Whoever holds the scissors wields the power': **An auto/biographical reflection on my 'Hairstory'**

This paper provides an auto/biographical account of my hair journey, with specific emphasis on my hairstyle changes, and their 'inextricable links' to my identity and self-presentation (Bankhead and Johnson 2014) at different stages in my life. In doing so, reference is made to the work of Anthony Giddens (1991) Erving Goffman (1950) and Judith Butler (1990). In addition, I discuss how for Black women, 'hair' is also a continual source of political debates. These centre on whether particular styles (e.g relaxing (chemical straightening), and/or weave), mean we present ourselves in ways reflecting European (often hegemonic) beauty standards, rooted in longstanding negative representations of 'tightly curled' African hair. Conversely, are growing numbers of Black women (including me) who opt for 'natural' hair, choosing to present ourselves in ways which consciously reject hegemonic standards of beauty? Or are these hairstyles simply a matter of choice and/or convenience? Drawing on the work of Black Feminist researchers Teihasha Bankhead, Tabora Johnson (2014), and Cheryl Johnson (2009), I describe 'brushes' with these issues in Black hair salons, which impacted on my experiences in this context. Other issues, such as extraordinary lengths of time spent waiting to be seen are discussed, alongside power relationships existing between the hairstylist/salon owners and the clients, arising from these situations. In doing so Foucault's notions of power (1984) and Freund and Maguire's discussion of time and power (2003) are referred to.

Introduction:

'Hair' is something we all relate to regardless of gender, ethnicity and/or social class. As Cheryl Thompson (2009) notes we (especially women) spend copious amounts of time making decisions about how we style it; how it will look to ourselves and others. What we do with our hair may be determined by several factors, including conformity to particular socio-political norms, which in turn may be influenced by the macro/micro social context we are in. Perhaps our hair styles represent one 'marker', amongst others, for example style of dress, indicating where we are in our lives, and who we are at that point.

This paper is an auto/biographical account of my own hairstory, which seeks to bring alive this element of my lived experience, and that of many others (especially Black women) and also to 'extend sociological understanding' (Sparkes, 2000: 21) around the politics surrounding Black women's hair and how this may influence how we frame our identities. Debates around Black hair politics centre on the extent to which particular 'hair types' and styles conform to/reject European hegemonic ideas of beauty, whether they represent ethnic/cultural pride and the political and social implications associated with particular hairstyle choices. As

theorists such as bell hooks (1992), Tabora Johnson and Teiahsha Bankhead (2014), amongst others note, historically, physical attributes of Black women, including our short, tightly curled hair, have been denigrated. In contrast long straight flowing European hair represented 'ideal beauty'. Such views are rooted in slavery and latterly the colonial era, but have influenced hairstyle choices since deep seated, negative ideas around Black womens' physical characteristics can, in some cases lead to a sense of inadequacy. This may be conveyed in language used. For instance, I regularly hear women denounce their as 'afro' hair as 'picky' or 'nappy'. Sadly, as Maxine Leeds Craig (2002) notes, use of such pejorative terms is common amongst Black populations worldwide.

There has been a shift in these attitudes, which started with Black power in the 1960s and the recent natural hair movement. In both cases many Black people have consciously rejected hegemonic beauty ideals and instead embrace their 'Afro hair'. Moreover, currently (and thankfully) within the media there is also greater recognition of stunningly beautiful Black women such as Lupita N'yongo and Alex Wek, (both have natural hair). Yet we are still routinely bombarded with images reinforcing dominant notions of 'beauty'. Not only do these ideas affect us psychologically, but also in relation to our experiences in institutions such as education and the workplace. I consider how, for instance, Black children are singled out for Afro hairstyles at school, and in the workplace, their natural hairstyle is deemed 'unprofessional'. Taken together these factors also have financial implications as many Black women will spend a lot of money on hairstyling and products.

Additionally, I highlight our experiences as consumers within Black hair salons, and how Black hair politics may also shape these. Timekeeping, or lack thereof, is a further issue, affecting the quality of our encounters within these contexts, as it may determine whether clients remain with particular salons. This is also discussed here.

After a brief summary of auto/biography as an approach, and my application of it, I reflect on my 'hair journey'. Specifically, I am concerned with the various hairstyles I have had, and how they correspond with my 'presentation of self' at certain stages of my life. In doing so, the work of Erving Goffman (1959), Judith Butler (1990) and Anthony Giddens (1991) are relevant. I acknowledge that earlier in my life, I had a superficial awareness about debates around Black hair politics but I maintain that for the most part, my hairstyles have not been determined by them. Rather, they were representative of life stages, and choice, especially from my teenage years onwards. I discuss how, as a child growing up in a Midlands Ghanaian

community, attempts were made to ensure that I personified a girl who was reared in Ghana. This extended to my hairstyle, and I had little say in terms of how I would have liked it to be. However, as I reached my teens, and 20s, I slowly began to 'challenge' the status quo (e.g family and the Ghanaian community) about issues, including my hairstyles. I began to choose how my hair should be, and have styles that were 'en vogue', but which I felt suited me, although some did look positively awful. My freedom to experiment was further facilitated by the fact that I moved to London as a 19 year old student, so was away from the restrictions I had experienced when I was younger. I also reflect upon how, on reaching my mid-late 20s, I experienced a 'quarter life crisis', where I questioned my identity and the direction of my life. Again my chosen hairstyle reflected this.

I also discuss my observations/experiences of Black hair salons, including impacts of Black hair politics in these contexts and how these may shape interactions between client hairdressers, with reference to research by Tabora Johnson and Teiahsha Bankhead (2014) and Cheryl Thompson (2009). A further issue that is explored is the salon owners/stylists attitudes towards clients' time, and how this may shape power relationships between the two parties. Peter Freund and Meredith McGuire's research which explores relations between power and time, and also Michel Foucault's (1984) analysis of power and resistance are used in this context.

Use of Sociological Auto/biography to reflect on my 'hairstory'

Sociological auto/biographies entail 'telling ourselves stories about ourselves'. (Letherby and Cotterill 1993:68), and often enable reflections on past experiences. In this case it included consideration of how my hairstyles changed in conjunction with key stages of personal development during the course of my life, and encounters in numerous Black hairdressers over the past 20+ years. As is the case with autobiographies, these issues were analysed and 'assembled in hindsight', partly because as Ellis explains, 'the author does not live through these experiences solely to make them part of a published document' (Ellis *et al* 2011; unpaginated).

It is not unusual, when writing an autobiography or aspects of it to highlight certain 'epiphanies', or as Ellis *et al* describe it ' remembered moments perceived to have impacted on the trajectory of a person's life' (Ellis *et al* 2011 unpaginated). This was particularly evident when reflecting on how my hairstyle choices seemed to dovetail with particular life stages and experiences, for instance my encounter with the quarter life crisis during my mid-late 20s.

As Brennan and Letherby (2017) note, when we as academics critically reflect on and/or write about our personal experiences, this also entails recognising the impact of others in shaping our stories. Thus, while this paper focuses primarily on my encounters in the hair salons, I also acknowledge the roles of others, specifically my stylists and in some instances customers. One particular example, included in this account concerns my decision to have a short 'natural' haircut, and the negative responses of my hairdresser and other customers in the salon. Brennan and Letherby (2017:159) argue reflecting on the positioning of our own experiences, and those of others in our scholarly accounts illustrates 'the significance of an auto/biographical continuum'. Such a continuum, demonstrates that 'concentration on the self OR on the other is not clear cut' (Brennan and Letherby 2017: ibid), and effectively that there is frequently a 'slippage' between the two.

Another way in which my role and that of others in this story can be considered is by reflecting on our positions as 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. Robert Merton (1972) explains that 'insiders' are those who share common characteristics with those involved in the research. To that end, there were a number of commonalities between myself, the salon owners and customers, whom I interacted with. These included gender and race, as all my hairdressers were Black women, with shared experiences of marginalisation, racism and sexism. The majority, were from West African countries, including Cameroon, Nigeria and Ghana. I am from a Ghanaian background, which further reinforced my 'insider' status with other Ghanaian women.

In some respects, however, I was also an outsider, in that there were differences between my stylists and I in terms of characteristics (Merton 1972). Profession/status was one issue, another being non motherhood as I am in my mid 40s and childless, whereas most of my hairdressers and other customers are also mothers. I spent many hours entertaining their children while they dealt with a multitude of clients or went to the chicken shop.

Being an insider and an outsider raises questions about the extent to which, as researchers we are embedded or not in our topics of study. Similarities between myself, stylists and customers in terms of cultural backgrounds and experiences, alongside regular attendance at the salons provided innate understandings of how things work in that context. This indicates a significant level of embeddedness or deep '[immersion] in the social relations of the field' (Montenegro 2017:1). However, undertaking this auto/biographical 'work', in some ways made me more of an observer, as I analysed processes, dynamics between myself, customers and stylists, and also how issues such as Black hair politics played out in the salons.

My 'hairstory' also enables reflections on 'shared experiences in order to help insiders' (Ellis *et al* 2011: unpaginated). As noted above 'insiders' include the Black hairdressers, but also other Black women and men. It provides a 'thick description' of experiences which are arguably specific to Black hairdressers, and which Black women and men as cultural 'insiders' are perhaps able to understand/relate to, as a result of being customers in these establishments. This approach is also advantageous in that those outsiders, including White people and those from other non-Black minority ethnic groups who may have no prior knowledge of these issues can perhaps 'meaningfully engage' (Ellis *et al* 2011 unpaginated) with this aspect of Black people's cultural experiences. To this end, Ken Plummer (2001:401) suggests that 'what matters is the way in which the story enables the reader to enter the subjective world of the teller -to see the world from her or his point of view

Auto/biography also has 'clear epistemological, ethical and political implications' in that it 'gives voices to identities and groups previously excluded and othered' (Letherby and Brennan 2017:160). To that end, as Black women, we belong to a socially marginalised group, although if we understand the way power functions, we can identify ways to resist and use it to 'subvert the established order' (Landeira 2011:537). One such approach is by sharing our stories, that highlight our experiences of marginalisation. In this case, the focus is on how we are marginalised in terms of beauty ideals.

My life my hair

My hair styles have always reflected stages in my life. From the age of 7, a female family member would style my hair into 'Ghana braids', which involved the use of cotton to make plaits. Between the ages 9 and 13, my hair was cut into a short afro, or what my brother described as a 'scalp cut'. Interestingly, both styles reflected that of many Ghanaian girls 'back home'. This, in conjunction with continual attempts to transform my behaviour from being a mischievous inquisitive 'rocket' (and sometimes nuisance), into a quiet studious child, formed part of my parents' attempts to change me into the 'archetypal' Ghanaian child.

Moulding me into the 'archetypal Ghanaian girl' stemmed from their concerns that because we were British born and bred, my siblings and I would reject our [Ghanaian] heritage. This fear is shared by many first generation Ghanaians and migrants from other countries, with a strong sense of their own ethnicity, having grown up in their country of origin. Therefore, they

often wish to ensure that their ethnic identity is maintained amongst the second generation, and may adopt measures, including monitoring dress and hairstyles to ensure that this happens.

Following Erving Goffman's dramaturgical model (1959), we place considerable emphasis on the presentation of ourselves to others, and managing this effectively. I had internalised the idea that I had to present myself as, 'a true Ghanaian girl' (mum's words). Yet, beyond what I had been conditioned to believe about behaviour, hairstyle and dress, I was unsure of what else this entailed, partly because I had never visited Ghana at that point.

Goffman also explains that our performances/actions are shaped by the audiences we are exposed to, which in my case was the Nottingham Ghanaian community, whom at times could be very critical. Thus I was mindful of maintaining the impression that I was the 'True Ghanaian girl'. The idea that I had adopted/was 'performing' this role can also be understood with reference to Judith Butler's (1990:140) discussion of gender and performativity. A central tenet of this is that 'gender is a stylised repetition of acts'. Thus, it is effectively a performance, and the continual repetition of which, leads to the development and construction of our gender identity. Moreover, the structure and discourse of gender can be 'bodily and non-verbal'. Thus 'the repetition of acts' and 'bodily discourse' showed through my dress and hairstyles that I was forced to adhere to, alongside endless verbal/non-verbal instructions about these things.

I became a teenager in 1988. This stage of my life also marked a horrible period of storm and stress, coupled with a good dose of paranoia and incessant monitoring of my appearance and how I presented myself more generally. I also continued to internalise/respond (sometimes negatively) to how I thought I was perceived, especially by the Nottingham Ghanaian community. As indicated above, they could be critical and disapproving, especially of the younger generation who were born and raised in Britain. I recall an instance when I disagreed with my parents about a minor issue, yet my misdemeanour was inflated to cataclysmic proportions, with a fair amount of character defamation thrown into the mix. I was then reported to my aunt who was a senior in the community. She gave me a serious 'telling off', and said that I was a disappointment to my family and long dead ancestors. For a short time I became the topic of conversation (or folk devil) amongst some of the Ghanaian elders. These factors contributed to my doing quite a lot of what George Herbert Mead (1934) refers to as self-objectification. Much of this was clearly a hangover from my childhood, but in conjunction with my teenage angst, things were very uncomfortable.

The late 80s also represented the height of Thatcherism in the UK which led to greater freedom in terms of borrowing and making money. In turn, this contributed to increased levels of conspicuous consumption. It therefore became socially acceptable for people to buy lavish goods as a way of displaying their 'wealth', and 'elevated' social status. This was also encouraged within the media, for instance through lifestyle magazines, TV programmes and advertisements (Nunn 2013). There was also greater emphasis on 'self-presentation', which meant wearing the 'right clothes', carrying a 'Head' bag for teenagers and having 'appropriate' hairstyles. 'Big hair', achieved through curly perms, was, back then, 'a must' for girls. Although I could not afford the latest styles, I desperately felt the need to 'fit in' with my peers and show that I had embraced this 80s teenage 'chic'. Consequently, I no longer wanted my previous clothes, hairstyle (or bag!), as I felt it was all very 'unfashionable'.

After much begging, sulking and several arguments, I was allowed to have a 'Jheri curl', a perm which gave a 'glossy, loosely curled look' (www.makeuptalk.com), and was popular amongst Black people in Britain and America during the 1980s. This style, however, resulted in unfortunate consequences, for instance, greasy patches wherever I sat. If I was caught in the rain with no umbrella, milk coloured drops fell from my hair. Nevertheless, I maintained my 'Jheri curl' for six years. Following this, I had a shapeless 'weave on' hairstyle. A weave is whereby human hair extensions are sewn into natural hair after braiding it to add 'body or length' (https://bellatory.com/hair/Hair-ExtensionsWeave-for-Beginners, November 2019). Some weaves can look good, but if styled badly, they may resemble what Afua Hirsch (2012) describes as 'helmet heads of fake hair, cheaply sewn onto unsuspecting scalps'. Some are so thick that women use debit/credit cards to scratch their scalps. This was like mine, which earned me the nickname 'hat hair'.

After 'hat hair', came relaxers (chemicals used to straighten the hair), then braids. In my mid-late 20s, I moved away from relaxers and weaves. Instead, I opted for twists which are 'tightly strewn curls which are close to the head' (Alexander 2003:117). In 2003, I graduated to a 'big chop', which I tinted bright red. This, alongside my nose ring and tattoo, prompted questions from friends and family as to whether I was 'ok'.

As noted above, in the introduction, my hairstyles coincided with the fact that I was becoming more autonomous in my decisions about my hairstyles, other aspects of my appearance and my life more generally. This was also partly influenced by the fact that I had moved to London in the mid-1990s to study, which also meant a significant reduction in familial and community restrictions and much more freedom. Moreover, London in the 1990s was significantly more

stylistically and culturally diverse than where I had grown up, which was an additional factor in my decision to experiment further in terms of hair and fashion.

My choices also seemed to dovetail with attempts to understand my self-identity. Effectively, and in Anthony Giddens' (1991:242) terms I was 'engaging in a reflexive understanding of [my] biography'. In my mid- late 20s I began to also grapple with the stress of entering adulthood or the quarter life crisis (Atwood and Scholtz 2008) and trying to ensure that I made sensible life choices. Alongside all of this, I was learning to focus on my own needs, rather than pleasing others. Altogether it was a steep learning curve. I read many self-help books (particularly those written by Iyanla Vanzant, an African-American inspirational speaker), which Giddens (1991) explains, are often used as a form of therapy to help establish a strong and positive sense of self through a clearly understood narrative. In one publication, Vanzant described how she worked on loving herself and her appearance, by removing what she considered as unnecessary adornments, including her weave, as it did not reflect who she 'really' was. She therefore opted for a short crop, which she currently maintains.

Untangling Black hair politics in society and the salon:

As I matured, my hairstyles were based on personal choice. After my childhood experience, I decided that *I* would choose how my hair would be, and not have anyone dictate it. I had a superficial awareness of Black hair politics but with time, I read more and enhanced my knowledge of the debates. More specifically, I came to understand how it operates across society, including how our hairstyles are regarded institutions, such as education and the workplace. Emma Dabiri for instance, points out how from an early age Black children are punished at school because of their hair, more specifically because it is 'too short, too long, too big or too full' (Dabiri 2020, unpaginated). This invariably teaches Black children that their hair is 'not acceptable'. It then continues into the workplace where Black women are continually told that 'natural hair is unprofessional', so they should have alternative (or more Westernised) styles such as weaves and relaxers (BBC News 15th May 2016) As Awad et al note (2015:1), we are 'not impervious to' this relentless negativity about our appearance/features. Besides the ramifications psychologically, there are economic implications, because we spend a great deal of money and time on our hair. This includes, the cost of actually doing the hair, and the products required to maintain it, not to mention the time spent in the salons.

I also recognised how Black hair politics played out in other contexts that I found myself in, especially hair salons. I observed some of the impacts of the issues mentioned above on

clients', for example their feelings about their hair, and influences on their hairstyle choices. During a recent trip to the salon, for instance, I overheard a conversation between my stylist and another client who asked for her hair to be relaxed because she wanted to make a 'good impression' on her new employers.

Within the salons I also noted other things including approaches to customer service – specifically stylists' attitudes towards clients' hairstyles and their time. Taken together, these things shaped customers experiences in this context.

The 'big chop' –my brush with the imposition of 'hegemonic ideals' in the hair salon

Cheryl Johnson (2009 unpaginated) observes that 'the belief that straight, long flowing hair is a more acceptable choice than ones natural tress is what underpins the Black hair industry'. I have seen how this idea is expressed in salons, notably through images displayed on walls. In conversations which take place during lengthy waits to get our hair done, clients have also spoken about the insults they have received from hairdressers for choosing alternative styles, which are not 'long and flowy'. Black women's hair blogs also highlight this issue. In '*Hairdresser horrors'* (2013) a client described how a stylist 'made an off-hand offensive remark about her natural hair style suggesting [she] used chicken grease to style it'. I have experienced similar issues in salons, which led to arguments and/or made me go elsewhere. One encounter struck me more than any of the others, perhaps due to the circumstances in which it happened.

Until November 2011, I wore my hair in long twist extensions. It had been in a similar style for four years, but I wanted a drastic change. For a while I dithered about what I was going to do, yet I was certain that I no longer wanted twists for different reasons. Firstly, the style bored me and secondly, it was becoming a hassle. If I went swimming and/or to the gym, the sweat and water became embedded in my hair and took too long to dry. The twists also loosened quickly. Essentially, it meant a lot of time and money re-doing them. I spent hours on Black hair websites, trying to find solutions, but nothing ever worked.

Something I saw in Lewisham one rainy night also finalised my decision. Four twists lay on the wet filthy ground near the station entrance. They had been trodden on, making them look disgusting. Maybe subconsciously I was linking this image to my own hair when it was wet. Whatever, it was very off putting, which strengthened my resolve to make a change.

After much 'shilly-shallying', I opted for a 'big chop', like that I had previously. I also decided that, since this was such a drastic change, I would go to my hairdresser, whom I had been

patronising for the past five years. She was one of few stylists that I trusted, and I felt confident that she would style it well. Interestingly, however, when I said that I wanted my hair cut, she was less friendly than usual. I tried to ascertain the reason for this, and could not decide whether she had had a bad day, or whether it was because 'the big chop' meant that she would no longer receive the £70 that I was paying every five to six weeks for the twists. Nevertheless, she cut it. Sadly, it was not to the standard that I was expecting because it was uneven. When I mentioned it, more hair was cut, but it still looked wrong. Given her mood, I did not want a confrontation, so I paid and left. This experience really demonstrated that 'whoever holds the scissors holds the power… '

I felt uncomfortable about walking around with uneven hair, even in darkness! So I went to Ola (pseudonym) my now ex partner's barber. He was very surprised to see me, as barbers' shops are primarily masculine arenas. However, he cut it nicely and charged significantly less than my original hairdresser, so I continued to go there for my 'trims'.

In February 2012, I wanted another change, and I decided to add some colour. Ola however, would not dye it, because he was 'strictly cuts'. So despite my misgivings, I contacted my previous hairdresser, and asked if she would colour it for me, as when she did it for others it always looked good. I also assumed that she would have calmed down from my previous visit.

When I arrived in the shop, a student was filming. She was interested in the processes involved in creating different hairstyles for Black women, and the film was a part of her Masters' thesis. At the time, my hairdresser was attaching a 'weave' to a woman's hair, and explaining the stages involved. Soon she stopped to wash and dye my hair, and again, described the process. As I was walking towards the dryer, she commented to the student that 'short and natural hairstyles weren't 'in'. Instead, 'Black women should have long flowing hair'. The lady who was having her weave inserted agreed and said 'you have to do these things to be beautiful'. These comments were clearly aimed at me and my hairstyle choice.

Their attitudes infuriated me and I was mortified because the exchange had been caught on camera. If my hair had not been wet with the dye, I would have left. Yet I could not let this go. Thus, in clipped tones I stated that people can choose to have their hair in any style that they wish, and that weaves were not 'quite my bag'. Moreover, hair used for weaves often came from Chinese or Indian women, so that they could provide financially for their families, which did not sit well with me. In response, I received a chorus of cussing and drawn out teeth sucking. I never returned to that salon.

After a Facebook rant about this experience, I reflected on issues emerging from it. For instance, my stylist's comments clearly demonstrated how the continual reinforcement of hegemonic beauty ideals affect the Black hair industry. Sometimes there is a failure to acknowledge that clients may want alternatives and that, as Johnson (2009 unpaginated) notes 'Black women have the right to wear their hair however they please'. Regardless of what hairdressers think of our choices, it is important to respect them and not impose their views. However, refusal to recognise this can be a bone of contention between clients and hairdressers.

The rude, dismissive way in which I was treated also bothered me. Usually at work, we manage how we display our emotions and communicate, which as Arlie Hochschild (1983) notes, is an element of emotional labour. In some industries, for instance debt collecting, it is considered acceptable to display emotions such as aggression, as it is perceived that such an approach is more likely to frighten people into paying up. This would not work in areas such as beauty therapy, however. Instead, these areas require the skilful display of emotions in a positive manner, for instance by smiling, being caring and polite (Fineman 1996 in Torien and Kitzinger 2007:646), and generally respecting clients' needs. Obviously in these environments, we as customers are essential to the generation of profits, so the way in which we are treated is critical to our perceptions about service. (Torien and Kitzinger 2007). Yet, these issues were clearly not considered in my experience on that day. The incivility that I encountered might have resulted from my stylist being overworked, because her salon is often busy. To this end, Hocshchild (1983) acknowledges that in hectic and demanding working environments, it is not uncommon for employees to display negative emotions, often due to stress. Conversely, it may have been because I had been going to the salon for a considerable amount of time, and for the most part we had a friendly, open relationship, so perhaps she felt that she was able to say whatever she liked. However, for me, she had clearly overstepped the mark, hence my refusal to return.

'A chicken run or my hair done? The choice isn't always mine' : Time, power and the salon experience:

Time spent waiting for stylists is another issue affecting customer experiences at Black salons. As noted previously the wait is often a long one. Admittedly, there are some personal benefits to this, as it allows me the opportunity to stop and indulge in some life planning. The salons are also a social space where stylists and clients can banter/debate about issues affecting African and Caribbean communities, here and 'back home', and watch and exchange

Nollywood (Nigerian/West African) films. Thus, essentially, Black salons are, as Bryant Alexander (2003:105) explains, a useful place for 'socio-cultural interactions', and 'integral and specific cultural sites within the Black community' , which in many respects mirror a 'constructed community for social and intellectual talk on agreed issues'.

Nada Algharabali (2014) compares her experiences in British and Kuwaiti beauty salons. In doing so, she recognises the existence of cultural differences between the two. More specifically she observes 'varying degree [s] in the ratio of hair-care, transactional communication and small talk that takes place during service encounters'. Within Kuwaiti owned salons, much time is spent discussing 'the latest societal goings on, asking personal questions or engaging in topic talk, or storytelling' (Algharabali 2014:36). This reflects what occurs in many Black hairdressers, and contrasts with the situation in White hairdressers, which Algharabali notes, are quieter, with greater preference for focusing on haircare advice. She also finds that there is a 'business like' approaches to dealing with clients. This is not to say that White salon owners are not friendly and/or attentive, but arguably less 'small talk' means that the hair is completed quickly, leaving the client with more time to complete other aspects of their daily business. Incidentally, at some of the salons I have been to, some clients have indicated to me, during our discussions that they would prefer it if their hairdressers operated in the same 'business like and efficient' way because it often takes a long time to be attended to. I return to this shortly.

Nevertheless, hairdressers can generally be likened to what Patricia Malcomson (2013 unpaginated) describes as 'attentive therapists' who are 'being paid to listen' and where 'a degree of discretion is assumed as is a degree of impartiality'. Despite the experience described above, I have observed that some salon owners display feelings of empathy and understanding towards their clients, although they may have their own worries to contend with. Effectively, they are adhering to 'feeling rules', which is another element of emotional labour (Hochshild 1983). Clients benefit from this experience, as they feel able to discuss personal issues freely and at great length with the salon owners and others. Moreover, because clients often have no connection beyond the salon they feel secure in the knowledge that whatever is discussed in the hairdresser stays there. To me, such experiences in this environment are also synonymous with Benedict Anderson's idea of the 'imagined community', whereby people may 'never [truly] know most of their fellow members, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion'. (Anderson 1991:6)

Lengthy periods spent in the salons are, as noted previously, a source of frustration amongst clients. It often takes a while for hair to be started, and there are constant interruptions during the process of styling. These delays are again a major topic of discussion in Black women's hair blogs. Take, for instance this post in '*The Natural Lounge'* (2010), which discusses South East London Black hairdressers:

> 'I stopped going to Black hairdressers' full stop, though my chief reason was the ridiculous length of time that they imagined that I had to spend in their salon'

In my experience, these interruptions have often been for 'chicken runs', whereby hairdressers stop to buy food from the local fried chicken shop. Once they have bought the food, time is spent eating it before returning to complete our hair. These interruptions are annoying for clients, yet, it must be acknowledged that often salons can only afford to employ a small number of stylists. Large numbers of clients coming throughout the day therefore means longer working hours, and little time to eat.

However, despite small numbers of stylists, salon owners tend to accept more clients than is manageable, which frequently results in double bookings. Sometimes they fail to inform clients of possible delays beforehand. It is also often frequently the case that those who arrive later are prioritised over others, who had booked well in advance. On one occasion, I had a four hour wait before the stylist returned to my hair. Thankfully, I was on leave and had set aside that day for my appointment. Nevertheless, it was frustrating, and I expressed my views in no uncertain terms, for which, I received a small discount.

Peter Freund and Meredith Maguire (2003:89) explain that: 'control over time – our own or other people's – is a form of power', and 'those with more power have more control over time'. Both observations resonate with my experiences of the salons, because I too, began to recognise the fact that hairdressers have a considerable amount of power over our time. To an extent, we are at their mercy as a result. Firstly, we know that while our hairdressers cannot physically restrain us from leaving the shop, we do not want to go out with incomplete hair. My hairdressers have all been located in main roads in Lewisham, so walking out with unfinished twists and no hat would certainly invite mockery. Leaving would also mean finding another hairdresser to complete it. While there are many nearby, there is the question of whether another stylist would ensure that our hair is completed to a satisfactory standard. There is also every possibility that, for the reasons discussed previously, it would take a long time for hair to be completed. We therefore have no option but to remain. Arguably, the

stylists and salon owners are aware of our situation, which makes them secure in the knowledge that we will wait, and that they will still be paid. But effectively, they are capitalising on the power that they have in these circumstances.

Nevertheless, as clients, we are not entirely powerless. In Michel Foucault's words, 'power is everywhere', and not restricted to those who seek to use it as a method of dominating those in a less powerful position. Rather, power is:

> ...diffuse rather than concentrated, embodied and enacted rather than possessed, discursive rather than purely coercive, and constitutes agents rather than being deployed by them… (Foucault 1984 in Gaventa 2003:1)

Essentially, power is not always a negative and repressive issue which forces individuals into doing things that they may not wish to. Thus, we may exercise our power by refusing to pay the full price for our hair. I and other clients have done this previously, and the stylists could not argue, due to the inconvenience we experienced. In some cases, clients paid nothing, which resulted in showdowns not unlike those enacted in the Nollywood films that we had just been watching. Negative experiences also mean that clients have the power to decide never to return to particular salons.

Yet, it is important to recognise the pressures many of these salon owners face, which in turn, may impact on what they offer to customers. In many cases, as Cynthia Forson (2013:2) correctly observes in her case study which explored Black women in business, salon owners are often female migrants, who have established these businesses so as to:

> …counter obstacles to career development that they perceive in paid employment, such as barriers to promotion, the pay gap, [and] long working hours…

Because many salons often 'serve a predominantly low income population' (Forson 2013:3), they must attract and maintain as many clients as possible, to keep the business afloat and cover basic costs, including electricity, equipment, staff wages among other things. Juggling costs is often difficult and partly explains the inadequate number of hairdressers.

Salon owners also face stiff competition from other shops located close by, which creates additional stress for them, especially if their prices are being undercut by their competitors. Where my current salon is situated, there are at least five others, who offer similar, if not lower prices. Some proprietors are extremely blatant in their attempts to prevent people from

going to their usual salons and offer even lower prices than originally advertised in their windows. As a result, they often succeed in winning clients over. I am regularly accosted by such women when I walk to my usual salon, despite reiterating that I have an appointment booked already, and that I am remaining with my current hairdresser… for now.

It is difficult not to empathise with salon owners in light of these issues. However, the poor time keeping, and negative attitudes towards clients will mean that 'consumers [will not] always stay loyal', and will travel long distances to identify what suits them, as Temitope Ogunyemi (2014 unpaginated) concluded in her research on Black hair businesses. I recently calculated that I have been to over 20 different salons in my lifetime. Admittedly, some of these changes were a result of relocation, but many were attributable to dissatisfaction with service.

Final Thoughts

Cheryl Johnson (2009 unpaginated) suggests that 'beneath each hairstyle and experience there is a deeply personal story', which I concur with. Beneath the 'scalp cut' and the Ghana braids of my childhood years lay a story about 'conformity' and pressure to present myself as the 'archetypal Ghanaian child'. The removal of the weave and relaxers, and replacement with the 'natural twists' the 'big chop' also reflect stories about the quest to 'find me'. My experiences in the salons form an important part of this story. Despite stylists' attempts to 'shame' me into wearing 'long flowy' styles (which would also make them more money), I felt empowered enough to be able to assert myself, amidst the high-grade cussing.

Spending endless hours waiting to be attended to, tells a story of power relations between clients and the stylists; the sense of powerlessness resulting from waiting be seen; exercising our power when deciding whether or not to pay stylists, depending on our experiences, and whether to remain loyal to the salon, all of which have ramifications for the business. Interactions with others' in the salons allow us to observe the 'twists and turns of life' by listening to others experiences, as well as through banter.

Although this is *my* hairstory, as indicated previously, what is written here will resonate with other Black women. Many will, for instance, relate to the nuances associated with our hairstyle choices, specifically the impact of socio-historical factors resulting in routine reminders that our hair and beauty is not 'good enough'. Like me, they may have first-hand understandings of how these ideas can also translate to the micro level, specifically in salons, whereby stylists

who have perhaps internalised ideas about the dominant notions of beauty, convey them in their 'advice' about hairstyle choices.

Using auto/biography enables these issues to be explored in depth. Furthermore, they allow for stories of marginalised groups (including Black women) to be heard (Brennan and Letherby 2015). If these narratives are told continuously, they will eventually help to challenge dominant (and negative) perceptions about who we are and our experiences as Black women (Landeira 2011).

Admittedly there are shortcomings associated with auto/biographies, because our stories are often reflected upon in hindsight, meaning that we may remember things 'in the perspective of the present' (Owusu-Kwarteng 2011:67), and perhaps not as accurately as we would like. Having said that use of auto/biography to explore our hairstories is a valuable approach, because it enables the diversities and commonalities of our experiences, as Black women, to be recognised.

There is obviously scope for further research on this area, using different approaches. One such example might be an ethnography in a hairdresser, whereby observations could be made about the surroundings, interactions between stylists and clients, who could also be interviewed. A further suggestion is to interview the stylists themselves, about their experiences as hairdressers, what informed their decisions to undertake this career, the influence of wider societal views around Black women's appearance upon the services they and possibly advice they offer to their clients. These suggestions would perhaps offer another dimension to the analysis of Black hair politics and how they operate at a micro level, specifically in the salons.

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank Professor Gayle Letherby (University of Plymouth), for her invaluable support and for introducing me to the BSA Autobiographical Group, who have been extremely welcoming and supportive of my research endeavours. Thanks also go to my line manager Professor Tracey Reynolds (University of Greenwich) for her continual encouragement and patience in my journey as an early career researcher and more recently, to Associate Professor in Sociology.

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