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Because you're worth it: Women's daily hair care routines in contemporary Britain

Dr Sabine Hielscher

Hair care is a significant international industry – estimated to be worth over £1.44 billion in contemporary Britain (Mintel, 2015). Given this, it is perhaps not so surprising to learn that British women spend on average £40,000 on their hair over a lifetime (Sharkey, 2014). However, despite women's preoccupation with hair, social science research has paid little attention to this area (McCracken, 1997; Cox, 1999).

Most previous studies have examined the changing nature of styles and fashion, offering valuable insights into its symbolic, ritualistic and religious nature and in turn demonstrating the conspicuous aspects of hair (Cox 1999; Biddle-Perry and Cheang, 2008). While the public nature of hair has been documented, what is rarely explored is the private world of hair care, often part of a wider network of day-to-day domestic routines (Shove, 2003).

My in-depth research into women's daily hair care (Hielscher, 2011; Hielscher, 2013) has shown that the performance of these 'private' moments is an instance when women interact with their hair visually and tactilely, considering both their own personal tastes as well as social acceptability. As such, these ubiquitous performances have a far wider significance than simply 'doing your hair' as they can reveal dynamics of social life through notions of what it is to have socially acceptable hair.

The methodology of this research had to consider ways of examining the intimate practice of hair care that is mainly carried out alone, especially without the presence of a researcher. Instead of merely relying on verbal accounts, several sources of data were collected. Women disclosed the various places where they do things to their hair and keep their hair care products and tools around their home. Sometimes women even demonstrated their use. Products and tools had an integrated part in the open-ended interviews. The more visual insights of women's hair care routines, such as photographs and the evocative interviewing technique¹, aided the process of accessing more 'observational' insights without having to conduct detailed observations.

¹ The method gathers detailed accounts of lived experiences and processes, away from verbalised memories, generalisations and opinions (Light 2006).

Through studying daily hair care routines many different narratives could be told. For example, the predicament that women can face between balancing their own 'naturally' produced bodily substances (such as sebum), with the need to apply 'synthetic' hair care products (such as conditioners).

"Because I straighten the hair, I need to buy these products to counterbalance it. Even if they may damage it further, or might not help, they make it temporarily better." 'Winona' – teacher mid 30s, married with one child living in Southern England

An additional narrative is based on the interplay between what women do routinely with their hair and moments where this routine changes, whether such instances are desired or not. However, what runs through all of these accounts is how the process of dealing with hair, such as shampooing or drying it, and the embodied experience of the material propensities, such as greasiness or frizziness, is just as important as the final visual result. By concentrating on the ordinary nature of the performance of hair care and its materialisation through daily interaction, it is possible to gain a more subtle understanding of how women attempt to achieve socially acceptable hair. So it is not simply about the appearance of the hair, for example, by checking in the mirror or seeking reassurance, but also the underlying embodied feelings that women experience in seeking to create hair that looks 'normal' to them.

"I just felt like I wanted to get my hair washed so I did feel a better... I was just aware of it and it felt really greasy and I felt mucky." 'Simone' – nursery nurse mid 30s, living in Northern England

The significance of embodied feelings become particularly apparent when women are not able to go through their usual daily hair care routine. Several women in the study described times when their hair became 'alien' to them and how they would be aware of it, for instance, when leaving it 'untouched' in the morning. Similar to a piece of clothing, hair can be perceived as if it is a 'prosthesis', an addition to the body that does not fuse with the wearer (see Woodward, 2007 for a study on clothes). It becomes somehow external, perceived to be like a piece of clothing that can be worn but not taken off.

"Sometimes I find it really, really, really irritates me. Just it being around, you know

all being around my neck that really irritates me.” ‘Holly’ – student early 20s, living in Northern England

During these days the hair feels different to how it is usually experienced when women could go through their usual motions of dealing with their hair. The majority of women developed long-term routines during which they created an understanding of how their ‘normal’ hair feels and looks. Such hair heavily relies on women going through the usual process of dealing with it, as it helps to create a mental picture of whether the hair feels and looks ‘nice’ or ‘awful’.

“It’s not that it looks greasy or anything, it is just because I know myself that I’ve not took that time in the morning to wash it. Somebody else might not know that I have not washed it that morning. It is just me I am aware of it.” ‘Tracey’ – administrator early 30s, divorced with one child living in Northern England

For some it was the case that ‘untouched’ hair, because, for example, lack of time, can result in reduced confidence or even feeling less professional at work and in the process demonstrating the social significance of everyday hair care routines. The women were generally uncomfortable with the experience of untouched hair and tried to avoid this or at least carry out their daily routines as soon as possible in order to become part of the self again.

In conclusion, the production of socially acceptable hair does not only rely on visual interactions with hair but also how it is sensually experienced and the time invested in caring for the hair. The practice of hair care is characterised by regularity that relies on routinized ways of experiencing the hair and normalizing standards. Due to the performance of hair care, routines can be reinforced and ‘progressively integrated into the habit body’ (Dant, 2005, p. 97); highlighting that the process of dealing with the hair can be as significant as its end result. Such findings are of significance not only to achieving a deeper understanding of the embodied nature of daily routines today, but also to how a focus on performance can be used to enrich historical and archaeological accounts and the tensions that arise from attempting to create hair that is socially acceptable.

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