

GOING NATURAL:  
AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN AND THEIR HAIR

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

The study seeks to gain a better understanding of the term "going natural" in regards to women with natural African American hair. The study also seeks to understand natural hair and reclaiming a positive perspective of acceptance and natural appearance. The study will give light to what it is to have natural hair in present day and calls upon the experience of the Black woman on her journey with her hair and her past.

## **DEDICATION**

For my wonderful mother who has always been my role model in hair, beauty, and class. You started this journey and I have looked up to you every step of the way.

For my amazing family: Ray, Ray II, and Bridgette. Thank you for your support and the foundations to pursue my dreams.

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## INTRODUCTION

As societal beings, appearances are important to humans. Appearance is a person's first opportunity to present themselves to other individuals and society. How others perceive the person will be based on first and subsequent impressions of the way a person presents him or herself. Humans gain a sense of who they are based on other's reactions of them and appearance is a big part of how humans shape their self-identity. The presentation of the self is therefore very important in maintaining one's self identity. Erving Goffman (1959) developed the concept of the presentation of the self and its importance to maintain one's identity. As well as allowing the individual to gain a sense of their selves, presentation of self allows the individual to gain a sense of the other, and what he or she may be expecting of the individual.

Since presentation of the self greatly depends on how the other perceives the individual, certain groups in society might systematically feel unworthy or maintain a negative connotation with their self-identity. African Americans are faced with many barriers upon first appearances because of the history of specific ideologies. Even upon a first social encounter, another individual or set of individuals may have a preconceived perception of the individual due to stereotypes or other misinformation. The individual perceives this reaction of the other and therefore recognizes that he or she might not be what the other expected. As a result, the person may feel they have to undo the preconceived perception. More specifically, African American women have had to deal with even more pressures from society to have a certain appearance. The standard of beauty, and what is considered beauty for a long time in America was not met by African American women (Patton 2006). Today American society is more accepting but African

American women still battle stereotypes of their character and their identity, with regards to being perceived by the other.

There are many ways for an individual to decide how to present themselves and for women— of all races— one of the main considerations is through their hair. Hair can be a very important factor to most women because of the characteristics one can show about themselves through their hair. Traditional ideals of American beauty have taught women that frizziness is bad, poofy is ugly, afros are unprofessional, dreads are dirty, etc. (Bellinger 2007). These ideals are carried throughout generations of society and the message is still very prevalent. African American women knowing this therefore realize they must work hard to prove that their hair texture does not assume negative qualities about their identity. Many of the ways African American women disband this stereotype is to avoid the natural state that their hair grows. African American hair in its natural state is typically very curly, sometimes kinky, and coarse. These are the same qualities that have been given negative connotations and for generations African American women have avoided being labeled these sorts of things at all costs. Recently, and not for the first time in American history, African American women have been returning to their roots and wearing their hair in its natural state.

The current study seeks to better understand the struggle of “going natural” and the effect that African American women’s natural hair has in their lives. Since hair is such an integral component in the presentation of self, the study also seeks to find whether there are any differences in the women’s lives since they have returned to their natural state and how their natural hair affects their lives in different social situations.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Natural hair on African American women can appear in many different styles but most Black hair in its natural state appears tightly coiled or kinky (Bellinger 2007). The term natural hair is an identifier in the African American community because hair is differentiated between natural and permed or relaxed. Most African American women began to perm their hair at very young ages because it is what their mothers did and their mothers before them. The notion of perming hair has very deep rooted cause and symbolism behind it. African American women or women whose natural hair appears thick and coiled in nature often feel it is necessary for them to chemically process their hair this way. This is due to centuries of the White ideals of beauty and the negation of African American as decent, let alone beautiful. These notions of beauty standards date back to slavery and the effects are still prevalent today.

According to de Sa Dias, Baby, Kaneko, and Velasco, (2007) to perm one's hair means to permanently chemically straighten the hair follicle. To do this a strong alkaline chemical is necessary to flatten the root of the hair (de Sais, Baby, Kaneko, and Velasco 2007). This process is repeated every six to eight weeks depending on how fast one's hair grows. The perming process can be painful as the chemicals are literally changing the makeup of the hair follicle. The perm is applied to the root of the hair but sometimes it rubs onto the scalp. When the perm meets flesh stinging occurs and if unchanged this can cause burning and scarring. There have also been long term effects over time of perming one's hair to include baldness and some studies even link health conditions to the chemical process.

The question thus remains as to why African American women go through such difficulties and costs to have their hair chemically altered straight. The alternative to this straight processed hair is to wear their hair naturally. There is a stigma associated with African American women who wear their hair naturally. The origins of this stigma can be placed back to slavery; if a person possessed straighter hair they were known to have a “free-person” status or not being owned by a master and therefore a slave (Patton 2006). In fact, according to Patton (2006) if an African American woman’s skin was dark and she possessed kinky hair, the likelihood of her being a field slave increased greatly. Over generations African Americans started accepting that their hair simply was not good. It was very common for the slave masters to communicate to the slaves that their hair was wool and even encouraged them to dislike their hair (Bellinger 2007). Even though the slaves had little time to themselves, when the slave masters would entertain they made sure that the house slaves straightened or hid their hair under scarfs so the guests would not be offended (Bellinger 2007). Over time this constant degradation of hair, and therefore body, beauty, and self-image started becoming the African American woman’s image of herself. DeGruy-Leary stated “Black women began to perceive themselves as ugly and inferior, and if you believe you’re inferior, then you’re much easier to control” (Byrd and Tharps 2001:14).

By the time of the era of Reconstruction in America, African American women genuinely thought their hair was bad. With the appearance of Madam C. J. Walker and others (Patton 2006), Black hair care was beginning to become available to the masses. Advertisements to change Black hair, skin, and facial features were on the rise (Rooks 1996) and they made sure to point out the negative features of the African American woman. One such article states “positively nothing detracts so much from your appearance as short, matted, un-attractive curly

hair” (Rooks 1996:33). Since the White standard of beauty included hair to be long, straight, styled, and to look feminine (Patton 2006) anything that did not resemble this was ugly, un-attractive, or un-desirable. The same advertisement also mentions that the African American women owe themselves and the people they surround themselves with to buy the product which will straighten their hair (Rooks 2006). Even the advertisement attested to how important hair is to appearance, and therefore self-image. The ad implies that since the White ideals of beauty promote hair that looks styled and straight anything else is classified as ugly. There is also a negative connotation about the woman as a whole if her hair appears in its natural state.

Since hair is such an integral part to one’s presentation and identity, the way a woman presents her hair to society is what society will presume about her character. Hair speaks to a person’s “beauty, economic status, power, and beliefs” (Bellinger 2007:65). Indeed in the African cultures the way one wore their hair would reflect their “status, gender, ethnic origin, leadership role, personal taste, or place in the life cycle” (Sieber and Herreman 2000:56). Since natural hair still presents itself as uncombed, kinky, coiled, matted, etc. in American society, the perceiver might presume that the woman is uneducated, unemployed, has low morals, and bad hygiene. Natural hair is still viewed in this negative way by a great deal of people and certainly by mainstream standards of beauty. Thus the notion of “good hair” is created.

“Good hair” is a term used—often times by African American women—to describe the hegemonic definition of beauty in America. In 1997, Saltzberg and Chrisler stated that beauty is the hegemonic standard of the ruling class (Patton 2006). Good hair possesses the qualities that bad hair does not. In the African American community, the way Black hair appears naturally is

synonymous with bad hair. Although slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and the civil rights era are past events of America's history, the standard of what is beauty still remains of mostly White ideals. Thus even in the African American community, the notion of natural hair is synonymous with bad hair. "Good hair" is therefore "long, straight, and has a silky feeling or when one has seemingly Caucasian hair" (Bellinger 2007:67). In the African American community there is a keen liking to obtaining "good hair." This has to deal with being accepted by society and self-acceptance.

Presently however, there have been rises in the amount of African American women who choose to wear their hair as it grows naturally out of their heads. This can be explained as rejecting mainstream standards of beauty and accepting themselves. A growth in the number of natural-haired African American women is nothing new however. The 1960s represented a time in American history and African American history where Blacks as a whole were examining what it was to be Black in America. The Black Power movement starting in the 1960s was one of the first movements to take a further look at the effects of generations of White beauty standards on African American women and girls (Patton 2006). Doing this also allowed African Americans to show what color meant and how people judge based on that criteria alone (Patton 2006). This examination not only allowed for reflection, but a reclaiming of the once shunned characteristics, the most famous—or infamous—having been the afro.

Hair, therefore, became one of the tools or mechanisms that African Americans could utilize in order to confront the damaging Eurocentric standards of beauty that African

Americans were unable to attain. For a brief moment, African Americans were able to create and reify their own standards of beauty (Patton 2006:40).

However, as this era came to a close and the 1980s began, cultural assimilation started to rule out the battle cries of the great movements of the 1960s (Patton 2006). Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s African Americans as a whole focused more on security and jobs; and landing a job as an African American woman meant looking the part: molding herself into the hegemonic ideal of beauty.

Heading into the turn of the century, African American women have once again called for an acceptance of their appearance and therefore an acceptance and representation of their beauty, character, and selves. African American women had not readily seen themselves represented in mainstream media so they made it their responsibility to create their own standard of beauty (Patton 2006). They recognized that the standard of beauty in America came from racist notions to enforce the inferiority of African Americans. In a 2000 study of African American teens, Duke found that when asked about magazine ads, they claimed not to accept the ideals portrayed there (Jefferson and Stake 2009). Jefferson and Stake (2009) elaborated that since there were very few models that the girls identified with, they tended to disregard what they saw as irrelevant to themselves.

Because of the lack of representation of African American women in mass media the Black community has called upon themselves to create and define their own standards of beauty. “African Americans may be more likely to define beauty in terms of personality, attitude, and character as well as physical appearance in addition to rejecting Western beauty standards as a

protective strategy” (Jefferson and Stake 2009:398). While the notion of creating a separate standard of beauty is intended to not demean or negate “non-white” features, the fact remains that even the African American community has a Western standard of beauty when it comes to how a woman should look.

Debunking the myth of what is beauty would require Euro American women to say “the hell with what men think” and African American women would have to say “the hell with what all of White culture thinks” (Wilson and Russell 1996: 85). This is quite a difficult position for all women and even more so for African American women because African American women have to challenge [an] entire race of people and system of thought. As a society, we seem to forget our rhizomatic past (Gilroy 1993); a past that is impacted by the diasporic connections between people and cultures (Patton 2006:46).

Requiring a complete societal change is a heavy task and no matter how it is perceived; hair will always say something about appearance, which speaks to identity, which speaks to how the individual views the self. Hair is linked to identifying one’s self because it contributes to body image, body satisfaction, and the appearance of the self (Jefferson and Stake 2009). Hair speaks to one’s character and is representative of their status in society. Hair is also a measure of beauty and how one styles their hair effects one’s level of beauty in society. Beauty then speaks to how the individual views the self and how the individual perceives others viewing them as in the presentation of self (Goffman 1959). Cash et al. (2004) explains that body image gives predictive validity of an ideal self (Jefferson and Stake 2009).

Presentation of self is the theoretical framework that employs that individuals gain a sense of self identity with how they present themselves and that is either affirmed or denied in how others react to their presentation (Goffman 1959). In addition to measuring the others' reaction to an individual, the individual gains a sense of the other as well (Goffman 1959). Upon a first meeting two individuals should have no preconceived notions about the other until the meeting has actually taken place. It is in these moments that the individual can decide how to treat the individual regarding meetings in the future. For African American women, stereotypes and assumptions are already working against them before the first meeting. Combine this with having natural hair and upon the first meeting with another individual, according to mainstream society, the character of the African American women has already been decided for her. Goffman (1959:27) also discusses "fronts", which is an established role that the individual may feel compelled upon to assume. African American women feel compelled to put on the front of the permed, straightened hair so as to set aside the assumption that might be given that she is lazy, poor, etc. if she decided to show her natural hair upon the first meeting.

Indeed even African American women state this as a reason for perming their hair. Olive, a participant in Bellinger's (2007) study stated that hair says how well she takes care of herself. "I am willing to spend this much on my hair. Who knows how much I will spend on other things" (Bellinger 2007:70). Without even realizing it Olive has put up the front in order to give herself more of a level playing field for the first meeting.

Presentation of the self also helps the individual to mold a sense of identity about them. Richard Videbeck conducted a study testing whether others' reactions affected the individuals'

self-conception (Manis 1967). One of Videbeck's hypotheses was that if the other responded positively to the individual's actions, the individual would change his self-rating accordingly and if the other responded disapprovingly, the individual would adjust his self-concept to a point lower than it was originally (Manis 1967). This adjustment of self-conception explains the situation surrounding the notion of "good" and "bad" hair. Presentation of self is the process through which one gains an idea about their self-identity and conception. If the individual is constantly met with disapproval from the other, the individual will begin to think that the specific quality—hair—that they possess is negative and view themselves accordingly. To avoid this negative trait, many African American women feel it is necessary to forego their natural hair. Videbeck found that positive reactions simply reinforced the ideas that the individuals' had about themselves already but negative reactions lead to negative conceptions of the self (Manis 1967). The participants consisted of a group of students who received excellent reading marks in their class. Videbeck's study was over the course of an afternoon and despite all of the participants' excellent reading abilities; when scored that they read badly repeatedly throughout the day, at the end of the day the participants truly believed they were bad readers (Manis 1967). All of the respondents self-rated themselves highly before the experiment and in fact all of the participants had received high marks for their reading abilities which was why they were chosen for the study (Manis 1967). This is the perfect example of how over generations of an ideology, African American women can truly believe that natural hair is synonymous with bad hair and the only good hair is long and straight.

Seeing that appearance, others perceptions of one's appearance, and ideology all contribute to creating one's self identity, one has to raise light as to why African American

women still feel as if they have to prove their worth of beauty in present day. The current study seeks to understand the struggle of African American women and their hair today. More specifically the current study seeks to understand natural hair and reclaiming a positive light of acceptance and of natural appearance. The study will give light to what it is to be natural in present day and call upon the experiences of the Black woman on her journey with her hair and her past.

## **METHODS**

In order to gain a better understanding of the African American woman and her natural hair, a series of open ended interviews were conducted. The interview consisted of thirteen questions with follow up questions for more information. Although there were varied questions, three categories emerged from the questions: the time frame involving their natural hair, reactions of persons involved, and an overall conviction towards their natural hair and all that entails being natural. During the interviews it was apparent that ultimately deciding to transition to natural hair was the most difficult part of the entire experience. Moreover, five general themes were made clear about the feelings, experiences, and expectations involved with going natural.

### Recruitment

The participants for the research study consisted of women who had natural hair as defined by the African American community. Not all of the women were of complete African American descent but if they possessed the specific hair type they still qualified to be in the study. The women were either students at the University of Central Florida or lived in the surrounding community. All of the participants were either attending college or had received higher education degrees.

The recruitment strategies included a varied number of techniques. First I contacted some people who I knew were natural and they agreed to do the interview. Before they agreed upon a meeting time I would either e-mail or text message the participant to ensure that they were still available to do the interview. After each interview I would ask the participant to recommend someone who they knew would be interested in the study. I gave my contact information to the

participant who passed it along to their recommendation and if the recommended person wanted to proceed I received either a text message, e-mail, or message on a social networking website. I would respond to their interest by sending them a pre-written prompt of the details of the study and contact information. From there, we agreed upon a meeting time and place. Using this snowball sample of recommendations allowed for a diverse group of participants because it allowed me to interview people with whom I did not have a rapport. When the recommendations were not coming back to me as fast as I had anticipated I relied on a social networking website to help get participants. I placed a post similar to the content of the e-mail and received interests through the website as well. Nine of the ten interviews conducted were over the phone as meeting times and schedules often clashed. The tenth interview was completed face to face.

### Respondents

All of the respondents were female as the purpose of the research is to get the perspective of the female and her experiences with wearing her hair in its natural state. Six participants had already transitioned to their natural hair, meaning that before the transitioning process they had a perm or relaxer in their hair. One participant had been natural all of her life, one participant was still in the transitioning process and one participant had been natural for most of her life, switched to perm, and then decided to transition and go natural again. All of the participants were at least eighteen years of age, volunteered, and gave their consent to be a part of the study. Of the participants who had transitioned to be natural, most had done so within the past two to three years so this experience was still very new to them as the texture of the hair can change as it gets longer. Within the transition to go natural there are two ways to do it. The first way is

“transitioning” and involves working with the two textures of natural and permed hair. The second is to do the “big chop”, or “the BC,” and involves cutting off all the relaxed ends of the hair. In this situation, women are often left with very short hair because of the tendency of shrinkage in natural hair.

Some respondents noted that their race was African American while others stated African American and added a heritage, such as Caribbean. One respondent was biracial, being half Black and half White. Another respondent noted that religion had played a role in her decision to become natural.

#### Data Collection

After receiving permission from the Institutional Review Board at the University of Central Florida, I began conducting interviews with participants. Because most of the interviews were done over the phone I read them the consent form; for the face to face interview the participant read the form herself. Once I established consent and their names, I began recording the interview with a digital voice recorder. I took a few observational notes during each participant’s interviews in addition to the recording. I did not record the participants’ name because I intend to change all participant personal information upon publication of the study. The questions were open ended and allowed for variation. The participants were asked about their natural hair, their self-perception, and how society has responded to their decision to wear their natural hair. For the three separate participants who did not have the traditional process of transitioning to natural hair the questions were modified. I established a laid back environment to engage as much personal experience from the participants as possible. After completion of the

first interview I added a few questions that were not included in the list to the Institutional Review Board but I kept the questions in the rest of the interviews because it helped to further understand the process of being natural. The average interview lasted around ten to twenty minutes but there were several that went above that time and the longest interview was forty minutes. The interviews were later transcribed into documents using Express Scribe, a program that slows down voice recordings for easier transcription. The questions used in the interview can be found in the appendix.

### Human Subjects and the IRB

Each participant had the opportunity to participate or decline their involvement in the study. All respondents were made aware of the goal of the research which is to understand the struggle of the African American woman with her natural hair and regaining a positive light of acceptance and natural appearance. Every participant either saw or was read in full the explanation of research and gave their consent. Consent was given by the participants' permission to begin the study after they understood and comprehended what was being asked of them. I asked their names before the interview which I kept track of with the rest of my research. I am the only person who knows the participants' true identity, which will be changed amongst the completion of this study. The transcriptions of the interviews are in a place known only to me as well as the voice recordings. Upon completion of the findings and discussion sections, the voice recordings will be discarded. Several of the participants noted that they would like to see the research upon completion.

## Analysis

I approached the analysis of the written transcriptions for themes with a symbolic interactionist perspective. Symbolic interaction deals with the way individuals interpret the society around them. This seemed fitting given the content of the interviews was about changing the way society sees them and the way they fit into society. It is clear in the transcriptions that women with natural hair are burdened by the hegemony and their journey accepting and adjusting to it has a great deal to do with their actions, interactions, and reactions within society.

I read through each transcript multiple times and employed qualitative coding to establish themes and see what participants seemed to talk about most and agree. Five themes emerged from this process: the amount of time it took to go natural, an initial personal reaction, the reaction of family and friends, a gendered reaction, and the establishment of natural hair as its own complex realm. It was also apparent that each participant barely remembers her hair before she received a perm in her youth. In the African American community it is common practice to begin perming a young girl's hair when she is five or six, as was the case with most participants. There was a connection with regard to this practice, with their desire to go natural in the present day. Each participant was asked if they had anything further to state about the subject upon completion of the interview and most stated that they wished society was more accepting of different hairstyles as there would not be so much pressure from such an early age to have straight hair.

### Reflexive Statement

I became interested in this research after witnessing my mother go back and forth for months about her decision to stop putting a relaxer in her hair. I was inspired by her to do the same thing a few months later. After some time, women in my extended family started showing interest in being natural as well. I noticed that there were so many questions, anxieties and fears associated with the term “going natural.” I recall being so adamant about never going natural because I would not be accepted socially, professionally, but mostly by myself. After witnessing the same feeling in others around me I was inspired to learn more about the history of natural African American hair in America and also the importance of hair as a symbol in society.

My lessons as a sociology student taught me that there is significance in symbols like hair and language; these things that invoke so much feeling have a history behind them and I felt that I needed to shed some light on the subject to understand all the negativity associated with having natural hair. Beginning the interview process of the study I realized that some of my questions were posed in a way that evoked a certain kind of answer. After interviewing began, I adjusted my questions because while there is a lot of negativity associated with natural hair there is also some positivity and the views of the women who experienced those positives are just as important to the understanding of the overall realm of being natural. I had to learn to set aside my personal experience with being natural and let the participant guide the interview to where her story emerged. All the same, it was very easy to connect with all my participants during the interviews because the experiences that naturals go through are so unique in their nature that

when you see other women with natural hair there is an instant connection and it is almost as if you have received confirmation that the decision to go natural was indeed an excellent choice.

There was a lot of laughter in every interview, mostly nervous laughter that was connected with a story of a bad experience but also good laughter too, that was in association with understanding from what the other was referencing. Most participants expressed extreme concern for the next generation of young Black women believing that they will not be accepted unless they perm their hair. The worry came from a place of sympathy but also worry for their health and view of themselves.

Despite the time constrictions of a single semester, I have enjoyed the process of interviewing each participant and taking what each says and applying a sociological perspective. For a long time I kept thinking that this research would not advance the study of sociology because it is about hair. With the help of my thesis chair and what I have learned from applying the symbolic interactionist approach, I know realize that it is because hair is a symbol that it is important to study. It is this reason that this study is advancing the realm of sociology; by adding to it the importance that hair plays, but also the importance of accepting different cultures, styles, and people because ultimately difference and some people's aversion to difference is the driving force that sparks conflict in a society.

## FINDINGS

This study gives light to the personal experiences of women with natural African American hair and focuses on five general themes. First, I will address the timeline involving going natural which includes the transitioning process and discovery of what it is to be natural. Next I will note the respondents' personal reactions when they made the shift from being in a transitory period to being fully natural. Then I will document the reactions of the respondents' friends and family members. It is important to note the reaction of others close to the respondents to see how this affected the respondent and if they adjusted their situation based on others view of themselves. After that I will discuss a gendered reaction which deals with reactions from other men and women in the African American community; the reactions of these did not necessarily have to generate from people who the respondent knew. Lastly I will discuss the establishment of natural African American hair existing in its own complex realm as well as there being unique experiences which only members coming into the group or already in the group can recognize or identify.

### The Timeline of Going Natural

Women with natural African American hair describe difficulty in going natural and a worry that they will not be fully accepted upon going natural. There was often a time frame of months before the women decided to be fully natural. What is clear in the data is that there is hesitation at first and that hesitation stems from how they think they will be viewed differently in society and how society will categorize them with negative traits.

### *Being Natural is a Thing?*

The women express concern from the point they learned what going natural is and what it means for them. There are many things to consider but while the timeline involves a matter of months, some women are clearly excited to begin their transitory process. For example Alison, expressed concern for what being natural entails but also excitement to transition.

When it was first presented to me it was like—I guess a little doubt --like “Can I actually do this? Am I actually going to do this?” uh “How am I going to”—um—“How am I going to actually be able to wear my hair or style my hair if I have to go to work or interviews or jobs”—uuh “or anything.” So those ideals came to me in the time that you have to put in with doing-- with—um with natural hair. Even when I had permed hair—I— it was still a time with washing and perm—I mean washing and blow drying and straightening. It’s still a time but it’s like a wrap. You do your quick wrap...and that was it. But natural hair it was a time—you know the time is more longer and you have to make sure you style it at night so that in the morning it looks—a – a different way and you have to keep doing that same process. So it was like “Am I ready?”—you have to have a real like mindset. If you’re ready to, um you know go through the whole transition—the whole natural thing was putting in the time for natural hair. So when that was presented to me I had my mind made up. I was—you know I was already --and like I made the transition process longer and I was hoping to go even longer before I actually cut it off but because of, um some damaged hair I had to go ahead and cut it off before I

had damaged the hair that was already growing—trying to grow out. So, um that's my—  
oh in a roundabout way....

Another participant, Kim responded apprehensively,

I was hesitant but I was-- like I embraced the idea but I was still hesitant because it's just  
like-- I didn't know how I would look with just you know—with an afro and hair—like  
not--you know, short hair pretty much. And I just-- like I didn't know with what could I  
do with it, could I do anything with it, whatever, stuff like that.

Michelle, who is still transitioning, expressed concern with regards towards her career and  
explained that is where her hesitation stemmed from.

Oh um I just saw a lot of women walking around with their hair like that but um—and  
then I had a friend, she had her hair natural for like two years but, um she said at her  
workplace people kept, um asking her to straighten her hair back because they liked it  
the way that it was before so that's one of the reasons why I would keep going back and  
forth where I'm like, you know, once I graduate I'll be in the workforce and how will  
people perceive me during interviews?

These data show the qualms involved with making the decision to go natural but there is also  
data that showed a lengthy time line before the women become fully natural. The women express  
wanting to be assured about their decision to go natural. They also express the difficulty with  
transitioning and their worries about having very short hair.

*I'm Going to go Natural...One Day*

One respondent, Jenny, expressed somewhat of a timeline and explained how she found herself veering towards having natural hair.

Umm really—its—I was really really tired of it. My last perm—okay I should say my last perm was June of 2004. But then umm I knew...that I wanted to and then I started getting braids like you know extensions? And then I just kept doing it. So eventually, I just transitioned into it naturally. But it took maybe about—from my last perm it took—I, I knew it my last perm that I was done. I didn't want it anymore.

Christine expressed surety of self and explained that it was simply a matter of not wanting to let go of her length that took her so long to transition.

9 months which is my transitioning period. I didn't want to let go of my hair I didn't want to let go of the length, um but I'm really glad that I did.

Valerie responded to the question of how long it took her to go natural with questioning would it be a practical lifestyle.

Valerie: Um, I think...I decided that I wanted to go natural around March (counting) so like 7 months before I actually went natural...

Interviewer: And why do you think, um it took that amount of time?

Valerie: Because I wanted to do research on it before I actually, um went natural.

Ashley described how she just did not want to have considerably short hair.

Um—well I stopped my relaxer my senior year around prom time. And then I officially cut off—cut off all my relaxed hair, um the summer of 2008. So about 2, 3 months after I stopped getting relaxers was when I officially cut off—every—all my –uh—natural—my PERMED hair off.

When probed why it took that amount of time Ashley responded:

Uhh. Hmm. No specific amount of time. I wanted to allow my natural hair to grow out a little bit more. I didn't want to just like shave my head bald or anything. So I wanted to give my natural hair time to grow out before I cut off the relaxed hair.

Another participant, Michelle is still in the transition process and her indecision was stemmed from fear of how others would react.

Um I've thought about it a lot for the past two years but I've kind of been, um undecided just because, you know I don't want to get strange stares or, you know I don't want to feel uncomfortable.

Further probing of the time frame reveals a very real concern for being accepted in society.

Well because society is—I think—they only want to see hair a certain way and I think media to African American women has bought into that theory of your hair should be strait and, um and I struggle with that so even though I've been wearing my hair natural [transitioning], um I'm very tempted to relax it.

One respondent, Donna, had a unique situation amongst the already unique situation of being natural. As a young child she did not receive perms or relaxers and decided to put a perm in her

hair at age fifteen. She discussed how long it took her after putting the perm in, that she decided she wanted to go back to being natural:

Yeah for me I feel like it was pretty immediate probably like when [I] permed it. I went and had it done professionally and the person who permed it for me actually straightened it out and did it professionally, it was a birthday present. And the first time I had to go home and wash my hair and saw what it looked like when it was wet and dry again, I decided at that point that I didn't like it, it was stingy and it just wasn't what I thought—like I thought that it was going to be straight and shiny all the time.

It is apparent that the women have concerns with regard to uncertainty about their hair and just making sure that they are making the right decisions for themselves.

#### Initial Personal Reaction

Upon shifting into being fully natural there is expected to be a difference in the way one takes care of their hair but also with regards to how one feels about themselves. I asked the women how they reacted when they either decided to do the big chop or cut off the remaining permed ends. The big chop is a term used to describe cutting off all the relaxed ends of one's permed hair, usually leaving an individual with very short hair. The other, cutting off the remainder of the relaxed ends, is similar but implies that there was a transitory period of more than about six months so the hair can be allowed to grow to a suitable length.

*Wait, What Did I Just Do?*

When these women decided to go natural there was what was often described as a bittersweet feeling. There were bouts of panic and some regret but most women eventually loved their decision.

Ashley described the range of emotions she experienced

Hmm. Um—(laughs). I was a little embarrassed to go out (laughs). Because it was about maybe two or three inches long and um—I was in a dorm so I had roommates, one was Hispanic and one was um Caucasian so—we were all kind of in shock like “What did you do to your hair!” So it was different because at that time there weren’t as many girls who were natural on campus so it kind of stood out more. But after that evening when I washed it and –you know—put product in it and everything, I loved it. I loved the length that it was...

Alison expressed a bittersweet feeling and a concern for how she was actually going to wear her hair from that point.

Okay umm. When I first saw—looked in the mirror after my BC [short for big chop] I was like “Oh my gosh for real!” Because I never--I never ever cut my hair so I never had short hair before. And so for it to chop--and it was short and I was expecting—I was wanting –from me transitioning I knew how my curl pattern was but I was wishing and hoping that from seeing um –one of my friends natural hair is like big and curly and that’s what I was hoping for but when I saw my, um own natural hair it was like—it was

like...bittersweet probably more to say. It was like “Oh my god!” like “How am I going to pull this off!” Its short and then-- like my hair—from my natural hair it like-- I realized that’s it’s still two different textures. Like in the front it’s all soft and not as curled and coarse as it should be and in the back its like that whole natural --and it’s not—it’s not nappy but its more coarse and the curls are more tighter than the front so it –like-- I still to deal with the two diff textures but it’s more easy...so it’s like just a bitter sweet happy, bitter sweet unsure feeling. But getting compliments from random people and other people and from friends and family, it was uh—it made the process, um more easier.

Jenny recalled a reaction of confusion about mainly not knowing what to do with her hair.

Ummmm. I didn’t really—know—I didn’t really...okay you know how some people do the big chop and all that. I didn’t go through that because I just took out the braid put it in there... Took out. Put In. And I did that for like a year so my hair had already grown—by the time—by—by-about a year my hair had already grown a good amount and the permed ends had already been clipped off. So each time I took them out I’d wash it and clip off a little bit more of the perm. And my first reaction? Ehhhhh. I didn’t know what to do with it (laughs).

When prompted about why she reacted such a way she described the two different textures of the hair she had and the hair she now possessed.

Umm—because—it’s funny I was so used to my straight hair with the perm and to have the curly hair...to have the curly hair and it doesn’t lay the same way as the perm. You know. A little bit thicker than the perm. Um and I also think I didn’t—I didn’t know what

products to use. I didn't research—you know as much as there is now, there wasn't that much 8 years ago. And I wasn't well prepared for it. I just figured I'd just keep putting braids in my hair—and then—you know—throughout the perm.

Christine showed shock at first but then quickly adjusted:

Um my initial reaction was “Oh my gosh I have no more hair on my head!” Um and I was quite in shock for, not long—maybe a few hours. I kept feeling my shoulders thinking that hair would be there and it wasn't and I would keep looking in the mirror—I—for like the whole day that I did the BC just because I was in so much shock. And um—and then the next day I went from feeling—you know a little sad and depressed about me cutting it off to being freeing! Like I felt so freeing and it was a great feeling—something that I can't explain um when you cut your hair off and you—you get used to it like “Yeah this is me and I'm proud of who I am.”

#### *Not too Shabby at All*

While some women were hesitant in their reactions others showed how they really loved their new hair. Joan stated simply that she liked it, followed by a laugh. Another respondent, Valerie stated that she was excited because she no longer had to deal with the two clashing textures of permed and natural hair.

Um I was excited because dealing with different textures was really difficult so I was—it was—I was washing my hair and my straight hair started getting detangled so I just –um, that day I decided to just cut it off. So I was excited.

Kim also expressed a more light hearted reaction:

Wow. (laughs) like I was just, you know.. I was like “Oh welp! I have no choice but to rock it!” so--you know I think that hardest part was actually just taking the scissors and cutting it.

No matter the type of reaction the women portrayed it was clear that they were ready to go through with their decision and no one wanted to decide to get a weave or return to perming their hair.

#### Reactions of Family and Friends

It is imperative to include reactions of loved ones and persons close to the respondents because at the base of symbolic interactionist perspective is the interactions between different people. People constantly mold and shape how they interpret the society around them and accordingly adjust to how they think society interprets them. It is important that the research notes any change in feeling the respondent had in response to the reactions of others close to them.

#### *Chile, You Did What?*

Some women stated that their family was shocked and angered by their decision to be natural. Hair is already a symbol of status in mainstream society but for a very long while in the African American community, more value was placed on hair than in the mainstream society because it was one of the things that African Americans had guaranteed control of in their lives and therefore much more value was placed on it. This is not so prevalent in newer generations

except in areas of poverty, and with older generations hair still holds this place value. Therefore, when some of these young women went to their extended family, many older members were extremely offended because of the high status value they placed on hair. Ashley recalled her family being shocked and her mom being unsupportive.

Um. Its—well—initially. Um. They were kind of like “Oh okay,” but then as my natural hair started growing out more—the texture of my natural hair is not your typical—not your typical but—I feel like most African American women who want to go natural-- like they want to go natural because they see, uh different product lines in commercials of women who are natural with like this curly, springy curl in their hair and my texture does not do that; some parts have that texture, others are more coarse. So my family’s initial reaction was—they kept on complaining about, um—there’s this thing called shrinkage where your text—like—African American hair absorbs moisture so it shrinks. You can never really see its full potential of the length of it because it—you know the moisture in the atmosphere and if you take a hot shower your hair will shrink. So every time my family would come around it would be in its shrunken state so they thought that I kept cutting it and they just thought that-- you know “Why aren’t you letting it grow out?” And my mom actually made comments about it looking unkempt and “Why don’t you comb it; why don’t you do this, why don’t you do that to it.” Um—referring to hairstyles but –you know—when it’s in its shrunken state it kind of has a mind of its own and it does what it wants to do. So my family’s comments were more so –um—you know— “You should do something to it; you have it just shrunken, you should braid it, twist it,” –

you know—but surprisingly my father was more supportive than my mother so that was kind of interesting.

I thought it was interesting the way her mom responded so I then asked Ashley if she thought her mom was upset simply because she did the big chop and her hair was short or more so of her being natural, or a little bit of both.

You know I think it was more so—hmm that’s a good question. (pause) I think that—you know—most Black women when they--when they go natural they think their hair is going to look a certain way and nine times out of ten it doesn’t really grow out the way they want it to. So I think my mom thought that –you know my hair should have been maybe a looser curl or you know have more definition to it or something but in its natural state it just doesn’t do that. So I think she was more umm—I don’t want to say ignorant—well yeah because, I think she’s more ignorant to the fact that all natural hair does its own thing. Like all of African American women have different textures and a lot of us are mixed with different things culturally so we have multiple textures in our head. So I think she was more focused on the fact that um the texture was more coarse and—and I guess in her personal opinion it looked unkempt. I don’t think she was like concerned about me going natural because she was saying –you know it’s more healthier for you, it’s cheaper, you don’t have to get relaxers every month, and it’s better on your scalp and your health and things like that. She agreed with that aspect of it but the actual look of my hair I think is what turned her off.

Christine recalled her mother being very upset with her:

Oh goodness gracious! My mother did not talk to me for about four days and that's really long because I talk to her every day, twice a day. And for her to go four days without speaking to me was really tough, she didn't like the idea at all. Um, she was out of state so I had to tell her over the phone and I sent her pictures and she was beyond upset. Um, everyone else was pretty supportive, um regards to my family. My friends didn't want me to do the BC. Um, some of them didn't want me and some of them supported me, some of them—the ones that didn't want me to do it were like “Oh you're going to look different, you're going to look bald headed,” and “Oh you're just not going to be pretty anymore!” and then—you know I had—you know some friends who were like “Do it, do it , do it!”

When asked why her mom reacted so negatively she responded:

Because she believes that your hair is your beauty and she knew how long it used to be. And she—after—she would constantly remind me like “Oh [Christine] your hair used to be so long and now you just cut it off, and you look like a boy,” and you know—she just—uh—you know, you know.

Alison experienced two completely different reactions from both sides of her family. Here is an account of a reaction of shock and anger.

...But when I went to go and see my other grandmother—my um paternal grandmother she... “Oh my gosh what you gon' do with that nappy hair!” And it's like I was kind of turned off, like kind of offended by—but I don't know —she still was like “It's cute but it's nappy,” I don't know she was giving me a mixed kind of vibe so.

Lauren, a respondent who has been natural all her life described the somewhat negative reaction of family members and others when her mom decided she was not going to put a perm in her hair when she was younger.

Um, I did sometime mainly from people who did my hair, like my hair dressers and because it was hard to do my hair—hard to straighten natural hair. But growing up almost till two years ago, I've constantly straightened my hair or I'd have it in, um like a braided style or twist. So I never really wore my hair out natural it was just always straight. And so a lot of times my classmates wouldn't even realize that I had natural hair. They just thought I had good hair and when I would tell them that I don't have a perm they would be kind of shocked. Like "Whoa, you don't have a perm?" and some of them would be like "Girl you need to get a perm!" Because, you know my hair would grow back so fast so it was nothing that was too crazy but I think everybody accepted me pretty well.

It is important to note that because of the stigma of having natural hair, more so in the 90s than today that she felt compelled to keep her hair straightened even though it was not permed.

Donna, who had been natural until she permed at age fifteen, described her family's reaction when she decided to be natural again.

It was a bit of an argument—most of my life—especially my hair quote, unquote got "nappy" around twelve. My aunt and cousins wanted me to perm my hair. My mom always kind of respected that I was younger and it should be my decision so she waited until I was old enough to make that decision myself. And she was a little disappointed and then she saw how pretty and long it was and she was fine so when I actually turned

around the next year and decided to go natural again, I think everyone kind of freaked out about it. Um, in my family I'm the only with natural—well I have a younger cousin now—but up until that point I was the only one in the family with natural hair or decided to go natural so everyone was-- was against it and they had always heard that your hair is going to fall out so they were really afraid for me.

*Okay, This is Okay*

While some people met with angered reactions other respondents had a positive experience when telling their families of their decision to be natural. Alison, a respondent who had different reactions from both sides of her family recalled a positive reaction.

Um, it really—I can tell you two family sides. My um—ma-maternal family was like very, like happy kind of like all—my mom never had a perm and my grandmother like...my mom and grandmother, um pressed hair—they straightened their hair with a hot comb so for them it was like you know it's a good feeling, its good. They were still like “Oh my god I can't believe you cut you hair.” But it was still—they liked it. They wanted to run a comb through my hair but they didn't say it was ugly or anything. I didn't get any bad feelings from them.

Jenny also noted that her mother was very accepting:

My family—my mom—which was its really just my mom—it's just my mom and me. So she had already been natural about a year and a half before I went. So she was welcoming

of it. But other family members...they didn't really say anything. They're not really around me so.

Kim described a very positive experience and that a trend had started in her family:

My family was very acceptable, um I had a cousin that went natural when I was in middle school and she had very long hair and everyone was like "Why did you cut it?" But, you know after her and after me that's when, like the revolution in my family started, like I have aunts and my grandmothers that are natural and everybody's going natural now so.

Joan described a reaction of inquisitiveness.

I mean they didn't treat me any different, they were just curious as to why-- like why I did it. But it's just curious. It wasn't like a negative reaction so.

While these women had more supportive family there were still slight concerns, as it is no mistake that their loved one is to face certain challenges along the way having made the decision to be natural.

### *Go Ahead Girl, but Are You Sure?*

A lot of the women were met with mixed reactions from their friends. Most friends were supportive but stated that they had concerns while other friends were genuinely happy for the respondents. Alison described the mixed reactions from her friends.

Most of my friends (laughs) are like—I have friends that are natural and then I have friends that still are permed or still wear weave. So the ones that are natural, you know

they're more like—to give compliments they are more to like “Oh I like it, you should do this with you hair. You should do that.” My friends that, you know wear—have perms or wear weaves it was more of “Oh its cute okay. You really did it.” You know, it's like—I don't know—it was like they liked it but not as—I felt they liked it and it was like—more of like “Oh you really went through with it. I never-- I really didn't think you was going to actually cut your hair. I—I didn't think you was going to actually,” um “do it but you did it.” They said they liked it and they gave some compliments about it but it's still that—two different sides –like you can tell --what should I say—the vibe or um, the way they reacted by –whether they had the natural hair or not.

Valerie discussed how her friends came to like her hair:

Um, I think at first people were skeptical because the fact that a lot of people around me were going natural and so they thought it was more so of a fad...but it um—I think that when they saw that I was doing styles and other things with my hair they started to like it.

Jenny stated how her friends also grew to like her hair.

Umm. A lot of my friends—I knew a lot of friends that had already started going natural. And the rest of them were a bit, uh, you know apprehensive about it. Some weren't very positive. But now they've changed (laughs) And a lot of them are thinking about doing it themselves.

The friends of the respondents express the same concern as the accepting family members in the sense that they are worried for their friend and what she will face. After the respondent had

demonstrated the true nature of the natural hair as opposed to the stereotypes and false things they were told would happen, the friends started to come around to like the hair and some are even pursuing becoming natural themselves.

### *This Changes Things*

Still some women were affected by the reactions of their family and friends and they changed how they saw themselves. There was a varied reaction of changes, some were positive, some were negative. Some were not affected at all by others reactions. Ashley recalled how her mother's unaccepting ways had an effect on how she viewed herself. She found herself trying to impress her mom and doing extra things so she could feel pretty and accepted.

I would say yes and no. I say yes because when my mom like—every time I would go home to visit umm I would specifically try to do some sort of style with it. Whether it be a twist out where you twist your hair like in two strand twist or you know—some—a braid out—something so that she would think of it as being styled. And I felt that—you know—no matter what type of style I would use or do, every time she saw me it was like “Oh you know I can take you to get your hair done. I know of a natural salon” It would be something and I'd be like “Oh but I did it...it's done!” But I felt like my styles were never to her standard or her liking so every time I went home it was a constant struggle because she was always telling me “It doesn't look” –like—“Right,” like she would literally say that. And I think it definitely took a toll on um my confidence (clears throat) and self-esteem because I was kind of like-you know—it's your mother and most girls you know, they want to have approval from their mothers. So you know it was a decision

that I made to go natural for you know curiosity and...just to try something new and different and really like begin to love how I am naturally and you know—for your mother to be telling you they don't like it it's kind of like “Well you don't like ME then!” You know?

Jenny also expressed a change in her self- perception:

It did. (pause) because as I said I was so used to my hair being long with the perm. My hair was down my shoulders. So I was so used to that and then now to just have curly hair—you know—even when I would stretch it and it would be long when I stretched it! But then you know—curly...shrinks back up. And it took me a while to get used to that but the negativity? It was kind of hard in the beginning, yeah.

*Just Let it Roll off My Back*

Many of the women described that they were not going to let people's reactions affect them negatively. While they did not internalize others' reactions negatively they did modify their self-perception to a more positive one as a way of adjusting to different reactions. Kim described how she affirmed her decision through others reactions.

Um, no—not change just more informed how I begin to saw my—to see myself. Like you know it's just still...this is the right decision to do like I already felt good about it and to see the support and the admiration from everybody else it was just like yeah this was something I needed to do.

Christine stated that she was satisfied with her decision when asked if her new hair changed how she viewed herself:

Not at all. I was happy, I mean although I didn't have the length that they had or it wasn't straight, I was very happy with my hair.

Alison stated that she experienced a general content feeling of having a new style.

No it didn't change how I saw myself. I still felt as myself it's just that now with natural hair. I didn't have like a bad—like bad mood or happy mood.... Now I rock a new—it's a new me it's a new hairstyle. I didn't change anything else.

Valerie noted that she is the one who is going through a change, not anyone else, so she did not let anything negatively affect her.

Not really because um, to me it's just like I'm the one who has to wake up and do my hair in the morning so despite the fact that even if I did—not too many people opposed me going natural but um, I—there were a couple-- but to me it was more so—I—I'm the one who has to do my hair in the morning so essentially it's up to me how I do my hair.

So while these particular women did not let the negative comments affect them in an adverse way, the comments inspired them to view themselves in a more positive way and become more confident and sure of themselves and their decision to become natural.

### Gendered Reactions

Gendered reactions are the reactions of males and females within the African American community. Because of the hegemony, even most people in the African American community believe that straight hair is the only way to wear your hair. To thwart confusion, I use straight hair as defined by the Caucasian broader community. Even Caucasian women with curly hair are accepted by mainstream society although it is still not the preferred look, which is ultimately decided by the dominant hegemony of mass media and the elitist idealistic beauty standard. However, natural African American hair is beyond just curly or wavy and despite what has been done to keep the hair moisturized it is often “unkempt” in appearance, according to the standards of acceptable hair. The hair appears frizzy sometimes or puffy and despite a woman looking very put together, people tend to notice just the hair and assume all sorts of negative things about that woman’s character. It is also imperative to note that women with natural African American hair feel compelled to straighten their hair for a lack of not feeling accepted in the mainstream society. This is very different than when Caucasian or other women with smooth, fine hair perm or dye their hair. While not undermining the fact that every woman feels she has to modify and change herself to feel accepted, the basis of perming natural African American hair lies behind feeling accepted as the Caucasian woman with straight hair. In a roundabout way, basically women with African American natural hair perm their hair in order to be on the same playing field as Caucasian women with seemingly straight hair.

For this reason I have included a question about reactions from African American men and women and what they have said or implied to the respondents about their natural hair. That

being said there are also many people in the African American community who understand and recognize the importance in women wearing their hair the way it grows naturally out of there head. Kim experienced many positive reactions from men and women in the African American community.

I get a lot of positive reactions um, they more so –I know for me at least they we...me and not what I'm necessarily hiding behind or what I should be hiding behind. They see every part of me you know they focus on me so it's just like, you know...positive you know? It's like they don't see them trying to hide behind this thing it's like what you see is what you get kind of thing.

Ashley expressed that she received varying reactions from men and women and different types of men within the African American community.

Um, yea. So the African American women-- like my mom specifically she --you know had the comments about the texture and --you know how it was shrunken and everything and how—you know—in her view it looks unkempt right? But um other women -- like...my African American friends in particular they were like—they would make comments like “Oh you know it looks cute on you but it would never fit me. My head is too this...too that or my hair is too”-- it was always like “Oh it looks good on you but it wouldn't fit me.” But African American men--I feel that distant. Some African American men like they are like your men who are in corporate America or like the business men—they particularly--I feel would have negative feedback most of the time, not all of the time. But you know...African American roots...be into like poetry or like really into

uplifting Black women—they loved it. They always commenting me on it and they like it how it looks--everything. So I—like its equal amount of feedback from—you know—both—well multiple categories of Black men but overall I would say that um Black women were more supportive than Black men were. The ones that I came across.

Jenny recalled other people in the African American community being apprehensive at first but over the years have come to accept it.

Since I've been natural, uh in the beginning, eight years ago, a lot of guys didn't really like it. And now they're turning more towards it...and a lot of girls...um with them having the permed straight hair it was-it was kind of –you know the same thing. I guess-I guess it's changed over time. A lot of people have accepted it more know, it wasn't-it wasn't such a positive thing back then.

Christine noted a significant difference between African American men and women:

Um, wow. I can first start out by saying African American men do not like natural hair. Um, most of them—you know, were like “Oh what happened to you hair?” Like “Uh, nothing! I cut it off,” like “What do you think happened to it?” You know what I mean? And they would just—you know, have these weird looks like “Uhhhhh, aren't you supposed to have straight hair?” You know what I mean? And it's because they're so used to seeing that, they're not used to seeing Black women in their natural state so this is like, foreign to them. But I mean African American women, I've gotten mixed looks. Um, most of the time—you know African American women are very nice and –you know they smile a lot because—you know, they know the struggle and –you know,

they're—they're just like "Oh," you know, "I like—I like your hair!" They're very supportive um, but then you have that twenty five percent that just give you dirty looks. Or like "Ugh you went natural!" (laughs) ""Team creamy crack!"

These women found that men had a very different, negative reaction than African American women did. Once again because of the mainstream society, media, etc., the men think that African American women should have straight hair. Christine also stated that most African Americans are not used to seeing our natural hair. Because mothers perm their children's hair at such a young age it is rare that African Americans even recall what their own natural hair looks like so it is a shock to see women walking around with natural hair. The whole ideal behind women with natural African American hair needs to be adjusted and not considered radical for these women to wear their hair without putting in chemicals that alter the hair follicle.

### The World of African American Hair

One thing that every participant agreed with is that other races seemed not to identify with African American hair as part of the norm. Some women received disconcerting looks from other races as if in disapproval of the respondents' decision to wear their hair in its natural state. Some women expressed other races' naivety with regards towards different hair and lack of respect towards diverse hairstyles.

### *Your Hair is...Different*

The women were asked if they thought other races understood the world of African American hair and its complexity. Every respondent said no.

Michelle made comments about others trying to touch her hair and having to constantly explain.

Um, no I don't think so because um, growing up as a child um, people would always ask me about my hair, ask could they touch it and make comments about um—"Wow I can't believe it so soft!" You know, and I would ask them like "What do you mean?" And they would say "Oh I just thought it was going to be really," um "Coarse and nappy to touch," so. Um, I've heard things like that throughout my lifetime of—uh when they actually go to touch my hair and touch natural hair...so yeah.

Jenny started out on the fence but eventually settled with deciding that others do not understand.

It depends. Like Spanish people, they get it. Some of them. You know the Black Spanish people? They understand it. But uh, no. (laughs) I don't think they see the difficulty--they have difficulty with their own but I don't think they see the main difficulty.

Donna commented how hair means something different in the African American community than it does for the rest of mainstream society.

I don't think they do at all. I mean from what I've seen in my family...I was raised primarily by the Black side of my family. Hair has always been a statement thing, um its always going with the style or else you're just all natural or whatever is going on in the world around us. Like my aunt in the 90s had this really awkward mushroom kind of cut thing (laughs)... it—it's always this huge like status and a lot of other races I don't think they understand that. They always seem to question "Oh well why did you choose to go back natural, why did you perm it in the first place?" Um, a lot of people who have

naturally straight hair just don't understand the concept of why we want it straight at all. Like they're obsessed with the curls, they don't understand how hard it is to take care of the hair.

Ashley stated that it is the fault of the African American community that other races don't accept natural hair. She explains how young girls get perms so early in life and Black people don't even know how their real hair looks so how do they expect others to see it and accept it.

Um. I would say no and I don't feel that they care. Um I say that because um (pause) I (pause) when it comes to weaves and stuff --like all races get them now so that's nothing new, that's nothing out of the norm. But the whole new natural hair was coming back at this point um I don't think that other races really understand it but I don't think that they care to learn about it...it's just kind of like "Ok that's how her hair is okay whatever." You know and...I blame that on you know—I blame that on the African American community. I do. Because I feel that—you know—white—well Caucasian and Hispanic and Asian people, they are not used to seeing our hair in its natural state because I wasn't even used to seeing my own hair in its natural state. So when they see it it's kind of like a shocker because they never seen that before. I had a little boy—I'm a teacher and he was like "Why is your hair like that?" And I'm like "What do you mean?" and "This is how my hair is" and I was trying to think to myself like there's other little African American girls who have like barrettes and stuff but it's-- all --their hair is pressed out—you know it's not in its natural, shrunken state. So these kids—and people have never seen African American women with their natural hair so it probably is confusing to other races but I

don't think that they care um—you know about how our hair functions and you know how if we were going on a job interview—you know --were not going to have silky straight hair. It's going to be –you know—we can do it nicely and neat but it's not going to be silky straight and flowing and blowing in the wind. You know, but I don't think other races understand that just because um your hair is not bone straight doesn't mean it's not styled or it isn't kempt you know?

Kim expressed her opinion on other races' comprehension of African American natural hair.

No. I don't think so at all. They think we're like formally trained and when we do our hair I would say they don't know the actual conflict about—you know they don't fully understand the conflict of our hair at all. Not from my experience.

Valerie seemed hesitant in her response but it is clear that she did not see any understanding from other races.

Um, not so much. Um especially when it comes to dealing with weave or other things that we put in our hair because of the fact that umm—I think their hair is more manageable than ours and um yeah...

Joan stated that other races do not understand the want of women with natural African American hair to wear it the way it grows out of their head.

Um...no I don't think they understand... Um because-- because they have different kind of hair so they wouldn't be able to, I guess relate to it. And they wouldn't be able to understand why exactly we like our hair like this or whatever so.

Christine offered a diverse answer and stated that it depends on if other races are cultured and are willing to try to understand but ultimately stated that other races do not comprehend the struggle.

Um, it depends. Um, if the race, you know are cultured in that aspect of –you know— they—they’re aware that you know—Black weave—they’re aware of weave and you know different things of that nature, um. My –my white peers who have complimented me—they—they’re more cultured and so they know about weave, they know about extensions, they know about afros and –you know? I—I don’t know. I guess my um, response is a little bit bias because they’re aware. But as far as like going to a strange place or strange area, I have gotten weird stares from um, Caucasian people who just look at my afro like “What is that ish on her head?” You know what I mean? And—and that’s just like going to an area that I don’t know, I’m not familiar with. But as far as UCF area and my side of town? Uh, its ok and I’m fine but anywhere else, hmm I don’t think that the culture—other races really understand um, our struggle and what we go through.

Lauren described how other races might try to understand but that they will never fully grasp the negative associations and stereotypes that come along with choosing to wear one’s hair natural.

No I feel they don’t know. At all. I feel they just know it from the surface like what it looks like. Sometimes they know how it feels but they don’t really understand how much work goes into it how much um, different stereotypes are attached with different styles, different ways women do hair. They don’t know how expensive it can be for the different types of product um, and they don’t understand how-- you know-- how much skill it takes to be able to style natural hair and keep it up and keep it healthy and keep it looking, you

know beautiful and interesting and um, it's not just about just waking up out of bed and just putting some—it's like so much more, so much deeper, it's almost like its own culture and I feel like people have just you know...

Lastly, Alison simply stated that other races will not fully grasp the difficulty:

I don't think so. I think they try to ask questions but I don't think they will—they fully understand.

While all the women had varying answers to the rest of the questions, every single respondent answered to the effect that other races do not fully understand the realm of African American hair. When I posed the question I asked it in the broader sense to include other types of African American hair and not just natural hair. Granted within the African American community natural hair is a sub-realm; African American hair as a whole and its meanings are still heavily misunderstood by mainstream society.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study show the significance of natural hair to women in the African American community. While not undermining the importance of appearance with regards to hair for other women, women with natural African American hair feel it is necessary to perm their hair to compete with other women in the labor and social markets. This results in a different standard of appearance for African American women. African American women feel that going natural is a difficult personal decision and a social statement. For example, a Caucasian woman wears her hair in its natural state without these feelings. So women who possess natural African American hair should not be called into question for choosing to grow their hair naturally.

Regarding the timeline of going natural, most women noted that it was a process of months of going back and forth between a decision to wear their natural hair or keep a perm. Such consideration was taken because of fear of how others would perceive them and even how they would perceive themselves. American society has an established norm of how hair should look and there is a scale of hair that is deemed acceptable (associated with positive traits) and unacceptable (associated with negative connotations). Even for the women whose transition time was considered to be relatively short, it still took two to three months to make a decision, which gives some insight to the arduous situation. The fact remains that there is a systemic negativity associated with being natural. Thankfully more people are recognizing the errors of stereotypes and associations in character based upon physical appearance, however there is still work to be done and research to raise awareness.

Women's initial personal reaction to their hair was mentioned as a theme because of their new appearance and presentation of self. Some women noted how they were unsure of how they would style their hair, and they became self-conscious of negative perceptions. All the same, these very women were the ones who came to a position that they loved their hair and they were going to keep it natural. Seeing their new hair made them view themselves in a different light because for most, it was their first time ever seeing and working with their natural hair. They also expressed a desire to learn about all the styles they can do in addition to learning and growing with their hair.

The reactions of the respondents' friends and families alluded to how the process of presentation of self and self-perception works. As well as allowing the individual to gain a sense of their selves, presentation of self allows the individual to gain a sense of the other, and what he or she may be expecting of the individual. When family members of respondents reacted in a negative way, some women viewed themselves and their decision to go natural as a mistake. It is one thing for mainstream society to not accept the hair you are born with but it is another kind of feeling when the very group from which you hail would view your (and their) hair as untamed and irresponsible. These women were surrounded with feelings of doubt and negative self-perception based on the ways that other saw these negative traits.

There were also women who received negative comments but let those comments fuel their affirmation that they made the right decision. One respondent recalled that she was the one who would have to deal with her hair and she knows her character so she would not let others' negative comments bother her. Other women used the negative comments as fuel for their

decision and projected an even more positive view of themselves because they viewed themselves as special and unique. The positive comments received by the respondents also affected their presentation of self and willed it to a place of confidence and acceptance because of their bold decision and the approval of others vindicated their choice even more. Although I still call to question, and urge others to question, why the decision for a woman to wear her natural hair is considered bold.

The section regarding reactions of men and women within the African American community also proved interesting because one would assume that if the mainstream society holds different value than the smaller group then the smaller group would hold a corresponding meaning. However, there are many within the African American community who would disagree with the notion that women should wear their natural African American hair. Since it is the mainstream society that sets the ideals, those ideals are absorbed within the smaller groups as well and then it is internalized that they have to fit the status quo. The notion of wearing your hair natural is seen as defiant within the mainstream African American community as well and it is still not widely accepted. The respondents experienced various reactions from other women in the African American community who were not natural and from African American men. As with any difference that occurs between or amongst groups in society, the education and tolerance of a pattern of behavior or stigma needs to be addressed so the society can grow, and so the individual can feel she or he is accepted by that society.

The last motif was that women possessing natural hair have become part of their own complex world or that everything surrounding the decision to go and be natural is very complex

in its execution and definition. The women in this community recognize that their hair is not taken by all or accepted as the norm. They also recognize that other cultures do not fully understand and whereas some would want to understand, they might not ever fully gain a complete understanding of the extent of struggle these women go through during the whole process of transitioning and well into being natural. These women would also state that they do not view themselves as the victim but rather view ignorant or intolerant people as the victim because of the extent of their tolerance or lack thereof. These women would not undermine the struggle of all women to meet certain standards of beauty but urge for others to understand that whereas women with fine, curvy, wavy, or hair that is not similar to that of natural African American hair start out on the same playing field, women with natural African American hair do not. They would have others understand that women in the African American community feel they need to perm their hair to compete with women with hair that is fine in nature. The basis for going natural besides personal ones is to be able to wear their hair how it occurs in its natural state without it being called into question. The respondents urge others to comprehend the extent of the costs, health issues, and social pressures the mainstream society is manifesting with a demand for straight, “normal” hair.

The learning experience that the African American community and the larger mainstream society can take away from this study is that transitioning to natural hair is a complicated process. There is initial apprehension, positive and negative feelings and feedback, the women have to deal with all sorts of reactions and interactions with those closest to her and those of strangers and the subsequent adjustments of self-conception that follows. The simple fact that the least amount of time to transition amounted to two months entails that there is much more

involved socially and mentally than just getting a simple haircut. These decisions the women made affected their self-esteem and presentation of self; the qualms and indecisiveness stemmed from pressures from the broader society and a yearning for acceptance within the society.

Yet not every journey was negative in nature, for example, Alison experienced a more positive arch while Joan's journey was more middle of the road, not having too many negative experiences while not being praised for her decision either. Ashley, however, did have a more negative experience, but it is important to note that no matter what their experiences each respondent went through, everyone felt good about their decision to be natural.

So what does this mean for women with natural African American hair? This study establishes that there is a process that these women have to go through but this study also recognizes that this process should not be necessary for these women to have to experience. Everything that goes into the decision of deciding to transition, from how it will affect their career, to presentation of self, to receiving unnerving stares; this is the behavior that should change. Throughout history, change is an element that does not happen easily or quickly but it does happen and knowledge and awareness such as this study are the tools to help implement its cause.

### Limitations

One limitation of this study was the time frame of a single semester. Interviews do take time to plan, record, and transcribe; combined with that as an undergraduate there are more academic commitments than just thesis writing. If I had a less restricted time frame there could have been room for more interviews to make for more diverse findings. Another shortcoming

was that while there were three participants who had different stories than the rest, I would like to have included more people who were in the transition stage, biracial, or had always been natural. The experiences of these women would add to the collective of the majority of women who are natural by the traditional means.

Another possible limitation is that all the interviews were not completed face to face. This format would allow for me to note any facial expressions and possibly make it easier to note innuendos to be considered in analysis. This is also the first qualitative study that I have completed so there was a learning curve which is a limitation because there were many steps taken to narrow the focus of the findings when I got to the part of attempting to establish themes.

There is also a limitation with regards to location because the University of Central Florida and surrounding community is mostly an urban, forward thinking place. Even some of the women noted this in their interviews and that if they were to go to a different part of Florida there would be a much more negative response. Likewise in other parts of the country there would also be more varied responses to natural hair so there is a limitation present because there is only one geographic area being studied.

### Implications and Future Research

I would like this research to reach a broad community of women with natural African American hair and for this scientific approach to be considered amongst their personal experience. I feel that adding theory behind their feelings will make many women feel that what they are experiencing is not something to be cast off as trivial and has actual effects and

consequences. I would also like for this research to be added to the field so others interested can gain insight to the difficulties and proficiencies that are all a part of being a woman with natural African American hair in today's society.

Future research would include additional participants with more diverse experiences to add to the collective of experiences shared by women with natural African American hair. While these women share the trait of having natural African American hair, the stories do vary; it is important to consider every aspect especially when qualitative measures are used. I would expand the research to focus groups as well to establish a group narrative of experiences.

## **APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

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- What is your Race? Your age?
- Why did you decide to go natural? How long have you been natural?
- How long did it take you before you absolutely decided to go natural? Why do you think it took that amount of time?
- What was your initial reaction to your natural hair?
- How did your family react? Your friends? Did the way they react change how you saw yourself? Why is there negativity?
- How did you react when the idea of going natural was first presented to you? Why do you think that was?
- What reactions do you get from other African Americans? Are there differences between AA women and men? Other races?
- Would you say other races understand our world of hair and its complexity? Why? Why not?
- How do African American women who do not have natural hair react?
- When you see other naturals, what goes through your mind?
- How do you respond if people ask if you went natural as some sort of statement?
- Is the way you wear your hair the result of religious practices?
- How do you feel now that you made the decision to go natural?

**APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVAL LETTER**

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University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research & Commercialization  
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246  
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276  
[www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html](http://www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html)

### Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1  
FWA00000351, IRB00001138**

To: **David A. Gay and Co-PI: Brittney R. Dennis**

Date: **August 28, 2012**

Dear Researcher:

On 8/28/2012, the IRB approved the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review: Exempt Determination  
Project Title: Going Natural: African American Women and Their Hair  
Investigator: David A. Gay  
IRB Number: SBE-12-08601  
Funding Agency:  
Grant Title:  
Research ID: N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewski, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Patria Davis on 08/28/2012 10:03:19 AM EDT

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Patria Davis', written over a faint, larger signature.

IRB Coordinator

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