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How are Ethnic Hairstyles Really Viewed in the Workplace?

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Abstract

Black hair historically has been controversial especially when worn in its natural state in styles like Afros, braids, cornrows and dreadlocks. An undertone that natural hair is “unacceptable, unprofessional and even ugly” continues to exist in society.

Keywords

human resources, ethnic, ethnic hairstyles, black hair, afros, cornrows, dreadlocks, African Americans, black pride, hair discrimination, discrimination, sex, race, disability, equal opportunities, minorities, discrimination, organizational culture, culture, morn, macro-culture, senior leadership, firm culture, Caucasian, non-Caucasian

Comments

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Question: How are ethnic hairstyles really viewed in the workplace? Are they career stallers?

Introduction: Black hair historically has been controversial especially when worn in its natural state in styles like Afros, braids, cornrows and dreadlocks. An undertone that natural hair is “unacceptable, unprofessional and even ugly” continues to exist in society.¹

Importance of Ethnic hairstyles: For African Americans, hair always carried symbolism. Ever since African civilizations bloomed, hairstyles have been used to indicate person’s age, religion, ethnic identity, marital status, wealth and rank within the community. In the 60’s and 70’s, the Afro was more than hair. It was a symbol of black pride, a salient affirmation of African roots and the beauty of blackness.²

Implications of Ethnic hairstyles: Natural hair discrimination in the workplace has been widely reported. Discrimination in the workplace on grounds of sex, race, disability and other factors have prevailed regardless of legislation over three decades, business case for promoting equal opportunities or arguments around the moral issues. The situation is challenging for ethnic minority groups, who comply with their religious or cultural expectations by presenting themselves in a specified manner. Physical characteristics of people at work are central to both how they are perceived and the opportunities they enjoy. Deviation in physical appearance from the majority norm can negatively affect career success.²

Case: In 1981, a black woman employed with American Airlines was told that her cornrow hairstyle violated the company’s grooming policy. She filed an action against the airline on the grounds of racial discrimination, and not only was her complaint dismissed – a federal court judge claimed Rogers failed to prove racism was at play – but she was also accused of mimicking white actress Bo Derek’s hairstyle in the 1979 film 10.²

Case: Last year, the Congressional Black Caucus took the U.S. military to task for its grooming policies, which barred cornrows, twists and dreadlocks. Eventual outcome now allow cornrows braids.

Case: The Transportation Security Administration disproportionately patted down women’s hair- especially their Afros. . It’s a practice TSA only agreed to stop a few months ago, when the agency reached an agreement with the ACLU of Northern California, which had filed a complaint in 2012.

Most corporate environments are accepting of ethnic hairdos, but others quietly regard them as “unprofessional”. Image experts both black and white, subtly advise black women to remove their braids, dreadlocks or other ethnic hairdos before interviewing at corporate jobs. TV journalists through years have been suspended or threatened with reprisal for sporting cornrows or Afros.⁴ Scans of major black magazines like Ebony, Essence and Black Enterprise show that despite burgeoning pride in hairstyles, many black women(especially in high ranking positions) continue to chemically straighten their hair.

Manager’s Perception of Ethnic hairstyles: In a 1992 study, J.S. Bowman surveyed personnel officials from forty agencies and found that 75% of the managers in their sample believe that employees who are well-dressed and groomed are perceived as more intelligent, hardworking and socially acceptable than those with a more casual appearance.³

Manager with a hidden bias would not select a candidate with ethnic hairstyle for a job. If the candidate had straightened hair looking more white and less ethnic, then there would have been a better chance for the candidate to get a job.²

Underlying Theories

Organizational Culture: The culture and norms of groups are inherited from the macro-culture they were formed in.⁵ Cultural norms can include style of dress, hairstyle, language, communication style etc. Corporate culture is weighted in favor of western European norms. Culture is reinforced and perpetuated by an organization's senior leadership. Promotions, prestige, and status serve to create an image of the desired employee. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the norms and characteristics of senior leaders reproduce themselves within organizations.⁵

Ethnic Identity: Ethnic identity and the corresponding norms of individual employees have a varying degree of similarity to the dominant norms of the employer. Those whose ethnic or cultural identity differs significantly from the firm can be subject to stereotypes and find it more difficult to access influential social networks.⁶ In order to penetrate influential networks and take advantage of promotion opportunities workers must be perceived to fit into the dominant firm culture. The more a person is perceived to "fit in" with the firm culture the better their workplace outcomes, and the greater the degree of deviation from the group the worse the outcome. Workers who haven identity that differs from the dominant firm culture are faced with the choice to assimilate or exclusion. This is a conscious choice to retain their own identity at the expense of their career aspirations, live a dual life with a professional identity, or abandon one's heritage culture for the dominant culture. Such an abandonment is linked to higher stress levels for the individual.⁷

The research of Clark & Clark was pivotal in the U.S. Supreme Court ruling *Brown v. Board of Education*.⁸ Their landmark study proved the relationship between the signaling of a dominant group and one's views of self-worth and objective outcomes.⁸ Two replications took place in 2013. In the 1st test subject police both Caucasian and non-Caucasian officers were placed in a fast paced game environment and instructed to fire on armed characters. In a scenario designed to force reflexive actions officers all ethnicities were found to fire on unarmed characters of the racial minority more often than Caucasian characters, betraying the perception of danger where there was none.⁸ In the second, subjects were placed in 1 of 3 game environments, control or a scenario designed to induce identification with a hero or a villain followed by a test of pro-social tendencies. Subjects in the hero condition displayed pro-social behavior at a higher rate than both the villain and control condition.⁹ These studies indicate being identified with the dominant culture is linked to more desirable behavior, while being linked to the minority culture is linked to increased negative perceptions.

Psychological safety describes the degree to which an individual feels they can contribute without fear of negative consequences.¹¹ High levels of psychological safety are correlated with positive business outcomes in terms of creativity, engagement, innovation, and financial outcomes. In the case of a mismatch between an individual's identity and that of the firm that safety is likely to be compromised. Overcoming cultural bias requires the embracing of cultural differences. This will require conscious steps led by senior leaders. Measures like diversity training may be a helpful starting point. However, firms must take deliberate steps to favor professional suitability over acceptability.⁷ The negative effects associated with cultural minority identity stem from a negative comparison to a more dominant and therefore desirable identity.

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