looking at skin color has found that light-skinned women fare significantly better with regards to educational attainment, employment status, and the social status of their spouse compared to dark-skinned women. My research demonstrates that similar effects exist for hair texture. Furthermore, research has shown that White women exhibit biases toward afro-textured hair – which they tend to regard as less beautiful, less attractive, and less professional than straight-textured hair.

Taken together, these findings highlight the subtle but pervasive ways in which hair issues complicate the lives and claims to equal rights of African-American women. The effects can show up in implicit as well as explicit ways. In one illustrative 2016 example, 15-year-old Ashanti Scott was subject to a new dress code at Butler Traditional High School banning "dreadlocks, cornrolls, twists, mohawks" (sic), and required "afros [be] no

more than two inches in length." Although the Butler school administration suspended the policy shortly after complaints began to flood in via social media, this story is far from isolated. In the U.S. educational system, students of color are frequently subject to unfair and harmful rules policing their personal appearance.

Physical and Psychological Costs

My work explores not only the sources of policies policing appearance in racially unfair ways; I also examine the physical and psychological costs of such policies. First, my research shows that the perceived need to straighten hair can impose significant physical and psychological costs. Secondly, many hairstyling options available to women of color, including braiding styles and weaves, are associated with the risk of permanent scalp issues or hair loss. Lastly, the constant need to manage their appearance and identity undermines women's confidence and self-esteem. In fact, I have heard from some women who admitted to calling in sick and refusing to leave their house, if their hair was not perfectly straight on a particular day.

In contrast, women who were encouraged to embrace their cultural and ethnic heritage and take pride in their hair as well as skin color were more likely to develop a positive self-image from an early age. These women not only avoided bodily harms such as burnt scalps, but were also more likely to develop positive self-esteem. In addition, these women were less likely to assume their natural hair texture could be a barrier to educational or career success.

Ways to Achieve and Teach Equal Rights

My findings emphasize the need to address the social and historical factors underlying the policing of hair in schools, in order to treat the next generations more fairly, and to reduce the risk for physical and psychological injuries stemming from discriminatory school policies and dress codes. Crucially, teachers and school administrators are responsible for making choices that eliminate discrimination in the education of the next generation of citizens. Because people's reactions to each other's appearance is often the first place where racial discrimination finds expression, they should be especially mindful of the ways dress-codes and other policies about personal appearance can unfairly impact students and faculty of color.

Centralized interventions are not always the best way to spark change and broader. The use of social media can be highly effective. With her mother's support, Ashanti Scott chose to challenge her school's hair policy in social media – and the spread of her message led to a widespread condemnation and a swift reversal in school policy. Other efforts can include the use of parent committees to suggest appropriate schools-wide standards. And official interventions can produce shifts in school dress codes, as happened through a letter from the Massachusetts Attorney General's office condemning Mystic Valley Regional Charter School in Malden for expelling students because their hair did not comply with discriminatory dress-codes. Finally, teachers and administrators may need to learn more about the history of Black hair and the physical and psychological injuries African-American women often suffer as they struggle to meet unfair standards of beauty. In other words, diversity teaching for and by teachers should not only focus on the variety of skin tones but should also include lessons on other outward reflections of racial identity such as hair textures and styles.

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Read more in Johanna Lukate, ""Blackness Disrupts my Germanness: On Embodiedment and Questions of Identity and Belonging Among Women of Colour in Germany," in *To Exist is to Resists: Black Feminism in Europe,* edited by Akwugo Emejulu and Francesca Sobande (Pluto Press, forthcoming).