**UK Black Hair Matters: A Thematic Analysis exploring Afro-Caribbean women’s hair as representations of the socially constructed knowledge of identity and identity threats**

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**Abstract**

Hair has the ability to visibly define ethnic difference, determine identity and impact self-esteem. Although empirical research has explored the hair texture altering behaviours of African American women, the experiences of Afro-caribbean women in the UK have been under-investigated despite being shaped by distinct cultural and historical contexts. Guided by the theoretical explanations of identity processes theory and situational identity and threats, semi-structured interviews of UK Afro-Caribbean women were used to investigate intergroup factors which affect their responses to intergroup relations and the salience of personal and social identity. Through the social constructionist epistemological approach, thematic analysis suggested that Afro-Caribbean women’s hair was subjectively positioned as a source of everyday subtle racism. The findings differ from American studies as UK Afro-Caribbean women describe the threat to identity as not only pervasive but endemic.

*Keywords*: Afro-Caribbean hair, UK women, identity process theory, identity threat, sources of racism

**Introduction**

Race-based hair discrimination is ignored in the UK. Hair can define ethnic difference (Davis-Sivasothy, 2011), determine identity (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014) and influence self-esteem (Bellinger, 2007). For centuries, European physical attributes of long straight hair (Etcoff, 1999) have defined beauty, professionalism (Erasmus, 1997) and ethnic identity in the UK. However, women of Afro-Caribbean descent have characteristically different (tightly curled) hair follicle configurations (Scott, 1988) than European hair (Craig, 2006). Therefore, natural Afro-Caribbean hair texture does not reflect these normative standards of beauty (Banks, 2016; Bellinger, 2007). Many products and practices marketed for use by Afro-Caribbean women (ACW) to achieve Eurocentric hair ideals are carcinogenetic, being linked to hormone disorders (Wise et al., 2012) reproductive health challenges (Wise et al., 2012), respiratory disorders (Helm et al., 2018) cancer, follicle damage (Scott, 1988) and hair loss (Shetty et al., 2013). Consequently, this study focuses on hair texture given its ability to determine ethnic identity (Maddox, 2014; Bencosme, 2017). Research on attitudes towards intergenerationally normalised beauty ideals, their impact on ethnic group membership and influence on behaviour, predominantly focuses on African-American or Black American women’s (AAW) experiences (Abdullah, 1998; Banks, 2016). Such research contends that despite wellbeing concerns, many women risk their health and lives to replicate Eurocentric hair texture ideals (Ellis-Hervey et al., 2016; Oyedemi, 2016). The attitudes and experiences of ACW in the UK are under-investigated (Williams, 2020), but are worthy of attention and important given their unique historic and contemporary lived experiences. Through HT discussions, this study will investigate intergroup factors which affect UK ACW’s responses to intergroup relations and the salience of social identity.

***Media Influence: significance of hair beauty norms on ACW***

UK media portray Afro-Caribbean hair as a significant identifier, and an area of difference and conflict in relation to identity (Dabiri, 2020). Despite wellness concerns, social media images add to and embed pressure for ACW to attain and maintain Eurocentric hairstyles (Oyedemi, 2016). Harwood et al. (2005) maintain that repetitive social media messages may define a group, establish group status norms normalising such conventions by presenting them as socially accepted. Pickett and Brewer (2001) go further to underline the extent to which individuals identify with a social group is likely to be based upon their awareness of shared historical and contemporary experiences.

Although cultural and ethnic identities arguably are subject to constant change, Berger (1972) posits that the foundations of beauty depiction in the media have their origins in proliferation of white European art which coincided with imperialism and the rise of capitalism. Berger (1972) suggests that through this medium, the universal beauty norm became the white aesthetic. The Afro-Caribbean aesthetic being depicted as of diminished or inferior worth, to be managed, hidden, and devalued. Hill Collins (1993), supported by Byrd and Tharps (2001), contends that the value placed on the white visual aesthetic is contextual; the legacy of colonialism and slavery informs the contemporary construction of beauty in hair in the media. Consequently, although all cultural groups are influenced by media definitions and images of beauty, the products and magazines targeted for ACW promote straight HT (Abdullah, 1998). Perkins (1996) posits such targeting has traumatised some AAW. Crenshaw (1991) suggests that the American media’s negative and overly sexualised representation of AAW represents a symbolic assault (Phelps-Ward & Laura, 2016). Such conclusions are supported by recent empirical findings of differences between AAW and European American women’s responses to media images (Carrington, 2017). Although there is significant research suggesting for AAW HT emphasises difference, disadvantage and stigmatisation, little has been written about the attitudes, experiences, and behaviours of ACW in the UK. This study acknowledges the construct of beautiful hair is worthy of exploration through ACW interactions in UK society.

***Sisters not Twins: US verses UK contextual experience differences***

Studies of African-American women have traditionally contextualised investigations into the pursuit of the Eurocentric ideology of beautiful and professional hair texture (physical capital; Hayes 2011) by grounding them in an enslaved and post abolitionist past. Although UK ACW and AAW share histories of the importance of their HT (i.e., in telling stories, representing status, heritage and at times documenting escape routes and concealing weapons and wealth) the legacy of racist ideologies differ. Stark contextual differences in the UK include the presence of ‘free’ Tudor, Georgian, Victorian and Edwardian ACW; the absence of legal segregation, the governments ‘lead’ in ending slavery and the invitation of ACW to migrate to the UK after 1950. Such social and political differences have perpetuated the myth of the UK as a post-racial society (a society absent of prejudice or racism). Such protestations hide the divergence of societal attitudes and behaviours towards UK ACW, especially in the years after 1950. Although both AAW and UK ACW have shared histories of cultural marginalisation, the voluntary migration of ACW to the UK after 1950 represents, a symptom, not a cause of imperialism. This study considers this contextual difference is worthy of examination.

This study places this research in the contemporary “hostile” (p. 9, Williams, 2020) social environment (known as the ‘Windrush scandal’), experienced by UK ACW from the 1950’s. The Windrush generation are defined as individuals or direct descendants of Caribbean ethnic and national origin who entered the UK after World War II between 1948 and 1973 in response to the UK Government’s invitation of employment. From 1950, in response to the large numbers of migrants arriving in the UK, public sentiment towards the immigration policy and migrants hardened. Such conflict was violently expressed in the political and ethnic riots in Notting Hill and Nottingham in 1958 (Miles, 1984). This negative and *hostile* social environment continued into the 2000s, fuelling discriminatory legislation (from the 1960s to 1980s) and strategies designed to confound further migration and their descendants’ ability to remain in the UK (Taylor, 2020; Williams, 2020). This research is of particular importance given the unprecedented scale of the June and July 2020 Black Lives Matter protests calling for the urgent end to racism, together with economic, political, and social inequality for ACW.

***Identity Process Theory***

Ethnic identity can usefully be conceptualised as a key aspect of social identity (Breakwell, 1983). Empirical research into identity historically applies the propositions of Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel, 1978, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1985) which predicts that the in-group (in this instance, ACW) will prefer their own hair texture to that of the out-group (straight hair texture). Although widely adopted SIT is limited to a social-psychological perspective rather than individual examination of identity (Breakwell & Canter, 1993; 2001). Through extending SIT propositions, Breakwell’s, ‘*homiletical’* Identity Process Theory (IPT; Breakwell, 1983) offersa theoretical framework to examine identity processes experienced by an individual within social environments (Moscovici, 1988). As such, it offers a useful framework for examing how ACW in the UK define and defend their identity within contextually ‘hostile’ social environments. Breakwell (2015) outlines three levels of analysis in IPT: elements of positive identity, methods of coping with threats to identity, and the motivations of individuals and group defences of their identity. Breakwell (1983) also conceptualised the structure of social identity as having two dimensions: content and value. The content dimension consists of identities originating from social experience including any identified group memberships, such as ethnicity (e.g., British Afro-Caribbean), personal traits (e.g., gender) and physical aspects (e.g., hair texture). The value dimension relates to the appraisal of identity in binary terms, such as ‘good’ or ‘bad’.

In respect of identity processes, Breakwell (1983) posits two universal processes which form the structure of identity: assimilation-accommodation and evaluation. Breakwell (1986) opines that four non-static motives guide these processes: time and situation continuity; distinctiveness from others, self-efficacy and self-worth or value (self-esteem). For ACW, assimilation-accommodation describes the absorbing of social change and media information reinforcing European hair texture ideals and its transformational qualities regarding identity into their identity structure. Such processes may result in ACW adjustingtheir identity structure to increase self-esteem (e.g., Can I still consider myself a ACW if I alter my natural hair texture?). In respect of the evaluation process, for UK ACW this refers to evaluating the extent to which their identity and hair texture affect their self-worth. Breakwell, (1986) predicts such evaluation will be contingent upon personal goals and social contexts (e.g., I love my natural hair texture, but I must wear a long straight wig to secure a managerial promotion). The model proposes that an individual’s sense of self is not static, instead it is continual. Despite Vignoles (2019), Vignoles et al. (2002), Vignoles et al. (2006), Jaspal and Cinnirella’s (2010a) concerns with the nature of these elements, (proposing three further identity motives: belonging, meaning and interconnectedness) IPT delineates a subjective identity structure which is responsive, incorporating internal and external forces in the shaping and maintenance of identity.

***Identity Threats***

IPT suggests an integrated approach to investigating social identity threats. IPT predicts ACW whose hair texture does not adhere to social norms will experience identity threat–hair texture representing a location of negative social comparisons. To address this subjective threat, IPT suggests that ACW will employ one or more different identity management strategies: intrapsychic (denial, re-evaluation), interpersonal (negativism, passing, compliance) or intergroup (group support and action). Informed by West’s (2012) qualitative research with AAW, the present study will use IPT propositions and predictors to analyse responses, motivations, and identity management strategies of UK ACW to perceived threats to their identity related to hair texture. Such research is considered of particular significance given that during the period of research, saw calls for large scale social change during the Black Lives Matter protests across the UK.

Therefore, the aim of this research was to explore the attitudes, experiences, and behaviours of UK ACW regarding hair texture. Specifically, guided by theoretical predictions of IPT, the research aims to explore how hair texture is implicated in the construction of social identity, the experience of identity threat, and the management of such threats for UK ACW.

**Method**

***Design***

A qualitative research design was considered the most appropriate research method to explore the attitudes, comparison behaviours and lived experiences UK ACW regarding hair texture. Specifically, three research questions were addressed: how social identity is constructed, maybe threatened and managed? Ethical approval was granted by the University of Derby Ethics Committee.

***Participants***

Participants (seven) were recruited via emails and social media using a purposive approach and snowballing sampling technique (Willig, 2017). Participants who were aged under 18, not resident in the UK, did not identify in whole or in part as of Afro-Caribbean descent and/or female, were excluded from the research. One participant was excluded as theydid not identify as Afro-Caribbean. The remaining (six) participants aged between 18-70 years of age (M = 56.5, SD = 15.69) were interviewed (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

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Participant alias(age group) Ethnic Origin

Fanny (66–75) African- Caribbean

Joan (46–55) Mixed racial heritage

Lillian (41–50) Black-Caribbean

Margaret (21-30) Black-Caribbean

Mary (56–65) Caribbean

Phillis (61–70) Jamaican

Sample size is not considered significant in thematic analysis given its focus on themes and patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Isman et al. (2013) opine that meaningful patterns maybe developed from a sample size of six.

***Data Collection***

Each interview was guided by an interview schedule informed by West’s (2012) American study. The individual interviews took place in person, in public places (i.e., churches, restaurants or cafés), using an interview schedule, open-ended and follow-up questions were used to elicit the participant’s experiences and attitudes. The interviews concluded with two demographic questions (age and ethnic origin). The interviews engaged between 40 and 60 minutes.

***Analytic Strategy***

A social constructionist thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to investigate the lived experiences of participants. Thematic analysis informed by Foucault’s (1985) view of power relations was chosen as a method of examination of the data. Thematic analysis facilitates the identification of patterns in data by organising data into meaningful themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). There is a paucity of investigation into UK Afro-Caribbean hair texture, and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) enables new themes and concepts to emerge from interview data. A social constructionist epistemology facilitates investigation of the discourses of ACW in relation to identity and coping strategies, within its cultural, historical and social context (Harper, 2011). In respect of theoretical framework, von Glasersfeld and Kelley, (1982) posit IPT as a social constructionistmodel of identity processes as it emphasises individual autonomy in identity construction and management.This approach is considered appropriate given it involves analysis of discourses (the significant contextual features and immersive descriptions of the data) within the broader social contexts (White & Rayner, 2014), allowing for the subjective experiences of participants to be analysed.

Utilising, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) semi-structured interview audio files were listened to twice in order to draw early impressions of themes prior to transcription. Thereafter, they were transcribed verbatim by the researcher and analysed to identify and explore intergroup factors which affect ACW’s responses to the intergroup relations and the salience of social identity using thematic analysis. The data underwent the five stages of analysis suggested by Braun & Clarke (2006). Themes were amalgamated and linked together to create a meaningful explanation of the topic are set out at Figure 2 below (Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

Figure 2: *Thematic Map, Showing Final Two Main Themes (Braun & Wilkinson, 2003).*

![Diagram

Description automatically generated]()

**Results**

This research explores attitudes, experiences, and behaviour of UK ACW towards hair texture. Through investigation of three research questions (how social identity is constructed, maybe threatened and how these are managed) two main themes (hair texture as identity; hair texture as symbolic violence) and four sub-themes (good hair; self-esteem; power and status situations and identity management strategies) emerged. Using IPT, each theme and sub-theme is analysed below.

***Hair texture as identity***

Social constructions of normative standards of hair texture were discussed in every interview and perceptions of hair texture acceptability appeared to be an important general dimension. Amongst all, hair texture evaluation was used to describe group membership and derive self-concept. Hair texture descriptions being used to create and depersonalise group identities.

**Joan:**  afro curls which represents the black culture. (Line 50)

All self-categorise as members of the ingroup being African-haired women. Such identities were described as fixed.

***Good Hair***

For the ACW in this research, the outgroup are women categorised as meeting dominant normative UK standards of ideal hair texture - ‘good hair’ (Phillis, line 437). The value of the outgroup’s ‘good hair’ was described with reference to hair texture, length, growth direction and colour (Breakwell, 1983);

**Margret:** I think very straight, very long, and very blond. (Line 45).

Evaluation of Afro-Caribbean hair was described exclusively in respect of its texture. Demonstrating social identification through the use of ethnically specific slang (patois), these women valued Afro-Caribbean hair texture negatively; likening its qualities to coarseness, irregularity and restriction (Breakwell, 1983).

**Mary:** European hair is silky, straightened whereas for black hair it is more tightly curled and that’s why they call it. Theyeither call it ‘nappy hair’ or ‘kinky hair’. (Line 289)

**Lillian:** It’s picky. I don’t like that. (Line 240)

Social comparison processes are demonstratedthrough Mary and Lillian’s evaluation of Afro-Caribbean hair textureas distinctive, stigmatised and devalued (Breakwell, 1983). The consequence of membership of the devalued group is positioned as intertwined with self-worth (Hogg, et al., 1987; Breakwell, 1992). Through descriptions of feelings of anxiety (Mary, line 424) confusion (Phillis, line 196), frustration, (Joan, line 389) and depression (Margret, line 277; Mary, line 269) the characteristics of hair texture of the ingroup is positioned as low status when compared to the positively described outgroup (Joan, line 515). All participants identify with a collective identity based on group membership and describe its negative aspects (Breakwell,1986).

***Self-esteem***

Self-esteem motives are described by Mary as interrupting the continuity of assimilation-accommodation and evaluation processes (Breakwell, 1986). Specifically, Mary describes, the operation of self-worth motives;

**Mary:** for women, when your hair is right, you feel right. And if someone’s telling you that your hair isn’t good enough then, what, how does that make, what does that do to you psychologically? …It suppresses you. (Line 304)

Mary describes perceptions of the psychological reality of the dominant social constructions of beautiful hair texture as a threat to ACW’s identity by challenging self-efficacy, self-worth, and value motives. Many describe such challenges to self-esteem as a threat through reactions to past situations.

**Phillis:** This is an assault on who you are. You have been told that your hair is not good. So, the good hair and the bad hair syndrome, was a common conversation. (Line 437)

Other discourses speak of identity challenge through descriptions of being bullied by others (Fanny, line 250), feeling ugly (Joan, line 373) or feelings of inadequacy (Mary, line 783).

**Joan:** I wanted to go to my natural hair… I didn’t actually like what I was seeing in the mirror…you’re fighting with it and that’s why I wore wigs… (Line 389).

Although many link hair texture to gender identity (Mary, line 548), some describe how in attempting to deal with their disadvantaged situation, they navigate daily feelings of lost autonomy in everyday settings or roles (Foucault, 1985). However, the data may be seen to go further to describe how ACW’s hair texture represents an identity threat based on socially constructed knowledge of who they are (symbolic violence).

***Hair Texture as symbolic violence***

The origin of negative social comparisons of Afro-Caribbean HT is described through not only personal, but social historical perspectives (Breakwell, 2015). Such perspectives are described as reflective of symbolically violent social and legislative changes occurring in the UK after 1950 which are perceived to devalue the Windrush generation of ACW.

**Mary:** … I have a strong identity of who I am…I’m from Jamaica. I know my roots in Jamaica. ...when I came to this country, it was totally different, and it was alienating, and it made me feel sad. (Line 172)

**Mary:** … going for a job and being told that in order to get it,… you gotta do something with your hair… you have to lose your identity as a black person to get on and to achieve and to progress. And if you don’t do that and conform then you won’t. (Line 926)

Others, however, describe an institutionalised origin;

**Phillis**: the subtle form or the blatant form of white supremacy... if you are going to keep a group of people down, then who do you let through?.. who will you let come through, and how do you maintain white supremacy? You have to find a way of feeding negative stereotypes of who you think those people are. And those who come through, will have to behave like the archetypal English person. (Line 726)

Through descriptions of routine social interactions, specifically with the media, some describe subtle reinforcement and normalisation of negative representations of Afro-Caribbean hair texture and who ACW are.

**Joan:** Because of the way the media portrays it…it’s ingrained in black people because of years gone by when you would have to have straight hair to be socially acceptable. (Line 139)

**Phillis:** They know the message has been well received. (Line, 278)

Although social representations in the media are described by Joan and Phillis as entrenching negative social values of ACW’s hair texture and ACW and that in doing so, affecting distinctiveness and self-esteem (Jefferson & Stake, 2009); differing from the US studies, this experience of dissatisfaction is not homogeneous. Others describe the influence of media images in different ways: some consider the media as an important top-down source of reassurance and affirmation of their inner value rather than a reinforcement of negative social value.

**Joan:** at one time, they wouldn’t have people on the TV enough to identify with. Whereas now, you don’t have to worry…You’re just accepted as you are because there is all these people on the TV with hair like me, face like me, skin like me. And that’s what the media has allowed you to-to have. (Line 812).

However, most characterise the effect of media representations of ACW’s hair texture as a vehicle to subtly perpetuate and preserve perceived social value criteria in respect of Afro-Caribbean hair texture as representations of who ACW are. A type of hair equity.

**Phillis:** Black is bad. Black is not a good idea. …And my blackness was seen as a curse. (Line 295).

Further, reflecting Harwood and Roy (2005), many describe negative perceptions of Afro-Caribbean hair texture as not only reinforced by the media but affirmed by other ingroup members: peers and family members.

**Phillis:** I grew up in a family where, the beast of self-hate was also in evidence. (Line 373)

ACW’s hair texture is linked to identity through descriptions of thoughts, actions and affects. Social constructions of beautiful hair texture being depicted as a perpetual measure of an individual’s personal worth – with ACW and their hair texture being positioned as inferior.

**Phillis:** … we don’t aim to be African. We aim to be European. (Line 291)

Although US AAW hair texture studies suggest that hair texture maybe used to investigate the structure of identity, analysis using IPT draws the focus from the individual level of cognition to include the social dimension (the possible self). The data describes two situational cues which may increase awareness of the salience of identity, specifically status and power situations (Foucault, 1978).

***Status and Power Situations***

The impact of status situations on the salience of identity was discussed by all. Experiences of employment appointment and promotion were commonly described as emphasising awareness of hair texture distinctions, assignment of group identity and negative assumptions of group and individual identity (Phillis, line 767). All perceived that wearing their natural hair texture was not ‘acceptable’ in these situations (Joan, line 139), and that ‘acceptable’ hair texture is pivotal to career progression (Mary, line 58). Many describe awareness or feelings of being judged by the outgroup.

**Phillis:** Black woman, black people are always policed by society. They watch us and because we are being watched, whether we like to believe so or not, erm, we’re being policed. (Line 348)

Phillis describes such judgement as pervasive and exclusively negative in respect of their hair texture and who ACW are. All describe such surveillance as threatening to the salience of their identity (Breakwell 2015).

**Mary:** … once I started to wear my hair naturally… my confidence just wasn’t there. I would be in a meeting and …I used to feel confident and stuff, I just feel as if my confidence was nothing... because suddenly people were just focusing more on my hair and less on what I was saying. (Line 898)

Such threats to identity manifested for some in expressions of shame, frustration, or concerns about authenticity (Breakwell, 2015).

**Mary:** … working with white culture …. you want to fit in, but it’s like you selling out who you are… You sell out who you are because it’s like you’re saying your culture, you as a black woman, is not good enough. So, in order to fit in... I look more like you, than less than you. (Line 774)

Others, described the need to disengage from the group (Phillis, line 673) or redefine it (Margaret, line 272) as a response to this negative scrutiny (Breakwell, 2015). All describe negative consequences in attempts to maintain their natural hair texture in professional environments (Phillis, line 767; Joan, line 189).

Common to all participants were everyday descriptions of power situations, accentuating perceptions of awareness of negative evaluations of their HT and being perceived only in terms of their devalued group membership by the outgroup.

**Fanny:** The actress [Lupita Nyong’o] … I think she’s just a brilliant role model for black women... she was on the cover and they changed the hair and she protested about it and they had to change it back. (Line 861)

Fanny describes ACW’s hair texture as devalued because of negative stereotypes in respect of who Afro-Caribbean are. Specifically, others describe feelings of lacking in character or competence: “bad” (Mary, line 664), “ugly” (Phillis, line 298, Joan, line 366), not “confident” (Lillian, line 805, Mary, line 911) and “not being any good” (Fanny, line 801).

**Mary:** So, you just go along with it but it’s like saying that your hair as a black person is not good enough. (Line 300)

All describe assimilation of negative stereotypes of their ethnic group and acknowledge that they converge to threaten the self-esteem of ACW (Breakwell, 2015). Further, that interactions with others and wider society exacerbate this threat. Participants discuss feelings of such interactions as a symbolic form of violence against their integrity (Joan, lines, 190, 303; Phillis, line 926) as they describe feeling that the low status of their group (validity) is forcibly allocated to them by society.

***Identity Management Strategies***

In their own biographies all participants describe their group status as unfavourable (through negative social identity experiences) and how they use their hair texture to employ individual identity management coping strategies: specifically social creativity (through compliance), individualisation (withdrawing from group membership through passing), or social competition (negativism; Breakwell, 2015). In doing so, they describe their choice of strategy as mediated by their perception of the socio-structural characteristics of intergroup relations and identification with the group (Breakwell, 1988). All describe the need for daily cognitive effort to maintain the choices made and compliance strategies (such as choosing to alter hair texture or covering it with a wig or extensions) as a dominant and rational strategy to achieve social acceptance despite potential damage to self-esteem.

Some women describe how employing a **social creativity** (through compliance) strategy results in social approval and manifests in feelings of relief and protected self-esteem.

**Phillis**: After I started doing it [hair] myself and it was much sleeker and I actually was treated like a completely different person…people approached me more, I remember when I tried to get work experience it seemed to make a difference (Line 272).

Others describe that by covering their hair texture with hair extensions they remove negative perceptions and enable a form of conditional acceptance by the outgroup.

**Margaret:** I definitely noticed a change in the way I was being perceived...definitely more people approaching me and complimented my hair and saying, ‘Oh it’s so straight, so lovely’. (Line 285).

However, for others, altering hair texture to adhere to normative constructs of 'beauty' is described as deeply damaging to self-esteem, self-worth, and as anxiety inducing (Gordon, 1980).

**Mary**: … when you forget who you are, where you are, your culture, where you are coming from, it creates a sense of depression. Because you are fitting into another culture that you cannot identify with and what is wrong with my culture? What is wrong with me as a human? As a black woman with lovely kinky hair. What is wrong with that? (Line 267).

Significantly, such descriptions suggest that compliance is not long lasting. Lillian describes, even when the decision of compliance is made, the influence of social interaction with minority groups within the ingroup results in feelings of internal conflict. IPT predicts the strength of group identification mediates the extent that an individual may engage in individual strategies to change their status.

***Individualisation*** (withdrawing from group membership through passing) was also described as a strategy to disguise the threatened characteristics and manage the threat to self-image (Breakwell, 2015).

**Mary:…**people even confused me from being a black woman…they didn’t know how to because of my hair. Because I had really thick, lovely hair so it you didn’t look err um like a black woman. (Line 150)

**Joan:** I didn’t actually like what I was seeing in the mirror, Line 389)

However, Joan goes further in descriptions of the impact of realism, emphasising time, suggesting a daily internal struggle to manage the threatened characteristics.

Others describe adopting a strategy of ***Social Competition (negativism)*** by choosing not to (active redefining) or to stop (negativism) adhering to normative hair texture standards as way of managing identity threat.

**Fanny:** I just think they also need to fix what is within. And the whole march to belonging is about their concerns, they’re not happy with themselves sometimes. (Line 315)

However, Phillis maybe seen to actively redefine her identity, informed by negativity (Breakwell, 2015). She presents a meaningful and long-lasting experience of reinterpreting negatively viewed characteristics by openly and directly confronting the normative expectation of beautiful hair texture.

**Phillis: …** everything about us has been controlled by white racism. By the structures of a racist culture, which says we have to do everything, to demonise you and in so doing we have to assault your humanity. … I’ve never done anything to my hair. (Line 402).

Phillis describes the subjective threat with direct criticism of the outgroup. She describes managing the threat by embodying and redefining the negatively constructed difference. Such a strategy actively celebrates and champions the criticised difference. In emphasising pride in her group Phillis describes not only the positive daily effort to actively redefine the negative narrative, but an authentic and powerful interpersonal coping strategy. Mary may be seen to further this, presenting the redefining strategy as a meaningful long-lasting mode.

**Mary:** the moment I stopped doing my hair, ….it just feel as if I’m back (Line 893).

All describe choosing not to alter their hair texture as a lasting strategy to increase the salience of identity as ACW and regain self-esteem (Breakwell, 2015).

**Discussion**

Through the social constructionist epistemological approach, thematic analysis positioned UK ACW’s follicle configurations as a source of everyday subtle racism.Using IPT inter-group and personal theoretical framework, two main themes (Hair texture as identity; Hair texture as symbolic violence) and four-sub themes (good hair; self-esteem; status and power situations and identity management strategies) were explored. Reflective of US studies, the themes suggest that constructions of hair texture represents intergroup conflict based on social comparison processes. However, the UK data goes further to suggest the nature of the comparison process results in subtle racism affecting every aspect of ACW lives.

As predicted by IPT (Breakwell, 1983), elements of positive identity, methods of coping with threats to identity and identity defence motivations were discussed. Constructions of ethnic identity as a facet of social identity was discussed through social, historical, and subjective perspectives of self-value by all (Breakwell, 2015). Mirroring US studies, all described UK ACW distinctive hair texture characteristics as shaping the content dimensions of ethnic identity over a lifespan and defining social groups. The data focused on how the assimilation-accommodation and evaluation process components of identity underpin, influence, and change the structure of ethnic identity over time through everyday inter-group interactions (Breakwell, 1983). Further, reflective of US research, UK ACW describe the interplay of their historic and contemporary social narratives when negotiating the status of their social group in relation to their hair texture and what it represents. The sum of such narratives described as ‘hostile’ towards ACW hair texture and who they are. For UK ACW, exposure to the media was described as a constant source of oppressive surveillance and reinforcement of European hair texture beauty ideals. Hair texture was described as a locus of negative social comparisons. All discourses describing the hair texture of ACW as ‘bad’ due to perceived media and social pressure for ACW to make and maintain daily adjustments to the structure of their identity through their hair texture decisions. Hair texture described as the site of subtle racism - a form of symbolic violence against ACW. Importantly, the results contradict descriptions of the UK as a post-racial society.

Contrary to IPT primary predictions, social constructions of beautiful hair texture make outgroup characteristics (i.e., straight hair texture) salient for ACW. The results suggest, through hair texture decisions UK ACW seek to gain self-esteem, in addition to agency. However, differing from AAW research, motivated by an awareness to be positively perceived, UK ACW described hair texture as a trigger for subtle everyday symbolic violent objectification, particularly experienced during imbalances of power and status situations. The nature and success of identity management strategies are explored through interactions with others and wider society. Hair texture choices were described as an individual mitigation strategy to manage the impact of validity or integrity challenges. Although as proposed by IPT, UK ACW employed one or more identity management strategies, in contrast to US research, the analysis highlights that UK ACW are more attuned to the differences amongst ingroup members and significantly, subtle everyday triggers of symbolic violent objectification of their hair texture. The subtlety demonstrated in descriptions of hair texture intertwined with self-esteem and representations of the socially constructed knowledge of who they are. Such symbolic violence is described as pervasive and endemic.

This evidence-based research has limitations. Firstly, the demographic sample is relatively narrow. Further research may extend the scope of the population of study to investigate women identifying in whole or in part as of African heritage. Age and occupation may also have significant implications for wider investigation. Secondly, although IPT provides an analyses framework for individual identity and identity threats, the extent of the perceived threat is not predicted. The 2020 Black Lives Matter protests represent a community response against the overwhelming inequities experienced by the UK black community. Such protests attempt to change social and political will by pushing the gaze of concern toward the everyday experiences of oppression and inequality negotiated by black people in the UK. This research links the everyday hair practices of ACW with the social and political context within the UK.Regardless of the studies limitations,ethnocentric ideals of hair texture has an insidious impact on constructions of identity for UK ACW. Urgent social and political change is necessary to end the described multi-generational abuse. UK Black Hair Matters.

**Reflexivity**

All interviews were undertaken by the first author. The first author’s role in this research has not been as a neutral observer. It is acknowledged that her influences and personal values have shaped the investigation process and findings (Willig, 2017). Such bias includes her ethnic origin as a UK ACW who has worn her hair, naturally, in extensions, or under wigs for over 46 years. However, this was a collaborative work between two female authors who agreed on the robustness and clarity of the analysis.

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