



Exploring the complexity of hair and identity among African American female adolescents in foster care

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ABSTRACT

African American children are disproportionately overrepresented in the child welfare system. Many of these children linger in the system and experience disconnection from their biological families, communities, cultural beliefs, values and practices. Familial socialization and cultural exposure are essential to developing a positive ethnic identity and self-concept. For African American female adolescents, hair and hair care are critical areas for such socialization and support. This exploratory qualitative study examined the hair and hair care experiences and perceptions of African American female adolescents in foster care. The goal was to examine hair and hair's connection to, and influence on, sense of self and self-esteem for African American female adolescents in foster care.

Eleven African American female adolescents participated in individual interviews, and grounded theory was used to analyze the data. Four major themes emerged: perceptions of hair and identity as an African American female; hair care experiences/support and perspectives; societal influences on self-awareness; and influence of the foster care system. Results from the study indicated African American female adolescents in foster care identify hair as important. Participants noted hair was connected to appearance and shaped who they are and how they viewed themselves as African American females. Participants addressed the complexity of hair and politics associated with hair. The findings further emphasized the role of racial socialization and the importance of a supportive hair care environment. Participants also discussed their awareness of societal influences on their perception of African American women. They offered recommendations for improving the hair care experiences of African American children in foster care, for supporting positive development of identity and self-esteem, and for implementing standards of practice that will ensure these youths' cultural needs are addressed in the child welfare system.

1. Introduction

Widespread attention has been given to the disproportionate number of African American children in the child welfare system. In 2015 there were approximately 427, 910 children in foster care, and African Americans comprised 24% of the children in care (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017), although they represented only 14% of the national child population (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2017). Scholars have explored factors that contribute to racial disproportionality and provided recommendations for enhancing services in efforts to decrease the number of African American children in the child welfare system (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972; Derezotes & Poertner, 2005; Everett, Chipungu, & Leashore, 2004 and Roberts, 2002). However, there continues to be much debate and controversy surrounding the complexities of race and why African American children are at greater risk for placement in foster care.

While major attention has been given to the important problem of racial disproportionality, less focus has been placed on the specific cultural needs of African American children once involved in the child welfare system. Yet, African American children involved in the system are at greater risk of receiving fewer services or substandard quality of

services, and they are less likely to be adopted and have longer lengths of stay in care (Barth, 2005). These factors may pose a greater risk of disconnection from biological families, communities, cultural beliefs, and values and practices, especially if the case plan does not include reunification.

There have been efforts made to respond to African American children's cultural needs, primarily by attempting to bolster familial and cultural connections through kinship care and through highlighting the importance of cultural competency and sensitivity when working with African American families (Schwartz, 2007). Less attention however, has been devoted to identifying and implementing practices and policies that promote cultural identity and connection to culture for African American adolescents who often linger in foster care, across all placement types.

1.1. Importance of culture and racial socialization

Familial socialization and cultural exposure are essential to developing positive ethnic identity and self-concept (Neblett, Smalls, Ford, Nguyen, & Sellers, 2009). African American children receive valuable messages regarding race, ethnicity, and culture that promote their development of a positive frame of reference for self-identity, self-worth,

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comfort, and affection, which, in turn, serve as buffers against the negative consequences of racism (Murray & Mandara, 2002). These messages are often conveyed through interactions with family and community members. Thus, African American children who linger in the child welfare system are at risk of losing their connection to African American cultural beliefs and practices, which could deprive them of cultural socialization sources and processes essential for developing healthy self-concept and self-esteem.

1.1.1. Racial socialization around physical attributes

African American females, in particular, often receive subtle and not so subtle messages regarding physical appearance, including features such as hair texture, shape and size of the lips, and skin complexion (McAdoo, 2002). Parker et al. (1995) reflected, “In a context in which the beauty standards of the larger society are often the antithesis of African American physical attributes (facial features, body shape, body size, and hair), positive feedback from other members of the African American community is important” (p. 109). It is critical for African American females to be exposed to racial socialization from individuals who positively affirm the beauty and value of Black physical attributes, including hair (Turnage, 2004). These individuals could be family members, community members, peers or mentors, who can help to counteract or buffer negative messages and social experiences that could potentially have an adverse impact on an adolescent’s construction of positive self-concept and self-esteem around physical beauty. Typically, child welfare systems lack policies and standards of practice tailored to the culturally-specific physical care needs of African American children and adolescents in foster care. Such policies and standards would include exposure to essential racial socialization agents that could be key for promoting their developing physical self-care skills, positive physical identity, and self-esteem, as they learn about what it means to be African American. For many African American adolescents, hair and hair care have particular meaning and salience in shaping identity and self-esteem.

1.2. Importance of hair and hair care

Understanding the history and cultural meanings of Black hair in America are vital to understanding why hair may be particularly important for identity and self-esteem among African American females. Byrd and Tharps (2001) noted, “...ever since African civilizations bloomed, hairstyles have been used to indicate a person’s marital status, age, religion, ethnic identity, wealth, and rank within the community (p. 2)” Enslaved Africans in America were prohibited from utilizing combs and other essential products for hair and grooming, and shaving the heads of slaves was a widespread practice by slave owners in an attempt to erase identity (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). Further, many enslaved Africans were the product of miscegenation and as a result they had European features such as lighter skin and straighter hair. These practices isolated enslaved African Americans from connection to culture and identity, fostering internalized negative messages and longstanding division related to whether natural, wooly or kinky hair is “bad hair” and straight hair is “good hair.”

Following abolishment of slavery, African Americans struggled with redefining what it meant to be of African descent living in America, and “hair was considered the most telling feature of Negro status” (Byrd & Tharps, 2001, p.17). Media messaging was loud and clear, as manufacturers of hair straightening products urged African American women to straighten their hair in an effort to foster societal acceptance (Rooks, 1996). The mid-60’s birthed the revolution of Black hair; the first time African Americans put forth a collective effort to embrace their African roots, political consciousness, and Black pride (Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Rooks, 1996). This era ushered in new perspectives within the African American community emphasizing choice for women in regard to hair style preference and hairstyling techniques, including a surge of elaborate and intricate styles from cornrows, hair weaves and extensions,

to twist and dreadlocks, often reflecting African traditions and identity (For additional information about hair care terms/styles see Byrd & Tharps, 2014). Today this quest continues as African American women highlight the importance of natural hair care.

From an empirical perspective, limited research has been conducted to examine the meaning of hair and hair care among African American female adolescents. Banks (2000) conducted 43 individual interviews and five focus groups with African American girls and women, ages 13 to 76, to explore why hair matters. Consistent with related historical and empirical findings, Banks found that the meaning and value of hair extend beyond grooming practices and aesthetics. Hair holds value whether good or bad, varies as a function of age, relates to U.S. beauty culture, and shapes self-perceptions and identity formation (Banks, 2000). Additional findings from Turnage (2004) confirmed that African American female adolescents continue to contend with dominant European cultural standards of beauty, often having to make decisions about whether to conform and alter their physical appearance or to embrace their ethnic appearance.

Research has not been conducted on the meaning of hair and experiences of hair care among African American female adolescents in foster care, and variability regarding knowledge and experience most likely exists among caregivers within the child welfare system, both African American and non-African American. Building understanding of the cultural significance of hair and its function in promoting the identity and self-esteem of African American female adolescents in foster care is essential for connecting these adolescents to their culture and empowering them to be proud of who they are as African Americans. Thus, this exploratory qualitative study examined the hair and hair care experiences and perceptions of African American female adolescents in foster care, focusing on the role of hair and hair care in identity and self-esteem, hair care experiences and perceptions, and the influences of racial socialization and the foster care system on hair and hair care.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

Purposive sampling was used to identify and recruit female adolescents who met the following study eligibility criteria: 1) each was between the ages of 13 and 17; 2) each self-identified as African American; 3) each was under the guardianship of the Department of Human Services (DHS) for at least one year; and 4) the participants overall were placed in a range of settings, including relative, non-relative, residential care and group homes. This age range was targeted given that developmentally this is the stage where identity development blossoms and adolescents can encounter challenges as they attempt to establish a sense of self (Kools, 1997). Setting diversity was varied in order to examine adolescents’ experiences and perspectives in and across different types of foster care. Participants were sought who were both closely connected to the African American community (e.g., involved with community-based activities/organization, culturally specific services, etc.), and not closely connected to the community.

The study was conducted in a large metropolitan area, in partnership with DHS Child Welfare. A detailed e-mail and flier explaining the study was drafted by the researcher and distributed by a representative of the DHS research committee, to the DHS Child Welfare listserv (including DHS staff, caseworkers, and community partners). DHS staff/caseworkers were encouraged to contact the researcher regarding potential participants. The researcher communicated with caseworkers via e-mail and telephone, and potentially eligible youth based on eligibility criteria, were contacted to discuss their initial interest in the study. Upon referral, the researcher explained the study by verbally reviewing the informed consent form with each interested youth, and obtaining written assent from the youth and legal consent from the caseworker. The researcher coordinated with the youth and care

provider to schedule the interview and identified a meeting location.

2.2. Data collection

Individual interviews were used to explore the research questions. A demographic questionnaire was administered prior to each interview that included specific questions regarding age, race/ethnicity, foster care experiences (e.g., length of stay in foster care, amount of time at current placement, number of placements, etc.), and hair care experiences (e.g., type/style of hair, products, and hair care). Interviews were conducted by the researcher in a private location that was most convenient for participants, such as a quiet room in the home, library, or another community location. The interview guide protocol included questions regarding identity, ethnicity, hair, socialization, and foster care, and allowed for follow up questions based on each participant's responses. Exemplar questions included: 1) "When did you start thinking/caring about your hair?"; 2) How do you typically style/wear your hair?; 3) How important is your hair and how it looks?; 4) How do you feel when your hair looks/doesn't look the way you want?; 5) Tell me about a hair experience that you remember most; 6) What do other people like your friends, family, teachers, or caseworker say about your hair?; 7) You said (name) helps with your hair now, what does the person do? Did you know this person before you went into foster care?; and 8) What could foster parents/caseworkers do to show they care about girls with hair like yours?"

The interviewer's positioning as an African American researcher appeared to facilitate participant's comfort and sharing of information, especially on sensitive topics such as experiences of racism, complexities of colorism (light skin/dark skin) within the African American community. On average, each interview was about an hour and interviews were conducted until theme saturation was largely achieved. Each interview was audio taped and transcribed verbatim.

2.3. Data analysis

This exploratory study used grounded theory to examine the relationship of hair and hair care, with self-concept, self-esteem, racial socialization, and foster care. Grounded theory can be a useful method when there is little knowledge in a particular area and when exploring how people define and experience situations within a particular context/setting, such as foster care (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). There is very little information available on the hair care experiences of African American female adolescents in foster care. The racial socialization literature suggests that African American female adolescents may encounter situations that influence their perception of hair and hair care and how they view themselves. Thus, use of this approach facilitated analysis of African American female adolescents' experiences and perceptions related to hair and hair care in the unique context of foster care.

Open coding was used to identify as many categories as possible, then related categories were grouped by themes. Each interview was transcribed and analyzed individually for specific information, then the categories were compared to assess similarities pertaining to specific phenomena and subcategories were formulated based on similarities. The researcher also noted participants' affect and non-verbal body language during the interviews. Memos and journals were used to assist the researcher in capturing the researcher's responses and reactions to the information, as well as, to track general themes that emerged during each interview. Memos helped with identifying shifts in the data or content, and noting relationships between categories. The use of grounded theory facilitated the researcher's understanding of the varied perceptions and experiences reported, such as socialization messages, placement context, connection to biological family, community, culture, and other important factors. The final stage of data analysis included selective coding, which consisted of validating the relationship between main categories and integrating the empirical data to help

identify emergent theoretical elements. The researcher also ensured saturation of the data occurred and that no new information, categories or themes emerged within the study. Member checking with interviewees was utilized to ensure accuracy of the researcher's interpretation of participants' reports. Interviewees were contacted during data analysis to review excerpts of their transcripts and to confirm the meaning and intent of their statements and descriptions.

3. Results

3.1. Demographics

Study participants included 11 female adolescents who self-identified as African American and were born in the U.S., consistent with the study's attention to the historical and cultural context of African American hair and hair care. Participants' ages ranged from 13 to 17, and all were under the guardianship of DHS Child Welfare for at least one year. Placement types included relative, non-relative, and adoptive. Participants reported being in foster care from one to 17 years, and the number of placements ranged from one to 14. Participants described their hair texture as thick, soft, nappy, and curly. All participants reported having contact with biological family members including parents, grandparents, siblings, and extended family members. Some had frequent contact, including regular visits, while some had limited contact via telephone. Most of the participants reported being involved in dance, sports, church and/or community-based activities.

3.2. Interview themes

Four major themes emerged from the data: perceptions of hair and identity as an African American female; hair care experiences/support and perspectives; societal influences on self-awareness; and influence of the foster care system.

3.3. Perceptions of hair and identity as an african american female

The value of hair as a representation of one's identity and a contributor to self-esteem was evident across interviews. Subthemes emerged around importance, appearance, and self-esteem.

3.3.1. Importance of hair and appearance

All 11 participants reported that their hair was important and many participants emphasized hair as a reflection of their identity. Participant 7 remarked:

I think hair is important because there are so many reasons, it brings out who you are. It is fun to do things with your hair, like braids or just letting it out naturally. If I didn't have hair, I probably would wear a wig or something. I don't think you could go without hair.

Another participant stated, "Yes, it is important because it just shapes who I am... it makes me feel more confident and more girly" (participant 2). The idea that hair may hold special importance for African Americans was echoed by participant 4 who shared, "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 in a ponytail and slick it back rather than white people and Hispanics, so a little bit more."

Nine participants were candid about discussing the importance of physical appearance and overall image, as judged by themselves and by others. For example, participant 4 explained,

I feel like your hair and your face, not even really your face, but your hair kind of fits your image. If your hair is a mess people are probably going to think you are a mess. I feel like it is very important to keep your hair up.

Another participant stated,

Yes, if I come out and my hair is not looking the way I want it to be, I don't feel comfortable. I just don't feel comfortable. It is like having a piece of food on your face and no one tells you. It is kind of embarrassing, and you don't even know it. Me, personally, and I don't know if this is just me, over thinking, but if I know something is not right on me, I feel like everyone is looking at me (participant 4).

Participant 11 asserted that appearance may be more important for African Americans:

Yeah, I think it just shows what kind of person you are. To me, if you have crazy, frizzy hair, that is just nappy—I don't think it matters to white people. They can just wear it down and it looks all the same. I think with black people it is different, because you have to try harder for your hair. I feel if you don't try and make your hair look good, it looks like you don't care about yourself.

These statements suggest an intersection of appearance and self-care, as participants surmised that failing to properly care for one's hair implied not caring about oneself.

3.3.2. Self-esteem

Participants noted that there were many factors that influenced their esteem, and which varied from day to day. They shared a wide range of feelings connected to hair and sense of self, as well as discussed how other factors, such as being in foster care or not being able to achieve a desired look, influenced how they felt about their hair and themselves. Participant 5 stated, “When my hair looks nice, I feel pretty, and try to figure out an outfit to go with how my hair looks.” Participant 6 noted, “I feel pretty. I feel my best right when I get my hair done, a new weave or something.” Another participant directly connected her hair to feeling confident: “I feel like when my hair looks good, I don't really worry about it. I feel more confidence if my hair looks good” (participant 11).

Some participants described variability in how their hair and feelings toward self were related. For example, participant 4 described:

When I do wear my regular hair, I don't feel as pretty as I would if I had a weave, a straight weave. I feel like a different person, kind of. I am still the same person, but I feel different with the weave. It is not really my hair, but it is close to what other people like, other than my real hair.

Another participant stated, “Yeah, when I don't have my hair done, I feel like ... ugly” (participant 6). This participant also described how she had been wearing her hair in a messy bun lately, which was related to the stress of moving from a foster home she had been in for years out-of-state: “It is usually because just being in foster care is stressful, so I have school and all that, and have to get up early, so usually when I am just really tired or stressed out” (participant 6). The experiences participants shared suggest that they incorporated hair into their identity and sense of self-esteem, while also acknowledging the impact of other societal influences, such as internalizing messages, whether positive or negative, about what it meant to be an African American female.

3.4. Hair care experiences, support and perspectives

This theme reflects on how participants defined their hair and what they did to care for it, as well as participants' perceptions of their hair. Interconnected thematic categories include knowledge and responsibility, maintenance and manageability, and appreciation for uniqueness and generational differences.

3.4.1. Knowledge and responsibility

Nine participants shared various ways they learned how to care for their hair. Some participants indicated they learned just by doing or observing. One participant remarked, “I have a sister and I played with her hair. Sometimes I braided her hair and stuff like that, that was

mostly it. Her hair is softer than mine, which made it easier to play with” (participant 11). Another participant shared, “Yes, she [grandmother] taught us different hair styles. When she would do my sister's hair, she would have us sit and watch. That is how I knew how to curl mine, and stuff” (participant 9). In contrast to learning from family of origin, participant 5 described the progress she has made since her foster parent taught her how to properly care for her hair:

I feel that I'm getting there. I used to flat iron my hair and put a lot of oils in it to get it really straight, and I was never really taught that that is not the way that it needed to be done. Then when I came here, she [foster parent] told me that is how your hair gets all sticking together and it doesn't flow. Then she taught me to just put a little bit of oil in it and it gets like this. So after she taught me the first few times, I have been doing it.

Participants communicated insight about needing hair care products to properly care for their hair. Seven participants indicated that by the time they had entered middle school, they were doing their own hair, as a natural progression toward independence. Other reasons included change in the caregiver's commitment to continue to care for their hair (due to time or participant's style preference), or peers teasing them about their hair. One participant shared “Well, it hurt whenever she did my hair, so I think 12 was around the time I started getting in middle school. I wanted to do it myself, so I told her I was going to do it by myself. She was fine with it” (participant 11). Participants also noted that their assuming responsibility was typically a decision made with their care provider. Participant 4 explained how being teased by peers and feeling embarrassed led to her doing her own hair:

A lot of the kids in my class would say that I put chicken grease in my hair or it was too oily or something. Then that is when after a while I just started to do my own hair because of the embarrassment... I just stopped putting oils in my hair. I would just keep my hair – usually what I would do is wet it and it would be a natural kind of shine for a little bit and then it would eventually dry up and become really poofy or something.

3.4.2. Maintenance and manageability

Eleven participants discussed the importance of having the correct hair care products and styling aids to properly care for their hair. Some participants also discussed their typical hair care routine used to maintain healthy hair or a particular hairstyle:

We have to use certain things like oils, different kinds of shampoos. We can't just go to the discount store and get an off-brand kind in order for our hair to be healthy... I do it all by myself, so it takes a while for me to do it (participant 4).

Most participants named grease, oil, and gel as the primary products used for hair care. Other products such as pink lotion, conditioner, and curl activator were mentioned. A doo-rag or scarf to wrap hair up was described as a method to preserve hairstyle. Ten participants conveyed an understanding of the type of products to use and things they needed to do to maintain good hair care practices.

Some participants stated they wore certain hairstyles for convenience, while others selected a hairstyle because of the way it looked. For example, participant 2 noted, “... I can do more with my hair in braids... put them in a bun, twist them, and braid it all in one braid.” Participants also discussed the type of hair they desired, such as long, straight, or thin, and how they selected a hairstyle to achieve this look. Participant 10 discussed the importance of familiarity and individuality, as she selected hairstyles that were not trendy: “Yeah, I like to wear my hair in different styles, not like how everyone is wearing their hair nowadays. I just stick with the hairstyles that I can do and am familiar with.” These participants emphasized maintenance as an important aspect of hair care, and when they had access to the proper products, they were able to manipulate and manage their hair.

Eight participants discussed a variety of experiences from selecting hairstyles that were easy to manage, to altering their hair to make it more manageable. For example, participant 11 stated, “It was just really simple, and I think that’s why I liked it. I didn’t have to wake up and do my hair.” Another participant discussed using chemicals to alter the state of her hair for manageability:

Sometimes I want to get a perm because when I shampoo my hair, it is hard to comb out and when a perm is in my hair, it is not hard. But she [grandmother] said, ‘That perm, it makes your hair fall out, so I don’t know’ (participant 8).

The ability to comb one’s hair seemed to be a key aspect of manageability. Some participants noted difficulty with not being able to comb their hair. Participant 4 associated this difficulty with feeling scared to comb her hair, as she was afraid of pain:

It just shrivels up a little bit and is hard to comb, too, because I have really curly hair and then when I am trying to comb it out, it hurts my head. I don’t like pain in my head, it hurts. I’m kind of scared to comb my hair when it is like that, because I’m afraid of the pain, so I end up probably just leaving it like that until I end up flat ironing it again. The flat iron will kind of straighten it out in order for it to be easier for me to comb it out.

Some participants discussed challenges with manageability, but chose to use other methods besides chemicals, including products like olive oil, shampoos, and conditioners, to help address these challenges.

3.4.3. *Appreciation for uniqueness and generational change*

Ten participants were able to articulate something they liked about their hair; despite some wishing they had other qualities. They commented on length, texture, and versatility with styling. Participant 5 noted, “It is soft, and I like the color of it, and how it flows in the wind.” Another participant remarked:

I do like that my hair is curly, even [though] it comes with being coarse and hard to brush. I like that, and that is the reason I [haven’t] put relaxer in my hair. I really like my curls. I like that I can make it straight if I want it to. I just think I like it because it can do a lot of things (participant 11).

Participant 10 noted differences in comparison to hair texture of non African-Americans. “I like that it is thick and different from other people’s hair. I like the short style sometimes... because other people like their hair really long and silky, sleek-like, like Caucasian people. I just like my hair.” Participant 7 expressed how she embraced a hairstyle not commonly worn. She remarked, “It is an afro and not many people have afros. It is fun to play with when you have nothing to do.”

A shared perspective that emerged during discussion of hair attributes was having hair that flowed in the wind. For example, participant 3 stated, “When it flows with the wind... that is when I have my real hair. That blows with the wind as well...” Participant 4 explained:

I like that my hair is long enough to flat iron. 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.

Another participant noted how she does not like the texture of her hair because it does not flow. She remarked, “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” (participant 7). All of the participants who conveyed this sentiment either permed their hair or straightened it with a flat iron. This perspective is striking as it could be interpreted that these participants were aspiring to achieve a look that is not often associated with Black hair.

Nine participants expressed appreciation for their hair and its unique attributes. In addition, three participants also spoke to historical

aspects of Black hair care, by discussing generational differences among hairstyles and hair care perspectives. Participant 4 explained the challenge of receiving hair care advice from her older foster parent:

Now she [foster parent] is older, she is 62, and she gets just basically curls in her hair, an older woman hair style... now if I ask her advice on hair, she would kind of give me something that she felt was nice in her time. I am older now and also my generation is totally different from her generation. I don’t like what she chooses for me... she tells me that I should get little curls or something, and I don’t want those curls. She might tell me to go with a natural ‘fro or something, and I don’t want a natural ‘fro... she is giving older advice about how it would be in her time. There are just certain things that I don’t ask for her help.

On the other hand, participant 10 talked about being inspired by how her grandmother styled her hair and wanting to achieve the same look:

...because other African Americans from back in the day, I see how they be having their hair. They have the little curly hairstyles, and use hot combs and stuff to curl it. That’s what I do sometimes and my grandma does to my hair, so I’ll look like an intelligent person.

These findings suggest there is a link between self-concept and hair. More importantly, they confirm the importance of looking presentable and intelligent.

3.5. *Societal influences on self-awareness*

Eleven participants shared that the hair care messages they received from family members, peers, and society in general influenced how they viewed African American hair. Their descriptions provide validation that racial socialization plays a role in influencing African American female adolescents’ perception of hair/hair care. This theme was revealed through the categories of media, cultural differences, and other people’s perceptions.

3.6. *Media*

Seven participants shared their views on the portrayal of African American women in media (television, magazine, and social media). They discussed commonalities regarding what was displayed; for example:

Mainly what I see in commercials, they always talk about there are certain products that they use, and they never show African American women - they always show white women, and I don’t like the fact that they do that because they make it seem like their product that they are trying to sell is only for that type of hair... it is just a stereotype (participant 5).

Some participants highlighted how there seemed to be a preference for long straight hair and how this is not common for African American hair:

I feel that is what people want to see [straight hair]. I think people think nowadays that is beautiful, other than curly hair; they are, oh, her hair is nappy or something else. Where if the hair is straight, they are, she has beautiful hair (participant 4).

Likewise, participant 6 stated, “Hair like white people, straight... society thinks it is prettier.” Participant 11 discussed how she observed the promotion of natural hair for African American women in social media:

I was looking at You-Tube things, and there was something about how to do the natural process and how to do your hair naturally, I was thinking, don’t people already know that. Then I thought about it, and they probably don’t because they have weaves and stuff so it

is harder to take care of your hair.

She also highlighted how there is more awareness of natural hair: ... “I feel like people are trying to bring the pride of having your hair natural, which I think is really cool.”

3.7. Cultural differences

Five participants highlighted noticeable differences between African American hair and the hair of people of other ethnicities. They emphasized versatility with African American hair such as hair texture and hairstyles. Participant 9 stated, “Caucasian people, their hair doesn't really get nappy that much... they can't do black people hair styles.” Another participant noted, “Yeah, the black people have the worst hair and white people have good hair - Mexicans have good hair because it grows longer than ours” (participant 3). Participant 5 described her perspective on cultural differences when she observed other African American children with non- African American care providers:

That's why I really don't like, when I see African American kids adopted... it is like we know what we can and can't do to our hair, and they are so used to what they use, and the products that they use in their hair and what they do... how they do their hair versus how we do our hair is a totally different concept. I just feel that the way that they do their hair is totally different.

3.8. Other people's perceptions

Eight participants reported awareness of how other people perceived their hair or they commented on how African American hair was perceived in general. They primarily noted compliments they received about their hair. Some participants reported assumptions made based on factors such as texture and length:

Yeah, people say I have pretty straight hair, that is because it is flat ironed, but most of the time, if I was going to get compliments on my hair, it would be because of my hair color, because I always change my hair color (participant 4).

Another participant noted, “When I wear curly weaves, people like my hair better... just that it looks prettier. I guess just because, I don't know, anything new is prettier. My foster mom - she likes my curly hair better than when I get it straight” (participant 6).

A topic that is salient within African American culture and is often sensitive to discuss is colorism. Colorism is the difference between skin complexion, categorized as light and dark skinned, where those with lighter skin receive better treatment than those with darker skin. Three participants discussed this issue in association with hair and other people's perceptions. Participant 3 remarked:

... or the only thing they could say is I am prettier. Because they are light skinned... they say light skin is prettier. I said, I guess you can say that, call it how you see it. I could care less... 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 skin has better hair, I think, than light skins.

Further participant 6 stated, in reference to wearing natural hair, “It is more, 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.”

The term “good hair” arose during some interviews. This term is used within African American culture to denote hair that is similar to European hair. This researcher expected to hear this term throughout the interviews, but it was only stated by two participants. Participant 11 remarked, “I think good hair is white hair, the less coarse it is, the better it is.” Another participant acknowledged hearing the term, but not

knowing what it meant. She stated, “My grandma and my mom say I have good hair, but I don't know what they mean by that... that it doesn't fall out a lot, that it is long?” (participant 8). Although other participants did not use the term “good hair”, references were made throughout the interviews that implied their understanding of the term, such as the desire to have long and straight hair, consistent with European hair.

Some participants discussed peer influence on hair style:

Every black girl I know my age wears weaves. I don't know anybody that wears their natural hair... I haven't been to school out here, but everybody I know in Arizona wears weaves and all the girls out here that I have met so far wear weaves. It is just weave, weave, weave (participant 6).

Participants seemed to be very aware of what others had to say about their hair and their own observations of those statements and perceptions, which suggest that the messages received about hair and their surroundings potentially influence their hair choices.

3.9. Influence of the foster care system

Participants discussed the impact of living in foster care on their hair and hair care experiences and perceptions. Some participants recalled vivid memories of their early childhood and how they felt about their hair while in foster care. Participant 7 explained how she did not take pictures of herself when she moved to a new foster home because she did not like how she looked in the photos:

Yeah, I do (referring to a photo), it is at my old foster mom's house, a school picture and it looked horrible. It made my whole entire smile look crooked because my hair was not even combed out. Yet, everybody still loved my hair.

A few participants reflected on their early childhood hair care memories, particularly with their biological mothers. Participant 3 expressed how she wished her foster parent would have used a similar approach as her mother when it came to hair care. She shared, “When I was with my mom, she used to make me sit there and get my hair done. I wish she [foster parent] would be at least like her [mother], but she was not at all.”

Ten participants reported not having any conversations with caseworkers regarding their hair care needs; some stated they rarely had any contact with their caseworkers. Many participants indicated that taking care of their hair was the responsibility of their care providers. Participant 4 stated, “To be honest, I don't remember any of them [child welfare staff] helping me with my hair. Me and my foster mom have always taken care of my hair. If it wasn't her or it wasn't me, it wasn't them.” She also mentioned race and the lack of knowledge regarding hair care as factors in not talking with her caseworker about hair. She reported “No, she is white. She doesn't even know. I feel like I don't try to complain too much. I am the type of person that if I feel something, I try to fix it myself.” (participant 4). Another participant talked about a caseworker's attempt to be helpful and reported “No, she actually sent me to this one thing ..., and you get a dress and do your hair and make you look all pretty. I was like, I am not letting them mess up my hair” (participant 5).

Three participants highlighted how their relationship with their foster parent improved their knowledge of hair and hair care, and influenced how they cared for their hair. One participant noted the benefit that her foster parent was a licensed beautician; but in contrast to these positive influences, most participants recalled the negative impacts that being in foster care had on their hair and hair care.

Participant 2 reflected on being in a foster home where the foster parents were not knowledgeable about caring for her hair:

I used to have barrettes all over my head until I came here [current foster home]... they just would stick it up in the barrettes and let it

stay there until it would get stuck to my head... it was hard to take them out and would be hard to comb out... it would hurt.

Another participant remarked:

Most of them were Caucasian, so they weren't quite sure what to do with my hair because it was nappy and really short... my hair wasn't that strong, it is pretty weak, so they just pulled it and strands of hair would just fall out (participant 7).

Participant 6 stated, "She [foster parent] bought sew-ins for sewing into a scalp... yeah, she doesn't know the difference between braiding hair and sewing hair... she doesn't even ask questions anymore. She just gives me money." Participant 5 discussed how she believed money played a major role in the lack of hair care she received in former foster homes:

Other than the foster placement that I am in now, my previous foster home was very, I don't know, honestly I never had really good hair care there, because she wouldn't get me the things that I needed. When it came time for me to do my hair, I had to ask my [biological] mother to send me the money to get it done.

Participant 1 described her experience of being in a group home and not having access to hair care products: "I was used to having them available to me, so I guess it was just like shock or something." She also noted that getting her hair done was used as a reward at the group home rather than as a basic care need. She selected to go to the beauty shop as her reward. Other participants shared that their care providers covered the cost of hair care, and for the most part they were able to get their hair care needs met.

4. Recommendations for foster care system

All of the participants provided recommendations for what the foster care system could do to ensure African American female adolescents in foster care receive proper hair care. Many of the recommendations focused on the importance of having foster parents who are knowledgeable about Black hair and placing African American children with African American foster parents. Participant 2 stated, "They should just place them where someone can do hair and care for their hair... African Americans that know how to do hair... because they know about their race's hair." Another participant highlighted the importance of feeling comfortable asking for what she needed: "Actually, sometimes I just wouldn't ask for stuff from the foster mom and would just have my [biological] mom get it, because I knew she would know what to get" (participant 11).

Some participants emphasized the importance of knowing about different hair textures for African Americans, which may impact the type of hair products needed. Participant 1 explained, "Not all girls have the same type of hair... some people have really curly hair and some have wavy hair, and some have super-super curly hair. So we don't always use the same products." Participant 5 noted:

Everybody's hair texture is different and some need different attention than others. Some need braids more often to help it grow and get to the point where it needs to be taken care of. Some just need to learn how to do their hair.

Participant 4 provided instructions for foster parents of different race children:

They should go online and figure it out, look around, see how black people's hair is, and maybe even talk to some black people and ask them what they should do, [say] that they have a foster child that is African American and they want to help them out but don't really know what to do... it's their choice, they could bring them in a shop or they could actually figure out ways that they could help to do their hair - Or go to your foster child and ask them how do they think is the best way to take care of their hair and what are some

ways they can help them to take care of their hair and just be a support system.

Other participants also mentioned the importance of directly asking a foster child about their hair care needs. This could be a conversation that a caseworker has with the child prior to placement or one a foster parent has with the child at the beginning of a placement. Participants seemed to be very clear about what worked and what was helpful. They provided practical recommendations that could easily be implemented in the foster care system.

5. Discussion

This exploratory qualitative study examined the current hair and hair care experiences and perceptions of African American female adolescents in foster care, specifically examining their attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, and socialization messages regarding hair and the association of hair and hair care with their identity and self-esteem. Exploring the topics of hair and hair care evoked references to racism, colorism, and generational differences within African American culture, reflecting the strong connections of culture and hair. Overall, many of the study's results were consistent with the literature surrounding the role of racial socialization in establishing an ethnic identity and developing a healthy sense of self and self-esteem.

Consistent with the literature, the African American female adolescents in foster care in this study shared similar hair care experiences as reported for African American adolescents in general (Banks, 2000; Phinney, 1989). They discussed their struggles with coming to terms with their hair, learning how to care for their hair, and taking great pride in their hair. It was expected that adolescents who remained in foster care would have limited to no contact with their biological families; however, many participants reported having consistent relationships with biological family members that directly and indirectly contributed to their hair care knowledge. Some participants made clear distinctions regarding their hair care interactions with African American providers versus White providers. Participants seemed to be more comfortable with and receptive of knowledge received from African American care providers. Given the connection many participants had with biological family members, it is assumed that the knowledge passed down was from an African American perspective, which would imply inter-generational communication of attitudes, beliefs, and approaches regarding hair and hair care. These findings speak to the importance of culturally-based community connections in supporting African American female adolescents in developing appropriate hair care practices and routines. In association with this contact, many participants reported benefits of gaining important cultural knowledge and information about hair and hair care from family and community members, confirming early literature that racial socialization plays a key role in the acquisition of knowledge (Lesane-Brown, 2006). Most of the participants had been in foster care long-term, common for adolescents in care, but all reported having contact with family members, suggesting familial contact serves as a buffer and potentially has a positive impact on identity development. Findings from other studies (Kools, 1997; Schwartz, 2007) have addressed the importance of familial connection in promoting healthy sense of self and a positive ethnic identity.

This study's results regarding hair's influence on identity and self-esteem is also supported by Banks (2000) findings, which concluded that hair holds value and that there is a relationship between hair and identity. In addition, McAdoo (2002) highlighted the messages that African American females receive about appearance and how these messages can shape their awareness of hair texture and skin complexion. This is consistent with the study participants' discussion of the significance of overall appearance. Participants also commented about the amount of time and effort that goes into looking presentable, and how this is of utmost importance. These findings reinforce the

importance of taking a holistic approach when considering the well-being of African American children, extending beyond attention to a safe living environment, to factor in culture and provide resources to support young women in developing a healthy sense of self and positive self-esteem.

All participants endorsed hair's importance and its link to appearance and self-esteem. For example, many participants gave examples of situations where they did not achieve a desired look and how that impacted whether or not they felt that they looked presentable, how they interpreted how other perceived their appearance, and how they felt overall about themselves. Turnage (2004) found a similarly strong connection between self-perception and self-esteem. While much of the literature on improving the outcomes of children in foster care is disappointing, these findings offer promise around the potential for adolescent females in foster care to develop and convey pride in identifying as African Americans.

The study participants were very cognizant of the influence of media and the messages perpetuated about African American women regarding image. More importantly, they highlighted the lack of African American women and dominance of European women in media. Awad et al. (2015) discuss how society's view of what is attractive or unattractive for a Black female- profoundly impacts psychosocial development. African American female adolescents in foster care are not exempt from societal influences such as those conveyed in media. This impact was evident through the discussion of a few participants who expressed the desire to have hair that flows in the wind, signifying an attribute more consistent with European hair. Poran (2002) reported similar findings among women of color in college who defined beauty that resembled that of the dominant culture's standards of beauty. This finding speaks to the challenges African American females encounter as they evaluate messages they receive about what it means to be an African American female in this society, and how to process these messages as they navigate their quest for ethnic identity.

Participants addressed the complexity of politics surrounding Black hair. This was evident through their discussions of challenges specific to African Americans and hair. They discussed the importance of having care providers who understand Black hair, but more importantly, they indirectly spoke to the need to have a hair care environment that affirms who they are as African American females, that is non-judgmental regarding hair care preferences (natural or altered), that allows them to be comfortable with who they are, and that ultimately supports their decisions in how to care for their hair.

Understanding the politics of Black hair is vital for any care provider of African American female adolescents. African Americans are generally more focused on hair than other cultural groups, in part directly connected to a traumatic history and how hair (specifically hair texture) was used as a way to cause division among African Americans. Today, there is a movement encouraging African American women to embrace their natural hair and be proud of their hair texture.

The findings were mixed in comparison with other studies suggesting that long-term foster care and multiple placements adversely impact ethnic identity (Kools, 1997; White et al., 2008). Some participants reported benefits based on placement with care providers who were knowledgeable about Black hair care, while other participants reported the negative impact of placement with care providers who were not knowledgeable. In regards to the benefits of non-relative placements, participants indicated that it was helpful to have a care provider who was culturally attuned to their hair care needs. Some participants recalled challenging experiences they encountered, which collectively appeared to be the result of the care provider's lack of knowledge regarding Black hair and hair care. Participants shared painful memories of their hair hurting when combed, not liking how they looked in photos, and not being able to adopt certain hairstyles (such as braids) due to cost and lack of funding. As a result, participants provided a variety of suggestions to improve the experiences of African American female adolescents in foster care surrounding hair care.

6. Implications for the foster care system

Valuable input was provided by participants around their need for validation and support. Associated recommendations to help address some of these needs include: 1) Increase caseworkers' awareness of the importance of culture and hair care among African American children in foster care; 2) Ensure that caseworkers and care providers are knowledgeable about Black hair care and hair care products for African American children in foster care; 3) Facilitate the development of partnerships between the foster care system and independent beauticians/barbers and local beauty salons and barbershops to address the hair care needs of African American children in foster care; and 4) Target funds to pay for the hair care needs of African American children in foster care.

Insufficient access to hair care products, as well as to support around proper hair care maintenance, were reflected in participants' reports of lack of knowledge and inappropriate use of hair care products, which could have an adverse impact on African American adolescents in foster care. Training should be developed to teach Black hair care to caseworkers and care providers. Through training, workers could gain a better understanding of the importance of hair and learn basic information regarding hair care products, hair care maintenance, and resources to meet the hair care needs of African American children in foster care. The training should also address the complexity and politics of Black hair, which are key aspects to understanding Black hair care. There is a delicate intersection of politics and development, as African American females find themselves at different stages of the developmental continuum when it comes to hair and hair care. Caseworkers would benefit from advice on how to ask about the hair care needs of African American children when considering placement options to ensure hair care support and supply needs are addressed. Many of the participants discussed the value of having connection to their biological families, suggesting that hair could potentially be used as a focal point for connecting youth with their biological families, and utilizing these relationships to help foster meaningful connections. In turn such connections could help African American female adolescents in foster care obtain valuable information regarding hair and hair care and potentially advance reunification by fostering positive interactions.

Finally, many participants reported that they were responsible for their hair care. They also confirmed that they primarily relied on their care providers to purchase hair care products and pay for hair care services. Caring for African American hair can be expensive and it appears as though providers are not compensated for these expenses. It would be beneficial for the foster care system to examine out-of-pocket hair care expenses for care providers, and include additional funding for hair care expenses.

7. Limitations

Findings from this exploratory qualitative study are intended to provide an in-depth view of the hair and hair care experiences and perceptions of a small number of African American adolescents in foster care and thus, are not intended for generalization to the population overall. Recruitment efforts were limited to participants who were accessible to the researcher, primarily through identification by DHS caseworkers. The study did not recruit participants in residential settings and it was limited to the experiences of African American female adolescents with open cases.

Despite these limitations, findings from this study could serve as the foundation for more extensive research in the area of race, ethnicity, hair, and hair care in the foster care system. Several important aspects were unearthed that warrant further exploration, such as detailed examination of the hair and hair care experiences and perceptions of African American males, multi-ethnic youth, and youth in specific placement types (e.g., kin care vs. group homes). Additional research could be conducted to investigate child welfare agency staff, care

providers', and community members' understanding of Black hair care, to develop and validate culturally specific training for caseworkers and care providers regarding hair and hair care, and to further analyze important factors associated with the connection of hair to sense of self and self-esteem, considering a larger, more representative sample of the population. Building upon this research, a logical next step would be to develop and evaluate a culturally specific training and support approach, as participants emphasized the need for care providers to be culturally aware of, and responsive to the hair preferences and hair care needs of African American children. Findings from such research would be generalizable to child welfare as a whole.

8. Conclusion

In sum, findings highlight areas for additional research, training, and policy development to ensure African American children receive the validation and support needed to properly address hair and hair care, as well as foster positive racial identity and self-esteem. Opportunity exists for caseworkers, care providers, and community partners to increase their knowledge and awareness of hair and hair care, and to promote significant improvement in the hair care experiences of African American children in foster care, by developing policies and practices that will properly support their hair care needs.

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