

**U.S. Black Hair Politics: A Public Health Concern for Black Women and Girls**

by

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University of Pittsburgh, 2022

## **Abstract**

Black women and girls in the United States disproportionately experience adverse health outcomes. While racism has been widely discussed as a determinant of health, we need to consider the intersectional experiences of Black women and girls and how health inequities perpetuate. Although the denigration of afro-textured hair has received some legal attention, it has been overlooked as a public health and equity concern. This critical literature synthesis presents the impact of Black hair politics on the well-being of Black women and girls through three specific factors: physiological, psychosocial, and socioeconomic. These influences exist at different levels of the social-ecological model, highlighting its public health significance and need for multilevel interventions. Legislation like the CROWN Act sets a legal precedent to change the conditions in which Black women and girls live, learn, and grow. In addition, an intervention for educational and medical institutions is suggested. It includes the integration of Black hair education, empowerment, inclusion, and accountability into curricula and practice to mitigate health inequities.

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## **Preface**

### **Acknowledgements**

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### **Capitalization**

It was challenging to balance the power dynamics of capitalization while also recognizing the significance of the social construct of race. I understand scholars who argue against the capitalization of the "w" in White for it has been used in supremacist contexts (e.g., Pérez-Huber, 2010; Stewart et al., 2017). At the same time, I recognize the immense force White supremacy has in our society and do not want to neutralize its impact on the lives of Black individuals (Ewing,

2020). Thus, I capitalize the “w” because the conversation around Black hair cannot happen without emphasizing the presence of Whiteness and privileges afforded to its social group. Lastly, I capitalize the “b” in Black to signify a collective identity resulting from enslavement and elevate their lived experiences.

## **Language**

*Black*: the descendants of enslaved peoples from African countries; individuals of the African diaspora

*Black/afro-textured hair*: the hair of Black individuals, altered (e.g., straight) or unaltered (e.g., natural)

*Natural hair*: the hair texture of Black individuals as it grows out of the scalp (e.g., curly, coily)

## 1.0 Introduction

Racial health inequities are not new; in fact, they are embedded in the fabric of what is now known as the United States (US) (Hammonds & Herzig, 2008; Krieger & Bassett, 1986; Omi & Winant, 2014). This country was constructed around the idea of the superiority of Whiteness. Racial oppression was the means to justify a capitalistic entity built on (1) the forced labor and enslavement of African captives and (2) the attempted genocide and displacement of Native nations and indigenous peoples (e.g., Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014; Omi & Winant, 2014). Thus, it is only natural that this nation would perpetuate a climate indifferent to the life outcomes (e.g., health) of marginalized social groups.

While I acknowledge the intergenerational trauma, structural violence, and health inequities apparent in Native communities, this paper explicitly explores the trauma of enslavement and its relation to anti-Blackness. More specifically, I focus on a group of individuals who, although have unique, individual experiences, share a collective experience in living within “imperialist-White-supremacist-capitalistic-patriarchal” structures (hooks, 1984): Black women and girls.

Institutionalized gendered racism (Jackson et al., 2001) is responsible for the adverse health experiences of Black women and girls. Extensive research has documented health inequities in mental health, infant and maternal health, gender-based violence, cardiometabolic diseases, breast cancer, and other life outcomes (e.g., Chin et al., 2021), and that these inequities are rooted in racism.

Audre Lorde, a self-defined “black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet,” is one of several scholars who have devoted themselves to Black Feminist (e.g., Collins, 2000; hooks, 1993) and

Womanist frameworks (e.g., Barlow, 2019; Hurston, 1937; Walker, 1983/2005) as a call for action against the disposability of Black women in the U.S. She writes, “Black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible,” (Lorde, 1984) and thus the structures and circumstances contributing to their well-being also go undetected.

Centering the voices of Black women is the only path towards health equity (Barlow & Johnson, 2021) and assuring that factors influential to their health are not overlooked. This includes phenotypical characteristics that are racialized and inseparable from the experiences of living while a Black women or girl. There is one salient factor that has defined Black feminine being in the aftermath of colonization. It has been used for centuries to degrade their humanness and elicit subjugation to oppressive systems that negatively impact their health and well-being. It is something non-Black individuals are quick to dismiss as significant and something Black women are continuously dealing with every day. The phenomenon is Black hair and the politicization of it from enslavement to contemporary times.

### **1.1 Black Hair and Why it Matters**

Black hair is more than aesthetics for Black women and girls. It is a medium of self-expression and individuality, but also a medium for oppression. Scholars across disciplines (i.e., anthropology, Black studies, sociology) have investigated the cultural significance of hair to Black women and girls in the context of prevailing Eurocentric beauty standards, racial identity, and discrimination (Banks, 2000; Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Craig, 2002; Jacobs-Huey, 2006; Rooks, 1996). Essentially, the way their hair grows out of their scalp, or natural hair, is deemed unacceptable and unattractive in juxtaposition to dominant, colonized paradigms that White hair

(straight, smooth, long) is most desirable. The following revelation by Lester (2000) perfectly depicts the complexity of afro-textured hair and Black femininity:

*Competing mythologies around something as deceptively insignificant as hair still haunt and complicate African Americans' self-identities and their ideals of beauty, thus revealing broad and complex social, historical, and political realities. The implications and consequences of the seemingly radical split between European standards of beauty and black people's hair become ways of building or crushing a black person's self-esteem, all based on the straightness or nappiness of an individual's hair (p. 203)*

The decision for Black women and girls to wear their hair in Afrocentric styles has resulted in discrimination and harassment in the spaces they exist everyday such as schools, workplaces, and institutions (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). While outcries for legislative attention have existed for decades, it was finally met with legal action in 2019. The Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair (CROWN) Act prohibits discrimination of race-based hairstyles and texture in schools, workplaces, and public accommodations and enforces accountability (*The Official CROWN Act*, n.d.). This acknowledges Black hair harassment as a social injustice.

However, this discourse fails to look at living with Black hair in a systems-lens – taking an interdisciplinary examination at Black hair politics, their findings, and its impact on the overall health and well-being. Thus, I argue that the politicization of Black hair, having existed at multiple levels of Black women and girls' lived experiences, is a threat to the ability of Black women and girls to thrive; it is a *public health concern*.

## 1.2 Public Health Justification

The American Public Health Association (APHA) broadly defines public health as promotion *and* protection of, “the health of people and the communities where they live, learn, work, and play,” (*What Is Public Health?*, n.d.). Health equity is a social justice-oriented concept of public health, “underlying a commitment to reduce—and, ultimately, eliminate—disparities in health and in its determinants,” and, “striving for the highest possible standard of health for all people,” (Braveman, 2014).

There are many factors that place Black women and girls at a lower *standard of health* compared to other racial groups. Health inequities facing Black women - heart disease, stroke, cancers, diabetes, maternal morbidities, obesity, stress – have been linked to their social, economic, and environmental disadvantage in relation to White society (Chin et al., 2021). These are called social determinants of health and include things such as income, education, housing segregation, occupation (*Healthy People 2030*, n.d.). In addition, a long-established, central component of public health and equity-driven initiatives is the social-ecological model (e.g., Sallis et al., 2008; *The Social-Ecological Model*, 2022; Wallerstein & Duran, 2003). Determinants of health do not just exist within an individual’s control such as knowledge, behaviors, or biological characteristics. The social-ecological model visualizes the barriers and facilitators to health outcomes at the interdependent levels of a person’s life: intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, community, and policy (e.g., Ma et al., 2017). Thus, when assessing the impact of Black hair politics on the health of Black women and girls, one must consider the contexts they live in and the accumulation of disadvantage beyond the individual level (e.g., institutions, policy).

### 1.2.1 Statement of Need

There is multi-disciplinary evidence that the lives of Black women and girls are negatively impacted by hair-related experiences. However, there are no studies to date that have assessed the literature in a social-ecological manner, looking collectively at the effects of Black hair politics, their different levels of influence, and the need to view its exacerbation of existing health inequities within this population. This paper adds Black hair politics to the narrative of the relationship between the structured system of racism and the influence of these experiences (e.g., Krieger et al., 1993) to inequitable health outcomes.

## 1.3 Paper Overview

My research aim is to investigate how Black hair politics affects the health and well-being of Black women and girls. I start by presenting a substantial overview on the sociohistorical saliency of Black hair and its uniqueness so that readers have a solid and truthful contextual understanding to digest the remainder of the piece. Next, I define what I mean by Black hair politics, informed by the theoretical framework of *dimensionality* (Hogan et al., 2012/2018) in health equity research, rooted in *Critical Race Theory* (CRT) and *intersectionality*. I then present the results of a literature review. I found that Black hair politics influence three areas of life for Black women and girls – *physiological*, *psychosocial*, *socioeconomic* – and reflect on the health implications of these findings. Lastly, I use the findings to present multilevel interventions aimed at addressing Black hair politics, and in turn, reducing adverse health outcomes experienced by Black women and girls.



## **2.0 The Hairstory: Black Hair & Colonized Beauty Standards**

### **2.1 Pre-Enslavement**

The narrative and beauty of Black hair begins long before enslavement and will continue long past these contemporary times. Afro-textured hair is varied because ancestral tribes in Africa were and still are incredibly diverse. Throughout the thousands of autonomous ancestral groups, hair was a common indicator of age, ethnicity, marital status, rank, religion, war, and wealth (Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Jacobs-Huey, 2006; Mercer, 1994; Rooks, 1996). For example, the Yoruba people of Western Africa (e.g., southeastern Nigeria) identify the uniqueness of the human species by one's hair and value it as a determinant of one's success or failure (Sieber & Herreman, 2000). Rosado (2003) signifies the importance of hair in the African diaspora by writing that hair communicates one's group identity and is perhaps more important than other characteristics such as skin color, language, or religion (p. 61). In addition, hair was not only a social signifier, but also a social opportunity. It allowed women to bond with each other and the process of caring for each other's hair was valued (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). From curls to twists to braids to knots to locs, traditional hairstyles are kept alive and reproduced today among individuals of the African diaspora.

## 2.2 Enslavement

However, the commodification of Black bodies and their forced enslavement from the 16th to 19th century disturbed the bond between Africans and their hair. Black hair became a tool for systemic violence, social penalization, and stigmatization - particularly against Black women (Opie & Phillips, 2015).

In the 1500s, the first thing European enslavers did to African captives was to shave their heads. This was purposeful, with the intention of stripping any visual representation of an individual's tribal affiliation, social status, culture, and identity (Sieber & Herreman, 2000). Furthermore, enslavers dehumanized them by asserting that Black hair was not real - it was wool (Byrd & Tharps, 2001).

With the burden of forced, unpaid, inhumane labor and brutal treatment, there was no time to care for one's health, let alone appearance (i.e., hair). To substitute for their long-lost resources, women resorted to bacon grease and butter to care for their hair (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). Those deemed worthy enough to work indoors were afforded more opportunities to style their hair and wore pinned-up, Eurocentric hairstyles perceived as clean and well-groomed. These women often had lighter skin and loose textured curls. In contrast, women confined to the fields wore their hair out or covered in head rags. This was not just to protect their head from the heat of the sun; the little time for self-care resulted in these women experiencing tangled and unhealthy hair. These women became the image of Blackness and their hair received several degrading labels – wild, unkempt, bad, ugly, knotty, dirty, nappy. In the words of Thompson (2009a), “once Black beauty was juxtaposed with White beauty, a socially stratified hierarchy began to take shape,” (p. 834).

Black hair also took on the connotation of “slave hair” (White & White, 1995). This had far-reaching consequences as hair developed into a gendered medium for social order. A social

hierarchy based on texture and colorism developed among enslaved women, starting with the notion of “good hair” (Eurocentric, straight hair) and “bad hair” (Afrocentric, curly, coiled hair) (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). Unfortunately, these narratives are strong within and outside the Black community to this day (Simon, 2000).

Throughout the 1700s and 1800s, Black hair styling shifted from centering the beauty and significance of the curl to adapting to Eurocentric styles (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). As wigs became associated with higher status, particularly among White men, enslaved women working indoors attempted to model these styles. By the time of the Civil War, Black women straightened their hair with a mixture of potatoes and lye. They did this to obtain “good hair” and avoid racist attacks. This was the beginning of straightening Black hair as a social tool.

### **2.3 Reconstruction & Harlem Renaissance**

The early 20th century saw a period of Black self-determination and cultural prosperity met with pressing social standards to assimilate into White American society, including beauty and status. Most products advertised to Black women during the early 1900s encouraged them to lighten their skin and straighten their hair for themselves and the “community” (Rooks, 1996). One of the largest influences around hair straightening was not a White person - it was a Black woman entrepreneur. Her name was Madam C.J. Walker. Her 1905 hair softener was the first product developed for and sold to Black women. Women used the softener and a hair straightening comb (hot comb) to temporarily straighten their naturally curly hair and conform to long, straight hair culture (Banks, 2000). Walker’s beauty empire had more than aesthetic benefits. Black women

had higher self-esteem after straightening their hair and the rise in hair straightening behavior paved the way for employment opportunities in salons (Byrd & Tharps, 2001).

Hair texture became a center of expressing Black pride and who was worthy of claiming it. While hair straightening was a common practice, it was not entirely accepted within the Black community. W.E.B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington, and Marcus Garvey, all prominent abolitionists, were also the most resistant to hair straightening (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). Those wearing their hair in its natural state, although seen as less attractive in White society, were seen as a “real” Black person within the Black community. Those who straightened their hair were deemed “fake” for wearing an unnatural look - one that glamorized White aesthetics over African roots (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). No matter the argument, modeling Eurocentric features was a form of survival for these women - differentiating between free or enslaved, worthy, or unworthy, employed or unemployed, educated or uneducated, and upper class or poor. By the mid-1920s, Black middle-class status was easily signified by straight hair (Rooks, 1996).

## **2.4 Civil Rights Era**

The Black Power Movement of the 1960s and 70s continued the conflict of Black beauty, pride, and authenticity. The widespread Black is Beautiful campaign criticized White hegemony and the color caste system (hooks, 1995). Black women’s act of resistance was to stop straightening their hair. The fact that Black hair could hold different styles was celebrated; wearing natural styles was seen as bold and confident (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Taylor, 1999). Overall, it was a movement to celebrate the diversity of Black life and evaluate the trauma of

racism. Endorsers were many prominent Black figures at the time including Cicely Tyson, James Brown, Sammy Davis Jr., and the Black Panther Party.

“Real” Blackness, like decades earlier, was communicated with hairstyles that were Afrocentric or known as “naturally” Black such as curls, afro, locs, braids, and twists (Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Tate, 2007). Additionally, the rejection of the White aesthetic and pride and solidarity in one’s African roots was met with retaliation. White America saw natural hair, and its endorsers, as too much Black power; it quickly became associated with fear of Black terrorism.

## **2.5 End of the Century & Rise of Workplace Discrimination**

The following decades saw both the continuation of straightening as well as a woman’s lack of pride to wear their hair naturally. The relaxer (chemical straightening) offered a more permanent solution to straight hair than thermal straightening. Originally developed in the 1960s (and falsely promoted as non-toxic), chemical straightening was convenient because women could apply it to their scalp at home and re-apply it every 2-3 months to accommodate new, naturally curly hair growth (Banks, 2000). Weaves, perms, and extensions also took hold. These styles, though potentially damaging to one’s natural hair, helped Black women achieve the look of straight, long hair.

While Black women knew their social acceptance depended on adopting Eurocentric appearances (Banks, 2000; Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Tate, 2007), many wanted to define beauty on their own Afrocentric terms by wearing natural hairstyles. The ripple effects of the Black Power Movement were still felt by White America, specifically White corporate America. In direct response to the threat of Black success and liberation, racist dress code and grooming policies

emerged such as the inability to wear one's afro, braids, locs, or twists. These restrictive grooming policies place unrealistic ideals on Black women and have a direct impact on their ability of them to wear their natural hair in the workplace (Bennett-Alexander & Harrison, 2016; Greene, 2017). Examples of these policies are found in several legal cases. Lawsuits referencing Title VII of the Civil Rights Act were abundant, ending in little to no support on the side of the plaintiffs. A small handful of these court cases include the following: a company-wide ban on braided hairstyles was ruled non-discriminatory and not racially significant (*Rogers v. American Airlines, Inc.*, 1981); a Black woman fired for wearing "finger waves" and the complaint ruled as non-discriminatory (*Hollins v. Atlantic Company, Inc.*, 1999); a hospital manager told a Black woman with an Afro that she "belong[ed] in a zoo" (*Ali v. Mount Sinai Hospital*, 1996); a Black woman told her termination was constitutional Afrocentric styles were in violation of a company grooming policy(*McManus v. MCI Communications Corp.*, 2000).

Overall, Black women in the 1980's and 90's saw a rise in punishment and harassment for wearing non-straight styles in the workplace; their hair was otherwise deemed unattractive, unacceptable, and unprofessional (Rudman & McLean, 2015). This brought Black feminine beauty and hair debates into the worthiness of Black women to make a living for themselves. To this day, decades later, it is still legal under federal law to discriminate Black women because of their hair.

## **2.6 21<sup>st</sup> Century and the Natural Hair Movement**

Instances of hair harassment continued into 21<sup>st</sup> century. Women were still fired for wearing their natural hair to work (e.g., *EEOC v. Catastrophe Mgmt. Sols.*, 2016), the U.S. military banned natural hairstyles in 2014 (Rhodan, 2014), and school districts across the nation banned

Afrocentric hairstyles which resulted in Black students being sent home, suspended, or expelled from school (e.g., Asmelash, 2020).

This hostility was also met with a movement similar to the Black is Beautiful movement of the 60's and 70's. The Natural Hair Movement began in the early 2000's. Led by millennials and younger generations, Black women and girls have opted to resist Eurocentric standards of ideal hair embrace and wear their hair in its natural state, un-texturized (Orey & Zhang, 2019). This also includes the rejection of the hair hierarchy or textured-rating system of looser textures/"good hair" and tightly, coiled textures/"bad hair." Omosigho (2018), like others, also believes this movement is responsible for the decreases in relaxer use and sales among Black women and girls over the last two decades. In 2010, 26% of Black women rejected chemical relaxers or straighteners; this number increased to 36% in 2011 (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014); in 2017, 71% of Black adults wore their natural hair at least once (Easter, 2017). There may be a greater awareness of the harmful side effects of relaxer use (James-Todd et al., 2012) along with the self-empowerment of rediscovering one's natural beauty (e.g., Norwood, 2018).

More inclusive and celebratory narratives of natural Black hair include Oscar-winning "Hair Love" (Cherry & Smith, 2019) and the "Super Bonnet" song (Rise Up, Sing Out, 2022). Despite this growing movement, Black hair politics is very much alive and salient in the lives of Black women and girls. For example, the Soul Cap, a swimming cap created to be inclusive, specifically of afro-textured hair, was banned at the 2020 Summer Olympic games even though it does not impact a swimmer's ability (Evans, 2021). Black women, girls, and their hair are largely misunderstood.

### **3.0 Black Hair Excellence and its Misconstruction**

#### **3.1 Black Hair Came first**

Perhaps the most exceptional truth, largely unknown, is that the Black hair was the first hair type: Hair DNA (through *serine protease 53*/gene PRSS53) reveals that the curl and coil came first (Adhikari et al., 2016; Sample, 2016). Acknowledging this fact completely invalidates the Afrocentric inferiority vs. Eurocentric superiority argument because it is based on a false notion of what is “standard”; straight hair is a mutation (Adhikari et al., 2016).

In addition, the inherent brilliance of Black hair and its texture resides in the fact that it evolved to protect one’s scalp from sun rays throughout the African continent. Not only did the hair follicle create a protective shield for the scalp, but it also created a ventilation system to keep the scalp cool (Adhikari et al., 2016; Sample, 2016). Tragically this narrative, together with the genetic primary of the curl, is not common as natural Black hair is perceived as non-ideal (Banks, 2000; Simon, 2000). Its beauty is concealed by the insecurity of White supremacy to Black excellence.

#### **3.2 The Beauty of Versatility**

Natural or altered, the fact that Black hair can hold different styles is something to commend. It did not just come first but is also the most versatile hair type. This characteristic was recognized during the Black Power Movement by contesters of what it means to be “authentically”



Black (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Taylor, 1999). The texture hierarchy is what is inauthentic. It is a colonized concept, something that has divided Black individuals and fostered the fallacy that Black hair is a monolith. While they may share the same properties, each head of afro-textured hair has diverse curl and coil patterns throughout; no head of hair is the same. That is the true beauty and authenticity – accepting that Black hair was, is, and will continue to be heterogenous and versatile because it holds within it the assorted textures of ancestral African tribes and record of genetic diversity from racial mixing over the centuries.

Withstanding all denigration, afro-textured hair is the most unique and versatile (Ashe, 2010; Giovalucchi, 2016)). The kink in the hair follicle creates a texture that can hold a multitude of styles (curls, straight, afro, braids, locs, twists, knots, updos) and Black women and girls have used their hairs' value with and against colonized standards. No other hair type is afforded this luxury. In a way, Black individuals have a creative advantage when it comes to hair styling but appreciation for its strength is lacking. The sole reason for its inferior social status is because of its African, non-European ancestry (Lara, 2010), especially for women. Furthermore, Black women are simultaneously defining their own standards by wearing their afros, braids, locs, and knots. Essentially these challenge Eurocentric beauty standards and are signs of boldness, confidence, and spiritual connectedness (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Spellers (2003) names the “kink factor” as central to hair for Black women. Black women have decided to create their own beauty standards to fit their hair textures (Tate, 2007). Presence or absence of the “kink factor” determines “good” and “bad hair” evaluations

### 3.3 Physiology and Styling of Black Hair

Afro-textured hair is biochemically and structurally unique. Compared to other types of human hair, Black hair follicles have curved bulbs/cross sections (Thibaut & Bernard, 2005) and a higher concentration of lipids (Camacho-Bragado et al., 2015; Cruz et al., 2013). This affects the keratin microstructure and results in the curly/coily phenotype. In addition, the curls create such intricate tangles that one's natural scalp oil (sebum) has a hard time flowing down the hair shaft. Because of this lack of natural oil, Black hair is dry, brittle, fragile, slow-growing, least-dense and easily susceptible to breakage. This results in hair that needs a lot of attention and upkeep to maintain its health. In addition to the inherent dryness and fragility, Black hair is naturally frizzy, voluminous, and tangles easily; this makes combing and styling a task (Franbourg et al., 2003; McMichael, 2003/2007).

On top of product and routine requirements, Black women and girls are burdened with the social pressure of historical, cultural, and personal beauty standards – standards that idealize straight, smooth, White hair. They may partake in manipulative or *traumatic* hair care practices to meet a perceived standard of beauty (e.g., Grimes, 2000; Haskin & Augh, 2016; Johnson & Bankhead, 2014; Khumalo et al., 2005; McMichael, 2007; Rucker Wright et al., 2011). These include thermal and chemical straightening (relaxers), weaves, and extensions. While natural hair styles are low-tension, these styles pose damage to one's scalp and hair shaft - hence why some refer to them as traumatic. The tension and follicular alteration can lead to several dermatological conditions disproportionately experienced by Black women and girls including permanent hair loss (Haskin & Augh, 2016), alopecia (i.e., central centrifugal cicatricial alopecia, chemical alopecia, and traction alopecia) (Callender et al., 2004; Shah & Alexis, 2010; Summers et al., 2011), folliculitis, and seborrheic dermatitis (Alexis et al., 2007; Sperling et al., 2000). For

example, alopecia is the fourth most common dermatological diagnosis among Black individuals accounting for 8.3% of visits (Alexis et al., 2007).

Lastly, there is a complex and dichotomous effect of moisture on Black hair. While natural Black hair struggles with moisture retention, too much moisture in contact with a finished hairstyle, whether straight or naturally curly, may be an issue. Moisture in the form of sweat, humidity, water, or rain reverts Black hair to its naturally curly state and may cause frizz; this contrasts with what is considered socially desirable or acceptable in appearance (Eyler et al., 2002; Im et al., 2012).

## 4.0 Conceptualizing Black Hair Politics

Evaluating the gendered, public health implications of living with Black hair requires a concept that best captures the totality of conditions. The literature is full of varying narratives of Black hair. Some center the natural/unnatural or “good/bad hair” arguments. Others look at the direct and indirect consequences of discrimination. There are also narratives looking at the trauma of enslavement on beauty standards. Kobena Mercer (1994) reasons:

*... as an aesthetic practice inscribed in everyday life, all Black hairstyles are political in that they each articulate responses to the panoply of historical forces which have invested this element of the ethnic signifier with both symbolic meaning and significance* (p. 104).

Considering this, I introduce the concept of *Black hair politics*. This term is meant to capture the totality of social and historical contexts that dictate what it is like living as a Black women or girl in a world that hates your hair. To do this, I have used Hogan and colleague’s (2012) framework of *dimensionality*. This was developed in response to the inadequate consideration of social and structural forces contributing to health inequities experienced by Black individuals. The authors explain:

*Dimensionality is an approach to understanding the origins of health inequities among African American populations and R4P is an organizing system for identifying and reversing its unfair, avoidable consequences. Dimensionality and R4P capture the complex linear and non-linear array of influences that cause health inequities and integrate multiple theoretical perspectives into a framework of action to eliminate inequity* (Hogan et al., 2018, p. 148).

They note that Black lived experiences and inequities need to be looked at from a temporal perspective (past, present, and future). This is something the field of public health largely ignores (Hogan et al., 2012). Within this health equity framework are the theoretical concepts of *Critical Race Theory (CRT)* and *intersectionality*.

With its origins in legal studies, CRT asserts that racism is imbedded in the structures, knowledge, and life outcomes of the U.S. and that centering the lived experiences of oppressed individuals (Black women and girls) is the key to social transformation (Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010; Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano et al., 2000; Yosso et al., 2009). Intersectionality is an identity and social process rooted in Black Feminism. For Black women and girls, this means that their experiences are rooted in their interdependent identities of Black *and* women/girl and must navigate the world through the interlocking oppressive systems of racism and sexism (Cole, 2009; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989; Schulz & Mullings, 2005). Furthermore, there is a historical context to individual health because one's life course (Gee et al., 2012; Hertzman & Boyce, 2010; Lu & Halfon, 2003), intergenerational risk factors (Ben-Shlomo & Kuh, 2002), and historical trauma (Duran & Duran 1995; Sotero 2006; Walters & Simoni, 2002). I use these historical concepts, CRT, and intersectionality to conceptualize Black hair politics as a risk factor for health inequities.

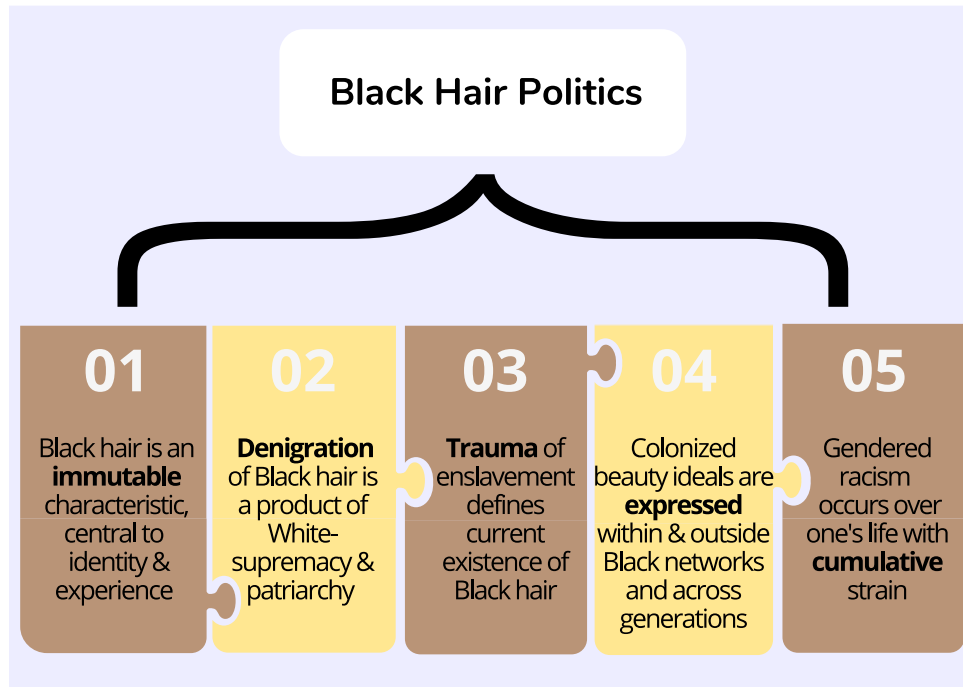


Figure 1. The five tenets of Black hair politics

Black hair politics consists of five tenets. First, Black hair must be understood as an immutable characteristic, *central* to the identities and lived experiences of Black women and girls. Second, the *denigration* of Black hair is a direct result of both the anti-Black and patriarchal gaze. Third, the gendered racism of Black hair (i.e., harassment, discrimination, social desirability) occurs throughout the lives of Black women and girls with *cumulative strain*. Next, Eurocentric beauty standards are *perpetuated* intra-racially, inter-racially, and inter-generationally. Lastly, the *trauma of enslavement* (physical, psychological, social, political, and economic) is inseparable from the contemporary existence of Black women, girls, and their hair.

## **5.0 Methods**

### **5.1 Literature Search**

A literature search was conducted via the University of Pittsburgh library catalog. For the database search, the search syntax included the following Boolean operators:

Title contains [hair\* OR “natural hair” OR “Black hair” OR “Afro-textured hair”] AND Title contains [black OR Black OR “African American” OR “American, African” OR “Black Americans” OR “American, Black” OR “Americans, Black” OR “Black American” OR “African-Americans” OR “African-American”] AND Title contains [child\* OR girl\* OR woman OR women OR woman’s OR female\* OR adolescen\*]

I limited the search results to articles and book chapters, peer-reviewed, and published between January 1, 2000, and current publications. The year 2000 was chosen as a cut off for it accounts for the beginning of the Natural Hair Movement and wider discussion around Black hair politics (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). I executed the search on March 9, 2022. The publications - title, abstract, full-text detail - were reviewed based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) empirical study related to Black hair politics as defined in this paper; (2) research focused on Black women and/or girls; (3) research focused on U.S. populations; (4) full text available in English. Figure 2 depicts this publication selection process.

A final total of 41 articles were selected for review ranging from a multitude of disciplines. The analysis involved identifying common themes of how Black hair politics impacts the lives of Black women and girls. These results were then assessed on their public health significance. Table 1 lists the publications and their characteristics.

## **5.2 Author Positionality**

As a Black woman and health justice scholar, I entered this project with my own lived experiences and perceptions of health equity, anti-Blackness, and Black hair. I also acknowledge the privileges afforded to me as a light-skinned Black woman in higher academia. Thus, I wrote this paper with the intention of de-centering myself, using existing narratives on Black hair, and understanding that experiences of being Black and a woman are not monolithic. While I call into question my positionality, I also want to emphasize the value of self-relevant research (Amabile & Hall, 2021). Black Feminist scholarship (e.g., Collins, 2000) affirms that it is okay for Black scholars and oppressed groups to be interested in what they study for they are equipped with the skills to analyze oppressive systems.



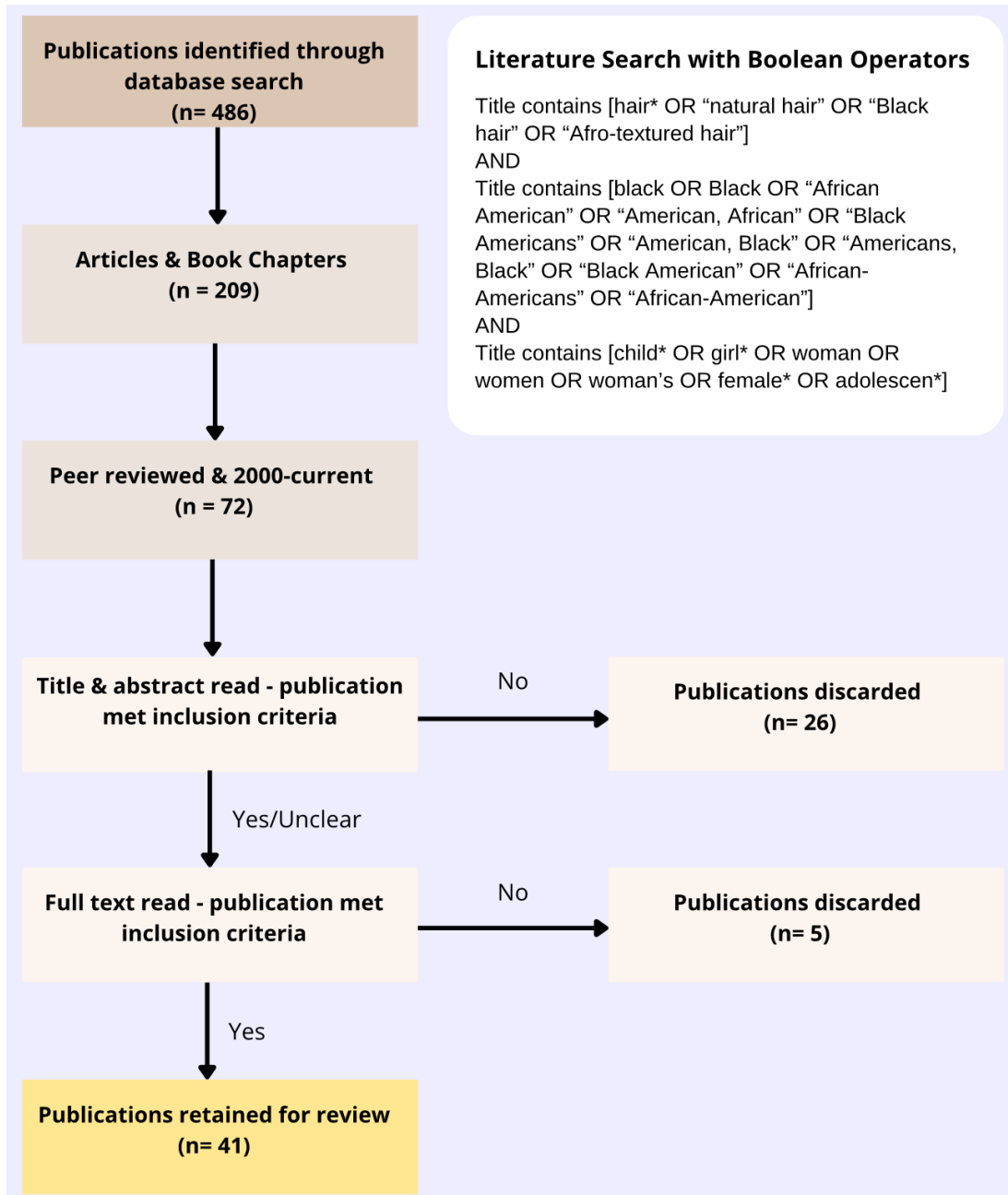


Figure 2. Publication selection flow chart

**Table 1. Literature review**

Author (Year)	Title	Year(s)	Location	Design	Sample Size	Age / Gender / Race	Areas of Life
Ahn et al. (2016)	Hair and Scalp Care in African American Women Who Exercise	2015	North Carolina	Quantitative (survey), cross-sectional	61	21-75 years Female Self-reported African, African Caribbean, or African American race	Physical Activity
Brooks & McNair (2015)	“Combing” Through Representations of Black Girls’ Hair in African American Children’s Literature	n.d.	NA	Qualitative (content analysis)	NA	Girl Black	Pride & Lack of Representation
Brown (2014)	"It's more than hair ... that's why you should care": the politics of appearance for Black women state legislators	2011	Maryland	Qualitative (interviews)	18	Women African American	Income & Occupation
Dawson & Karl (2018)	I am not my Hair, or am I? Examining Hair Choices of Black Female Executives	n.d.	Nation-wide	Qualitative	106 & 72	Women Black	Income & Occupation
De Souza et al. (2020)	Expectations of care among African-American Women with hair loss: A cross-sectional study	2019	Nation-wide	Quantitative (survey), cross-sectional	100+	18 years + Women African American	Clinical Care & Hair Health
Eberle et al. (2020)	Hair dye and chemical straightener use and breast cancer risk in a large US population of black and white women	2003-2009, 2016	Nation-wide	Quantitative (survey), longitudinal	46,709	35-74 years Women Black	Hair Product Toxicity
Essien & Wood (2020)	I Love My Hair: The Weaponizing of Black Girls Hair by Educators in Early Childhood Education	n.d.	Nation-wide	Qualitative (narrative)	44	Girls Black/African American	Hair Harassment & Social Interactions

Felix et al. (2020)	Sweat and Hair: Online Interventions for Improving Physical Activity in African-American Women	n.d.	Winston-Salem, North Carolina	Quantitative (survey), cross-sectional	22	18-54 years Women African American	Clinical Care & Hair Health, Physical Activity
Gaston et al. (2020a)	Chemical/straightening and other hair product usage during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood among African-American women: potential implications for health	2010-2018	Detroit, Michigan	Quantitative (survey), prospective cohort	1555	23-34 years Women Self-identified African American	Hair Product Toxicity
Gaston et al. (2020b)	Hair maintenance and chemical hair product usage as barriers to physical activity in childhood and adulthood among african american women	2010-2019	Detroit, Michigan	Quantitative (survey), prospective cohort	1558	23-35 years Women Self-identified Black/African American	Physical Activity
Gathers & Mahan (2014)	African american women, hair care, and health barriers	2011	Detroit, Michigan	Quantitative (survey)	200	21-83 years Women African American/Biracial	Clinical Care & Hair Health
Hall et al. (2013)	Hair care practices as a barrier to physical activity in african american women	2007	Winston-Salem, North Carolina	Quantitative (survey), cross-sectional	103	21-60 years Female Self-identified African American	Physical Activity
Harper & Choma (2019)	Internalised White Ideal, Skin Tone Surveillance, and Hair Surveillance Predict Skin and Hair Dissatisfaction and Skin Bleaching among African American and Indian Women	n.d.	Nation-wide	Quantitative (survey), cross-sectional	149	18-60 years Women African American	Identity Development & Internalized Gendered Racism

Helm et al. (2018)	Measurement of endocrine disrupting and asthma-associated chemicals in hair products used by Black women	2008	Nation-wide	Quantitative (chemical analysis), cross-sectional	NA	Women Black	Hair Product Toxicity
Huebschmann et al. (2016)	“My hair or my health”: Overcoming barriers to physical activity in African American women with a focus on hairstyle-related factors	2012-2013	Denver, Colorado	Mixed-methods (focus group, survey), cross-sectional	51	19-73 years Women African American	Physical Activity
Jeffries & Jeffries (2014)	Cultural Signification through Reader’s Theatre: An Analysis of African American Girls and Their Hair	n.d.	NA	Literary critique	NA	Girl African American	Education
Joseph et al. (2018)	Hair as a barrier to physical activity among African American women: A qualitative exploration	2016	Phoenix, Arizona	Qualitative (focus group)	23	24-49 years Women Self-reported African American	Physical Activity
Lewallen et al. (2015)	Hair care practices and structural evaluation of scalp and hair shaft parameters in African American and Caucasian women	n.d.	NA	Quantitative (survey)	30	27-63 years Female Self-identified African American	Clinical Care & Hair Health
Llanos et al. (2017)	Hair product use and breast cancer risk among African American and White women	2002-2014	New York City and New Jersey	Quantitative, case-control	1508	20-75 years Women Self-identified	Hair Product Toxicity
Manns-James & Neal-Barnett (2019)	Development of a culturally informed protocol for hair cortisol	n.d.	Midwestern city	Mixed-methods	136 & 49	Women Self-identified African American	Clinical Care & Hair Health

	sampling in Black women						
Mitchell Dove (2021)	The Influence of Colorism on the Hair Experiences of African American Female Adolescents	n.d.	Large metropolitan area	Qualitative (interviews)	11	13-17 years Female Self-identified as African American	Identity Development & Internalized Gendered Racism
Mitchell Dove & Powers (2018)	Exploring the complexity of hair and identity among African American female adolescents in foster care	n.d.	Large metropolitan area	Qualitative (interview)	11	13-17 years Female Self-identified African American	Identity Development & Internalized Gendered Racism, Pride & Lack of Representation, Hair Harassment & Social Interactions
Niel & Mbilishaka (2019)	“Hey Curlfriends!”: Hair Care and Self-Care Messaging on YouTube by Black Women Natural Hair Vloggers	n.d.	Nation-wide	Qualitative (content analysis)	20	Self-identify as female Self-identify as Black/African American	Physical Activity
O'Brien-Richardson (2019a)	Hair Harassment in Urban Schools and How It Shapes the Physical Activity of Black Adolescent Girls	n.d.	Urban community	Qualitative (focus group, interview)	37	14-19 years Female gender Self-identified race of African descent	Physical Activity, Hair Harassment & Social Interactions, Education
O'Brien-Richardson (2019b)	The Case for Hair Health in Health Education: Exploring Hair and Physical Activity Among Urban African American Girls	n.d.	Urban community	Qualitative (interview), cross-sectional	50	14-19 years Female gender Self-identified race of African descent	Physical Activity, Identity Development & Internalized Gendered Racism
Onnie Rogers et al. (2021)	“They’re always gonna notice my natural hair”: Identity, intersectionality and resistance among Black girls	2017-2018	Midwestern city	Qualitative (interview)	60	14-19 years Adolescent girl Self-identified Black/African American/Multiracial	Identity Development & Internalized Gendered Racism, Pride & Lack of Representation, Hair

							Harassment & Social Interactions
Patton (2006)	Hey Girl, Am I More than My Hair?: African American Women and Their Struggles with Beauty, Body Image, and Hair	n.d.	NA	Qualitative (narrative)	NA	Women African American	Identity Development & Internalized Gendered Racism, Income & Occupation
Payne (2011)	Examination of ethnic and policy issues in grooming preferences and ethnic hairstyles of African American women in corporate America	n.d.	NA	Qualitative (narrative)	NA	Women African American	Income & Occupation
Phelps-Ward & Laura (2016)	Talking back in cyberspace: self-love, hair care, and counter narratives in Black adolescent girls' YouTube vlogs	2014-2015	Nation-wide	Qualitative	13	13-17 years Girl Black	Pride & Lack of Representation
Randle (2015)	I Am Not My Hair: African American Women and Their Struggles with Embracing Natural Hair!	n.d.	NA	Qualitative (narrative)	NA	Women African American	Identity Development & Internalized Gendered Racism
Robinson (2011)	Hair as Race: Why "Good Hair" May Be Bad for Black Females	n.d.	Midwestern city	Qualitative	38	19-81 years Female Self-identified as African American/Biracial/Black	Identity Development & Internalized Gendered Racism
Rowe (2019)	"Nothing Else Mattered After That Wig Came Off": Black Women,	2014-2015	NA	Qualitative	NA	Women Black	Pride & Lack of Representation

	Unstyled Hair, and Scenes of Interiority						
Stiel et al. (2016)	A review of hair product use on breast cancer risk in African American women	n.d.	NA	Literature Review	NA	Girls and Women African American/Black	Hair Product Toxicity
Thompson (2009a)	Black women, beauty, and hair as a matter of being	2007	NA	Qualitative (interviews)	NA	Women Black and Bi-racial	Identity Development & Internalized Gendered Racism, Pride & Lack of Representation
Thompson (2009b)	Black Women and Identity: What's Hair Got to do with It?	2008	NA	Qualitative	NA	Women Black	Identity Development & Internalized Gendered Racism, Income & Occupation
Urvig et al. (2021)	Hair Maintenance As A Barrier To Physical Activity In African-american Women: A Quantitative Analysis	n.d.	NA	Quantitative	354	Mean 38.9 years Female Self-identified as African-American	Physical Activity
Versey (2014)	Centering perspectives on Black women, hair politics, and physical activity	NA	NA	Qualitative	NA	Women Black/African American	Physical Activity
Walker et al. (2022)	Allergenic Characterization of Best-Selling Hair Products Marketed to Black Women	2020	Nation-wide	Qualitative	NA	Women Black	Hair Product Toxicity
Wilson et al. (2018)	“White folks ain't got hair like us”: African American Mother– Daughter Hair Stories and Racial Socialization	2010	Northeast region	Qualitative	13	Mean 20 years Female Self-identified as black/African American	Hair Harassment & Social Interactions

Wise et al. (2012)	Hair relaxer use and risk of uterine leiomyomata in African-American women	1999-2009	Nation-wide	Quantitative (survey), prospective cohort study	23,580	21-69 years Women African-American	Hair Product Toxicity
Woolford et al. (2016)	No sweat: African American adolescent girls' opinions of hairstyle choices and physical activity	2011	Michigan, California, Georgia	Mixed-methods (focus group, survey)	36	14-17 years	Physical Activity



## 6.0 Black Hair Politics & Public Health

The literature analysis found Black hair politics to impact three areas of life for Black women and girls: physiological, psychosocial, and socioeconomic. These main factors are divided into subthemes apparent in the literature. Following each subtheme is a section on its public health significance.

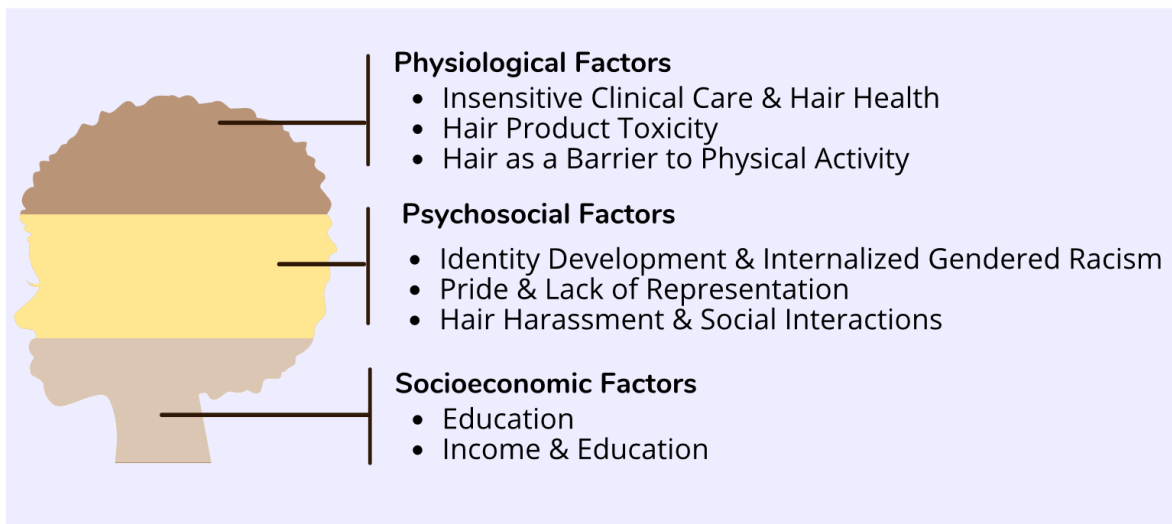


Figure 3. Areas of life affected by Black hair politics

### 6.1 Physiological Factors

#### 6.1.1 Clinical Care & Hair Health

The medical care Black women and girls receive is impacted by Black hair politics. A cross-sectional study by De Souza et al. (2020) reveals that Black women living with alopecia seek medical information from online resources are very rarely seek care from in-person providers.

Reasons for this include difficulty accessing a health care professional as well as insensitive knowledge of afro-textured hair. Despite the prevalence of hair loss, one's main source of hair-related information are hairstylists, the internet, and family members, not the medical setting. (Felix et al., 2020). Another study found that 68% of Black women felt their doctor did not understand Black hair (Gathers & Mahan, 2014).

This lack of understanding is also a contributor to inequities in neurological research study participation (Wright et al., 2018) and hair collection acceptability (Ford et al., 2016). Manns-James and Neal-Barnett (2019) conducted a multi-phase study to develop a culturally responsive protocol for hair sampling among a socioeconomically diverse group of Black women (college students and low-income mothers). Barriers to hair collection included hair damage concerns (e.g., concern for growth, breakage), inaccessibility of hair due to styling (e.g., box braids, locs, extensions) and cultural reasons (e.g., hair is important/love my hair). The combination of a culturally informed collection design and community-based research cosmetologist helped address concerns over hair health, leading to a higher acceptance rate (71%) among community members. It was important that the cosmologists centered hair health in dialogue with participants to increase trust and show there was a shared concern about participants' well-being. While hair accessibility was still a present barrier, the cosmetologists allowed flexibility and inclusion where there often was not. They were able to remove/re-attach extensions or unbraid/braid hair, preserving styles, allowing sampling to occur.

While Black women and girls can seek clinical care for their hair conditions, traumatic hair care practices may be the root cause. Straightening and relaxers harm the health of one's actual hair. For example, Gathers and Mahan (2014) assessed hair and scalp health among 200 Black women and found that itching, scaling, and breakage are significant concerns for Black women.

This is supported by a Lewallen et al. (2015) who found that Black women are more dissatisfied with their hair health than White women.

#### **6.1.1.1 Public Health Implications**

Black women clearly feel the medical space is unsafe for their hair. Hair is part of one's physical body and a distinct part of a Black women's body; thus, I would add that Black hair health and access to appropriate care is a health need. For a population already exhibiting systemic barriers to care (e.g., accessibility, affordability, quality) (Chinn et al., 2021), this hair-based discrimination contributes to the ability of Black women and girls to receive and maintain medical care.

There is also a lack of common and professional knowledge on the regularity of scalp conditions and best treatments. Apart from the psychological impact of hair loss, practitioners are often insensitive to Black women experiences and uneducated on Black hair structure, hair loss, and care (Callender et al., 2004). Scalp itching and hair loss may be due to the inherent fragility of the hair shaft, infrequent washing, and chemical processing (McMichael, 2003) and should be explained as such, in a non-pathologizing way. For example, itching and scalp flaking are symptoms used as a proxy for seborrheic dermatitis, the fifth most common reason for visiting a dermatologist among Black women (Alexis et al., 2007) and the most common scalp disorder in Black girls ages 1-15 at 33% (Rucker Wright et al., 2011). In addition, alopecia is the fourth most common dermatological diagnosis among Black individuals accounting for 8.3% of visits (Alexis et al., 2007). Fear of being mistreated or misunderstood in the medical setting allows these conditions to go untreated and places the overall hair health of women and girls at risk. In addition, providers may be relying too heavily on in-person interactions to promote information on hair

health. Online platforms and community-led dissemination of information may lead to better health outcomes.

Lastly, the under-representation of Black women and girls in hair sampling is significant because it could provide valuable insight into the effects of *weathering* on their health. Due to interpersonal and structural racism, inaccessibility of resources, and exhaustive coping strategies, Black women experience life-long chronic, toxic, and excessive stress (Geronimus et al., 2006). The buildup of stress over time leads to premature biological aging and contributes to poor health outcomes (Dominguez, 2011; Dominguez et al., 2008; Geronimus et al., 2006). Racism and its effects on the stress-pathway are important in race-based medicine. One way to measure stress is through its biomarker, which is present in human hair: cortisol. Barriers to hair cortisol analysis, such as hair, reduces the opportunity for public health insight into weathering in Black women and girls, crucial points of intervention, and treatment.

### **6.1.2 Hair Product Toxicity**

A good number of studies have documented the toxic components of Black hair products and their relationship to adverse health outcomes. Preliminary research by Helm et al. (2018) found that hair products used by Black women and girls (i.e., hot oil treatments, anti-frizz/polishes, leave-in conditioners, root stimulators, hair lotions, relaxers) contained endocrine-disrupting chemicals (EDCs) and asthma-associated chemicals. The products contained 68.18% of the 66 chemicals tested, with one from every chemical class. In addition, the hair relaxers targeted to Black youth contained five chemicals regulated by California's Proposition 65 (Prop 65) and/or banned by the European Union (EU) Cosmetics Directive because of their relation to reproductive harm and cancer. Despite the prevalence of these toxic chemicals, they were rarely listed on product labels.

Breast cancer incidence has received attention regarding hair product use. A literature review by Stiel et al. (2016) shows a growing body of evidence dedicated to assessing the relationship between hair product use and breast cancer risk in Black women. Most of the literature looks at exposure to environmental estrogen and other EDCs. Hair products included relaxers, creams, oils, and conditioners. Indirect links to breast cancer included early puberty and early menstruation. Direct links, though mixed, included uterine fibroids and denser breasts. They also noted that breast cancer risk from hair products is a substantial concern within the Black community but met with insufficient investigation, regulation, and communication. There are several community-academic partnerships committed to this issue (e.g., the Silent Spring Institute, the Breast Cancer Fund, We Act). They conclude with a push for scientific and political attention to the “cost of beauty.”

Two studies attempt to quantify hair product usage and breast cancer risk. Llanos and colleagues (2017) compared hair product usage and their associations with breast cancer risk in Black and White women. While relaxer and deep conditioner use were more common in Black women, only dark hair dye use was related to breast cancer risk. Eberle et al. (2020) builds on this by looking at 50,884 White and Black women about their hair product use frequency and breast cancer incidence over the course of 8 years. Hazard ratios were calculated looking at hair product use in those who developed breast cancer and those who did not. All women who used permanent dyes or straighteners within the past year were at an elevated risk for breast cancer. However, the association between dye and carcinogenesis was 45% stronger in Black women. This confirms prior studies on higher toxicity of hair products marketed to Black women.

Other physical health risks linked to Black hair products are skin irritation and fibroids. Walker et al. (2022) analyzed allergens present in Black hair products sold from best-selling

suppliers (i.e., Walmart, Amazon, Target). They found that 93% of the 82 products (shampoos, conditioners, leave-in conditioners) contained at least one common allergen and rinse-out products contained three or more. These allergens were not listed on product packaging and can increase one's risk of allergic contact dermatitis. In addition, an earlier study by Wise et al. (2012) found that hair relaxer use increases Black women's risk for uterine fibroids. A sample of 23,580 pre-menopausal Black women were asked about their hair relaxer use and followed from 1997-2009. A dose-response relationship exists between frequency and duration of relaxer use and fibroid incidence.

Lastly exposure to these toxic chemicals occurs throughout one's life. Gaston et al. (2020a) explored hair care behavior across one's lifespan and quantifies concurrent product use. They used self-reported data from 1555 Black about how often they used certain hair products and participated in hair care behaviors during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. These included leave-in conditioners, chemical products used to change hair texture (i.e., Jheri curl, relaxer, perm, straighteners), shampooing, growth/moisturizing products (i.e., oils, creams), styling (i.e., gel, mouse), and coloring. Overall, hair usage behaviors (type and frequency) vary across one's lifetime. Leave-in conditioner and chemical product use increased in prevalence from childhood to adolescence but decreased during adulthood. For example, use of chemical products more than twice per year was 9% in childhood, 73% in adolescence, and 29% in adulthood. Lastly, Black women had very high frequencies of weekly styling product use, but low frequency of weekly shampooing.

#### **6.1.2.1 Public Health Implications**

Simply put, Black women and girls are being placed at a greater risk for health conditions just from taking care of or styling their hair. Black women and girls have different hair product

usage behaviors compared to other races (James-Todd et al., 2012; Li et al., 2002; Tiwary, 1998; Wu et al., 2010); afro-textured hair health and the pressure of Eurocentric beauty standards require them to use a greater amount of products which are designed to moisturize, strengthen, or straighten their hair. However, with these products comes differential exposure to hormones (i.e., estrogen) and EDCs (i.e., parabens, phenols, and phthalates) (James-Todd et al., 2012). This under-regulation of ingredients and non-transparent exposure has been labeled an environmental justice concern (Zota & Shamasunder, 2017).

Women and girls exposed to these compounds exhibit changes in their biological processes such as extended puberty (Knower et al., 2014) or cancer cell growth (Charles & Darbre, 2013; Khanna et al., 2014); this may help explain hormonally mediated health outcomes that are higher or worse for Black women and girls. For example, fibroids are the leading cause of hysterectomies in the U.S. (Farquhar & Steiner, 2002) and are more common and severe in Black women compared to other races (Baird et al., 2003). Breast cancer is another large burden for Black women; it is the most common cancer and cancer death for this population (Giaquinto et al., 2022). When compared to White women, Black women are diagnosed with more aggressive tumors and die at higher rates following diagnosis (Howlader et al., 2014; Siegel et al., 2018; Warner et al., 2013; Warner et al., 2015). Lastly, allergic contact dermatitis occurs when one develops a rash due to substance contact with the skin (Stallings & Sood, 2016). White-washing of medical training fails to note that in more-pigmented skin, a rash is often characterized as rough and darker in comparison to assumed hypopigmented diagnostic criteria of redness. Thus, while Black women are at a higher risk of developing this condition (Stallings & Sood, 2016) they are also likely to be misdiagnosed and go without treatment.

In addition, hair product behavior throughout the life-stage is concerning considering their dangerous chemical compositions. The decades-long exposure of high-toxicity products met infrequent scalp cleansing means cumulative risk throughout one's life. Adolescence is a life-stage of concern. This is a time where girls are using the most hair products and thus being the most exposed to carcinogens during a critical time in development (Osborne et al., 2015). This raises the concern for long-term health implications.

Overall, Black hair product marketing and usage account for exposure inequities to toxic chemicals, despite little information or regulation. This may be exacerbating existing hormonally mediated health inequities experienced by Black women and girls.

### **6.1.3 Physical Activity**

Black hair politics is also a significant, yet largely disregarded, determinant of physical activity and cardiometabolic health for Black women and girls. Although a previous study found that half of Black women think hair care directly affect their decision to exercise, Hall et al. (2013) received national attention for expanding on this issue. One-hundred-and-three Black women completed a survey about their hairstyle maintenance and exercise behavior. Overall, hair concerns contributed to Black women not meeting physical activity levels. Nearly 40% of Black women avoid exercise entirely because of their hair and 50% must change their hairstyles to accommodate exercise. In terms of hair style, most women wore their hair relaxed (62.1%) or thermally straightened (22.3%). Women without relaxed hair were 16 times more likely to change their natural hairstyle for exercise. Issues consisted of not wanting to sweat out one's hairstyle and the time needed to wash, dry, and style hair. These time and money constraints are supported by several subsequent studies (Huebschmann et al., 2016; Joseph et al., 2018). This shows that



maintaining hair style is more important to some Black women than exercising because of White-dominated beauty norms to have neat, non-frizzy, straight hair. If one is to exercise, the cost associated with maintaining or redoing the style is prohibitive. A follow-up article by Versey (2014) emphasizes the intersectional lives of Black women and lack of existing public health interventions to consider why hair matters to physical activity engagement.

Similar studies strengthen evidence for hair maintenance as a sociocultural barrier to physical activity. Huebschmann et al. (2016) brings attention to specific components as to why hair maintenance is a barrier to physical activity in Black women in relation to various ages, physical activity strata, and other commonly reported barriers. While participants noted the time and financial burden of restyling hair, they also were concerned with appearing in public with messy/post-physical activity hair and the length of time it takes for their hair to dry. This also differed by physical activity level. Black women non-exercisers were more likely to report hair maintenance as a barrier (29%) compared to exercisers (7%). Physical activity-promoting factors included acceptance of natural or low-maintenance styles (e.g., wraps, braids, locs) and social support. In addition, Ahn et al. (2016) found that one-third of Black women felt their hair health (i.e., scalp itching and flaking, hair breakage) worsened following exercise and 18% admitted they would exercise more if it was not because of their hair. Unique findings from Joseph et al. (2018) found that their hair is a social burden when exercising. Black women avoided physical activity because they were tired of educating, defending, or justifying their hairstyle practices to non-Black peers; this included wearing certain styles to the gym (e.g., scarves, natural hair) or entering their workplace with a “messy” hair following exercise. Lastly, a recent study by Urvig et al. (2020) reveals that Black women differ in activity level based on the saliency of their hair exercise to avoidance. In other words, participants who self-reported that they avoided exercise because of

their hair had lower physical activity levels compared to those who did not report hair as a contributor to exercise deterrence or avoidance. These results build on previous literature where hair is a meaningful barrier to participation in physical activity for Black women.

Despite the breadth of knowledge on Black hair health and physical activity, this knowledge is largely concentrated within small interpersonal networks or academic journals – not in the general public’s reach. Niel and Mbilishaka (2019) finds that through YouTube vlogs, Black women discuss hair as a sociocultural barrier to exercise and model hair styling techniques for a physically active lifestyle. Furthermore, Felix and colleagues (2020) took a novel approach to hair-related concerns and created a website ([www.sweatandhair.com](http://www.sweatandhair.com)). This was made with the intention of increasing hair care knowledge and promoting physical activity in Black women of all hairstyles. Twenty-two Black women were surveyed before and after browsing the website. Only 27% of participants exercised regularly and women were largely upset with their hair following exercise. Over a third of subjects wore accommodating hairstyles when exercising (e.g., hair weaves/wigs, natural, braids, locs) in addition to preservation tools (e.g., hats, ponytails, wraps, buns). Overall, the website was a positively viewed online resources for information on hair and scalp health.

These feelings regarding hair and physical activity are also prevalent among Black girls. Woolford et al. (2016) explores the impact on ethnic identity, hair style choices, and physical activity levels for Black adolescent girls across three states. Girls that exercised reported needing to modify their hair. However, girls with a stronger sense of ethnic identity reported higher levels of physical activity; every 10 unit increase in ethnic identity score correlated with 2 more days of physical activity. Like their adult counterparts, girls avoided physical activity because of a preference for straighter styles over natural styles and sweating out one’s hair was a concern. Those

with extensions were more physically active; but although natural hair and protective styles were seen as better for physical activity, they were considered unattractive. This was the first study to find a relationship between ethnic identity and physical activity. O'Brien-Richardson (2019b) finds consistent results. They use the term hair harassment, a "social rejection as a result of hair," (p. 136) to define how cultural hair practices and attitudes impact Black adolescent girls' decision to participate in school physical education (gym) class. As expected, hair care maintenance and (time, effort, and money) associated with upkeep negatively impacted decisions. However, separating them from adult populations is their struggle to fit in and desire to be socially accepted. Girls wanted hair that was longer, straighter, and more beautiful in their eyes; this meant non-afro-textured hair or hair that was altered to meet Eurocentric beauty standards. They discussed social pressures to fit in/be accepted, please their caregivers by taking care of their hair, and avoid being teased for their hair's appearance after PE class. The school environment also expects Black girls to be comfortable with physical activity, which can place Black girls in conflict to meet racist norms for hair appearance. Lastly, all participants wanted a class regarding how to care for their hair and had very little knowledge on the management of their hair care during physical activity.

Gaston et al. (2020b) expands the qualitative literature by quantitatively assessing the relationship between hair maintenance and physical activity in both childhood and adulthood. A sample of 1558 Black women from a prospective cohort study self-reported chemical relaxer use, leave-in conditioner use, and physical activity across their lifespan. They found hair as a factor in adult physical activity. Women who chemically relaxed their hair more than twice a year (30%) and/or used leave-in conditioner monthly/rarely/never (76%) were less likely to participate in intense physical activity. Black women who had used leave-in conditioner often and had high hair maintenance behaviors were more physically active. Their results confirm previous

qualitative/mixed-methods studies showing hair maintenance as a barrier to physical activity in adulthood (Ahn et al., 2016; Hall et al., 2013; Huebschmann et al., 2016; Joseph et al., 2018). However, inconsistent with previous findings, relaxer use was not a potential barrier to physical activity in childhood (Woolford et al., 2016; O'Brien-Richardson, 2019a/2019b). The author thinks this may be due in part to cohort differences. Prior studies included Black adolescent girls who may partake in different hair product usage/maintenance behaviors due to hyperawareness of beauty standards compared to this study which looked at childhood/pre-adolescence.

#### **6.1.3.1 Public Health Implications**

Black adolescent girls and women have the highest prevalence of overweight and/or obesity compared to other race and gender groups (Ogden et al., 2015). In 2018, 44.2% of Black women were obese, compared to 31.2% of Black men and 28.7% of White women (*Summary Health Statistics Tables: National Health Interview Survey*, 2021). In 2017, 20.8% of Black adolescent girls were overweight, compared to 14.8% of Black men and 14.3% of White women (*1991-2019 High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data*, 2019).

Obesity places this population at risk for other co-morbidities. Black adolescent girls are more likely to develop metabolic conditions, ovarian cysts, orthopedic problems, and psychosocial concerns (e.g., Dietz, 1998; Steinberger et al., 1995). For Black women, obesity-related conditions include type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, hypertension, cancer, and stroke (e.g., Dietz, 1998; Go et al., 2013; Must & Strauss, 1999; Srinivasan et al., 1996). Thus, addressing obesity early in childhood or into adulthood would have significant life-long effects on health.

These are chronic diseases with complex etiologies and risk factors. Physical activity is one health behavior that can significantly lower one's risk of developing such conditions. National guidelines are based on the second edition of Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans presented

to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) in 2018: 150 min/week of moderate-intensity physical activity, 75 min of vigorous-intensity physical activity, or an equivalent combination of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (Piercy et al., 2018). Black women and girls have some of the lowest physical activity levels.

Hair-related concerns (e.g., appearance) and maintenance (e.g., time, money, effort) reduce physical activity engagement for this population. This is one barrier in addition to lack of time, childcare, inaccessibility to safe and affordable spaces, and fear of injury that prevent Black women and girls from exercising (Baruth et al., 2014; Harley et al., 2009; Orzech et al., 2013; Wilson et al., 2013). Thus, Black hair politics, in addition to other factors, create a potential pathway to chronic diseases.

There is an intersectional nature of Black women's lived experiences, social standards about their hair, and physical activity. The thought process of Black women deciding to engage in physical activity consists of an evaluation of whether they meet the White, normative standards of beauty and protect themselves from discriminatory experiences. This may mean straightening their hair or keeping a “neat,” non-frizzy appearance (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014; Zota & Shamasunder, 2017). A situation like physical activity vis-a-vis perspiration jeopardizes the sustainability of such appearances and is a threat to their self-image; thus, the activity is avoided. Considering hair as a salient in exercise decisions is crucial to understand and address physical inactivity in this population in hopes for positive physical health outcomes.

Lastly, it is important to emphasize that Black hair and women and girls' experiences are not monolithic; some do not view hair-related issues as a barrier to physical activity (Joseph et al., 2018). With these discussions around physical activity and obesity also needs to be skepticism around Body Mass Index (BMI) as a standard indicator of health status. BMI was never intended

to measure a person's body fat or health. It was developed by a Belgian man almost 200 years ago to categorize a population's characteristics in relation to the "ideal" – one that was White and male (Jackson-Gibson, 2021). Health insurance companies adopted this as an incorrect measure of wellness. Since BMI measures one's percentage of body fat and while Black women have a higher BMI, it may be healthy or natural (Fontaine et al., 2003). Regardless of BMI discrimination, Black women and girls, regardless of their weight, should be able to feel comfortable enough to engage in physical activity as a behavior but.

## **6.2 Psychosocial Factors**

### **6.2.1 Identity Development & Internalized Gendered Racism**

There is great physical and psychological harm done when girls are women are socialized to believe White features are at the top of the beauty hierarchy, most attractive, and the norm. Patton (2006) proposes that Black women and girls live at the intersection of body image, skin color, and hair and that these together "haunt" their existence, socially and psychologically. Black women live under a constant pressure, and eventually desire, to alter one's hair appearance to assimilate and be seen as attractive. This means straightening one's hair. The only dilemma is that the beauty standards are unattainable because they are White standards. Black women and girls' inability to obtain these standards can lead to self-loathing. Studies by Thompson (2009a/2009b) and Randle (2015) agree that Black women will continue to fail to meet mainstream standards and suffer the consequences. They argue how and why Black hair is not *just* hair. It *is* an issue because it exists in the context of power relations and hegemonical anti-Black beauty standards. The papers

go beyond the ritualistic nature of hair straightening and looks at the psychological damage, such as self-hatred. Black women narratives presented that the decision of going or not going natural is a personal one and largely based on fear of societal disdain.

This self-loathing, pressure, and fear is due to the internalization of White beauty standards. Black women are aware of the negative outcomes of internalized body and beauty ideals, or self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). In a study by Harper & Choma (2019), Black women were likely to discuss hair straightening products in terms of their negative psychological effects and societal impact/ramifications, such as in the context of racism and harm to one's personal identity. Those with higher internalized beauty ideals had higher hair texture surveillance and higher hair texture dissatisfaction.

Colorism and texturism are a largely responsible for internalized racism and identity harm. Robinson (2011) looked at what messages Black women receive on “good” and “bad” hair (e.g., texture and length). Responses centered around the hair hierarchy, with the understanding that afro-textured is viewed as inferior in society. When discussing “good” hair, it was about maintaining the appearance and the burden of straightening requirements. “Good hair” does not require straightening while “bad hair” does. “Bad hair” (short, tightly coiled, kinky) was appreciated for its versatility and racial significance; but it was harder to take care of and manage. Robinson writes, “whether related to race, beauty or maintenance, concepts of “good” and “bad hair” are bad for Black females because hair valuations that elevate wavier, straighter textures promote and perpetuate racialized beauty standards, while also devaluing hair textures common among Black females,” (p.372). This social stratification affects one's social identity and is also apparent at young ages. Mitchell Dove (2021) shows that Black adolescent girls in foster care discuss their hair in relation to the colorist historical framework (Ortega-Williams et al., 2019),

which looks at colorism with a historical and trauma-informed lens. They observed and experienced social interactions that caused traumatic hair experiences. Psychologically, they were aware of how hair texture affected their experiences and felt undesirable unless their hair was perceived as desirable or presentable.

Lastly, the societal disregard for Black hair is important for healthy human development. Onnie Rogers et al. (2021) used a developmental psychology perspective to highlight the centrality of racial identity to the lived experiences of Black girls. In their longitudinal study, 93% of 60 Black adolescent girls voluntarily brought up hair in their discussions about their social and academic lives. Hair impacted how they presented themselves (e.g., etiquette), what discrimination they faced, how beautiful they felt, their connection to Black culture. Overall, Black girls viewed their hair as a unique expression of themselves and how they “do” identity. This supports previous research where Black hair influences a girl’s self-esteem (Mitchell Dove and Powers, 2018) and degree of self-hate (O’Brien-Richardson, 2019b). The psychosocial nature of hair influences identity development and internalized racism across the lifespan.

#### **6.2.1.1 Public Health Implications**

Black hair politics threaten the self-perception and racial identity of Black women and girls. Thompson (2009b) writes, “the crux of the Black hair issue centers on three oppositional binaries—the natural/unnatural Black, “good/bad hair”, and the authentic/inauthentic Black,” to explain the complex internal and external dialogues facing this population (p. 831). Essentially, women and girls possess a “double consciousness” (Du Bois, 1968) or “dueling consciousness” (Kendi, 2019) by existing in an anti-Black and anti-femme world.

These systems of oppressions create the environment in which individuals make sense of themselves (Kteily & Richeson, 2016). The studies highlight that society, through interpersonal



interactions and social representation, perpetuates the romanticization of White features. As a result, Black women and girls are socialized in spaces that view their hair as undesirable; they in turn may internalize these beliefs and view their hair and overall self-image negatively. This chronic surveillance of their hair is an indication of self-objectification and can lead to range of health problems such as body shame, appearance anxiety, depression, sexual dysfunction, and eating disorders (Calogero et al., 2011; Moradi & Huang, 2008; Watson et al., 2012).

These White standards of ideal hair also exist in the context of colorism – a skin-tone/hair texture/facial feature bias where darker-skinned individuals face discrimination compared to lighter-skinned individuals who are held in positions of privilege (Hunter, 2002; Taylor, 1999). Colorism is a byproduct of racism and embedded in the fabric of American society and the trauma of Black people. It arises from enslavement with the raping and breeding of Black women by White men. This has led to the creation of a racial and social stratification system that idealizes White/European features and devalues Black/African ones (Hunter, 2007). The preference for looser curl textures, or texturism, is one way colorism manifests; the internalized hatred of one's coily, afro-textured may also lead to low levels of self-esteem and body dissatisfaction (Thompson & Keith, 2001).

Internalized beauty standards and colorism are also a large part of Black girls' lived experiences (Abrams et al., 2020; Wilder & Cain, 2011), which may affect how they develop (Rogers & Way, 2018). Black girls will vary in their racial identities, leading to different life outcomes. For example, positive and strong racial identity is associated with a higher sense of well-being (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014), greater awareness of racial inequality, and mitigates the negative impact of discrimination (Butler-Barnes et al., 2019; Yip, 2018). In addition, the literature shows that Black adolescents feel pressured by expectations to conform to beauty standards (e.g.,

straighten their hair) along with the desire to embrace their culture. Adolescents is an important age for it is a developmental period in which significant identity development commences (Kools, 1997), along with a time of crisis and confusion (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009). Overall, Black hair is an entry point for identity development and support in Black women and children with significant implications for their mental and social health.

### **6.2.2 Pride & Lack of Representation**

Hair representation (or lack of) is also important to the psychosocial well-being of Black women and girls. This starts early in childhood. Brooks and McNair (2015) conducted a content analysis of 6 picture books written by Black women about Black girl's hair centered in the U.S. First, the books showcased the beauty and worth of all hair textures, collectively challenging past and present beauty standards. Next, they integrated Black history within the stories. For example, several books explain how braids and cornrows got their name from their enslaved and sharecropping relatives while also communicating the strength behind them. Lastly, the showcased the bonding between women and girls while hair is being combed and/or styled. Results showed that children's books are another form of media that can counter or complement Eurocentric standards and Black hair.

Phelps-Ward and Laura (2016) are also concerned with the well-being of Black girls in response to the cumulative impact of society discriminating against their natural hair. They look at Black girls not as victims, but instead as active agents in their social worlds. The authors explore how 95 YouTube vlogs are used by Black girls to engage in self-love (hooks, 2000), develop self-definitions, and relate to natural hair politics. They found that vlogs were a 'homeplace' for Black curly girls. Not only could they connect with others on or contemplating on their natural

hair journey (advice, results, storytelling), but they were also able to work through their identities and experiences navigating through the symbolic violence of living while a Black woman. Discourse centered around natural hair as a ‘revolutionary’ and symbolic of action to push past Eurocentric standards and assert one’s own beauty. The same can be said about adult populations. Niel and Mbilishaka (2019) found natural hair vloggers to not only support hair and health, but it also creates a space for building self-efficacy and appreciation for one’s natural hair.

Film is another media platform where Black hair politics appear. Rowe (2019) unpacked the significance of climatic scenes in three popular shows/films: *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014), *Beyond the Lights* (2014), and *Being Mary Jane* (2015). In these scenes, the Black women protagonist removes their wig or sew-in hair extension (weave) to reveal their un-styled hair. These are not only moments of emotional growth for the characters; the author explains that they also hold great meaning for the Black women. These visual narratives reveal intimate moments of the “inner lives” of Black women are moments of “undoing” and “dissemblance” (Hine, 1989). These create spaces for Black women to view their authentic selves while in the lens of beauty, hair politics, and the relationship to one’s natural hair. The author is not arguing for or against hair alteration, or as they call it the “straight hair is self-hate” versus “natural hair is self-love” common debate. They say, “each of them offers a nuanced take on hair as a space of agency, negotiation, and embodied experiences of beauty,” (p. 33).

Onnie Rogers et al. (2021) ties together the potential of positive media representation as an opportunity for Black women and girls to develop racial pride and use their natural hair as a tool of resistance against racism. However, these latter analyses are examples of a few public sources of representation. Thompson (2009a) tries to grapple with the hard-to-believe fact that (1) millions of Black women grow up not knowing how to care for their natural hair and (2) Black women and

girls are primed to hide their natural hair. They explain this is because the only time Black hair is highlighted as beautiful or celebrated, is when it is altered - never in its natural state. Black women and girls are very aware of this and (Mitchell Dove & Powers, 2018) and conform to the Eurocentric standards endorsed by society.

#### **6.2.2.1 Public Health Implications**

Black women and girls are also robbed of an abundance of authentic, affirming depictions of their hair. They already face the challenges of developing a positive self-concept while navigating racial and gender oppression (Nasir, 2011; Rogers & Way, 2018; Spencer, 2008; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Hair politics further limits opportunities for prideful representation. This may have an impact on their social relationships and academic achievement, factors in positive overall health and well-being (Belgrave, 2009)

In addition, ideal hair standards may be causing emotional labor. The regulations of one emotion to meet expectations can conflict with one's true emotions and lead to stress, emotional exhaustion, and burnout (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Hochschild, 1983). Another phrase for this is "aesthetic labor" (Peluchette et al., 2006; Witz et al., 2003). Hair is an emotional and cognitive burden for Black women and girls; this on top of other economic stressors and life events can lead to low self-concept and psychological distress (de Groot et al., 2003). This is concerning since depression and feelings of sadness are disproportionately prevalent in Black women (e.g., de Groot et al., 2003; *Summary Health Statistics: National Health Interview Survey, 2018*, 2018; Ward et al. 2013).

It is important to remember the positive psychosocial effects Black hair representation can have. Pride in one's natural hair can be used as a tool for resisting societal norms, such as

Eurocentric hair standards and anti-Blackness (Rogers & Way, 2018; Way et al., 2013). This is a healthy response to oppression and key for a strong self-identity (Ward, 1996).

### **6.2.3 Hair Harassment & Social Interactions**

Lastly, there is a social cost associated with wearing one's natural hair, placing one at-risk for microaggressions and insults based on hair texture and styles. Unfortunately, most traumatic social interactions occur early in a Black women's life, both within and outside of their racial group.

Wilson et al. (2018) attempts to understand the how Black women participate in racial meaning-making through hair experiences with their mothers. Thirteen college students were interviewed about their mother-daughter relation, race, and hair. When it came to remembering hair-related experiences, 69% emotions to describe them were negative and most occurred before adolescence. First, women reported having conversations and being socially rejected because of their hair texture; this was a strong determinant of their racial experience and identity development. Next, playing with dolls was difficult for it was participants' first encounters with race and when they learned hair preference. Like previous literature, women viewed chemical-relaxer and hair straightening as a coming-of-age experience and fitting in to White friend groups. Overall, Black girls and adolescents experience discrimination and bias towards their phenotype; from these racial experiences, they form their racial identities and self-defining stereotypes. Ninety-three percent of the girls in a study by Onnie Rogers et al. (2021) were similarly aware of their social realities and impact of stereotypes. Mitchell Dove and Powers (2018) shows that these hair care experiences are no different among foster youth. Eleven Black girls in foster care were interviewed about their hair experiences and its impact on their sense of self. Overall, they felt their hair comes with unique

challenges unknown to other races and lacked care providers who were educate on Black hair or provided an affirming environment. They were tired of being judged if it was natural or altered. Black girls wanted their hair to be celebrated and feel supported to take care of their hair (e.g., painful combing) or wear certain styles (e.g., braids).

In addition, a lot of negative hair interactions occur in school environments. Essien and Wood (2020) explores hair microaggressions experienced by Black girls in early childhood education (preschool through third grade). Educators primarily viewed Black hair as “second-class”, communicating that Black hair is less preferential or beautiful. This was most common when hair was worn naturally (i.e., Afro, ponytails, twists). Teachers even redid girls’ hair by recombining or reapplying rubber bands. In addition, Black hair was seen as dirty, infected, and diseased. Some girls who wore their hair naturally were reported by teachers as having scalp conditions or lice infestations when in fact, it was natural shedding or flaking. This study shows that these Black girls receive microaggressions early in education that have the potential to impact how they perceive their hair and build their identities. Because of their hair, Black girls may not have access to spaces that are emotionally safe.

Peers, as well as educators, are perpetrators. O’Brien-Richardson (2019a) highlights the harassment Black girls experience in school regarding their hair, specifically during gym class. Fifty Black girls ages 14 to 19 were asked about their hair practices and their participation in gym class. Direct/social harassment (verbal, emotional, physical assault) and indirect/societal harassment (non-verbal) created a hostile environment for girls. They were called a “hot mess” by peers of all genders. Having sweaty, messy, or frizzy hair resulted in feelings of ostracization, harassment, staring, and lower status. Girls were also humiliated when boys routinely touched their

hair or took their hair accessories. Overall, Black girls are harassed in PE class and thus less likely to participate.

### **6.2.3.1 Public Health Implications**

Hair is an embodied social practice (Jacobs-Huey, 2006/2011) that Black girls and women use to communicate their racial identity; however, this expression is not left uncontested. The literature shows that hair harassment is pervasive, from family, educators, and peers. Overall, the words and standards used to attack Black girls, women, and their hair leave damaging scars (Bourdieu, 1977; Ferguson, 2001).

Racial and gender microaggressions (Sue, 2010) are ways in which Black women and girls and their hair are invalidated. Microaggressions are intentional or unintentional derogatory interactions that help perpetuate racism (Pierce, 1970). These are also messages received by marginalized groups from oppressive ones (DeAngelis, 2009; Harwood et al., 2012; Nadal et al., 2010; Torres-Harding et al., 2012), such as messages about the inferiority of Black hair. The negative impact of these messages is due to how pervasive and insidious they are. Considering how ingrained Black hair politics is in the lives of women and girls, it is likely negative outcomes are to result (Sue & Constantine, 2007). Gender and racial microaggressions are associated with high anxiety, low self-efficacy, limited attention, low confidence, and feelings of worthlessness (Sue, 2010).

It is also important to recognize that Black girls are learning and growing in toxic environments for their hair, which may impact their ability to thrive. Healthy cognitive, emotional, and behavioral developments are dependent on safe spaces (emotionally and physically) and interactions (Bowlby, 1982; White, 2013).

## **6.3 Socioeconomic Factors**

### **6.3.1 Education**

Black hair politics are not exempt from the classroom setting. Apart from in-school physical activity harassment presented by O'Brien-Richardson (2019a), Black girls are also at-risk of poorer academic performance and opportunity because of their hair. A minor finding in the study by Essien and Wood (2020) was that educators used hair as a proxy for criminality. This included Black girls being yelled at for beads clacking, distracting the class, and having “unkempt” hairstyles.

Contrastingly, Black hair has the power of helping girls achieve academic success. Jeffries and Jeffries (2014) show how important Black hair is to education by highlighting the cultural power of Black hair to assist in meaning-making through text apart from traditional methods such as performative literature. They transformed the children’s book *Bintou’s Braids* into a theatre script (*Little Bintou Loves Her Braids*). Not only was this done to deconstruct hair norms, but it is larger purposes was to provide another medium for literature engagement within elementary classrooms.

#### **6.3.1.1 Public Health Implications**

Black hair is important in the lives of Black girls and the school curriculum. Degrading messages about the worth of Black hair might less school-connectedness and confidence in the educational setting (Evans-Winters 2005; Morris 2016). This is just one example of their overall racialized and gendered school experiences.



Overall, Black girls are perceived as less innocent and more adult-like than their White classmates and are more likely to experience disciplinary measures (e.g., Epstein et al., 2017; Morris & Perry, 2017). In addition, their academic and social needs are dismissed and unmet (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). This may contribute to the achievement gap Black girls face (Barton & Coley, 2009) and lower one's academic attainment. The significance of the social context of education is that those with higher educational attainment are healthier; education as a facilitator for life opportunity is a producer of health inequities (Zajacova & Lawrence, 2018). These include those facing Black girls and women.

### **6.3.2 Income & Occupation**

Black hair politics also limits life opportunities in adulthood. Out of any race and gender group, Black women expend the most time and energy contemplating the meaning of their hair, discussing their hair, and styling their hair (Thompson, 2009b). While changing one's natural hair for employment or social mobility can be viewed as assimilation, it is also a creative tactic to survive White-centric environments (Patton, 2006).

Payne (2011) looks at the intersection of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VII) the Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) Commission, which are supposed to protect Black women from workplace discrimination. However, they note that hair discrimination is not prevented and argue that hair is a tool for racialized capitalism.

Furthermore, hair exists as a barrier to employment across levels of prestige. First, Brown (2014) document the struggles of 20 Black women state legislators. Their hair affected interactions with colleagues and constituents and how they viewed them. Legislators were hyperaware of the harmful interactions they would experience and had to negotiate when to/no to wear their natural

hair to best present themselves. Some preferred straight styles while others wanted to embrace their natural hair. Lastly, White legislators positively commented Black women when they had straight hair or weaves but negatively interacted with them when wearing natural hair styles. Similarly, Dawson and Karl (2018) investigated the hair choices made by Black women entrepreneurs and executives of large companies. Only 15% of executives wore Afrocentric hairstyles. In addition, more founders and co-founders wore Afrocentric styles (31.6%) compared to non-founders (9%). This signifies that those higher in the corporate ladder feel less pressure to conform to Eurocentric hairstyles and their job security less impacted by hair discrimination.

### **6.3.2.1 Public Health Implications**

Overall, Black women, a group with disproportionately high unemployment rates (Ewing-Nelson, 2021), must struggle with racist grooming policies to obtain employment and maintain employment. The literature shows that Black hair politics impact the practice and experiences of Black women, even those of high-ranking positions. Attractiveness – or in this case not having Black hair – determines economic opportunities for women considered more attractive are paid more and receive more job offers and promotions (Hamermesh & Biddle, 1994).

The labor market exists within a capitalistic and racist system, so discrimination is apparent (Cortina, 2008). In 2019, Black women made 63 cents for every dollar White men earned, meaning higher rates of fewer resources and lower wealth (*Shortchanged and Underpaid: Black Women and the Pay Gap*, 2021). A lowered chance of employment because of one's hair only exacerbates the likelihood of pay inequities. The hair hierarchy (Robinson, 2011) (hair texture existing across a privileged continuum with looser textures/ “good hair” at the top and tightly, coiled texture/ “bad hair” at the bottom) is used to discriminate against Black women in the workforce (Dawson et al., 2019). Thus, Black women who wear their hair naturally are at a heightened risk of discrimination.

This discrimination is also based on Eurocentric expectations on appearance. Because of their natural hair, Black women are judged on their professional competency, intelligence, and trustworthiness (Berscheid & Walster, 1974); this may contribute to Black women being labeled as unfit for a position or provided few opportunities for higher-paid positions (Hughes & Dodge, 1997; Khosrovani & Ward, 2011; Rosette & Dumas, 2007; Sanchez-Hucles, 1997). In the Perception Institute study, one in five Black women felt pressure to straighten their hair for work; natural Black hair was also seen as less beautiful, attractive, and professional than smooth, straight hair (Johnson et al., 2017). Furthermore, The Crown Research Study investigates corporate grooming policies (JOY Collective, 2019). It found that Black women are hyper aware of these policies (compared to White women) starting from the application process throughout employment. They are 30% more likely to be approached about their appearance and workplace standards. They also found a bias towards poor workplace performance and Afrocentric hairstyles.

This is also an intra-racial phenomenon. Black women who wear their natural hair are criticized by other Black individuals out of the belief that it devalues their academic and professional merit (Caldwell, 1991; Grayson, 1995; Lester, 2000). There is also a hiring bias. Job candidates with Afrocentric hair are seen as less professional than those with Eurocentric style, with Black applicants more judgmental of Black hairstyles than White applicants (Opie & Phillips, 2015). Regardless of the discrimination source, Black women might style their hair to meet expectations but conflict with their racial identity. This can lead to stress, emotional exhaustion, and burnout (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Hochschild, 1983; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1989), affecting one's ability to work.

All of this limited economic opportunity for Black women has significant health implications. Income inequities are responsible for racial inequities in health status, health

behavior, health care use, and health screening across the U.S. (Dubay & Lebrun, 2012). In addition, racialized economic segregation increases one's risk for several health inequities facing Black women. These include pre-term birth, infant mortality, cardiometabolic disease, and all-cause mortality (Larrabee Sonderlund et al., 2022).

## 7.0 Discussion

Inequities facing Black women and girls – scalp conditions, cancer, psychological distress, cardiometabolic disease, birth-related mortality – are health outcomes impacted by the sociopolitical context of Black hair politics. This includes society’s hatred towards natural Black hair, traumatic narratives from enslavement, and the difficulties navigating an anti-femme and anti-Black world.

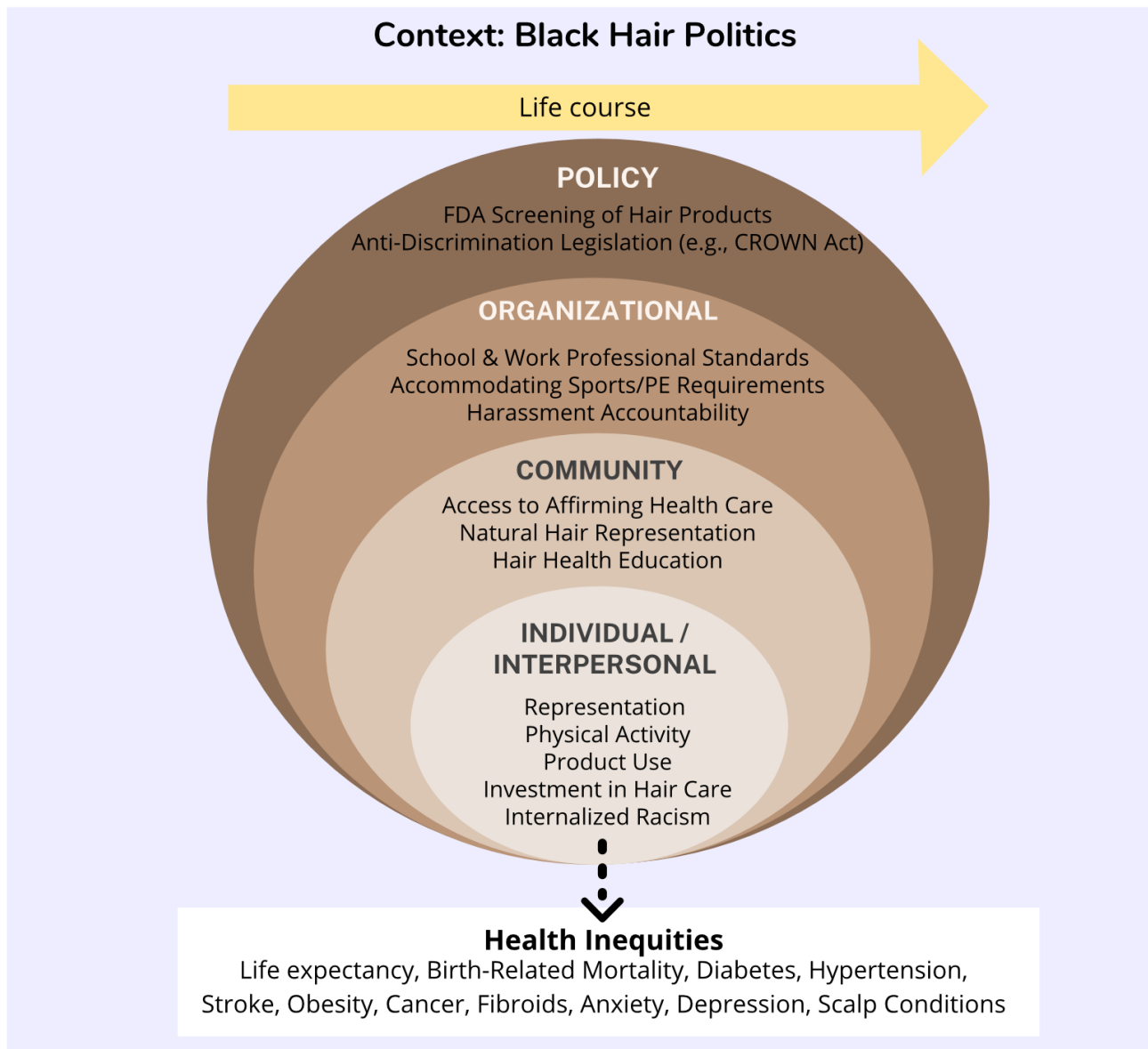
As a review, the literature on Black hair politics found three factors impacting the health of Black women and girls. First are physiological factors which include limited access to affirming medical and hair care, exposure to endocrine-disrupting chemicals through hair products, and hair as a barrier to physical activity engagement. Psychosocial factors are another contributor. Black hair politics affect mental and social health outcomes by conflicted racial identity development, lack of natural hair representation, and traumatic hair-related interactions. Lastly, the pressure of Black hair politics limits one’s educational and economic opportunities which are important contributors to health in the U.S.

The last theme, socioeconomic factors, is has the most potential for exploration considering scarcity of literature on the topic compared to other sections. However, Black hair politics may play it is systemic, influential role on health outcomes through education, income, and occupation; that is because, together, these factors combine to form one the most studied and fundamental causes of racial health inequities: socioeconomic status (SES) (Baker, 2014; Kraus & Stephens, 2012; Manstead, 2018).

Income, educational level, and occupation are objective and moderately inter-related correlates of a person’s access to material and social wealth (Torssander & Erikson, 2010). SES is

the resulting social stratification system and has been found to contribute to a range of health inequities (e.g., Jackson et al., 2006; Williams & Collins, 2001; Williams & Sternthal, 2010). It is important to note that racial health inequities in Black women persist after accounting for SES (Smith et al., 2021). Nevertheless, accounting for its role in adverse health outcomes among Black women and girls is important. Black hair politics restricts one's socioeconomic capital and advancement. These modern-day Black hair politics are no different than a century ago, when hair texture and style attributed to differing levels of social status for Black women (Cooper, 1971).

Overall, considering that Black hair politics may be affects key determinants of health, they are a potential pathway to racial health inequities burdening Black women and girls. Influences exist at different, yet fluid, levels of the social-ecological model, highlighting the need for multilevel interventions.



**Figure 4. Social-ecological model of Black hair politics and public health intervention points**

In the following sections, I review the significance of the CROWN Act, as well as present my own interventions to implement in curricula and practice to improved health outcomes for Black women and girls.

### **7.1.1 The CROWN Act**

Black hair politics and its plight on the lives of Black women and girls has not gone unrecognized. In stride with the Natural Hair Movement, an anti-discrimination legislation has been introduced to assure more safe and welcoming spaces for afro-textured hair. Initially passed in California in 2019, the CROWN Act prohibits discrimination of hair style and texture in K-12 public/charter schools, workplaces, and public accommodations and enforces accountability (*The Official CROWN Act*, n.d.). It does this by expanding the definition of race the Fair Employment and Housing Act (FEHA) and state Education Codes to include hair. As of April 2022, it is law in 15 states (California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nebraska Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Virginia, Washington) and 36 municipalities. In addition, the U.S. House of Representatives voted in favor of the CROWN Act on March 18, 2022. It is fate – along with a national stance against hair discrimination - lies in the Senate.

Legislation like the CROWN Act sets a legal precedent to change the conditions in which Black women and girls live, learn, and grow. But I want to focus beyond the protections afforded by social justice legislation; I want to focus on their ability to thrive.

### **7.1.2 Hair, Health, and Healing**

We need intersectional approaches that are tailored specifically to the lived experiences of Black women, girls, and their experience with Black hair politics. Considering this, I present a school-based and medical-based intervention titled *Hair, Health, and Healing*. These are holistic programs that address the politicization of Black hair beyond just the individual level. Although



specific components of each intervention are place-based, they center around four aims: education, empowerment, inclusivity, and accountability.

#### **7.1.2.1 School**

Black hair politics begins during one's childhood. Schools offer a direct site to mitigate the negative impact of Eurocentric ideals and harassment for they are primary sites of socialization for youth as they interact with peers, educators, and the educational environment (Evans-Winters, 2005; Morris, 2016). O'Brien-Richardson (2019b) supports the use of the school interventions to increase physical activity and build self-esteem in Black girls. The goal of this program is to increase physical activity rates for Black girls, provide them with safe ways to care for their hair, and create a safe and affirming school environment.

*Hair Education:* In K-12 classrooms, students and educators should incorporate Eurocentric standards of hair and history into the curriculum. This can help foster an understanding for contemporary contexts. For example, Black hair stylists can also be invited to lead physical education or health classes on hair texture, hygiene, and protective styles for physical activity. In addition, teachers must be part of the solution. Educators should be expected to learn about Black hair and how racist hair policies and practices actively harm Black girls.

*Hair Empowerment:* Peers and educators must also be aware of their large role in microaggressions and how to positively validate the hair experiences and racial identity of Black girls. Representation is another way to foster empowerment. Thus, perhaps older Black athletes and or students can give talks about their hair experiences, the beauty of natural hair, and how to navigate Black hair politics.

*Hair Inclusivity:* A straight-forward solution would be to ban dress code and grooming policies more likely to exclude or target Black hair styles. These include statements non-inclusive of hair color, extensions, appearance, braids, twists, locks, and length across genders. The CROWN Act would help to take care of this in public schools. In addition, gym class can be made more accessible if Black girls are given an option of what physical activity to participate in, presented with low-sweat exercises, and provided time following the class to re-style their hair.

*Hair Accountability:* Hair harassment must be explicitly stated as bullying to make sure appropriate punitive action is taken. Schools can also provide resources about the CROWN Act and how students and caregivers can get involved in their civil rights protection.

#### **7.1.2.2 Medicine**

The medical setting is another key intervention point because it is the place women and girls must go to seek health care. The literature shows there's an overwhelming amount of distrust and lack of culturally sensitive care for Black women and girls. A medical school curriculum change is a first step in addressing racism in practice and the opportunity for optimal health.

*Hair Education:* Like schools, medical training should include the history of Black hair, the impact of Eurocentric beauty standards, and how it is excluded in the medical setting. Medical providers should be at the forefront of advocating for safer ingredients in hair products. They can also use their medical expertise to inform patients of the health risks associated with endocrine-disrupting chemicals and how to scan ingredient lists for harmful substances.

*Hair Empowerment:* To encourage Black women to come to seek out medical care, providers must know how to interact respectfully with patients. This includes always listening and answering as many questions about procedures as the patient requests. All procedure steps and actions should be clearly described and understood before hair manipulation occurs (e.g., cortisol

collection, brain imaging). In addition, allowing the patient to brush or part their own hair when needed and coordinating dermatological appointments with consideration of salon visits.

*Hair Inclusivity:* Dress codes and grooming policies for medical professionals should be Black-hair friendly. Not only does this prevent discrimination of Black women employees, but it also creates an affirming space for patients to see their care providers wearing styles they can relate to. In addition, medical devices need to be reassessed for their White-centric biases. For example, scalp electrodes are not designed with afro-textured hair in mind and often result in inaccurate readings or the exclusion of Black women from neuroscience research in general (Choy et al., 2022). Some research teams have come up with solutions like electrode-hair clips and bringing in a hairdresser to braid one's hair (Etienne et al., 2020), fingered electrodes and non-permanent EEG sensors (Casson, 2019), and an electrode that easily connects to one's skin without gel (Sun et al., 2012). In addition, little things such as satin pillowcases and satin-lined surgical caps are ways to protect Black hair and create affirming patient experiences.

*Hair Accountability:* Medical institutions and providers should center the CROWN Act in its anti-discrimination guidelines and make sure to hold all discriminatory behavior accountable. Patients should also be allowed to anonymously reflect on each visit regarding their overall perception of respect, inclusion, and care satisfaction.

What if the hair of Black women and girls was celebrated and not a health risk? This paper is not arguing for Black women and girls to wear their hair natural. It is a call to society to recognize that Black women and girls are unable to wear and care for their hair without exposures, interactions, and repercussions that are a threat to their life-long health. Physiological, psychosocial, and socioeconomic barriers to health, because of Black hair, must be addressed.

In summary, multilevel interventions addressing Black hair politics are essential to health equity. Integrating Black hair education, empowerment, inclusion, and accountability into curricula and practice can be a means to improved health outcomes.

### **7.1.3 Limitations**

This paper is the first to examine Black hair politics and its multi-system influence on health inequities facing Black women and girls. While essential to advancing health equity research, it is not exempt from challenges.

The literature review was conducted by one researcher. Thus, the trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1986), or the dependability and validity, of the content analysis may be limited. In addition, the most studies drew results from specific geographic areas (e.g., urban, North, Midwest) and collected information during one point in their lives (e.g., only childhood or adulthood). Futures studies should explore Black hair politics across one's life course, such as through longitudinal design, and diverse geographic locations.

In addition, this paper is limited to the experiences of individuals fitting or identifying with the gender binary of woman or girl. Each study defined this differently (e.g., female sex, self-describe) which risks leaving out gender expansive adults and children. It is crucial that future studies acknowledge the intersectional nature of Black hair politics while also examining its impact on individuals of all gender identities and expressions.

The construct of race is another limitation. While this article uses Black as an encompassing term for all individuals of the African diaspora living in the U.S., this was not the case for the publications analyzed. Authors used Black, African American, and Biracial across studies and sometimes interchangeably. Some girls and women not identifying with these

categories but living with afro-textured hair might have been excluded even if impacted by Black hair politics. This reduces the scope of experiences and knowledge to be acquired.

Lastly, although the CROWN Act is a law made for Black women by Black women, I believe it serves a larger purpose. A notable phrase in Black Feminist literature is, “If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression,” (Combahee River Collective, 1977). Thus, along with the eradication of afro-textured hair discrimination is a desire to assure that all individuals can wear, style, and accommodate their hair as they please, without political, social, or legal repercussions. Framing Black hair politics as a public health issue is to center the experiences of Black women and girls *and* mobilize widespread awareness of how systemic forces impact the health of individuals.

## 8.0 Conclusion

In 2020, over 100 resolutions were passed in the U.S. at the state and local level declaring racism as a public health crisis (Mendez et al., 2021). While these policies were quick to name racism as a key determinant of racial health inequities, they were lacking detailed action-steps. However, superficial language that fails to commit to the acknowledgement of racial trauma and the eradication of racism throughout systems and institutions is insufficient (Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010). Failing to acknowledge and address Black hair politics will only allow racism to reproduce, leaving barriers to optimal health outcomes for Black women and girls uncontested.

Hair is widely understood as a symbol of self-expression and beauty for women. For Black women, hair is all of these and more. The meaning of hair is multi-dimensional and is based on historical legacies of racial oppression and resistance within and outside the Black community. It also affects the lives of Black women and girls distinct from any other race and gender group. From individual physical health to social interactions to emotional well-being to employment security – Black hair matters. It contributes to the environments Black women and girls exist and factors into significant social and structural determinants of health and life outcomes. For a population already burdened with inequities in adverse health outcomes, unjust Black hair politics exacerbate these conditions. Legislation only guarantees accountability. The CROWN Act sets a precedent for change. What we need is a cultural shift in attitudes, education, and opportunity.

This is the first research to present Black hair politics as a public health concern. Black hair used to be seen in society as solely an aesthetic factor. Yet, Black women and girls clapped back. At the turn of the century, more discourse started around the significance of Black hair to

sociohistorical contexts, Eurocentric beauty ideals, self-perception, and identity. Still, that was not enough to foster societal understanding. Consequently, at the beginning of this decade, a wave of legislation has swept the country to protect against Black hair discrimination. Despite all this, there is a lack of urgency and social change. Legislation is punitive, not pro-active. A shift from solely social justice to social justice *and* public health must be the next transformation of Black hair politics. If we are focused on the ability of Black women and girls to thrive, we must assure the conditions in which they live, and grow are nurturing and affirming – public health and health equity assure just that.

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