Handle with Hair: A Qualitative Course-Based Inquiry into How CYC Students Think About the Relationship between Hair, Identity, and Self-Perception

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Abstract

This course-based research study explored CYC students' thinking about the relationship between hair, self-perception, and identity. It focuses on CYC students for two reasons. First, the ability to form meaningful relationships with youth of many different cultural backgrounds and diverse lifestyles is an essential skill of CYC practitioners. Second, CYC students are encouraged to engage in discovery learning aimed at uncovering their unrecognized assumptions, cultural biases, attitudes, assumptions, stereotypes, prejudices, and privileges to ensure respect for the dignity of every person, regardless of their unique characteristics. Data was collected through online interviews and an arts-based activity. From the data analysis, the following four main themes were extracted: a) the power of hair as a symbol of beauty, b) the relationship between hair and self-esteem, c) hair oppression is real, and d) changing hair styles and life transitions. The findings of this course-based study support the existing literature on the significance of hair as a signifier of culture, identity, resistance, and social inclusion.
Keywords: Child and youth care; Course-based research; Hair; Qualitative.

1. Introduction

To start, we think it is important to explain why we chose to focus on the topic of hair and why this topic is so significant for the field of child and youth care (CYC). The ability to form meaningful relationships with youth of different cultural backgrounds and diverse lifestyles is an essential skill of a CYC practitioner. The preparation of CYC students in cultural competence practice, however, extends beyond cultural awareness and the recognition of differences (Mattingly et al., 2010). It requires CYC students to engage in discovery learning aimed at uncovering their unrecognized cultural biases, attitudes, assumptions, stereotypes, prejudices, and privileges to ensure respect for the dignity of every person, regardless of their unique characteristics. In Canadian society, not unlike other Western societies, "whites" have been the dominant social group, and as a result, standards of personal appearance are generally based on the physical appearance of "whites" (Carroll, 2014; Day, 2000; Giroux, 1997).

1.1. Western Ethnocentrism

In their examination of ethnocentrism, Samovar et al. (2009) emphasized a multilayered understanding of the concept, each layer embodying different layers of ethnocentrism and expressing different attitudes and tendencies:

Ethnocentrism can be viewed as having three levels: positive, negative, and extremely negative. The first, positive, is the belief that, at least for you, your culture is preferred over all others. This is natural, and inherently there is nothing wrong with it because you draw much of your personal identity and many of your beliefs from your native culture. At the negative level, you partially take on an evaluative dimension. You believe your culture is the center of everything and all other cultures should be measured and rated by its standards. (p. 180)

This inquiry concerns the relationship between ethnocentrism and the culture of hair.

1.2. Western Culture of Hair

From an anthropological perspective, the term "culture" refers to the universal human capacity to classify, codify, and communicate experiences in a symbolic manner (Baker, 2010; Brown *et al.*, 2017). Hair has remarkable cultural significance. It is perhaps one of the most powerful signifiers of race, ethnicity, culture, religion, beauty, social standing, age, and so on. Every culture, race, and ethnicity have distinct hair textures, colors, and styles, revealing different attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews and communicating a sense of self and personal identity. For example, hair is important in many religions and considered sacred in many cultures. Practicing Muslim women and Sikh men believe that their hair should not be visible in public, as a demonstration of their inner faith, courage, and piety. Orthodox Jews have different practices for men and women regarding hair. Some women wear head coverings – referred to as *sheitels – to signify that they are married* (Meister and Silverberg, 2020). Correspondingly, Hasidic Jewish men typically wear side curls and a beard called *payos* (Meister and Silverberg, 2020).

The LGBTQ+ community has also turned to hair to communicate messages about sexual and gender-based preferences, practices, and beliefs. This practice is traced back to David Bowie's bisexual androgynous alien rockstar persona, "Ziggy Stardust," who had flaming red hair and wore a skin-tight multicolour bodysuit. Five decades later, an ever-growing number of gender-neutral salons cater specifically to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) people (Stutchbury, 2016). Calgary-based LGBTQ+ musician, writer, and visual artist Vivek Shraya has partnered with Pantene, a brand of haircare products, on the "Hair Has No Gender" project to create awareness on behalf of the LGBTQ2S+ community and to share a unique Canadian perspective on the power of hair to express identity and the importance of support from loved ones. Hairstyles have always been important for expressing identity and as a signifier of race, ethnicity, and beauty. In ancient African civilization, for example, hair grooming, and styling were sources of pride among African people. Just about everything about a person's background, tribe, social status could be learned by looking at their hair, says journalist Lori Tharps, who co-wrote the book *Hair Story* about the history of black hair. As DeLongoria (2018) illustrates,

Hair grooming and styling were embedded in ancient African life and were sources of pride among African people. Evidence of braided styles in regions of the Sahara date back to 3000 B.C. Images of Black women in braids, locs, and twists have been found in ancient Greece and Rome from the period 200 B.C. The head of a young girl with cornrows found in Nubia was dated to 550-750 A.D. Braids, twists, and other naturals styles varied among groups such as the Zande in the Congo, the Bodi in Ethiopia, and the West African Mende, Wolof, Yoruba and Mandingo. Precursors to contemporary afros and locks were founded among the Kikuya, Masai and Himba of Kenya and Angola, the Fulani and Somali of northern Africa, and in ancient Khemet. Used as conveyors of messages, a language of sorts, specific hairstyles (or the lack thereof), various adornments, and headpieces often relayed ethnicity, marital status, age, religion, social standing, and/or geographic origin. (p. 40)

1.3. Oppression and Repression of Hair

Over the last few centuries, however, systemic racism and settler colonialism has resulted in the racialization of African hair. As opined by Johnson and Bankhead (2014).

Europeans, who had long traded and communicated with Africans, knew the complexity and significance of Black hair. They were often struck by the various hairstyles that they saw within each community. In an effort to dehumanize and break the African spirit, Europeans shaved the heads of enslaved Africans upon arrival to the Americas. This was not merely a random act, but rather a symbolic removal of African culture. The shaving of the hair represented a removal of any trace of African identity and further acted to dehumanize Africans coming to the Americas in bondage. (pp.87–88)

But today the ground is once again shifting, and there is a growing trend among Black women to return to their "natural roots." For many Aboriginal people, returning to traditional hairstyles is about reclaiming their culture, as it was customary for residential schools to force Indigenous children to cut their hair. As Danny Paul of Membertou First Nation explains, referring to those who were removed from their families and communities and sent to residential schools, "the hair would be the first thing to go. They'd cut their hair because they knew it was important to our people" (Reynolds, 2021). In its 2015 report, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission asserted that forced hair-cutting and other such practices used by residential schools amounted to cultural genocide (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2022).

2. Undergraduate Course-Based Research: A Pedagogical Method to Promote Criticality, Reflectivity, and Praxis

This section begins with a word about course-based research. The Bachelor of CYC program at MacEwan University is continuously searching for new pedagogical approaches to foster critical thinking, reflection, and praxis as integral components of the overall student educational experience. As such, a course-based research approach, in contrast to the traditional didactic approach to research-methods instruction, offers fourth-year undergraduate

students the opportunity to master introductory research skills by conceptualizing, designing, administering, and showcasing small low-risk research projects under the guidance and supervision of the course instructor—commonly, a professor with an extensive background in research and teaching. The use of course-based research in higher education has increased substantially in recent years (Allyn, 2013; Bellefeuille *et al.*, 2014; Harrison *et al.*, 2010). The benefits derived from a course-based approach to teaching research methods are significant for CYC students. First, there is value in providing students with authentic learning experiences that enhance the transfer of knowledge learned in traditional education practice. For example, former students have reported that their engagement in course-based research enabled them to deepen their scientific knowledge by adopting new methods of creative inquiry. Second, course-based research offers students the opportunity to work with instructors in a mentoring relationship; one result is that a greater number of students express interest in advancing to graduate studies. Third, results generated through course-based research can sometimes be published in peer-reviewed journals and online open-access portals and thereby contribute to the discipline's knowledge base. The ethical approval required to permit students to conduct course-based research projects is granted to the course instructor by the university's research ethics board (REB). Student research groups are then required to complete an REB application form for each course-based research project undertaken in the class; each application is reviewed by the course instructor and an REB committee to ensure that the project is completed in compliance with the ethics review requirements of the university.

3. Research Design

This course-based research inquiry is situated within the interpretive paradigm, in that it is a qualitative exploration of CYC students' thoughts about the relationship between hair, self-perception, and identity. Interpretivism is an approach to social science that focuses on individuals' lived experiences and the meanings they ascribe to them (Hammersley, 2013). Accordingly, the ontological position of interpretivism is relativism, a philosophical approach with the view that a single phenomenon may have multiple interpretations, rather than there being a truth that can be determined by a process of measurement (Neuman, 2014). The aim of interpretive research is to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and its complexity in its distinct context, rather than striving to generalize the findings to the whole population (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative inquiry is congruent with the core ontological assumption of relational-centered CYC practice, which holds that individuals are relationally constituted, and that meaning-making is a co-constructed relational process (Bellefeuille *et al.*, 2017). The strength of a qualitative inquiry is that it embraces specific data-collection and data-analysis practices to achieve a deeper and richer understanding of the phenomena under investigation (Creswell, 2013).

3.1. Statement of Research Question

The research question guiding this course-based research study is as follows: How do CYC students think about the relationship between hair, self-perception and identity?

3.2. Sampling Strategy

A qualitative nonprobability convenience sampling strategy was used to recruit participants. Convenience sampling is a common type of nonprobability sampling that involves the recruitment of a targeted population that meet specified criteria, such as easy accessibility, geographical proximity, or willingness to participate (Creswell and Plano, 2011). The sample population are CYC students enrolled in four years of study at MacEwan University. The proposed target number of participants is 28, distributed equally over the four years of study.

3.3. Data Collection Methods

Given the interpretive nature of this course-based study, data were collected via semi-structured Google Meet interviews. The interviewers began every conversation with a set of open-ended questions to allow the interview participants to direct the conversation as they saw fit. There is increased acceptance among scholars of the use of digitally mediated research data-collection methods (Alessi and Martin, 2010; Chen and Neo, 2019; Elford *et al.*, 2004). Cater (2011) and Johns *et al.* (2004) claim that digitally mediated research methods not only deliver greater flexibility in time and location of data collection, but they are also a highly socialized forms of interaction.

In addition, participants were invited to complete an arts-based activity. This activity was optional and involved the submission of an art piece in any form reflecting the participant's experience of their hair. Arts-based research is a growing method of inquiry that recognizes artistic expression as a way of knowing (McNiff, 1998). It is commonly undertaken in the field of CYC as a creative, critical and relational practice of inquiry that seeks to challenge the traditional standards of "doing research" by imagining new possibilities of engagement with youth (Bellefeuille and Ricks, 2010; Bellefeuille *et al.*, 2014). Arts-based researchers recognize that nondiscursive forms of inquiry – ranging from visual arts, performance, dance, music, creative writing, poetry and so on – can be forms of research (Angelides and Michaelidou, 2009; Barone and Eisner, 2012; Leavy, 2009; Liamputtong and Rumbold, 2008).

3.4. Data Analysis

The analysis of the data followed a six-step process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), comprising a combination of inductive and deductive thematic analysis. This approach was chosen because qualitative research is situated within the interpretive paradigm, emphasizing the search for meaning through what is observed and what is experienced and reported by the research participants (Creswell, 2013). For this reason, thematic-analysis methods

are considered the best-suited approaches to data analysis for their rigorous and methodical manner and yielding of rich, detailed, trustworthy, and insightful results (Braun and Clarke, 2006; King, 2004). The thematic analysis revealed four themes: a) the powerful symbolism of hair as a cultural marker of beauty and identity, b) the relationship between hair and self-esteem, c) hair oppression is real, and d) changing hair styles and life transitions.

a) The Powerful Symbolism of Hair as a Cultural Marker of Beauty and Identity

The participants emphasized the incredible power given to hair in our cultures and society at large as definitive social markers, indicating one's race and ethnicity, charm, beauty, religion, age, and so on. For example, one participant said that "most women are forced to keep their hair long as it defines their gender. It's almost not right to see ladies with short hair because they (in my culture) believe that our hair is our beauty." Another participant stated that, "hair is a person's life, a symbol of beauty, and people can tell which tribe you're from". Others said, "in pop culture, which is part of my white Western culture, having long and blond hair is a certain standard that represents a certain social class," and, "you can change your hair to match your identity"; "In India, hair is attached to beauty. If a woman has long hair, they are beautiful"; "As a Ukrainian, I am aware that hair is a signifier in certain ways, that long thick hair is a pretty big signifier of beauty, and the different ways of braiding are a signifier of purity … That was explained to me by other women in my culture." Finally, among the art pieces submitted in support of this theme were a poem and a photo (see Figure 1).

"Short, coarse, and full of curls
Blue, pink, or white as pearls
Whatever form it takes, my hair is me.
Long, straight, and dry as hay
Black, red, or ashy gray
Whatever form it takes, my hair is me.
When days feel long, I cut it short
When days feel dark, I dye it bright
Whatever form I take, my hair is who I want to be.
In all its colors and all its shapes
In all its forms, pending and passed
My hair is mine and mine at last."

Figure-1. Art Image Photo

b) The Relationship Between Hair and Self-Esteem

A second major theme that emerged from the data was how hair was reported to be strongly connected to one's level of self-esteem and self-worth. For example, one participant stated, "I had a lot of trouble as a kid managing my hair. Hairdressers didn't know what to do with it. I straightened my hair once in junior high and this guy, which I will never forget, told me that I looked like a horse, so I didn't straighten my hair for school for years." Another participant shared a story about her younger years in which she had lost some of her hair due to an illness and this had greatly affected her self-esteem. Other participants commented, "I've spent countless hours crying over my hair, my hair being too short; or I buy extensions and then I wash my hair a few times and the color doesn't match"; "When blonde jokes are made, especially at me, I have this moment where my heart falls, and I feel disappointed. Everything I am is reduced to this one nonfactual stupid stereotype. Does nothing about me matter?"; "I had been to a family function, and I had had to tie my hair differently because I went to a different church … When I went there, my families and cousins reacted and said, 'what is wrong with you?' It's like I covered my hair so tight, like it changed my identity and that affected my connection to that party that day. I just went and sat in a corner, and it affected my self-esteem because I couldn't really express myself because my cousins and family were like 'you have different hair today'"; and "Male pattern baldness is something that gets swept under the rug. It's a male issue, not that big of a deal, but early balding is a part of genetics, and a lot of young guys have a lot of anxiety about losing

their hair. It is a point of high stress." The art image submitted in support of this theme referenced one participant's struggle with having curly hair (see Figure 2).

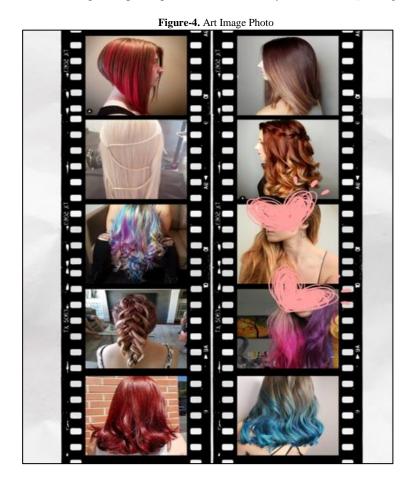**Figure-2**. Art Image

c) *Hair Oppression is Real*

A third noteworthy theme was how hair could be used as a tool of oppression. As one participant commented, "one time, I worked in a grocery store, and my manager told me that having an afro to work was unprofessional. I was instructed to never have my natural hair out again." Another participant explained, "I don't know if 'unaccepted' is the right word, but there's been some negative experiences for young black men. When they try to do something with their hair and it doesn't look right, people start to make fun of it … That's something that young black boys deal with pretty often." One participant also noted, "some people have been refused work because they have their natural hair … Other people from my culture wear weaves and wigs to look presentable, to look acceptable in the society we live in … Many people talk about social profiling, racial profiling, dreadlocks … Young males … they are scared of police because of their hair." The art image submitted referenced a woman of color with their hair braided. The photo was shared with us as representative of their culture and identity but also a celebration of their textured hair (see Figure 3).

Figure-3. *Art Image Photo*

d) *Changing Hair Styles and Life Transitions*

The final theme that emerged from the data was how hairstyles change as one progresses through life. For example, participants noted the following: "You can change it as you change your identity"; "I have break-up hair phases: when I am going through something and need a change, I will do something to my hair. It's often the first thing I do"; "There's a me that I want to be, and a real me"; "I feel like I have two identities that I am struggling

with: my public self and my private self"; "When I had fun wacky splashy pink hair, I think I acted bolder"; and "Hair is something that you can change; you can change it as you change your identity". The art image submitted in reference to this theme was a collage of a participant's different hairstyles over time (see Figure 4).

Figure-4. Art Image Photo

4. Conclusion

In the discipline of CYC, "cultural competence" refers to the ability to practice CYC in a manner that promotes social justice, social inclusion and social equality. To bring this about, CYC practitioners must understand the true meaning of cultural diversity in their profession, as they play such an important part in the lives of a diverse group of children and youth. As such, CYC practitioners require a deep understanding of the cultures of the children and youth they are serving. The aim of this qualitative course-based study was to open up a dialogue and gain insights into CYC students' awareness in their work with vulnerable youth specifically in regard to the significance of hair as a cultural marker in relation to issues of identity, social justice, and social inclusion. The findings of this study support the existing literature on the significance of hair as a signifier of *culture,* identity, resistance, and social inclusion. This study can hopefully lay the ground for more qualitative research to deepen the understanding of the meaning of hair for the diverse youth population in the province of Alberta and elsewhere.

Acknowledgment

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