

**“Getting to the roots”:
a critical examination into the social construction of hair amongst Coloured
women living in Cape Town**

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore how the social construction of head-hair impacts the lived experiences of a small group of ‘Coloured’ women living in Cape Town. In the first part, the dissertation argues that colonialism stigmatized the bodies of ‘non-whites’ as inferior; establishing racist, sexist, and classist perceptions of the human body in comparison to a ‘white’ imagery. The Apartheid regime in South Africa, in part, heightened these beliefs through social and structural means. All though not static, the influences of these racist ideologies remain prevalent in 21st century South African society and are prevailing in perceptions of hair. The thesis then reviews literature from a Euro-American context –concentrating on the ‘black’ American experience; to display the ways, in which straight and coarse hair textures are imbued with racist, sexist, and classist perceptions and meanings. As it stands, in the 21st century, mainstream American society continues to place high value on straight hair; which is attributed as being a ‘white’ aesthetic and is associated with positive meanings. Conversely, coarse hair is devalued aesthetically and is attributed as a representation of ‘blackness’ and is associated with negative meanings. The research utilizes postcolonial theory, critical race theory, and the concept intersectionality, in order to critique and expose the influence colonialism has had and continues to have on social interactions and categories. The research employs 9 individual qualitative interviews; in which, semi-structured questions surrounding hair were crafted. The participants of this study were purposively selected, based on the aims of the study and selection criteria. All of the participants self-identify as middle-class ‘Coloured’ women, they are between the ages of 18-30, and they attend four institutions of higher education in Cape Town. In conclusion, the data indicates that the participant’s experience hair based on racist, classist, and sexist aesthetic ideologies stemming from the Apartheid era, valorizing straight hair as a ‘white’ imagery. The data reveals, hair is perceived in oppositional binaries of coarse and straight hair; coarse hair is viewed as an indicator of ‘blackness’ and straight hair is viewed as a likeness to ‘whiteness’. These correlations hold very real social implications for the participants. This thesis brings forth the problematic issues within the construction of hair in society; as it is embedded into race, class and gender.

KEY WORDS: Coloured Women, Hair, Colonialism, Social Constructions, Race, Cape Town

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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to investigate a) how a small group of ‘Coloured’ women who live in Cape Town, construct their hair texture; b) whether their constructions of hair texture mirror those of the apartheid era, and, going further back, reflect colonial constructions of the ‘black’ body, and general and contemporary gendered norms of beauty; and c) how does living in Cape Town shape and influence their constructions of hair. There is a large amount of literature on the racialization and gendering of the body and on how colonialism and other forms of institutionalised racism have been implicated in this (see, hooks, 1988; Grayson, 1995; Erasmus 2000). Although some post-colonial work looks directly at the racialized and gendered construction of hair texture (e.g. Thompson, 2009; hooks, 1988), very little of it focuses on this process in the South African context. I found limited research and studies on hair, as it relates to ‘Coloured’ women. The lack of research on this important topic also speaks to the relevance of the research. In a global context, colonialism greatly shaped and influenced ideologies about race, gender, class and beauty through the body –in a hierarchal ranking. As South African Sociologist Zimitri Erasmus (2000, p.381) informs us,

“Western racisms in their various mutations make claims about the body: about beauty and ugliness, and about sexuality. The politics and violence of

this racism operate in and through the body. This legacy has meant that, in general, white bodies have graced with beauty while black bodies have been relegated to ugliness”.

That is, human bodies have been separated, categorized as races and genders, based on similarities and differences of physical characteristics in a hierarchal manner. The way that racial categorizations have traditionally been conceived of is attributable or at least strongly linked to *some* of the ideas about human types that came out of the European Enlightenment (Steyn 2001, p.17; Kitch pp. 28-45).

In the 1400s, European explorer’s shared stories about their encounters with people from various parts of the ‘new’ world (Steyn 2001, p.8). However, it was not until the 1700s that racial categories gained traction as a mechanism to divide and segregate individuals in ways which suited colonial purposes, i.e. which justified the theft of land and the subjugation of ‘black’ people (Steyn 2001, pp.13-14). During the colonial period and beyond, racial distinctions were held to be descriptive as opposed to normative. Thus, people who lived in places where colonizers had interest, such as Africa, Asia and the Americas, were characterized as racially inferior to Europe. The human body and its physical differences have been used and continue to be used as a means to create an ideal of how and what society should value and strive to be (Steyn, 2001; Kitch, 2009). This image has been constructed from the point of view of ‘white’ Europeans and justified on the

assumption of the precision and rational superiority of the values of the European Enlightenment (Steyn 2001, pp.4-5; Kitch 2009, pp.28-40).

South African Sociologist, Deborah Posel (2001a; 2001b) informs us that, before the National Party came into power in 1948, South Africa (SA) experienced centuries of segregation and hierarchal racial practices dominated by 'whites'. However, ideas about race were not fixed, and were determined locally (Posel 2001b, p.97). The ability to distinguish and separate based upon race was considered common knowledge, reliant on body features and lifestyle differences – thus, allowing for varying definitions of race based on local governance's knowledge and judgements about race. 'White' South Africans, men in particular, viewed apartheid (segregation) as a practical means to protect and uphold 'white' supremacy against the perceived 'black' danger (Posel 2001a, p.52). From this fear, the Population Registration Act was enacted in 1950. Its purpose was to serve as a rigid centralized and clearly understood articulator of racial classifications, and to mitigate ambiguity surrounding racial classification for all SA citizens (Posel 2001a, p.52). In return, race was used as a rigid means to maintain social and moral order through discipline, regulation and surveillance (2001a, p.52).

The Apartheid regime allowed 'whites' to benefit from the country's wealth and resources by allotting them to those categorized as 'white' (Posel 2001a, p.66). The Population Registration Act didn't just separate people into groups, it did so in a

hierarchical ranking; “[...] which ranked whiteness at its apex” (Posel 2001a, p.57) and “[...] ‘native’ the default classification” (Posel 2001b, p.105). To be classified as ‘native’, was considered to be the lowest in the racial hierarchy; being classified as ‘native’ meant harsher treatment in all areas of life. For instance, ‘natives’ were excluded from equal participation in and access to resources within society, such as education, work, property ownership, marriage, and the freedom live and travel without restrictions (Posel 2001a, p.93). The Population Registration Act categorized individuals into three racial groups: ‘native’, ‘Coloured’, and ‘white’; as Posel (2001a, p.56) states,

A white person is one who in appearance is, or who is generally accepted as, a white person, but does not include a person who, although in appearance obviously a white person, is generally accepted as Coloured person [author’s emphasis]

A native is a person who is in fact or is generally accepted as a member of any aboriginal race or tribe of Africa.

A Coloured person is a person who is not a white person nor a native.

The definition was proved to be illogical and based on normative assessments of lifestyle and physical features. The base for determining race was skin color and carried onto other physical features such as hair texture, the shape of the nose, lips and so on (Posel 2001a, pp.62-63). For example, the Act stated that a person is considered to be ‘Coloured’, so long as he or she is not visibly/generally accepted as ‘white’ or ‘native’. Although, thought to be a thorough explanation, it resulted

in many 'Coloured' people as defined in law, being able to be reclassified as 'white' or 'native', and many defined as 'native' being able to be reclassified as 'Coloured' and in a few cases 'white' people were reclassified as 'Coloured'. Due to this loop hole (reclassification), the regime established additional amendments, affidavits and tests to be administered to prove one's racial belonging (Posel 2001a, p.59). Thus, the infamous 'Pencil Test' was employed to ascertain racial difference between 'white' and 'non-white' persons. Classifiers would place a pencil in an individual's hair, if it did not pass through the hair, the person would automatically be considered 'non-white' and other 'tests' and lifestyle criteria were used to distinguish between 'native' and 'Coloured'. Additionally, classifiers would summon barbers and other 'experts' to determine if a person's hair was an acceptable texture for a 'white' person (Posel 2001b, p.105). For a person who considered their selves to be 'Coloured', being reclassified as 'native' carried much shame and meant for even more disadvantages within society. Posel (2001a, p.62) informs us that,

“The hierarchies of privilege and reward attached to the racial classification exercise extended the anxieties of race more widely, particularly within Coloured communities. Many of the appeals from people who considered *themselves* Coloured were *classified* as 'native' speak of the deep sense of

shame felt by those who found themselves officially downgraded a rung on the country's racial ladder”.

If ever one's 'Colouredness' came into question, there remained a burden to prove one's distinctiveness from 'natives', that is, those considered to be 'non-whites' had an incentive to attempt to be reclassified, hence the common practices to 'whiten' the body. Individuals had to have a close examination of the hair on their head and other parts of their body, their skin complexion couldn't be too dark, they had to associate with other 'Coloureds', and their work had to be in line with the type of work associated with 'Coloureds', along with their social standings, class status, and food consumption (Posel 2001a, pp.62-63). An example of the lived experience of racial categorization under apartheid, comes from Peter Hendrickse, now an ANC parliamentary member, who describes how members of his family were split into different racial classifications under the Population Registration Act and how many 'Coloureds' in his community would 'play-white' and cut off contact or deny association with other 'Coloureds' because of the advantages of this practice (Hendrickse n.d., p.17).

As South African Historian, Mohamed Adhikari (2005, p.11) informs us, due to the circumstances of racial hierarchy 'Coloured' identity favored an association to 'whiteness' and distancing toward 'Africaness'. That is, "...weather in the value placed on fair skin and straight hair, in the prizing of their white ancestors in their

family lineage, or taking in pride the degree to which they were able to conform to the standards of Western bourgeois” (Adhikari 2005, p.11). For ‘Coloured’ people, one’s hair alone could be the deciding factor as to what your life chances were. In many situations, one’s skin complexion and hair texture were the cause of broken homes and the denial of social and economic access. What should be clear from this discussion is that being any designation of a ‘non-white’ person was highly and materially disadvantageous. This helps to explain why people designated as one category or the other of a ‘non-white’ person engaged in practices to make them appear more ‘white’ such as the practice of hair straightening.

Presently, in the new millennium, hair continues to serve as a visual articulator of this value ranking system in many societies such as the United States (US) and SA. The status quo on what beautiful hair looks like maintains that straight, sleek, long hair is beautiful and desirable and is associated with ‘white’ Europeans –women in particular. Conversely, coarse textured hair is viewed as ugly and less desirable and is attributed toward being ‘black’ (Grayson 1995, pp.14-15). Postcolonial and feminist literature reveals that bodies are not just racialized, they are also gendered (Kitch 2009, pp.28-36). This applies as much to hair as any other physical feature. Women with coarse hair are likely to suffer discrimination and stigmatization (Thompson 2009, p.833). For example, Rose Weitz’s (2001, p.667) research has found that hair is integral to a woman’s social position being that hair is not only

public but personal. In that, it is visible and attached to the body; exposing it to cultural and social norms. Weitz (2001, p.683) shares,

“No matter what a woman does or doesn’t do with her hair –dyeing or not dyeing, curling not curling, covering with a bandana or leaving it uncovered –her hair will affect how others respond to her, and her power will increase or decrease accordingly [...]”.

And, in the South African context Erasmus (2001, p.13) argues that, “Hairstyling and texturizing were (and still are) key beautification practices in the making of womanhood among young coloured women”. It is important to note that post-1994, SA society experienced racially conscious movements that encouraged and promoted a framework of ‘Africanization’; which embraces an ‘authentic’ African aesthetic, such as coarse hair styles and textures. Thus, complicating and often competing alongside the prevailing ‘white’ aesthetic. In 21st century SA society, hair texture and styling is still used as a visual marker of race, often positioned in binary oppositions such as coarse versus straight hair. Coarse textured hair is attributed to being racialized as ‘black’ and straight hair is attributed to being racialized as ‘white’. Individuals, who identify as ‘Coloured’, are or may become entangled in social expectations based on hair texture because hair texture within this group varies greatly from coarse, to curly, to wavy, and to straight.

When examining hair texture and 'Coloured' identity, the notion of agency, must be taken into consideration and clarified. The research does not deny that 'Coloured' women have agency when it comes to their hair texture and styling. That is, individuals have the ability to choose how and what way they want to style their hair. Weitz (2001, p.669) argues that women use their hair both as a form of accommodation and resistances to forms of power. That is, women are aware of the cultural expectations entwined in their hair, and that they actively decipher between or interchangeably choose hairstyles that challenge or fall in line with social expectations (Weitz 2001, p.683).

It is not my intention to present women –in particular the participants in this study, as docile or passive beings who are completely controlled by their social conditioning. My intentions, based on what has emerged from the empirical research, is to show that the participants experience socially accepted norms inflected with racism, sexism and classicism; according to which, hair texture is judged as beautiful and desirable or the converse. Furthermore, the participants are influenced by these norms, even if they are not controlled by them. Based on the status quo, many women –of varying racial associations and hair textures, including the participants, style their hair to fit, meet or maintain the norm. Thus, hair styling choices, although made freely, have a relationship to hegemonic and

implicitly racist norms, which makes these choices multifaceted and sometimes reflective of problematic constellations of social power.

Why hair? Examining the social construction of hair texture can tell us something about power relations in a given social context. The assumptions surrounding what kind of hair is considered beautiful and desirable are often racist, sexist and classist and yet they often go unchallenged. A critical engagement with hair will allow me to reveal these normative assumptions. This study facilitates an examination of interconnectedness of hair texture with particular experiences of race, specifically in the lives of 'Coloured' women. If one doubts the enormous impact of norms around hair texture, one need only look at the hair care industry. According to Mpungose (2004, n.p.) the 'black' hair care business is a billion rand industry in SA. The 'black' hair care industry in SA heavily embraces and promotes the practice of straight hair, implicitly suggesting that any other kind of hair is not desirable. This is evident through the prominence and rapidly expanding sales of hair weaves, chemical relaxers, and flat irons. This is problematic because the industry manipulates the desire to be social accepted and associates it with positive attributes (already racialized), by promoting hair straightening as a necessity; therefore, reinforcing the status quo and influencing 'black' and 'Coloured' women to use products to achieve this desire. To illustrate this point consider the following advertisements:



(Dankieghd, 2011) (Relaxer Kit Super, n.d) (Coco Weave, n.d.)

For the purpose of the research, the study uses the term ‘Coloured’ according to how it is defined and used by South Africans in the 21st century; particularly, the women in this sample. ‘Coloured’ has a different meaning in SA to the US and it is, for some South Africans, an accepted and embraced identity. In SA and surrounding Southern African countries, ‘Coloured’ is a term created during the Nation Party’s Apartheid regime. ‘Coloured’ is viewed as a separate race related to but distinct from ‘black’ and ‘white’ races. Individuals who are of ‘mixed’ heritage of ‘black’, ‘white’ and ‘Asian’ decent are usually seen, and see themselves as ‘Coloured’.

It is important to note the contextual differences of the term ‘Coloured’, as it should not be confused with the US and other Western nations understanding of the word. In the US, historically, from the time of slavery, carrying on into segregation, as well as in the 21st century, the ‘one-drop rule’ has long been considered to be the determination of being ‘black’. The ‘rule’ asserts that one-drop of ‘black’ African blood designates a person as ‘black’. Thus, there are no

‘Coloureds’ in the US. As Davis (1991, n.p.) explains, “Not only does the one-drop rule apply to no other group than American ‘blacks’, but apparently the rule is unique in that it is found only in the US and not in any other nation in the world.” Thus, in the US the term ‘colored’ has changed meanings throughout time, and is now viewed as an outdated manner and to some as a derogatory reference to ‘blacks’/ African Americans. It also reveals that individuals who are ‘mixed’ with ‘black’ and ‘white’ are largely considered to be ‘black’. As a result, the South African racial categorization and understanding of ‘Coloured’ would be viewed as being ‘black’ in the US.

Whereas in SA, the terms ‘black’ or African are interchangeably used to refer to indigenous Bantu speaking people, and the terms ‘Bantu’ and ‘native’ are viewed as outdated and derogatory. The term ‘Coloured’ is not viewed as ‘black’ in the US context, “It instead alludes to a phenotypically varied social group of highly diverse cultural and geographical origins” (Adhikari 2005, p.2). By large, ‘Coloured’ people are descendents of both the indigenous Khoisan and European settlers (Adhikari 2005, p.2). Thus, ‘Coloureds’ are largely viewed as being ‘mixed’ race, this social understanding of the term has experienced some changes throughout the years but its overall understanding remains the same. Adhikari (2005, p.2), informs us that under the Apartheid rule, individuals categorized as ‘Coloured’, were considered to be a variation of ‘black’ people but still

considered its own distinct race. Due, to their ‘mixed’ heritage ‘Coloureds’ have held an “intermediate status in the South African racial hierarchy, distinct from the historically white minority and the numerically preponderant African population” (Adhikari 2005, p.2). In the 1970s-1980s, emerged the ‘black’ conscious and ‘Coloured’ rejectionist movements, which encouraged a rejection of the term ‘Coloured’ and embraced a collective ‘black’ identity, although many people still hold these ideologies their prominence were short lived. Post-Apartheid, resurged the embracement and usage, although still highly controversial, of the term ‘Coloured’ to identify South African people of ‘mixed’ races (Adhikari 2005, p.5-8). Presently, the term is, for the most part, viewed and used as a sense of pride of this groups diverse ‘racial’ background, history and culture.

The dissertation is structured in the following way, in chapter 2, I will be reviewing academic literature contextualizing the complexity of hair texture and styling in the US and SA as well as exploring the importance postcolonial theory, critical race theory (CRT), and intersectionality hold within this study. Chapter 3 will cover the methodology used for the study as well as introduce the participants and the criteria used to select them. Following, is chapter 4, in which the data will be analyzed through the findings based on the four themes; peer and familial pressures, racial binary, gender and political awareness. Last, chapter 5 will conclude the study.

Literature Review

In this chapter, I will review the major scholarship on the social construction of hair texture and styling. Hair is socially constructed in a multifaceted intersectional manner – i.e. it reflects not just racialization but also class and gender (see Erasmus, 2000; Grayson, 1995; hooks, 1988). Due to contextual differences, it is necessary to examine both global and local literature in order to gain a comprehensive perspective. In a global context, hair texture is viewed as beautiful and desirable according to values that reflect those developed and deployed to justify previous colonial domination. Straight hair is associated with positive attributes –beauty, sophistication, intelligence, racial superiority etc., and coarse hair with negative attributes –ugliness, a lack of sophistication, and general inferiority and so on (Erasmus, 2000; Grayson, 1995; Thompson, 2009). Because the social construction of hair is underexplored in South African scholarship, it is necessary to make use of studies and literature that examine hair texture in other contexts; such as the United States. I look now at the construction of hair and studies of the construction of hair that examines the topic in the global North.

The Euro-American context is unarguably very different from the SA context yet the US does share some commonalities –a history of colonization, slavery, and race-based segregation with SA. Hair has been and is a site of domination and

resistance for ‘black’ people. In the Euro-American context, coarse textured hair is viewed as ‘black’ hair and is socially positioned as inferior and less desirable. Many feminist and ‘black’ conscious scholars view the social construction of hair as political, racial, gendered, aesthetic and as cultural practices (Mercer, 1987; Grayson, 1995; Thompson, 2009). Due to the hierarchal devaluation of ‘black’ hair in the US, ‘black’ Americans experience hair styling in various ways. The meanings derived and attached to coarse textured hair in terms of hairstyling practices, though stigmatised since colonial times has not remained entirely static across time. The term coarse itself is a compacted word infused with value; as it is a commonly used descriptive term to reference hair that is curly –which includes loose to tightly coiled hair. Euro-American literature and scholarship on the social construction of hair focuses heavily on hair styling practices –in particular, hair straightening and the meanings attached to coarse hair as intimately related to values developed by colonists (Thompson, 2009; Mercer, 1987; Grayson, 1995). This literature is informed by postcolonial theory and the concept intersectionality. Of this work, the majority focuses on African Americans preferences and politics surrounding hair styling.

Shane White (1995) and Graham White (1995) inform us that the hair of ‘black’ African slaves disgusted, marvelled, and disturbed ‘white’ slave owners, “Whites frequently referred to blacks’ hair as ‘wool’ (the association with animals was

hardly accidental), in order to differentiate it from the supposedly superior white variety” (White 1995, p.58). Cheryl Thompson (2009, p.833) argues that hair has always played and continues to play an important role in the lives of ‘black’ people. Prior to slavery (in the US), ‘black’ Africans used various hair styles as a means to articulate culture and spirituality. Due to enslavement, and the harsh conditions that came with it, ‘blacks’ no longer had the resources, time or community to carry on these practices. That is, family and cultural groups were forcefully separated, which led to a breakdown of these social practices. However, during the 18th century, many house slaves began to style their hair to imitate the wigs and hair styles of their owners. This suggests the internalization of ‘white’ racist norms by ‘black’ people: “Black beauty was juxtaposed with White beauty; a socially stratified hierarchy began to take shape” (Thompsons 2009, p.834). Slavery played an important role in enforcing desires and fascination of obtaining straight hair amongst some ‘blacks’; many slaves did not have nor were they raised by their birth parents. Therefore, they viewed their slave owner’s as a representation of a parent; whom they therefore wished to emulate (Davis 2007, pp.28-29). That is, after experiencing several hundred years of slavery, there was a tendency amongst some ‘blacks’ to emulate ‘white’ slave owners; whom had straight hair, and ‘keen’ features [...] (Davis 2007, p.29). Some slaves internalized the idea that their body –particularly their hair, was the easiest feature to modify;

was inferior in comparison to the hair of their ‘white’ oppressors. Many slaves appear to have been aware of the social power that particular constructions of the physical body can secure, and responded to this knowledge by finding means to alter their appearance, for example their hair. Such means included straightening techniques and head wraps. As White and White (1995, p.48) state, “Throughout the centuries of their enslavement the bodies of African and African American slaves were surfaces on which were inscribed the signs of inferior status”.

Post formal slavery, many ‘black’ women adhered to social expectations regarding the appearance of their hair, signalled to them through means such as advertisements. The advertisement below illustrates the importance placed on hair maintenance for social acceptance.

"IMPROVE YOUR APPEARANCE"



WAR DECLARED ON BAD HAIR!

G. A. MORGAN'S HAIR PRODUCTS

WE GUARANTEE THAT
YOU CAN TREAT YOUR OWN HAIR
saving time, money and worry and getting better results by using
THE G. A. MORGAN METHOD.

The Only Complete Line in the World, for Men, Women and Children

WOMEN Our treatment will grow your hair and impart to it a beautiful, soft, wavy appearance, no matter how bald it looks now.

MEN You can positively and safely grow your hair in three months with our famous Hair Refiner Cream.

\$5.00 will bring you a complete, quick, permanent growth, including G. A. Morgan's Hair Dressing, Hair Wax, Shampoo Cream, Italian Hair Oil, Dr. Barber's Soap, Heavy Night Hair Pressing Cream, \$2.50

\$2.50 will bring a complete, quick, permanent growth, including G. A. Morgan's Hair Dressing, Hair Wax, Shampoo Cream, Italian Hair Oil, Dr. Barber's Soap, Heavy Night Hair Pressing Cream, \$2.50



G. A. MORGAN'S HAIR REFINER CREAM

"SELF TREATMENT GIVES BEST RESULTS"

AGENTS WANTED TO CANVASS G. A. MORGAN'S HAIR PRODUCTS

HAIR REFINER CREAM	\$1.00
HAIR REFINER SOAP	.25
ITALIAN HAIR OIL	.35
HAIR GROWER	.50
HAIR PRESSING GLOSS	.50
DANDRUFF AND TETTER TREATMENT	1.00
HAIR PRESSING NIGHT CAP	1.00
BLEACHING	.50
BLACK HAIR STAIN	.50
HAIR-LAY FINE POMADE	.25

THE G. A. MORGAN HAIR REFINING COMPANY
5204 HARLEM AVENUE, CLEVELAND, OHIO

Ask Your Druggist for It. Prompt Attention Given To Mail Orders.

THE BEST THERE IS—CHEAPER THAN THE CHEAPEST!

Tell Your Hair Dresser To Get
G. A. MORGAN'S
RIGHT OR LEFT-HANDED
HAIR COMB

EASY RETAINING
HIGH GRADE STEEL
EASY STRAIGHTENING
ANGULARLY CURVED
NICELY POLISHED
HARD WOOD HANDLES

AND GET ONE FOR YOUR OWN USE, PRICE **\$3.50**

CLIP THIS COUPON IT IS WORTH 25 CENTS

On one complete outfit of our goods for either men or women

Name _____
Address _____
City _____

According to this advertisement, there is a *war* against *bad hair* (coarse textured hair). To put it as bluntly as the advertisement does: coarse hair is ‘black’ hair and ‘black’ hair is bad hair, bad hair in turn, is socially unacceptable. However, the advertisement offers a remedy for bad ‘black’ hair; in the form of various products that ‘refine’ (straighten) one’s hair, such as chemical hair relaxers and hot combs (flat ironing device). This advertisement and other similar advertisements reinforced the idea that the ‘black’ body was profoundly inferior to the ‘white’ body; which was beautiful and to be valued and emulated. The focus, in terms of advertising on the appearance of ‘black’ women, is telling of the role that gender plays in constructing norms of beauty. Advertisements like the one above, illustrated to ‘black’ women that in order to be accepted or participate within society their bodies –hair needed to be modified; thus, reinforcing the normalization of hair straightening.

The thesis does not seek to legitimise or affirm the argument that ‘blacks’ or any other racial groups social constructions of hair is directly due to an internalization of oppression. The study seeks to analyze the multifaceted and contradictory nature entwined in hair textures on ‘Coloured’ identity, and to bring forth the power hierarchies.

Black hair as a Symbolism of Resistance against white Domination and Racism

By the 1920s straight hair served as a visual signifier of middle-class status in the US, this assisted in establishing hair straightening practices as a social norm amongst 'black' women (Thompson 2009, p.843). During the 1960s and 1970s, there was a shift in perceptions about hair straightening, many 'black' Americans used coarse hairstyles to communicate an 'Afrocentric' identity and as a means of resistance toward 'white' domination and racism. (Kuumba and Ajanaku 1998, p.227; Mercer 1987, p.38; Thompson 2009, p.831). The 1980-90s, ushered in a political awareness and a more generally acknowledged awareness of the devaluation of 'black' hair in US society (Grayson 1995, pp.14-17; hooks 1988, n.p.). 'Black' women's perceptions about hair straightening as a rite of passage into womanhood, shifted toward confronting the impacts of having coarse hair in a 'white' dominated society (hooks, 1988).

American feminist scholars, M. Bhati Kuumba and Femi Ajanaku's expertise lies in transnational feminism and social resistance of 'black' women. Kuumba and Ajanaku (1998) view hair as cultural, aesthetic and political. They argue that hair culture is vital among people of African descent as a means of social resistance, antiracist and anticolonial struggle. Kuumba and Ajanaku (1998, p.228) argue that, "Oppositional culture or 'cultures of resistance' to hegemony have been crucial for the survival of social groupings under the conditions of colonialism, enslavement, and racial/ethnic oppression". In the 1990s, meanings attached to dreadlocks

carried the negative stigma to weed smoking, hip-hop youth culture (Kuumba and Ajanaku 1998, p.233). However, in the 1950s, Jamaican Rastafarians used their body –hair, as a political form of resistance; styling their hair in dreadlocks to defy colonization and embrace a life style of ‘Afrocentrism’. The practice and ideology was well received and adopted by ‘black’ Americans in the 1970s (Kuumba and Ajanaku 1998, p.227). ‘Blacks’ relied on their culture as a strategic tool of social resistance, as a means of survival and liberation. The coarse hair styles served as a powerful nonverbal symbolic form of a collective resistance and rejection of dominate ‘white’ culture for ‘black’ communities in the West (Kuumba and Ajanaku 1998, p.229). This collective resistance is linked to recapturing or recreating a pre-colonial –indigenous cultural identity. As Kuumba and Ajanaku (1998, p.230), informs us that,

“An entire beauty industry developed in African and African diaspora communities which in large part, was (and is) based on simulating European hair texture, length, and style. From some perspectives, hair straightening and manipulation to emulate the European ideals is symbolic of cultural genocide”.

Since the 1990s, the focus of dreadlocks has shifted from a reflective collective African identity to a hair style negatively associated with marijuana users and

criminals. Yet, dreadlocks still symbolically serves as a form of resistance to ‘white’ beauty aesthetics, racism, colonialism, and capitalism.

‘Black’ feminist scholar, Deborah Grayson’s works focuses on ‘black’ women in American society; in the areas of health, surrogacy and beauty. Grayson (1995) study views the social positioning of coarse hair –commonly recognized as ‘black’ hair; as racist, aesthetic, and political. She argues that the body –hair and skin, are inscribed with a myriad of meanings, which often have negative social consequences for ‘black’ women, especially in relation to aesthetics. That is, hair serves as a visual articulator of racists’ hierarchal aesthetics that favor ‘whiteness’ and is reflected in the straightened ‘black’ hair. Characteristics of the body are used to inscribe and define racist ideologies of beauty. Grayson (1995, p.12) argues that, “Often when skin color has failed to function as an immediate sign of racial difference hair has been used to determine this”. In the US, views of hair texture and styling is shaped from a narrow viewpoint based on dominant social values (white, middle class, etc.), and is used to assign worth and value. Grayson (1995, p.16) acknowledges that ‘black’ hair practices (such as hair braiding, known as corn rows) also stem from African traditions, which *do not* mimic European standards of beauty. Nonetheless, ‘black’ women are able to find agency through using hair straightening as a tool to adjust to circumstances, and still allow for those African traditions to remain in use. “[...] Black women do not simply react

to what beauty culture mandates, they also recreate and redefine beauty culture. They do so because they have learned from girlhood that there are real consequences for their hairstyle choices” (Grayson 1998, p.17). Grayson argues that there is a societal obsession with hair and an interconnecting belief that one’s physical features define self-worth and identity (1995, p.14). Thus, due to this hierarchal system, the choices ‘black’ women in the U.S. make about their hair and physical appearance remain political whether intended or not, which have social repercussions. Therefore, the hairstyling ‘black’ women choose may result in acceptance or rejection within society (Grayson 1995, p.12).

Cheryl Thompson’s work concentrates on beauty aesthetics of ‘black’ women living in the US and Canada. Thompson’s (2009) study argues that hair is political and that all women, including ‘white’ women face social expectations in regards to their hair but they also receive affirmation; conversely, ‘black’ women’s hair is received negatively (Thompson 2009, p.840). Namely, hair continues to be socially constructed in ways that protect and nurture an unequal order of race and gender, in which ‘black’ women base their aesthetics in comparison to the expectations of ‘white’ women. Thompson (2009, p.382) informs us that, “the Eurocentric beauty standard of straight, long and flowing hair, has a sociocultural effect on ‘black’ women’s notion of physical attractiveness, but also courtship, self-esteem and identity”. That is, even in the 21st century American society, ‘black’ women are not

'liberated' from their hair styling practices because there remains a fear of social reprisal. Furthermore, that it is not possible for a 'black' bias/subjectivity toward coarse hair to exist, without a reliance and comparison to dominate 'white' culture (Thompson 2009, p.855). 'Black' women's hair is socialized based upon three opposing binaries: natural vs. unnatural black; good vs. bad hair; and the authentic vs. inauthentic 'black'. These three opposing binaries carry racial significance in that, being natural and authentic 'black' is reserved for dark-skinned people, it also carries the stigma that coarse hair and coarse hair styles (afro, dreadlocks) is bad hair. Whereas, being inauthentic, unnatural 'black' refers to light-skinned 'blacks' or 'blacks' who maintain straight hair or have a less coarse hair texture, is perceived of as good hair (Thompson 2009, p.831). Although hair styling practices change throughout time, there continues, in the new millennium, to be a societal devaluation of 'black' hair. Due to centuries of condemnation, 'black' women's hair no matter how it is styled remains infused with hierarchal ideas of beauty, race, class, and gender; which have real social and cultural implications on their lives.

American feminist and critical race scholar bell hooks (1988), asserts that there is an interconnectedness of 'white' supremacy and societal obsession with hair. That is, hair is socially constructed in an unequal racist manner which is dictated from a 'white' framework, which favors a 'white' aesthetics. hooks (1988, n.p.) states,

“The reality is: straightened hair is linked historically and currently to a system of racial domination that impresses upon ‘black’ people, and especially ‘black’ women, that we are not acceptable as we are, that we are not beautiful.” In hooks’ (segregated) community, hair straightening served as a ritual practice. It symbolized a passage into the community of ‘black’ womanhood (hooks 1988, n.p.). Because of racial segregation in the US, ‘black’ women were not confronted with ‘white’ aesthetics on a daily basis; and therefore, were unconscious or unaware of the ‘white’ supremacy. It wasn’t until the afro gained prominence in 1960s, that ‘blacks’ begin to conceptualize white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy. The afro allowed ‘blacks’ to critique and view hair straightening as a mentally colonized practice, it was effective yet it was not powerful enough to undo or permanently alter perceptions of beauty, as it relates to hair (hooks 1988, n.p.). “The afro served as a short lived attempted to foster self-love and oppose and overthrow white supremacy, as it related to hair texture being used as a qualifying measurement of beauty” (hooks 1988, n.p.). According to hooks, ‘white’ corporations realized the potential in creating hair care products geared toward ‘black’ women, and monopolized on this market segment. In doing so, suppressed ‘black’ consciousness, and allowed ‘white’ corporations to become the dominant definers for beauty aesthetics, and dispersed the communal ritualistic practice of hair pressing (hooks 1988, n.p.). The cultural practice of hair straightening and

‘white’ owned hair care corporations, “[...] continues to tap into the insecurity black women feel about our value in this white supremacist society” (hooks1988, n.p.).

Black Hair Styling as a Cultural Practice

Kobena Mercer (1987), a cultural critic of the African diaspora whose work concentrates on African American, Caribbean and ‘black’ British communities, opposes the argument that ‘black’ women engage in hair straightening because they have internalised ‘white’ aesthetics, and by straightening their hair ‘black’ women are attempting to emulate ‘white’ aspirations. Mercer (1987, p.35) argues that colonialism established a value system which inscribes human worth, which next to skin, ‘black’ people’s hair has been historically devalued and stigmatized. Mercer (1987, p.34) argues that hair straightening in the African American community is a cultural activity and practice, and that hair straightening needs to be ‘de-psychologized’. Hair styling practices such as the afro and dreadlocks stemmed as a response to the socio-political climate for the given time period, and that other hair styling practices are suggestive of historical and economical contexts (Mercer 1987, p.34). Since the 1980s and carrying on into the present, the afro and dreadlocks no longer hold the same cultural or political significance as they did in previous decades, and are even fashionable. Mercer argues that, to juxtapose these styles as natural and straight hair as unnatural creates a ‘black’

subjectivity. That is, it creates a bias toward afros and dreadlocks as qualifiers and representativeness of 'blackness'; in doing so, creates a false 'black' consciousness. Mercer (1987, p.34) acknowledges that, "[...]hair is never a straightforward biological 'fact' because it is almost always groomed, prepared, cut, concealed and generally 'worked upon' by human hands." Through being 'worked on' hairstyling a cultural practice, is imbued with social values.

The review of Euro-American literature affirms that coarse textured hair has been and continues to be social constructed based on a hierarchal value system. Coarse hair has been constructed to be synonymous with 'black' and is ladled (no matter how it is styled) with historically, political, racial, gendered, and aesthetic meanings, which forces 'black' women to be confronted with established norms. Be it as an aspiration of 'whiteness', a 'black authenticity', or social resistance. It was through colonial rule that the 'black' body –skin, hair and the likes, were established as inferior in comparison to that of 'whites'. In the 21st century, the 'black' body and coarse textured hair, continues to be positioned on the lower end of an aesthetic continuum, with negative associations and devaluation.

The social construction of hair in the South African context

As I have pointed out above there is far too little scholarship on hair and the sociality of hair in the South African context, even though historically hair,

together with other physical features like skin tone, was made significant to the racialized differentiation between South Africans during Apartheid. There is, however, some important work and I explore it in this section. SA Sociologist, Zimitri Erasmus, work is a notable exception. Erasmus was raised in Apartheid South Africa and was classified as 'Coloured'. In her work, Erasmus's challenges the understandings of 'mixed race' identities through her own personal experience as well as referencing the role of colonialism on South Africa(ns). Erasmus writes from personal experience about 'Coloured' identity and hair, having been racialized as 'Coloured' herself. She critiques the power relations which have created and maintained divisions between human beings based on the idea of race, especially in SA. She examines the racialization and exercise of social power through cultural practices and the politicization of hair. Erasmus (1997) illustrates the importance that the appearance of one's hair had on achieving membership and recognition within South African society as a middle-class 'Coloured' woman in the 1970s-80s.

As a teen her and her fellow 'Coloured' women in her community ritualistically performed 17 steps to achieve *good hair*. In her community, there was a strong emphasis on hair texture and hair maintenance. All the members of the community strived to have, obtain and maintain *gladde haren* (Afrikaans, referring to straight/sleek/smooth hair); *gladde haren* equated to *good hair*. It was through the

above hair practice as well as chemical relaxers, 'Coloureds' used hair texture as a visual marker of racial hierarchies and values of racist colonial concepts of beauty. As Erasmus (1997, p. 12) shares, "If you were fortunate enough to have a shiny mane of straight hair, you either inherited from one or both of your parents, or you spent hours at home bent over the basin as I did, washing weekly Sheening half-yearly". Hair articulated class status, racial heritage, and perceptions of beauty. Kroes haren (coarse hair) carried a stigma of shame and negative associations with 'natives' and 'blackness'. Having coarse hair usually resulted in social ridicule and rejection from the opposite sex (Erasmus 1997, p.13). 'Coloured' men pursued 'Coloured' women with naturally straight textured hair and other physical features resembling 'white' women, as Erasmus shares how having straightened hair still had the ability to marginalize 'Coloured' women; when their actual hair texture was exposed, "Often, not even straightened hair was good enough because of the shame it caused when it 'went home' in the rain or at the beach" (Erasmus 1997, p.13).

Even the types of hair care products and the different hair styling techniques 'Coloured' women utilized carried and articulated social meanings, such as class. It was socially accepted for working-class 'Coloured' women to be out in public with their hair rollers, showcasing their hair practice. Conversely, the same practice was viewed as unacceptable for middle-class 'Coloured' women, who were expected to

keep face and hide their practices, as not to appear cheap –lower class, or in need of having to ‘work’ on their hair (Erasmus 1997, p.12). Hair for ‘blacks’ and ‘Coloureds’ is a political mechanism; hair styling has been used to counter hegemonic beliefs and the on-going influence of aesthetic norms established through colonial rule. As she shares (Erasmus 1997, p.16),

“Through working on our hair we make it come to life. We open it to meanings, to interpretation. All hair is always worked on, constantly processed by cultural practices. There is no such thing as innocent, pure natural black hair”. These practices invest hair, biologically dead, with social meaning and value. Hair is gendered, racialised and sexualised. This makes it politicised. Hair is socially constructed, imbued with meanings and with multiple identities”.

Erasmus (2000, p.381) researches the role of hair as a social construction and as a form of contestation of hegemonic norms within the ‘black’ and ‘white’ paradigm. She addresses how the historical influences of colonialism ‘challenges’ ‘black’ women (which she includes ‘Coloured’/ ‘Creole’ women), regarding the idea that their hair styling tastes are just a matter of individual preference. She challenges the notion of a fixed ideology of ‘black’ hair, that is, the dominant belief that coarse hair is strictly an issue for dark skinned women, at the same time she sheds

light on the influence these perceptions have on 'Coloured' identity. The global notion of good hair –is long, straight, flowing hair that resembles 'white' hair, and bad hair –is short and kinky hair, amongst 'Coloured' Africans, 'black' Americans, and Caribbean (Erasmus 2000, p.381). Colonialism and slavery centred on civilization, which encouraged Western aesthetics on the above nations. According to Erasmus (2000, p.383), to have or to straighten one's hair represented racialized beliefs about beauty, race and worth. It establishes a racial hierarchy based upon 'pigmentocracy' and hair texture; as she states, "Lighter skin meant higher status and this was reflected in the women's hairstyles" (Erasmus 2000, p.383).

Erasmus argues that the practice of hair straightening has indeed been shaped by colonial rule, yet rejects the notion that hair straightening amongst 'Coloured' women is an aspiration toward 'whiteness' (Erasmus 2000, p.384). To view hair straightening as a 'white' racial imagery traps it in a binary of 'white' and 'black'. Erasmus argues, "[...] there is an underlying essentialism in this logic –the assumption that there is a single, pure and natural black way of wearing one's hair" (Erasmus 2000, p.382). This creates a 'black' subjectivity; valuing darker skinned and coarse hair, which marginalize lighter skinned women, who may or may not have coarse hair.

Erasmus' works highlights how influential colonialism and Apartheid were in shaping ideologies about the body and how those ideologies unfairly perplexes life for 'Coloured' people; in particular, 'Coloured' women and their hair. Hair straightening is a cultural practice for 'Coloured' women. However, hair has been socially constructed as an opposing hierarchal 'black'/'white' binary; which further marginalizes 'Coloured' women in society. To reference hair as 'black' promotes coarse hair styles such as, the afro and dreadlocks, as a positive aesthetic nostalgic of an African identity. It also has a tendency to construct coarse hair as a qualifier for 'blackness' and as being for dark skinned 'blacks'. Nevertheless, hair textures continue to be socially constructed based on an aesthetically racist hierarchal spectrum. In the 21st century, society at large continues to valorizes straight hair as a 'white' aesthetic and devalues coarse hair as a visual indicator of 'blackness'.

To date, research on coarse hair texture shows that the meanings attached and derived from it is multifaceted; it is historical, political, racist, sexist, gendered, classist, aesthetic, and cultural. The literature reinforces the research stance that how we interpret hair is contextual. What we consider to be beautiful, ugly, natural, unnatural etc. is and has been influenced by the hegemonic norms of our social context and the extent to which we are aware and critical of those norms. The research agrees that hair styling is a cultural practice and does not seek to

demonize hair straightening. Colonialism established a 'white' aesthetic valorizing the physical characteristics of 'white' women, which continues to influence perceptions of beauty. The ideological aesthetic beliefs are not static, they may and do shift over time, yet straight hair remains the status quo and continues to be attributed to 'whiteness'. There remains a hierarchal ranking –straight hair, which is associated to 'whites' and a devaluation of coarse hair, which is associated with 'blacks'. Women with coarse hair, no matter their racial associations, must navigate through these persisting ideologies; for 'black' women, it is constantly being compared to a hierarchal aesthetic that doesn't favor their physical characteristics. For, 'Coloured' women, it is navigating and or aligning one's self with the 'white' and/or 'black' binary, in which they are considered not fully included.

Women with coarse textured hair are able to express their agency through their hair styling practices; however, because hair has been shaped in colonial racist lens, no matter how 'black' or 'Coloured' women style their hair, it remains engulfed in its politicization. The study asserts that hair texture and styling are not merely an art form but indeed they articulate beliefs about race, gender, politics and beauty. As O'Leary (2010, p.116) informs, "Cultural groups are bound together by social traditions and common patterns of beliefs and behaviours". The beliefs held about hair texture and styling are upheld and maintained through group associations,

which influences the participants' day to day lives as it pertains to identity, self-esteem, courtship, friendship and beauty.

Theoretical Framework

This research draws upon postcolonial theory, critical race theory (CRT) and the concept intersectionality (Steyn, 2010; Ashcroft, 2006; Crenshaw, 1991; Abrams and Moio, 2009) to illustrate the power and influence of the various hegemonic constructions of hair. Moreover, it showcases the abilities categories have on separating, disadvantaging, and privileging people in hierarchal fashions; which has socially positioned 'whiteness' as an articulator of these categories. Postcolonial theory, CRT and the idea of intersectionality share a political component, in that they explicitly seek to challenge the dominance of Western ideologies and, at the same time, create a space for marginalized voices and perspectives to be heard and adequately theorized.

Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory outlines the impact of colonialism and colonial ideology on the material and psychic lives of the colonized, not only during the colonial period but also in contemporary times (see Fanon, 1967). Understanding the role that colonialism has had on the norms of contemporary society is crucial to an analysis

of the politics of hair and its representation. It provides insight into the formulation of categories; how they gained and continue to hold prominence in society. Also, it showcases the immense power and coverage of European dominance in and on the lives of colonized nations. As Prasad (2003, p.5) states, “Western colonialism, thus represents a unique constellation of complex and interrelated practices that sought to establish Western hegemony not only politically, militarily, economically, but also culturally and ideologically”. Postcolonial theory, addresses the ways in which colonialism created inferior depictions of colonised people. It challenges dominate Western ideology by including marginalized people into the discourse, challenging historical truths and narratives by analyzing established historical realities. As Ashcroft et al (2006, p.2) informs us that,

“Postcolonial theory involves discussion about experience of various kinds: migration, slavery, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, gender, place, and responses to the influential master discourses of imperial Europe such as history, philosophy and linguistics, and the fundamental experiences of speaking and writing by which all these come into being”.

Steyn (2010) views postcolonialism as the theoretical, literary and artistic traditions that have developed to analyze, resist and expose through deconstructive means the ideological frameworks of colonial oppression. Postcolonialism assumes that, independence has not resolved the issues of the past; and that previous

colonized nations are still subjected to colonial domination, be it overt or subtle (Ashcroft et al. 2006, pp.1-2). For, Fanon (1967) postcolonialism is a means to portray the role white superiority has created a distorted sense of self amongst colonised people.

The dissertation agrees with the assumption that, colonial rule was physically and mentally intrusive on the lives of colonised people in various ways and dimensions. Its impacts are still prevalent and although its influence continues to be altered, it indeed challenges the lifestyle and identity of colonised people. Postcolonial theory allows the dissertation to examine how the formulation and articulation of categories such as race and gender has and continues to create divisions for 'Coloured' women based on normalized ideas about the body (skin, hair, genitals and the likes) which emphasis physical differences, and how these differences have hierarchal value.

Critical Race Theory

CRT argues that race and racism is engrained in society, and that the legal process aids in privileging and preserving 'white' supremacy. It was founded in legal scholarship; and incorporates other academic disciplines such as sociology, intersectionality, postcolonial studies, and political science (Abrams and Moio 2009, p.250). CRT analyzes the existence of race, as Ortiz and Jani (2010, p.176) informs us, it assumes that race is a social construction, and that race permeates all

aspects of social interactions; thus, CRT rejects master narratives and universalism. It seeks racial transformation by examining how the construction of race and other racial ideologies such as colorblindness, affect and further marginalize the lives of 'non-white' people in society (Abrams and Moio 2009, p.250; Ortiz and Jani 2010, p.176).

CRT operates on the premises that racism is an everyday occurrence in the lives of 'non-whites'. The notion of race uses physical differences to categorize people, and that historical accounts/narratives exclude that of the racially oppressed to justify and legitimize its power; it also takes an intersectional account of how race is used in other forms of exclusion (Abrams and Moio 2009, p.250). The study finds CRT very beneficial, in that, it exposes racism that lies in physical differences, social interactions, and how hair textures and styles are used as visual articulators of these racialized ideologies.

Intersectionality

The concept Intersectionality affirms that gender, race and class amongst other categories of differences, cannot be separated when analysing individuals and groups in relations to societal phenomena (Kitch 2009, 2). Intersectionality operates under feminist theory but also incorporates postmodernist, antiracist and poststructuralist theory to critique and challenge Western essentialism, homogeneity, and universalism (McCall 2005, p.1776). Intersectionality is a term

first coined by feminist lawyer, Kimberle Crenshaw in the 1980s; it is used to describe the marginality in society women of 'color' experience due to their race, class and gender (Kitch 2009, 2).

Through intersectionality we are able to examine the past, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the impact colonialism has had on and continues to influence the lives of women based on intertwining dimensions of their identity. Brah and Phoenix (2004, 75) informs us that, "By revisiting these historical developments, we do not wish to suggest that the past unproblematically provides an answer to the present. On the contrary, we would wish to learn from and build upon these insights through critique so that they can shed new light on current predicaments". Intersectionality allows us to look at how the ideas about women and womanhood are shaped in different intersections of race, class, gender and sexuality, in life such as; employment, marriage, reproductive, and in this study; hair texture. Brah and Phoenix (2004, 76) regard the concept intersectionality as, "signifying the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axis of differentiation – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experimental – intersect in historically specific contexts". The study utilizes intersectionality, by relying on already established categories to critique how interrelating dimensions of the participants identity impact and complex their perceptions about hair. Also, it assists with revealing the influence colonialism has

had and continues to have on shaping perceptions of womanhood, race, and beauty through the body.

In this study, postcolonial theory, CRT, and intersectionality are very flexible theories; they afford various conceptualizations, in that they acknowledge that life and its occurrences are not static but fluid, which creates multifaceted perspectives, opportunities and challenges. The theories accept that meanings alter and change over time; thus, allowing for the utilizations of multiple approaches according to how appropriate they are to a given research context. The theories take fluidity into account, which allows for scrutiny of social constructions on the present and possible future, through the recognition of the past. They attempt to examine many different aspects of being to acquire a comprehensive picture.

Methodology

In this chapter, I will explain what methodology the study employs and why it is appropriate. In addition, I will explain the criteria for selection and introduce the participants. I then discuss the study's limitations, followed by the ethical consideration. Finally, I engage reflexively with my own positioning in relation to the study's participants.

As Mouton (1996, 39) shares, "The methodology of any research project is shaped and determined by the purpose of the research and the unit of analysis". This research is explorative, and seeks to gain insight into the phenomena of how hair is socially constructed in the lives of the participants; the design is nine semi-structured interviews. Through carefully crafted questions the participants are not limited to set responses. This provides room for discussion, allows for the ability for follow-up questions, and the possibility to further explore a response or theme (Mouton and Marias 1991, p.43). Irving Seidman (1998, p.3) contends that, "[...] interviews are a means to show interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience". Utilizing qualitative research allows the study to extract meaning based on affect, behaviour and cognition. Qualitative research allows for analysis of feelings and thoughts, which are not easily interpreted via quantitative measurements. Seidman (1998, pp.30-31) informs us, that qualitative research does not seek to predict or attempt to control

the experience. Therefore, I am obligated to adequately and appropriately present the experiences of the participant(s), in a manner to deepen the understanding of the issues being presented. The interviews allow for each participant to share their personal narratives, which offers detailed explanations of thoughts, which give much needed insight into morals, values, feelings, and beliefs. As Seidman (1998, 1) contends, “Telling stories is essentially a meaning-making process...Individual’s consciousness gives access to the most complicated social and educational issues, because social and educational issues are abstractions based on the concrete experience of people”. The participant’s responses are used to find common themes, messages, to challenge and expand on beliefs about hair. The data from the study serves as a platform to gain insight into how hair is constructed for ‘Coloured’ women, to which future studies can and should expand on.

The research only examines a small portion and particular sample of a larger group; therefore the study cannot make generalizations because the sample is purposive. In that, I non-randomly selected the participants based on the goals of the study. The study utilizes participants from four higher education institutions, which are located in or around Cape Town. As stated earlier, the study relies on already established categories to critique how a particular social group is marginalized due to interrelated dimensions of differences such as race, class, and gender.

To explore the social construction of hair, the thesis is informed by the theory of social constructivism. The utilization of social constructivism is vital to illustrate how influential social interactions are in shaping how we and others perceive reality based on our understanding of terms and categories. As Gregen (2003, 2) informs us, “Perhaps the pivotal assumption around which the constructionist dialogues revolve is that what we take to be knowledge of the world and self finds its origins in communal interchange...brought into being by historically and culturally located groups of people”. The purpose of the theory of social construction is not to deny or write-off physical differences; rather, it seeks the social roots of power in race, gender, and class, amongst other things.

Social construction theory contends that categories of gender, race, and class, and the meanings attached to them are social. It also opposes essentialism; that is, it opposes the idea that anything human has an essential nature – so for instance, a social constructivist would not agree that there are any essential and universal traits, to which we refer when we call a person ‘black’. The research begins from the premise that how we perceive reality is based on social constructions. That these perceptions are constructed does not mean they have no social reality. Thus, although this project takes the view that race is a socially constructed and politically invested category that does not mean that being perceived as a woman, as ‘Coloured’, and as working-class, to take one example, doesn’t facilitate a

concrete experience of the world, that is different from someone who is constructed as 'white', as a woman, and middle-class. The way that we are constructed has very real impacts on our experience of the world and on our life chances.

It is important that when analyzing social phenomena, that we understand the origins and influences of these constructions; thus, although it is possible to move beyond these categories, it is very important that we first address the impacts that these constructions have on individuals and groups (Zeus 2009, 125). Until we examine our constructions of race, gender, class and the like, it will be impossible to do any of the political work necessary in order to challenge them. Given that I have made it clear in the introduction that I do not see these categories as objective, I will refrain from using quotations when discussing race, gender and other such categories in the rest of the thesis. The research makes reference to these categories in exploring how a simple phenomenon like hair texture can reveal the very social and political work that such categorization accomplishes. The goal of this study is to examine how norms regarding hair reflect social interactions. The study brings forth the voices of a small sample of women, in attempts to create a platform of open and honest communication to share and analyze the lived impacts and perceived implications that hair texture and styling has on Coloured women living in Cape Town.

Selection of Participants

Being that hair styling is a cultural practice, the research desires to explore the experience of a hair of a specific group. “The selection of any particular cultural group will be driven by pragmatics, intrinsic interest, theory, or any combination thereof” (O’Leary 2010, 117). The study’s focus is on women between the ages of 18-30 years of age, who self-identify as Coloured, live in Cape Town, and attend a higher education institution; hair texture and style were not a selection factor. From informal interactions and discussions with Coloured people in Cape Town, I realized the emphasis on hair was stressed upon based on one’s gender, age and class. Initially, the snowball method was thought to be the most effective method to employ. There were a few challenges with securing interested participants as well as relying on participants to recruit acquaintances. Instead, the study employs the purposive sampling method, of non-randomly selecting participants based on the aims of the research and the criteria.

The participants consist of 9 university and college Coloured women, who are between the ages of 18-30 years of age. The participants attend four institutions located in the Western Cape Province of South Africa; the University of Cape Town, Varsity College, the University of Western Cape and Cape Peninsula University of Technology. A meeting time and place at the respective universities were established and the interviews were conducted, recorded, and later

transcribed. All of the participants describe their selves as middle-class, Coloured women; although, there were obvious differences in their clothing, mannerisms and discussion of material possessions. In order to protect the anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms are used.

In this section I introduce the participants to place their contributions in context.

“Everybody wants straighter hair; I think, because you see people with weaves and us blowing out our hair, getting relaxers just to have their hair straighter!”

Inid is a 21 year old Accounting student at the University of Cape Town. She is from Port Elizabeth in the Eastern Cape and describes herself as a middle-class Coloured, of German heritage. Inid responded to a flyer I posted requesting participants for my study. She arrived at our interview with her hair styled in a wavy texture. She considers her hair to be bushy and frizzy. She doesn't like the texture of her hair because it is difficult to manage. Hair plays an important role in the household she grew up in and straight hair is valued. For example, she shares how happy she and her family were when the GHD –a popular and expensive brand of a hair straightening tool, which stands for Good Hair Day (the product's name itself implies that straight hair is good hair), became available in South Africa. Her family purchased a knock-off brand and used it frequently. In short, she was and remains very appreciative to have a device that straightens her naturally curly hair. Although Inid prefers straight hair for herself, she says that she

doesn't have strong feelings about how other people style their hair, but when it comes to her own hair she has set ideas. She is constantly altering it because she isn't happy with it. She tells me that when her hair isn't straight she doesn't feel as pretty. This begs the question of why, which I explore in the analysis chapter.

“I am staying on my own, experiencing things on my own, I'm realizing that natural is the way to go and we don't have to adhere to societies ideas”

Ashley is a 21 year old Law student at Varsity College. She is from George and describes herself as middle-class, Malaysian-Coloured. On our meeting day, Ashley arrived with her hair down; it was long with soft curls. She describes her hair as straight –close to “gladde haren”. She owns a couple of GHD's and in her family the appearance of hair is very important. Both of her parents insist that she keeps her hair straight. Ashley appeared very aware of how her family, culture and peer group influences her perceptions of beauty and race. She is also cognisant of how these beliefs impact on her self-esteem and how she thinks and feels about her and other Coloured people's hair. She feels hurt, challenged and a bit ashamed for how she and other Coloured people react toward each other based on hair texture, especially since she and her family are socially perceived as being privileged due to being middle class. To her, their light skin and straight hair mark them as superior in terms of the perceived hierarchal ranking of race and class. Ashley reminds me a bit of myself, she struggles with embracing the complexity of her gender and race and how social constructions of hair influence her daily life.

Although she is aware of hair politics she still holds onto and keeps up with many of these beliefs and practices.

“Prejudices towards hair are so out there; again, the media puts so much pressure on the type of hair that you have and people can judge you on that”

Ama is a 20 year old Medical student at the University of the Western Cape. She describes herself as being Coloured, which, to her, means a mix of black and white ancestry. Ama lives in Bellville, in a predominantly Coloured community with both parents and her siblings. On the day of the interview, she was wearing her hair short and straight (chemically straightened). Ama considers her natural hair texture to be kinky. Ama shares that everyone in her family has a *problem* with kinky hair and that they all use hair relaxing products and GHD's on a regular basis. And yet, she believes that in the 'new South Africa' racial discrimination, is a thing of the past and that people are now judged based on their education and how they treat others; which, is ironic given how she feels about her own appearance (hair). She faults the mainstream media for perceptions of what constitutes beautiful hair. She believes in moving forward, leaving what is in the past in the past and to live in the now. She seemed to be aware of how hair is socially constructed and yet she didn't believe these constructions influenced her, because she is educated and understands how the media operates.

“Okay, if I know, like, I am going to a Coloured area or gathering sometimes I like have the foresight to actually straighten my hair. Like, if I don’t feel like dealing with drama”

Janay is a 21 year old student at the University of Cape Town. I met Janay while walking around on campus; she and I are amongst a very small group of women on campus who wear our hair styled in an afro on a regular basis. She self-identifies as Coloured but mainly because that is how society defines her. She is the only child; her father is black and her mother is white. She says she is fine with being Coloured but doesn’t like defining herself in racial terms; however, she knows that she can benefit from labelling herself as Coloured – in terms of job opportunities and social interactions. Janay grew up in a suburb of Johannesburg, which she views as progressive, diverse and accepting of differing hairstyles. Upon moving to Cape Town, she says she felt restricted and experienced a lot of negative responses from Coloured men and women due to the appearance of her hair. She says when she was young her mother didn’t know how to take care of her hair (because her mother is white and has straight hair and was unfamiliar with dealing with coarse hair). As she grew older, she attempted to style her hair in the same way that her black peers did. However, these styling techniques caused her hair to break, so she decided to embrace her natural hair texture, in order to keep it healthy. Janay speaks about being a Coloured woman in a dissociative manner, even though she claims membership within the group. Janay brings a unique element to the study.

She willingly challenges social expectations of race and beauty as it is commonly perceived in Cape Town for Coloured women. She is and considers herself Coloured racial but not culturally; she doesn't speak Afrikaans and her parents are not considered to be Coloured. She acknowledges that as a Coloured woman she receives pressure from other Coloured people to wear her hair straight yet she uses her agency to style her hair in an afro. She speaks with awareness about the racial politicization of hair in Cape Town yet she thinks that in the 'new South Africa' people do not discriminate against you based on your hair.

“There is always research on black and white, black and white, there's never you know –what about Coloureds? What about us?”

Illham is a 19 year old Political Science student at the University of Cape Town. I befriended Illham, when I did a small project for another class and she was a participant. Illham was born and raised in Diep River, a suburb of Cape Town, in a predominantly Coloured community with her father, step-mother and sister. She shares that, as a child; her step-mother would wash, blow dry and flat iron her and sister's hair on a weekly basis, along with relaxing it every few months. This practice was maintained up until she entered university; she now wears braided extensions and coarse hair styles. She considers herself to be middle-class but she doesn't consider her family financially well off. She is strongly aware of and understands how constructions of hair texture have influenced her life. She shares

that she chooses to associate with blacks and date black men because of the aesthetic pressures surrounding her hair texture. Interestingly enough, she hopes to marry a white man; in hopes that her children have a greater chance of not having coarse hair. This is due to her not feeling accepted, comfortable or pretty because according to her, she has *very* coarse hair. Due to her natural hair texture she has received social exclusion from other Coloured girls and guys.

“I’ve notice when I don’t wear weave I don’t get attention from guys, I know this is a bad thing to say, but when I do have my long hair a lot of people will say, ‘oh you look pretty, oh you look good’ but yea if I don’t have it nobody notices me”

Marie is a 30 year old Business Administration student at the University of Western Cape. She is the oldest and the only one of the participants who vividly remembers living under the Apartheid regime. She describes herself as Coloured and was raised in a Coloured Community in Cape Town; however, she views being Coloured as an extension of being black. She describes her natural hair texture as coarse. Marie considers herself to be middle class. She chooses to date only black men because in her opinion, they don’t place the same racialized expectations regarding her appearance, as do Coloured men. On the day of the interview, Marie is wearing a straight weave (attached hair piece). Marie is very aware of how the thoughts and beliefs that were instilled into her family, friends and community during the apartheid regime continue to carry heavy influence on her today. She

also understands the various social constructions of her hair play a vital role in how she thinks about beauty.

“I always work on it somehow, even if I wear it naturally. I’d always put something on it to smooth it down”

Thandy is a 26 year old Sociology student at the University of Cape Town. She describes herself as a middle-class, Javanese-Malaysian Coloured. I met Thandy during my first semester at UCT and we have been friends ever since. She was born in George and has lived in Cape Town for several years. When it comes to her personal appearance, especially her hair, she is feels very insecure. On the day of our interview, her hair is styled very straight. She describes her natural hair texture as neither coarse nor sleek. As a Sociology major, she is aware of how her socialization continues to influence how she and others Coloured people think and act surrounding hair. Although she shares her anger and dislike of racialized constructions of hair, she continues to place extreme pressure on herself to live up to the status quo.

“Your hair always has to look presentable”

Renee is a 20 year old Interior Design student at Cape Peninsula University of Technology. She was born and raised in Cape Town, where she lives with her mother, father and siblings. She describes herself as middle-class, Coloured – Indian and Malay – and half Christian, half Muslim. I met Renee while at Cape

Peninsula University of Technology. On the day of the interview, her hair is straight. She describes her natural hair texture as straight with a curl. Renee has a tendency to generalize when she speaks about hair, in her opinion her hair practices are motivated by a concern to maintain *clean* hair that all people share. Her preferences, according to her, have nothing to do with racialized beauty norms or their effects. She down plays the normative assumptions that are embedded in hair texture and styling choices, in practically all of her responses, she disagreed or states she doesn't believe hair influences her life choices; however, she notes on several occasions how Coloured guys would treat Coloured girls based on their hair texture.

“Like, I think I like my hair but sometimes when I come out the shower, I wish I didn't have to do it. I wish it could just be straight but I do like it when it's curly”

Mandy is a 20 year old Interior Design student at Cape Peninsula University of Technology. She is from Cape Town and describes herself as middle-class, Malaysian Coloured. She considers her natural hair texture to be straight but wavy. On the day of the interview her hair is straightened. In her responses, she attempts to avoid speaking about negative perceptions and characteristics surrounding hair texture. It is evident that her values on straight and coarse hair are informed by the hegemonic radicalised norms of beauty. For instance, she believes that “white people have a nicer texture –sleek”.

Limitations

The ideas and arguments put forth in this research do not serve to speak for or represent the entire Coloured community, given that the sampling technique I used was not random but purposive. Participants were chosen based on the aims of the study. Also, the sample size is not representative of the Coloured population in Cape Town, South Africa. The study is meant to highlight how the norms associated with hair texture contributes to the day-to-day interactions and how it intersects with race, class and gender; in hopes of broadening the channels and methods of discussion. The research does not offer suggestions on how to change people's perceptions of race, class, gender, ideas of beauty or socioeconomic conditions. Furthermore, my native language is English and a majority of the respondents are Afrikaans and English speakers. For parts of their response many of the participants would speak Afrikaans or use certain words, which would create some challenges for me with understanding what is being said; the participant would then reword their statement to give an English equivalence. However, they did not always translate. From this, I may have not heard them clearly or fully understand the message the participants may have been trying to convey. It would be of great benefit of future studies to have a native or fluent Afrikaans speaker to conduct the study to prevent or have the ability to translate certain expressions and words.

Ethical Considerations

The study requested personal thoughts and experiences from the participants, which could place them in vulnerable positions and even public ridicule. Because of this the researcher is ethically obligated to respect and maintain a level of professionalism and confidentiality. The participants were requested to sign a consent form, which outlined the objectives and expectations of the interview. Furthermore, the participants were informed about the purpose of the study. The researcher explained to the participants that their contributions to the study were voluntary and that the information gathered would be used as data. In order to protect the participant's anonymity, the researcher utilizes pseudonyms in place of the participant's given names.

The study is cognizant that the words and language used carry significance. Thus, great consideration was given toward perceived similarities and differences – nationality, race, religion, class and the likes. As O'Leary (2010, p.36) informs us, "The words you use, the concepts you call on, and the assumptions you premise can all conspire to put the respondents at ease or cause them to feel alienated". Due to the complexity of the social construction of hair, interview questions were crafted to be explicit yet not to intentional cause any physical or emotional harm. In employing this research project, it was necessary that I understand and

acknowledge my own life experiences and how it is and has been shaped. As O’Leary (2010, p.31) shares,

“It is society itself that is being researched, and as products of society, social science researchers need to recognize that their own worldview makes them value bound. If who we are colours what we see and how we interpret it, then the need to hear, see, and appreciate multiple perspectives or realities is essential to rigorous research”.

In doing so, I reflect on my positionality and attachment to the issue of hair in society, because of this she committed herself to present data accurately and take into consideration all possible viewpoints and positions.

Reflexivity

Being fully aware that I am a product of social constructions, I willingly self-identify as black. As a black American woman, I acknowledge the great efforts of other black Americans who fought against slavery and worked endlessly for civil rights and encouraged us to be proud of our African heritage through the black conscious movements, which have contributed greatly to the formation of my own identity. However proud I am of this identity, I still struggle with the acceptance of my hair in its natural state. Growing up, I realized that society –both dominant social

groups and subordinate ones, did not accept or appreciate my hair when it was in its natural state. Natural state can have various meanings, but in this thesis I use it to mean the hair texture one is born with, in my case thick, coarse textured hair. For the above reason, from the age of 10, I have constantly felt the need to ‘improve’ it, to make it acceptable to fit societal norms and myself by relaxing/straightening it through the use of chemicals. Recently, I have refrained from chemically straightening my hair; although, on a regular basis I use a flat iron to straighten it. On a few occasions, I have worn extensions (braids) and hair weaves (long and curled). Moreover, on a regular basis I wear it in various coarse hairstyles; the most common being the afro. In doing so, I know that these hair styles and hair textures will greatly affect how I feel about myself and how others may react and treat me in given contexts.

Arriving in South Africa, I was astonished to find out that most people here assume that I am Coloured. From the multitude of assumptions, I have experienced intrigue, mockery, ambiguous stares and comments about my hair –which I am at the moment, wearing in its natural state, from Coloured people –most of which was spoken in Afrikaans. So, I will never know what was said! I remember one instance; I was walking from the train station to catch a mini-taxi to Bellville for one of my interviews. A mini-taxi doorman, who happened to be an older Coloured man, was hanging out the door yelling the location that they were headed, he stops

gives me this shocked/astonished stare, chuckles, yells very loud in Afrikaans, points at me, makes a weird motion imitating an afro or something with his hands, shakes his head and laughs, gets back in the mini-taxi and drives away! I felt very offended, a bit ridiculed as to why he felt the need to do that to me.

From a few informal conversations, I became aware that Coloureds similar to black Americans, and black South Africans feel challenged with their hair texture; it is a multifaceted issue which carries strong sentiments. From this personal experience, I wondered what perceptions my Coloured female peers hold about their hair, as it relates to being a Coloured woman in South African society and where or what influenced these perceptions. Due to being a foreigner, I was new to the country and did not have any contacts or connections with the desired study population, this proved to be challenging. I had to learn formally and informally about Coloured culture, historical events and current situations. This was achieved through course work, additional readings, and watching documentaries and movies. As well as, informal interactions such as starting conversations with Coloured people on the streets, public transportations or at events and inquiring about their lifestyle, as well as befriending Coloured women to discuss their opinions and thoughts about hair and Coloured identity.

I most certainly did not want to come off as attempting to speak for this community, as if I knew what was or is best and I did not want to be judgemental.

In order to gain the trust of the participants, I found it very beneficial to the study that I was viewed as a peer; I am a University student, in the same age group as the participants, and my physical appearance is similar to theirs, this allowed for less intimidation. Also, it was important that I was genuine about my intentions and that I acknowledged and showed respect for the differences; culturally, racially, nationally and religiously of all of the participants and myself. These factors assisted with the participant's willingness to share their experiences; although, I believe there still remained some degree of reluctances with some of the participants. This could be attributed to me not being a part of the cultural group. Additionally, I noticed how the styling of my own hair affected how the participants responded to the questions as well as how I was received.

Analysis of Data

In this chapter, I begin with sharing my findings as to how the respondents perceive and experience hair texture in general as well as personally. I argue that respondents' perceptions of hair texture reflect racialized and gendered norms of beauty and attractiveness, which remain present in Capetonian society. I conclude with a discussion of the themes which have arisen. Analysis of the data reveals that there remains a social pressure amongst Coloured women to maintain straight hair. The participants' experiences and perceptions of hair are influenced by racist, sexist, and classist perceptions of beauty shaped through colonial ideology of non-white bodies, which were engrained in their social groups during the Apartheid era. These perceptions are upheld through peer and familial pressures, which the empirical data reveals are: a high placement and positive attributions of straight hair, which is attributed as a characteristic of whiteness; on the other hand, there is a devaluation and negative attributions of coarse hair, which is attributed as a characteristic of blackness. In other words, what respondents aspired to, in terms of the appearance of their hair, and what they were pressured to aspire to by their significant others, reflects the internalization of ideas of racial and class superiority; whiteness and middle to upper classness are viewed as superior and most sought after. I will also argue that many respondents showed a keen

awareness of the politics of hair and hair styling practices even though they upheld practices that reflect raced and classed norms of beauty and attractiveness.

The data reveals that respondents hold various perceptions of their hair texture and of what hair texture ought to be in order to be beautiful in general and engaged in various styling practices, all of which were related in some way to their group association as Coloured women. The respondents' gender, race and class impacted upon their perceptions of what qualifies as beautiful. These perceptions also played a major role in guiding the kind of styling practices they engaged in, their shared experiences illustrated in varying degrees, depending on the respondent in question, the perception that by having kroes (coarse) hair was considered ugly or unfavorable in Capetonian society.

Hair Aspirations: the Valorization of Gladde Haren (Sleek/Smooth hair)

All but two of the participants attempted to alter the appearance of their hair from a coarse texture to a more 'sleek' one by choosing to utilize various hair straightening products and styling techniques. Much of the participants' thoughts and feelings about the appearance of their hair stems from their personal experiences but is also a shared group experience, that as Coloured women they are expected to have or maintain straight hair. All of the participants share that straight hair is viewed as a positive aesthetic and social attribute for Coloureds,

especially for Coloured women. When asked about what ways hair texture and styling influences her life, Ashley responds,

“No other way really just like I said, society or what we grew up in; hair should look a certain way. I do sometimes look at people and think, okay she doesn’t have a GHD or she does have a GHD, and that you know because GHD’s are the in thing for hair, you know.”

Ashley acknowledges the pressure of adhering to the social expectations of maintaining straight hair from childhood. Although she is actively attempting to change her perceptions in adulthood, she subconsciously judges other Coloured women through visually examining their hair and qualifying them –aesthetically, racially, and class wise, based on her knowledge and experience of hair straightening practices. In doing so, she continues the practice of measuring and ranking worth based upon hair texture. Mandy and Renee both view their hair as straight yet from their responses their hair isn’t satisfactory straight enough. Renee shares,

“I like it [her hair texture] but I wouldn’t wear it every day, if I’m going for the wet look or to the beach.”

The ‘wet look’ refers to a hairstyle that is achieved when, she washes her hair and puts on hair gel to make her hair wavy and shiny –giving a wet appearance. She attempts to be accepting of her hair in its natural state, but it is only acceptable in

certain situations for a limited amount of time. Whereas, Mandy openly admits her dissatisfaction,

“I wouldn’t walk around like that every day, I don’t like the look.”

Due to their perceptions, they actively choose to straighten their hair (Weitz, 2001, p.683). When asked if she could change her hair would she and how, Inid responds without hesitation,

“Yes, straighter hair!” She carries on, “Everybody wants straighter hair I think, because you see people with weaves and us blowing out our hair, getting a relaxers just to have their hair straighter. I think people really want to have white people hair, but then you get white people who wish they had curly hair.”

Inid’s response is very loaded with ideas of race and gender valorization. She makes a generalizing assumption, that everyone wants straight hair but in actuality she is speaking about Coloured and black people; moreover, with coarse hair texture. When she speaks of seeing “*people with weaves*,” she is referring to black women and “*us*” blowing out our hair, she is referring to Coloured women. She acknowledges that white, women desire differing hair styles as well. When she states that women/people “*struggle*”, she is insinuating a depreciation of coarse hair and ascribing that, straight hair is white hair, which is the desired hair texture for Coloured women/ all women. I asked Ama the same question; she has mixed

emotions about having the ability to permanently changing the texture of her hair but ultimately prefers her natural hair texture. She informs me that she has a found appreciation of her natural texture, yet her response is conflicting to her actions. She shares that she chemically relaxes her hair (which is a semi-permanent process) and has done so continuously since childhood.

“You know I say yes and no, because at the moment my natural texture is very curly. So, some days when I feel that’s the desired style that I feel to wear, no hair product can give me the texture that I have right now. However, there are days when going out, you may want umm your hair to look straighter and at times if your hair is not of a straighter texture then you need to use these additional products.”

Ama showcases agency in her styling preferences based upon her feelings and social interactions. Yet, there remains a devaluation of coarse hair, as she explains in second person, if your hair is not straight then it “*needs additional*” products. Janay wears her hair styled in an afro. When asked what lead her to this hair styling choice, she responds,

“Umm, I think I just always wanted shaky hair, it was that type of thing when you are in school especially, it’s not cool to have like curly hair. Everyone is changing their hair because they want long flowing hair.”

She refers to her hair style as being *shaky* and that there was always a desire to wear her naturally curly hair texture. However, perhaps due to her age and inability to handle the social expectations, at that time she didn't feel or believe she had the ability to do so. She also reveals the dominant societal expectation of maintaining straight hair, even as a youth. However, through her desire she eventually decided to go against the status quo. In doing so, she exposes herself to social exclusion based upon negative assumptions about curly (coarse) hair being "not cool". I asked Illham what her hair styling choice says about her,

"Well, I mean I feel more confident when my hair is all done, but it's just a confidence booster. I'm more chilled (when hair is relaxed) I'm not as self-conscious as when my hair is in its natural state. When I got to university I stopped feeling self-conscious about my hair like, I stopped relaxing and I don't use the flat iron as much, I'm more at peace with myself."

Her response reveals that much of her self-esteem and emotions are entwined in her hair. Her hair texture and style has the ability to influence how she views herself. When her hair is straight, she elicits positive personal attributions compared to negative personal attributions when she wears her natural texture hair, which she describes as coarse. Attending university has played an important role in assisting her with being able to alter her perceptions about her hair styling practices, self-esteem and beauty. I asked Marie the same question and for her,

wearing hair weaves articulate beauty and womanhood. It boosts her self-esteem and gives her a sense of worth:

“With the weave I feel great, like a woman! Without, I don’t feel complete.”

Her response highlights a perceived ranking and qualification of beauty. Through wearing straight hair weave, Marie not only reinforces widespread ideologies about womanhood. She also highlights her strong sentiment to be viewed as a beautiful woman; in which, she cannot achieve with her natural hair texture. Thandy’s shares her typical styling practices,

“Ummm let’s see (pause). Well, I very rarely wear my hair loose. I try to go for the low maintenance look, like I want to look like I don’t do a lot of effort any way, even though I do have to blow dry it and iron it. Well, I don’t want to look high maintenance; like, I don’t want to look like I take care of my hair. I just want to look natural, real sort of.”

Her refusal or dislike to wear her hair loose reveals the prominence of straight hair on her identity and how she is perceived in society. She attempts to disguise the fact that she *needs to work/maintain* straight hair. This is reminiscent of Erasmus’ experience under the Apartheid regime, facing social pressures as a middle-class Coloured woman to not expose hair maintenance practices (Erasmus 1997, p.12).

The respondents illustrate the importance straight hair has on their personal lives. There is a clear desire and valorization of hair, straight hair being the apex but also

a form of imprisonment/lack of freedom. All of the participants experienced or experience any style of hair other than straight, in an unfavourable manner. The way straight hair is constructed in their lives greatly influences their beliefs about beauty, self-esteem and social interactions.

Hair Styling Choices: Straightening vs. Non-straightening practices

The majority of the respondent's divulged that they 'work' on their hair daily, washing and blow drying it at least once a week, and for some as frequently as every other day, and giving it a touch up daily with the GHD; unless, as Inid mentions, if she feels *lazy*, she will opt for the 'wet look'. Earlier, Renee shared how she will only style her hair in its natural texture, when she is opting for the wet look, or if she is going to the beach. Ashley shares about the two different looks that are deemed socially acceptable:

“[...] this wet look that we have. Then the very straight look. That basically is the two looks that we go for generally.”

Her response illustrates a prevailing perception of acceptable shared group styling practices. Marie's response demonstrates group styling preferences, which perceives non-straight hair styles as an articulation of blackness,

“With braids, automatically they will think that you are black because Coloured's don't really wear braids. There are a few but the one's that does have some black family or black backgrounds. You don't see Coloured

people with afros, very few with dreadlocks unless it's with their culture or religion. See with blacks, they just do it for fashion.”

Marie displays how hairstyles in the Coloured community are perceived unacceptable or acceptable based upon race. Coarse hair texture and styles are associated as signifiers of blackness; whereas, straight hair is a signifier of whiteness. This ideology creates a binary, which excludes Coloured people and creates ambiguous criteria for their hair texture and styling preferences.

Out of the 9 women, Janay and Illham are the only ones who actively and consistently wear their hair in its natural relatively un-styled state and texture, although both expressed their desires to have a naturally straighter hair texture. As Janay stated earlier, she always had a desire to wear her hair in non-straight styles but due to social influences decided to put it off, in favor of attempting various popular hair straightening practices at the time. When asked why she wears braids Illham responds,

“Umm well, because the people I surrounded myself with, I only have black friends at UCT. So, umm I mean back in high school; I only had Coloured friends the conversation most of the time went around hair and in university we don't really talk about hair as much. We talk about boys and blah blah blah but we don't talk about relaxers and flat irons, we talk about other things. [...] when I have my hair straightened you can see that I have it done

because I'm Coloured and I have the Coloured type of hair. So, I don't make –even if I don't verbalize you can see the social or political statement.”

Her response displays that as a Coloured woman, she is aware that her coarse hair texture is imbued with negative associations and that her hair texture and styling choices impact her perceptions of race, gender, friendship and beauty. This causes her to react in certain ways. She felt extreme pressure to adhere to social expectations surrounding hair practices (hair straightening) with her Coloured friends, based on her membership in the Coloured community. In order to relieve or escape these expectations, Illham decided to associate and acquire hair styling practices associated with blacks, even if though they carry negative stigmatizations.

The other 7 participants admitted that they strive to attain straight hair. Thandy shares her feelings about wearing her hair in various hair styles,

“Umm, I always work on it somehow. Even if I wear it naturally, I'd always put something on it to smooth it down, yea. I'm not completely comfortable with it in its natural state. Just umm, yea just not comfortable not necessarily angry or sad, yea just not confident!”

Her response reveals that her self-esteem is greatly intertwined with her hair texture and styling choices. She is unable to wear/style her hair in its natural state. Wearing her hair in its natural state or the thought of doing so greatly challenges

her self-esteem. To avoid negative feelings and associations with her natural hair texture, she feels the pressure to use products or as she stated earlier use another styling technique such as tying her hair back to make it appear “*smooth*”. She reflects on a memory, where she acknowledges how her mother plays a huge role in her decision to maintain straight hair, as she continues,

“...One day, I came home from the hair salon and she was like, ‘why can’t your hair look like that every day?’ (her eyes become watery) And like, like she said that and that’s something I remembered to this day, my natural hair needed to be worked on! Like, all my cousins use hair irons and blow dryers.” All of the participants at some point in the interview mentioned their and other Coloured women’s, and some Coloured men’s, dependence upon and gratitude for the GHD. Previously, Ashley shared how just by looking at another Coloured female, she judges whether or not they utilize a GHD. As Inid exclaims,

“Ugh it [GHD] is a god sent to Coloured women and black women. It straightens; it really straightens your hair a lot! Where umm –so, the blower doesn’t help as much, it comes out a lot straighter with the GHD!”

Inid’s reveals how important it is to have straight hair. Her response showcases the aesthetic beliefs about hair texture are indeed racialized and gendered. She refers to the hair straightening tool (GHD), as spiritual blessing in transforming non-straight hair to become straighter. Her response implies that, Coloured and black women

must work on their hair to make it straight and that straight hair is the desired hair texture/style.

When it comes to deciding on hairstyles, the participants are confronted with a binary –straight or coarse. The binary views straight hair as the most desired style and associated it as white hair. Coarse hair is the least favored hair styling and is associated as black hair. This binary impacts the participants identity as Coloured women; however, there is a shared group expectancy of hairstyling choices. The strived upon hairstyling being, straight hair, and the generally accepted “wet look”, any other hair texture or style is positioned as a marker of blackness and carries negative associations.

The Allure of Straight Hair

The data reveals a clear aspiration of class mobility and an aspiration to whiteness, illustrated by the fact that though the participants do not express the desire to be white, they yearn to have or possess the positive attributes that are attached to straight hair. In contrast, there is a clear dislike and a sense of shame that is attached with having coarse hair and being related to black women. When asked if hair holds any value most of the participants agreed that it does. Renee disagrees that hair possess any value, yet in the same instance she contradicts herself,

“No, not really. Maybe to girls but not to boys...I don’t know, I think it can make you feel more beautiful. It makes you feel good about yourself. It depends on how you feel in the morning, how you want to look during the day, maybe.”

She clearly acknowledges that hair plays a visual role on ideas of beauty, gender and self-esteem. As Illham and Marie both shared earlier, due to their coarse hair texture, they both opt to date black men because they believe black men are more accepting and view them as attractive despite them having or maintaining straight hair styles. Opposed to Coloured men, who they believe judge their physical attractiveness in a hierarchal fashion based on hair texture. As Inid shared earlier, “straight hair is white hair, white is the most desired hair”. Renee, Mandy and Thandy all view their hair as straight, yet it isn’t straight enough and unworthy of being worn on a regular basis. All of them previously shared their discomfort with their hair because they do not respectively perceive their hair as being socially acceptable without being straightened. This value system positions straight hair at the top of the beauty hierarchy; given that straight hair is mainly associated with white women, and that straightening hair is a costly practice; thus, associated with having money, one can argue that implicitly positioning straight hair at the top of such a hierarchy is equivalent to positioning middle to upper classness and

whiteness at the top of the hierarchy too. As Thandy shares her thoughts about whether hair texture is important amongst Coloureds,

“Yes it does, well within the Coloured community you get all textures of hair you get straight hair, frizzy hair. Umm and there is, this like sort of continuum; where the more sleeker your hair is, the better hair you have. You know, you have the frizzy hair and yea the closer your hair is to white hair, people see you as having better hair.”

She continues on, expressing how she believes Coloured women with naturally straight and naturally coarse hair are viewed amongst other Coloureds,

“If they have naturally straight hair, you be like, oh my word you are so lucky to have naturally straight hair! Like, if you see a Coloured woman and you can see that they worked on their hair to make it straight you think, oh you phony, you just worked on your hair to get it straight! It’s not naturally!”

Thandy’s response acknowledges the diverseness of hair textures experienced amongst Coloured women yet there still remains a group expectation of having and maintaining straight hair, even if your hair is not naturally so. She shares that as a Coloured person, *sleek* hair, places you as having better hair; which places you at a higher standing –you are then socially perceived as being close(r) to white; thus, whiteness and high social standings are perceived through hair texture.

Interestingly enough, the variations of hair textures within the Coloured community are well known, yet there is an envy of Coloured women who are born with straight textured hair. There also remains a dislike, even mockery of Coloured women with coarse textured hair –especially when it is obviously they use tools and products to straighten their hair. The irony of Thandy’s remark is that in her early responses she admits that she is apart of the Coloured women that have to *work* on their hair to achieve the desired *gladde haren*. When asked how Coloured women with naturally straight and coarse hair (respectively) are viewed amongst other Coloureds Marie shares,

“Most women strive for *gladde haren* –sleek hair, a lot of people I talk to; they always worried about when it’s raining, they think when it’s wet it’s gonna curl. They [Coloured women with straight hair texture] are seen as the source of beauty, more English speaking some of them refuse to say or identify or speak Afrikaans because they don’t want to be associated with low-class. Most people do think they are better than the ones with the coarse hair. They [Coloured women with coarse hair texture] just get on; they don’t really bother themselves with what other people think of them. They are perceived as lower class but I don’t think they are far as much what people think. Well I as far don’t personally care.”

Marie's response illustrates a clear hierarchal value system which places straight hair at as the highest ranking and the perception of upper-classness. This value system articulates a value on class and race. By having straight hair Coloured women achieve a likeness of white women; in this instance, English speaking women; this positioning straight hair as a marker of higher standing of class, race, worth and social acceptance. Conversely, Coloured women with coarse hair are automatically assumed to be of a lower social standing. Interestingly, she notes a fear of an element such as water, which possesses the ability to *reveal* a Coloured women's desire to be perceived as having naturally straight hair or dislike of wearing their natural hair texture. Interestingly enough, she views Coloured women with coarse hair as being free or unconcerned with the social perceptions interconnected with hair texture.

The respondents share that straight hair carries positive sentiments about social standings in a hierarchal manner. The positive associations place whiteness and upper-class in the highest regards, to which Coloured women compare their selves and other Coloured women to. Coarse hair is positioned at the bottom of this ranking system; Coloured and black women who maintain their hair in such fashion are placed. Coloured women who have straight hair are perceived –as well as perceived themselves as being of higher class and as the better courtship option.

Social and Economic Impacts surrounding Hair Texture

The beliefs that the respondents hold based on hair texture impact many facets of their lives, economically as well as socially, and in terms of acceptance and participation. For instance, coarse hair and certain hair styles such as the afro and dreadlocks may prevent or cause negative responses from employers and colleagues, as it may be viewed as unprofessional or of lower status. Ashley shares how she believes Coloured women with coarse hair are viewed,

“Umm, Coloured women with coarse hair are seen as the lower standing one. The ones who are domestic cleaners and yea blue collar workers. You seldom see a Coloured woman with coarse hair in a position of power, where you will find many Coloured women with straighter hair are in powerful positions.”

Ashley acknowledges that hair is important to one's social standing for Coloured women. She notes how one's natural hair; whether it is the texture or the styling, is used as a visual indicator of worth. She highlights this dynamic by noting how Coloured women in high ranking/powerful position have or maintain straight hair, and Coloured women with coarse hair are usually domestic workers or are viewed as lower class because of the negative associations. The participants also dedicate a huge amount of money on hair maintenance and products. To certain extents, the participants recognized the impacts that norms surrounding hair texture and styling has on their lives. As Ama shares,

“Well umm, personally it’s really costly. If I am using the chemical treatments, making use of weave techniques; that can be costly but other than that it depends on you personally. If I want to leave my hair it, frees me from the enslavement of kinky hair. But if I want to straighten my hair and style it in a certain way that is acceptable to society, then it not only takes up some of my time, it also has a major impact on my pocket-wallet and the type of way I see myself. I do my hair on a weekly basis and that’s in terms of washing and styling –that takes 3-4 hours, when I include all the treatments and the blow drying and the straightening of the hair, on a regular basis –I take about 20 minutes to do my hair; that is, if it’s chemically treated, then it’s easier to maintain.”

When asked to estimate how much she spends on hair products a year, Ama shares,

“I say roughly R3,000-4,000.”

Ama’s response offers insight into the thought and commitment that goes into her hair maintenance. Her comment about leaving her hair in its natural state as “*freeing her from the enslavement of kinky hair*”, shows not only a strong use of word choice but a vibrant grasp of the complexity, challenges and dynamics of her hair texture. She shows that by complying with straight hair practices she takes on/ inscribes into her body all the positive and negative social perceptions, and in her opinion, when she leaves her hair un-straightened she allows herself not to be

consumed by it. Although, she is aware of social constructions surrounding her hair styling options, she willingly remains in the “*enslavement of kinky hair*”; giving ample amount of her energy, time and money all to maintain straight hair.

To differing degrees the participants’ exhibit awareness of how their views on hair texture and styling shape and influence their lives as Coloured women. Yet, there remains a degree of denial or inability/desire to delve into the hierarchal racial, gendered and classist negative perceptions surrounding coarse hair and positive perceptions surrounding straight hair. When questioned if hair texture mattered to her as a Coloured woman, Renee responds,

“Mmm, no, not really.”

She doesn’t expand on her opinion although in her previous responses she shares how she likes her hair texture but wouldn’t wear her hair in its natural state. So, there remains a contradiction between what she says and her actions. If her hair texture didn’t matter, why is she unwilling to wear/ style it so on a daily or regular basis? Ashley acknowledges how hair is a complex issue within the Coloured community and in South African society;

“I think [Coloured hair] is always the subject of mockery; especially all the comedians always make fun of Coloureds’ hair. It’s always been imprinted in our society that hair is a problem...there’s always jokes, you hear about

the old ladies with their swirl caps on and with rollers in their hair.

Everything is about that, yea.”

Her remarks display how it is easier to view hair in superficial terms rather than challenge the status quo or critique the stereotypes that continue to be reinforced in society. As she shares her awareness of the intricacy of how Coloured hair has and is constructed within society. Interestingly, her previous remarks reveals that she upholds many of the beliefs and practices she expresses a discontent and dislike of. When questioned, if hair texture influences her socially, Mandy responds,

“No I don’t think in today’s society, because people do put in perms and stuff. No, I don’t think so.”

Her remark, illustrates that there is or at least hair texture was in issue at some point in society. She insists that it is not, but immediately after acknowledges that “*people*” do alter their hair but she doesn’t believe it has any social influence. She fails to question, challenge or think who are the people that alter their hair? Why do these people alter their hair? What does *perms and stuff* articulate within society? Similar to Renee and Thandy, she states in earlier remarks, that she wouldn’t wear her hair in its natural texture/style. This shows that her hair texture does indeed influence her socially.

As Erasmus (1997, 12) shares, “Black hair is politicised by class and gender. It is also racialised”. From the data I highlight in various ways the importance hair

plays in their lives, as Coloured women. From all the participants responses, five major themes emerged; peer and familial pressures, racial binaries based on hair texture, perceptions of class based on hair texture, the role gender has on hair texture and styling practices, and confronting the politicization of their hair as Coloured women.

Familial and Peer Pressure to Maintain Straight Hair

The participant's family and friends prove to be critical influences on shaping their thoughts on and experiences with hair. The interview material revealed that family and peers place high importance on straight hair. Thus, family and peers are the most prominent influences in terms of the extent to which participant's adhering to upheld hegemonic norms regarding the appearance of hair. The participants' experiences and beliefs reveal how their preferences in terms of hair styling and appearance were acquired and maintained through contact with family and friends. Inid informs that her hair maintenance practices are upheld through friendship,

“Ugh, well it's particularly a friend thing; where we used to wash and blow our hair out every weekend. Umm, during the week it was school, so twice a week. Friday's were hair day; we wash and dry out hair to last the weekend and yea, so that's how that came about.”

She asserts that she doesn't care about hair texture but acknowledges that hair texture influences her social interactions,

“Well umm, I don't really care about hair texture but the person approaching me might. So, you always do think like, you will see cliques of people and they all have straight hair in that clique. So, you think maybe I shouldn't try and get into that group because my hair is not as straight as theirs. So, I probably wouldn't make the cut anyways. So in that way, it does make you feel a little inferior to others but when someone comes up to me and they have different hair, I really don't care.”

Inid's remarks offers insight into how hair texture and styling is very important to her social interactions amongst her peers. She bonded with her group of friends, as they made hair straightening a habitual ritual. Although she may not discriminate or judge her friends based on hair texture, she is aware that her Coloured peers examine her hair texture and use it as a measurement of worth and acceptance. In her social interactions, one's hair texture can greatly impact your in-group social standings in a hierarchal manner with straight hair being the most desired. As she acknowledges that she does experience inferiorization due to her coarse hair texture. Thandy shares an event from her family experience that continues to influence her and her family to value straight hair,

“Well see, this issue with hair is passed on to us. I remember my mom telling me my aunt wanted to marry this guy with unstraight hair. She became pregnant and the guy went to my grandparents and asked if he could marry her and my grandparents said no. So he left and was never really in my cousin’s life, and ever since my cousin was young she would always have weekly appointments at the hair salon. See, during apartheid my grandparents had a deep understanding of how looks could influence life chances. This has unfortunately been passed down on to our generation and we are trying to work to accept our hair as is.”

This memory illustrates not only the complicity of Thandy’s relatives in maintaining racist norms of beauty and attractiveness, but it also indicates the broader social presence of those norms. I argue that the complicity is complicated because, as Thandy points out, her grandparents maintained these norms precisely because they were aware of negative consequences of not doing so. Erasmus (2000, 381) notes that, “These racial hierarchies and values of colonial racism have left a deep mark on our conceptions of beauty defining beauty against blackness”. Ama shares her experiences of coming of age and inscribed expectations,

“The first relaxer I had was at the age of 11 and ever since after that I had to maintain. So, I’d say I started at age 11 with oil treatment, relaxing and curling and maintaining of the hair...Because of the hair texture that is in

our family, it's a pass on thing when you become of a certain age your parents; your mom starts to maintain your hair by means of use of these different products her mother used on her hair or that her grandmother used on her hair. So, it's from generation to generation depending on the type of texture that we have."

Ama is aware that her and her family's hair practices continue to be influenced from previous generation's being passed down via maternal lineage. What should be noted is how she speaks that, her and her family members need to straighten their hair "*because of the hair texture that is in their family*"; her remarks illustrate a clear depreciation of coarse hair texture and the normative assumption that one's hair ought to be straight(ened). Janay shares how members of her peer group use their shared identity to police the expected norms and practices as it pertains to hair. When asked if she believes her hair will have an effect on her in the working environment, she shares an encounter she had at work,

"Umm yea, I do, I know it will, there was this one student job I did have in a retail store, and it was all like Coloureds working, and they like sat me down and told me, 'you know you need to straighten your hair, because we have an image to maintain,' it was that kind of thing! I think in the professional world people are going to be more politically correct about it, cos you know

you can't say that, you know they don't actually understand that you can't make people do that [...].”

The reaction Janay receives from her peers based on her hair styling choice—an afro, demonstrates how influential group association is, as it relates to normative assumptions about hair texture. Her peers felt such a discomfort, because they believed that her hair styling choice –an afro, reflected negatively upon the rest of them as a group and due to this discomfort they attempted to enforce/alter her styling choice in a manner which they believed to be favorable. The reaction of Janay's peers illustrates ideas of beauty, professionalism and racism. Coarse hair, in particular hair styled in an afro is socially perceived as visually unpleasing and unacceptable for a Coloured person to style their hair, especially in the workforce.

For all of the participants the social behavior of family and friends greatly impacts how their views surrounding hair texture, both in terms of their personal preferences and in terms of what beauty norms they generally subscribed to. In all instances, straight hair was stressed as the status quo; whether it was for social acceptance, visual comfort or life chances.

Hair as a Marker of Race

The data shows that in the lives of the participant's, hair texture articulates race in binary terms; black –kroes (coarse) and white –gladde (sleek/straight). Erasmus

(1997, p.12) shares how in the Coloured community certain Afrikaans words are used to describe coarse hair: kroes (coarse /kinky), peper-korrels (pepper-corns, and other derogatory terms to reference similarities to black people. On the other hand, the terms: lekker haren (nice/sleek hair) or gladde haren (smooth/sleek hair) are used to reference hair to the likeness of whites or is considered to be a characteristic of whiteness. Throughout all of the interviews the notion of hair being *good or bad* remained dominate, with coarse hair being viewed as black and bad, and straight hair being viewed as white and good. When asked to describe her hair Marie states,

“Well, mine is like black and some Coloureds have hair similar to white people. So, once again it depends on your background but for me it’s just the same as black hair.”

She demonstrates the constant binary of using racial terms of black hair and white hair as definitive spectrums. Being that she has black heritage she equates her coarse hair and Coloured identity, as being the same as being black. When asked if she could describe what Coloured hair is, Mandy offers what appears to be ambiguous response; even though she is aware that the study is about Coloured women and their perceptions on hair and previous questions were asked about Coloured women,

“What Coloured hair, are you talking about the race? Oh, I don’t know, I think white people have much nicer texture –sleek. Coloured hair is more mixed in between. Not all of them have wash and wavy (laughs).”

Perhaps, her apparent confusion is a diversion tactic, an attempt to avoid introspection into the social constructions surrounding hair and Coloured identity or she was uninterested with the questions posed to her. Whatever her reason, she includes racial comparisons as means to describe her perceptions of Coloured hair. As Mandy believes, Coloured hair is not white hair, which she perceives in a high standing as being “nicer” and a “sleek” texture. However; to her, Coloured hair remains a mixture of coarse and “sleek”, which usually results in a wavy texture. From her response, interestingly enough, she does not mention blacks or coarse hair directly but her reference and heckle of “*not all of them* [Coloureds] *having the wash and wavy*”; implies a correlation of negative/ less desired hair texture which goes without words, perceives coarse hair is not a nice texture and is viewed as black hair. Again, even though Coloured people are not viewed as white and at the top of the racial hierarchy, she perceives that they are in a higher ranking than blacks –whose blackness is established or signified on the basis of, amongst other things, their ‘undesirably’ coarse hair texture.

When questioned if she believes hair represents one's background, Renee initially states on occasion, however; at the end of her remark she acknowledges that she believes it does. She speaks of hair as a visual indicator of race and religion,

“Sometimes, like you can see...Say, if I have a cousin and her hair is really nice, like I can see if it's Indian hair. Say, if I have another cousin on the Christian side and I can see if her hair is, not as nice then yea basically.”

She relies on her own racial and religious background of being, in her words, half Muslim – of Indian and Malaysian descent and half Christian. She hierarchal ranks members of her family hair texture; she views Indian hair as being *really nice* and Christian (one can assume a coarse, less sleek texture) as *not as nice*.

Whether it's a birth of a child, religion, positive and negative attributes or comparison, hair texture definitely is used as an indicator of race for the participants. Hair amongst other cues, serves as a marker of race; which is usually viewed in binary terms of black and white. As Erasmus (2001, 14) shares, “In my community practices such as curling or straightening one's hair carried a stigma of shame. The humiliation of being ‘less than white’ made being ‘better than black’ a very fragile position to occupy”. The research reveals that the participants continue to internalize coarse hair as a stigmatization of blackness and straight hair as a likeness to white. In doing so, maintaining hierarchal racist ideologies about the body, established during colonial rule.

Hair as a Marker of Class

The third theme to emerge is the respondents' perceptions that hair texture serves as a marker of class. I asked Janay if hair texture represents one's background, and she shares that she believes hair straightening practices are evidence of class status:

“I think so yea, because yea as I've said you know Coloured people's obsession with straightening their hair, it does show a class thing to a degree. Cos a lot of the Coloured people I know at UCT or you know more advantage Coloured people will have curly hair...It's like the more higher class Coloured people in this set or this context, like they're okay with curly hair, they kind of understand you know why straight hair is not necessarily what you have to do. Cos I feel like, maybe poor Coloured's feel like they have to have straight hair. It's not necessarily something they want but it's being pounded in to them cos they are uneducated So, a lot of them are still very caught up in the apartheid era of brutality.”

To her, it is Coloured women's class that allow them freedom and agency to wear their hair in different styles. Janay assumes that “*higher class*” Coloured women are afforded the choice of hair styling because they have access to education and other resources. Due to this access, they are not plagued with the challenges of hair texture and styling preferences, because they are able to emancipate themselves through higher learning. Whereas, lower-class Coloured women, who straighten

their hair do so out of necessity and subjugation. Although she may not be aware of it, she attaches hierarchal characteristics and perceptions about class. Upper-class Coloured's possess agency –are educate, confident, conscious and liberated; conversely, lower class Coloured's are docile bodies –uneducated, unsure of their selves, still under the confinement of Apartheid. Ashley shares how her views on class and hair texture were formed,

“I think um previously, when I was living in George and I had that small town mentality; where we were taught, not taught but it was a social norm rather for Coloured people to have: the straighter the hair, the more higher up you stand in the social standing and society and umm, now my mind is open and it has been changed. I mean, I am here among so many different scholars it's quite diverse, even at UCT it's very diverse. You see different people and you realize that there are different walks of life and it has nothing to do with their hair, it's quite a shallow thing to think of hair.”

Ashley is reflexive about how influential her group association and location plays a role in shaping her beliefs about hair. Her grappling with hair is undermined, through her seeing diverse people and disconnecting the supremacy of hair texture and styling practices on her life as nothing more than superficial.

The responses from the participants illustrate the hierarchal ranking perceptions of class based upon straight or coarse hair textures. These perceptions correlate

positive associations as being characteristics of upper/middle-class and negative associations toward being lower-class, based upon one's hairstyling.

The Gendered Aspect of Hair

The fourth theme relates to the role of gender in hair styling practices. All of the participants shared either thoughts or experiences of how gender influences perceptions of hair. For Illham, hair texture plays an important role in her dating life and how she believes guys view females,

“Yes it does, I remember my ex-boyfriend told me that umm he always kind of analyzes a girl by the way she does her hair. So, that stuck out for me because I never knew that guys look out for how to maintain yourself and I never knew it was that important. Especially, if I'm dating a Coloured guy; I'd be more conscious about my hair and do my hair more often than, if I'm dating a black guy then I wouldn't. Recently, I've been dating a lot of black guys because I feel more at ease with them. Coloured guys are a lot of maintenance in terms of me, I have to measure myself and I feel like I have to put on this different person in front of them. If I'm maintaining my hair always looking good, so there's a lot of work that goes into it.”

In her experience, it is not only her gender but also her race which influences perceptions about hair. For her, dating a Coloured guy creates a lot of pressure and

ideas of beauty, causing her a great deal of anxiety and to be very self-conscious of her hair. To relieve herself from the perceived gendered expectations of hair from men within her racial group, she dates black men. Marie shares why she believes hair texture and styling is more important to women than men,

“I think Coloured females are more conscious of their hair texture because guys can just shave it off, nobody sees the kind of texture of their hair but Coloured ladies are always worried about ‘oh it’s too thick let me straighten it’. People relax their hair or comb it just to make it look sleeker, yup.”

Marie makes an interesting point as to how hair styling choices are socially constructed based on gender. Men have the ability to hide or avoid perceptions surrounding hair texture because shaving one’s hair for men is socially acceptable, even fashionable hairstyling practice; whereas, hair for women has been socially constructed to value long, straight hair. Mandy shares how she believes that hair has value in society,

“I do, I think it can make a girl sometimes. Like, a girl’s beauty sometimes lies in her hair. I think hair just has a lot of value...It can affect your love life. Some guys judge girls by their hair. In primary school, it was a big issue; people would bully people if they didn’t have nice hair. The boys would, they guys would make fun of girls who didn’t have nice hair.”

As a female, Mandy presents how assumptions about beauty, dating opportunities, and peer acceptance can be greatly affected based upon one's hair. She too, places great importance and value on gender and expectations as it relates to hair, as she states that "*I think it can make a girl sometimes*". For her, hair ideas of beauty resonate within a "*girl's*" hair. Her response reinforces and upholds hegemonic beliefs about gender and beauty.

Confronting the Socialization of Hair Straightening and Coloured Identity

The participants show various degrees of awareness and willingness to implicitly address the unequal aesthetic, racist, sexist, classist, and political contestations, within their hair texture and styling. When questioned how she thinks society views Coloured hair, Ama believes there is little acceptance of the various hair textures within the Coloured community and that there is a pressure to maintain straight hair,

"Oh that's difficult one, well society if you look at the number of products that are out there to make you hair more straighter and more manageable and look at the weave industry. There is still that pressure that society puts on Coloured women with their Coloured hair to transform to something they think is acceptable. So, society in the end has not yet accepted the fact that kinky hair or Coloured hair is beautiful in its own way; and it portrays who we are and I think that if we take away the texture of our hair, or we don't

embrace it or we feel ashamed of it, then what we are actually doing is burying ourselves, we are burying our culture and our true essence of who we are.”

Her response seems informed about the politicization of straight hair and embracing of Coloured hair. She attributes the disapproval of Coloured hair to society and asserts that Coloured people should embrace the difference in hair texture as to not deny their culture of “*true essence of who we are*”. Yet, she highlights a clear internalization of the racial and aesthetic beliefs as she discusses hair products are able to make Coloured hair “*more manageable*”. I asked Marie if society rewards Coloured people for maintaining a certain style or hair texture, she responds,

“You know once again, it depends on what people you are around. Some just don’t care but unfortunately, within the subconscious they will comment. I think the Coloured community regulates because they think if you have straight hair you’re better, so they will want to keep up with that but within society so many different races hair texture you know styles, nobody really bothers.”

She acknowledges that in the Coloured community, there remains reserved judgments about hair texture. By not verbalizing these perceptions, hair texture remains a figment of one’s imagination. Although, the perceptions are not

addressed; a group expectation persists, which in a hierarchal ranking values members with straight hair and expects other members to adhere to the established norm. Marie's believes that because of the racial variations within society, "*nobody really bothers*", delineates any conscious awareness about the difficulties Coloured people experience through their hair. Thandy believes there are benefits to having Coloured hair,

"Well, I think it's definitely, when you are talking about Coloured are you talking about those who braid their hair or all types? Umm well, I think benefits in my hair, umm well benefits when it's worked on. Yea, I think you think you are perceived better by people and in its natural state you can do a lot with Coloured hair you can do braids, you can do extensions, corn rows yea you can do a lot."

Her response is indicative of how hair has been/is social constructed and is strongly infused with normative assumptions. She perceives positive identity –self-esteem as well as social and cultural gains as a benefit obtained through Coloured hair. However, in order to achieve these benefits Coloured hair needs to be *worked on*. Interesting enough, when she mentions hair in its natural state she offers hair styles associated with coarse –black hair.

For the participants living in Cape Town, their hair texture and styling choices are constructed with a myriad of interconnecting meanings; used to determine beauty

and worth in an unequal racist, sexist, classist measurement. Hair texture is measured based upon and against a white imagery and a black subjective; in which, they are considered not to hold membership in either. The manner in which the binary is and has been socially constructed greatly influences their lives as Coloured, middle-class women. Their hair –no matter how it is styled, serves as a visual articulator of their social standings in various facets of life. The majority of the participants are aware of the meanings infused in their hair, yet they take it as how things just are. This allows the perceptions and attitudes surrounding hair to go unquestioned and remain unchanged; which in turn, upholds superficial hierarchal beliefs about race, gender, beauty and acceptance.

Conclusion

As the findings in this study demonstrate, the participants continue to construct their hair based on ideologies and perceptions about the body from a Western Eurocentric view. This lens was shaped by colonialism, and heightened in the Apartheid era through social and structural perceptions about race, gender, class, and beauty through the body –hair being a key factor. Present day, the data proves that in the lives of the participants as Coloured women, living in Cape Town, hair still articulates perceptions about gender, race, and class, and beauty in a hierarchal ranking. As Coloured women, there remains a social pressure of maintaining straight hair, not only on the participants, but also how they view other Coloured people, as well as how other Coloured people view them. The participants rely on their hair texture and styling for cues on self-esteem, dating, beauty and other social interactions.

As Erasmus (1997, 16) notes that, “[...] hair is shafts of dead cells”. However, hair has been and is social constructed with meaning, which carries heavy consequences for all; but its interpretation and perceptions on the lives of black women globally, locally, and more specifically Coloured women in Cape Town, South Africa cannot be denied. The purpose of this study is not to argue that a certain hair style or texture is right for Coloured women, it is to problematize and challenge the beliefs and perceptions held about these practices from a historical

and intersectional account. Thus, the Coloured women in this study are able to obtain agency through their hair texture and styling practices. However, hair texture and styling dictates their participation and acceptance in society.

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Appendices

Interview Consent Form

University of Cape Town, Sociology Department, Diversity Studies Programme

Name of interviewer: Denisha Richardson

Name of assignment: Master's of Philosophy Minor Dissertation

1. I agree to be interviewed for the purposes of the student assignment named above.
2. The purpose and nature of the interview has been explained to me.
3. I agree that the interview may be electronically recorded.
4. Any questions that I asked about the purpose and nature of the interview and assignment have been answered to my satisfaction.
5.
 - a) I agree that my name may be used for the purposes of the assignment only and not for publication. **OR**
 - b) I understand that the student may wish to pursue publication at a later date and my name may be used. **OR**

c) I do not wish my name to be used or cited, or my identity otherwise disclosed, in the assignment.

Name _____ and _____ signature _____ of
interviewee: _____

Date: _____

6. I have explained the project and the implications of being interviewed to the interviewee and I believe that the consent is informed and that he/she understands the implications of participation.

Name _____ and _____ signature _____ of
interviewer: _____

Date: _____

Interview Schedule

Individual Interview

1. How do you maintain your hair (straight, cut, dye)?
2. Do you use any hair products?
3. How often do you do this? (styling, use of products)
4. How long have you done this? (since what age)
5. Why do you do maintain your hair this way or what made you do it (how was it introduced in your life?)
6. What does your hair say about you, when you have these different styles? (image, political, social)
7. If you could change your hair, would you? What would you change it to?
8. How do you feel about your hair in its natural state?
9. How do members of your family maintain their hair?
10. Do you think hair has any value? (socially, economically, politically, personally)
11. In your own words, describe 'Coloured hair'?
12. As a Coloured woman does hair texture matter?
13. How do you think society views hair?
14. How do you think society views Coloured hair?

15. Do you think hair represents one's background? (culturally, politically, class)
16. Do you think your hair texture or styling will affect your future career?
17. Do you think your hair texture or styling has or will affect your education?
18. Will people take you more seriously by having a certain texture or style of hair?
19. In what other ways does hair style and texture influence your life?
20. How does hair styling and texture influence you socially? (interactions)
21. When you have children or if you have children, do you/did you hope that they will have a certain texture of hair?
22. How does being Coloured impact your hair styling choices?
23. What challenges do you face with your hair as a Coloured person?
24. What benefits do you gain with your hair as a Coloured person?
25. Do you feel your hair plays a significant role in your life chances?
26. How does having Coloured hair differ from that of blacks and whites?
27. What do you think of your hair?
28. When you hear the term, gladdeharen what feelings or thoughts do you have?
29. How/has apartheid impacted your opinions about hair texture and styling?
30. Does the type of hair you have matter more or less if you are a Coloured male or female?
31. Why is that?

32. How do some of your friends maintain their hair?
33. Does this influence your hair styling or desires?
34. How are Coloured women with straight hair viewed in the Coloured community?
35. How are Coloured women with coarse hair viewed in the Coloured community?
36. How are Coloured men with straight hair viewed in the Coloured community?
37. How are Coloured men with coarse hair viewed in the Coloured community?
38. Can you explain some typical hair styles and treatment of Coloured women?
39. Can you explain some typical hair styles and treatment of Coloured men?
40. Is there a certain style or texture of hair which is seen as good or positive? If so, what type and why?
41. Is there a certain style or texture of hair which is seen as bad or negative? If so, what type and why?
42. Should hair texture and styling even be examined, studied or mentioned academically?
43. Does society award coloured men and women for having or maintaining a certain type and texture of hair? If so, how?

To build on the above questions, additional questions were asked depending on the response of the participants.