

Hair and its Ramifications (HAIR): A Model Describing How Hair Bias Shapes Black  
Women's Work Experiences When Wearing Natural Hair

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## Abstract

Despite the CROWN Act of 2022, which stands for Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair, current hair bias research and frameworks have not fully accounted for how hair microaggressions connect to Black women's experiences at work. Grounded in social identity theory and conservation of resources theory, we introduce the hair and its ramifications (HAIR) model, a comprehensive model on the consequences of hair-related microaggressions with a distinct focus on Black women's hair. We emphasize Black women because they are the targets of hair bias for reasons that include both their racio-ethnic status and their gender status (intersectionality) which results in their unique experience of identity threats and subsequent adverse outcomes. The HAIR model offers boundary conditions that either increase the possibility that identity threat will occur after a hair microaggression or reduce the negative impact of an identity threat on perceived inclusion. We also discuss implications related to Black women's experience when the environment devalues their natural hair and encourages them to modify their hair to meet Eurocentric standards of beauty, particularly if they want to advance within organizations. Theoretical and future research implications of the HAIR model are also offered.

*Keywords:* natural hair, hair bias, microaggressions, social identity threat, conservation of resources, intersectionality, Black women experiences

## **Hair and its Ramifications (HAIR): A Model Describing How Hair Bias Shapes Black Women's Work Experiences When Wearing Natural Hair**

“Your hair reminds me of an alpaca ... You just want to pet it” said the White male British news anchor to Dr. Zoe Williams, a Black woman medical doctor, who appears regularly on the show to report medical updates (Chilton, 2021).

According to Byrd (2014) and Pitt (2022), hair bias towards natural hairstyles is a subtle yet pervasive form of social injustice that extends to the workplace, ultimately resulting in social oppression, where entrenched and sustained discrimination and prejudices impede the progress of women and people of color. Hair bias is often expressed in the form of microaggressions which are defined as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group” (Sue et al., 2008 p. 273). Microaggressions involve insults, slights, invalidations, putdowns, and offensive behaviors that individuals from a target group experience in their interactions with those who engage in demeaning conduct (Sue et al., 2019). Microaggressions, such as the one experienced by Dr. Zoe Williams are common for Black women. For instance, Black women are 2.5 times more likely to be perceived as unprofessional due to their hair. Over 20% of Black women aged 25-34 have been sent home from work due to their hair. Furthermore, Black women with coily (e.g., tight curls) or textured hair experience double the rate of microaggressions in the workplace compared to those with straighter hair (JOY Collective, 2021; Trusty et al., 2023).

As a result of these microaggressions experienced especially by Black women, the Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair (CROWN) Act was the first anti-hair discrimination act to be passed in the United States (U.S.) House of Representatives (CROWN Act, 2022). The CROWN Act, which half of the 50 states in the U.S. have enacted (Payne-Patterson, 2024), codified into law protections against the hair bias that researchers have

written about for several years (Donahoo, 2021; Donahoo & Smith, 2022; Johnson & Bankhead, 2014; Opie & Phillips, 2015; Pitts, 2021; Rosette & Dumas, 2007). Although the CROWN Act has set forth legal precedent to address hair-based discriminatory behavior within organizations, the experiences of those marginalized by hair bias against them, particularly Black women, prevail. Scholarship on hair bias is emerging, and this research has highlighted its decrements to targets of hair bias (Koval & Rosette, 2021; Opie & Phillips, 2015; Trusty et al., 2023). Yet, the literature lacks a theoretical foundation that explains the experience of those impacted by hair bias perpetrators. Our work addresses this needed research agenda for those marginalized and with a specific focus on hair microaggressions experienced by Black women.

Consistent with previous work like Rosette and Dumas (2007), Trusty et al. (2023), and Summers et al. (2022), we concentrate on Black women as opposed to Black men. While hair also warrants consideration for Black men regarding grooming, mental health, cultural perception, and more, the experience with hair is somewhat distinct for Black women. For instance, men can opt for a short hairstyle that aligns with cultural norms as they aspire for success and positions in the workplace (Mbilishaka et al., 2020) and Black men are not as likely to be pressured to modify their natural hair in the manner that Black women tend to be. Specifically, Black women feel more pressure to straighten their natural hair so that it looks more Eurocentric whereas Black men can typically keep their Afrocentric natural hair if it is short and perceived to be neatly groomed. Therefore, Black women generally require more modifications and have higher expectations to adhere to Eurocentric beauty norms compared to Black men (Lashley, 2020).<sup>1</sup>

Black women and their hair represent a stigmatized identity, which refers to persons affiliated with a particular group that is presumed to be inferior, resulting in a tainted identity

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to note that we have been unable to find any statistics on the CROWN Act web site about Black men's experiences with Afrocentric hair. Likewise, research articles with a focus on Black men's hair are lacking. Some Black men must certainly be experiencing hair bias, but research has not yet focused on them and future research should do so.

that makes for problematic inclusion (or exclusion) in society (Goffman, 1963). Dawson et al. (2019) state that attributes which are perceived as different from the social norms are often given negative labels, and people associated with those labels become targets of bias and discrimination. Black women's hair has been subjected to years of classification, ridicule, and ostracism in the U.S., Caribbean, Africa, and wherever else African people (or people of African ancestry) reside (Alubafi et al., 2018; McGill Johnson et al., 2017; Rosette & Dumas, 2007). We argue that hair bias, negative stereotypes or attitudes consciously or unconsciously directed towards Black women with natural or textured hair (McGill Johnson et al., 2017) expressed as a microaggression, results in their experiencing identity threats. Identity threat emerges when the impression of someone's in-group is threatened by the triggering of negative group stereotypes, or by the stigmatization of the in-group (Martiny & Nikitin, 2019). More specifically, identity threat is defined as "a set of psychological concerns pertaining to the value of one's identity in a setting, including worries about authenticity and belonging as well as concerns about being devalued, disrespected, stereotyped, and marginalized in a setting" (Kroeper et al., 2022, p. 400). Our work offers a theoretical framework to better understand the experience of hair bias against Black women expressed in the form of microaggressions, articulating the threat and strained experience that impacts important outcomes, as well as highlighting critical boundary conditions that can further prevent bias from prevailing against Black women and foster identity safety (Emerson & Murphy, 2014).

In this conceptual paper, we examine the experience of Black women and their hair as they experience intersectionality because of their traditionally lower social status due to both sex and race (McKinsey & Company, 2022; World Economic Forum, 2022). Intersectionality acknowledges the influence of multiple social identities a person possesses (Crenshaw, 2018; Triana et al., 2021). This allows for a nuanced view of the experiences of people who hold two or more stigmatized identities, such as Black women (Woods-Giscombé & Lobel, 2008).

To assess the intersectionality of Black women's experiences with hair bias, this investigation combines social identity theory (SIT; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel, 1981) with conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) to explain the process of experiencing hair microaggressions for Black women. SIT theory explains that people derive their self-esteem from the social groups to which they belong (Tajfel, 1981). COR theory is a theory of stress which explains that people feel stressed when their resources are threatened, but they also use their pool of available resources to (e.g., relationships) to handle encountered stressors (Hobfoll, 1989). We propose that the main effect between microaggressions and work outcomes is sequentially mediated by identity threat and inclusion. This delineates a series of mediation processes experienced by Black women with natural hair following a microaggression. In the first stage of our conceptual model, we use SIT to explain how hair microaggressions trigger identity threat as well as moderators that exacerbate identity threat. This encompasses Propositions 1-5. In the second stage of our conceptual model, we use COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2011), along with the concept of identity safety from SIT (Emerson & Murphy, 2014), which highlights a set of moderating factors that provide additional resources for individuals to draw needed support that can mitigate the harmful effects of identity threat. This encompasses Propositions 6-11. By utilizing both SIT and COR theory, we offer a more holistic model of Black women's experience in the workplace when wearing natural hair.

Theoretically, the Hair and its Ramifications (HAIR) model that we develop represents a notable advancement in the existing academic literature on hair bias in the workplace (Dawson et al., 2019; Donahoo, 2021; Koval & Rosette, 2021; Opie & Phillips, 2015; Peluchette & Karl, 2023; Powell, 2018; Rosette & Dumas, 2007; Summers et al., 2022; Trusty et al., 2023). By utilizing SIT, the HAIR model presents a comprehensive understanding of hair bias against Black women (e.g., hair microaggressions) and identity threat for Black women. The model examines individual differences that can create identity salience

(Petriglieri, 2011) and exacerbate identity threat when microaggressions against their hair are detected. The model also assesses moderators that can create identity safety (which allows minorities to fulfill their potential without being derailed by identity concerns; Emerson & Murphy, 2014) to mitigate the harmful effects of identity threat and boost Black women's perceptions of inclusion at work and, ultimately, individual employee outcomes (e.g., reduced stress, increased well-being, job attitudes, and expected career trajectory). Also, by incorporating COR theory, we build a more nuanced and specific narrative around hair bias and its effects, and we examine the resources that enable Black women to overcome this bias.

The HAIR model addresses the call made by Newman and colleagues (2017) which urges researchers to utilize alternate theories, in addition to social identity, to explain organizational phenomena. Importantly, we pinpoint factors that can help Black women overcome hair bias. Our model provides needed insight into the mechanisms (i.e., the mediators based on SIT) between hair microaggressions and individual outcomes for Black women, which are currently a black box.<sup>2</sup> Only when you understand the process that is taking place can you begin to address the problem and mitigate the harm experienced by Black women through the use of resources underlying COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989). Pinpointing both problems and solutions is powerful because it can provide agency to Black women when solutions are identified to mitigate the problem of hair microaggressions. In that regard, our comprehensive theoretical framework provides a conceptual grounding to assess moderators that can shield Black women from, or at least lessen, the harmful impact of identity threat for individuals and organizations alike.

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<sup>2</sup> For a complete list of research papers published to date on the subject of hair bias and microaggressions against Black women's hair, see the Online Appendix.

## Conceptual Background

### The Context of Hair Bias and Microaggressions Against Black Women's Hair

To begin, there is ample evidence, both historical and contemporary, that hair bias exists (Alubafi et al., 2018; Byrd & Tharps, 2001). The Perception Institute in New York reported that participants scored Black women's natural hair as less appealing, less attractive, and less professional than the natural hair of those who are not Black (e.g., straight hair) (McGill et al., 2017). Black women endure hair bias, signaling to them that their natural hair is inferior (Koval & Rosette, 2021; McGill et al., 2017; Opie & Phillips, 2015). "Hair is a marker of femininity, so to restrict or demean one's hair is a direct attack on women's being" (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014, p. 92).

**Intersectional stereotyping.** We draw on Crenshaw's (1989) seminal work on intersectionality which focuses on the need to examine multiple identities such as race and gender together to account for multiple sources of oppression and disadvantage. Intersections are the associations of multiple social categories underscored by power, privilege, and disadvantage, resulting in perplexing inequalities (Gray et al., 2017; Ruiz Castro & Holvino, 2016). Intersectionality extends over social categories such as race, gender, social class, sexual orientation, religion, and physical ability (Rosette et al., 2018). SIT explains how people make sense of who they are depending upon their social group membership (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Considering multiple group identities (e.g., sex and race) results in unique experiences separate from their originating categories, and this shapes individual identity (Kaufmann & Derry, 2023; Rosette et al., 2018). Moreover, Black women negotiate how they present their racial identities (Rosette & Dumas, 2007), with some even engaging in hair straightening practices (Chapman, 2007), as hair is a salient representation of the intersections of their gender and race.

Intersectionality also affects how Black women are perceived by others. When using an intersectional lens, Black women as a subgroup, for example, are explicitly perceived

as *Black women* due to expectations on perceivers to categorize this subgroup in the general sense, neither as *Black* nor as *women* (Petsko et al., 2022; Ponce de Leon & Rosette, 2022; Raver & Nishii, 2010). Black women as a subgroup are profiled as Afrocentric which is far off from Eurocentrism and are surpassingly associated with racial stereotypes when viewed through the lens of race (Bhattacharyya & Berdahl, 2023; Petsko et al., 2022; Rabelo et al., 2021). Ponce de Leon and Rosette (2022) state that Black women's two-part-subordinated identities may intensify the disadvantages experienced compared to White women or Black men. In a separate study, Rosette et al. (2018) used an intersectional framework to compare the different stereotypes attributed to White, Asian, and Black women. Among the stereotypes associated with Black women, the findings suggest that natural hair is a significant predictor of Black identity and may accentuate stereotypes assigned to Black women, such as a lack of competence, therefore restricting their perceived employability (Maddox, 2014; Opie & Phillips, 2015; Rosette et al., 2018).

Although each identity of Black women carries a stigma, the blended intersection resulting in Black women's textured curly and/or coily hair also carries a social stigma (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014; Petsko et al., 2022). This stigma is rooted in Eurocentric beauty standards that valorize and prioritize straight hair over curly or coiled textures (Lashley, 2020; Rogers et al., 2022). The stark contrast between Black women's natural hair and Eurocentric ideals contributes to a stigma which encompasses racial, gender and cultural biases, positioning natural curly and coily hair at the lower end of the beauty continuum (Ponce de Leon & Rosette, 2022; Robinson, 2011; Trusty et al., 2023). Research indicates that Black women who choose to wear their hair naturally often encounter prejudice and bias in both social and professional settings (Johnson & Bankhead, 2013; Ndichu & Upadhaya, 2019). The decision to embrace natural hair, therefore represents a significant challenge to ingrained workplace expectations and involves navigating complex social and organizational norms (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). This

process is not merely symbolic but is laden with socio-cultural significance, as it challenges these norms and renegotiates identity markers often associated with race and ethnicity (Byrd & Tharps, 2021; Ndichu & Upadhyaya, 2019).

Furthermore, Black women's intersectional identities result in them being "othered" in a way which creates a psychological distance between them and women of other racial subgroups (Bhattacharyya & Berdahl, 2023; Ponce de Leon & Rosette, 2022; Rosette et al., 2018; Trope & Liberman, 2010). This othering manifests in various forms within the workplace, which is often structured around dominant White and male norms (Rabelo et al., 2021). Black women face both the glass ceiling and the "concrete wall" of racial discrimination, resulting in lower wages and fewer opportunities for advancement (Smith & Nkomo, 2021). They encounter microaggressions, lack of opportunities, and underrepresentation in leadership roles, contributing to a hostile work environment and hindering career advancement (Holder et al., 2015; Rosette et al., 2018). Consequently, Black women must navigate a complex landscape of stereotypes, devoting significant emotional and cognitive resources to manage their professional identities while contending with the psychological toll of being othered (Hall et al., 2011; Smith & Nkomo, 2021). The workplace often fails to accommodate or validate their unique experiences and perspectives, leading to perceptions of exclusion and invisibility (Holder et al., 2015). Moreover, intersectional stereotypes can exacerbate negative perceptions and treatment of Black women further impacting their social and professional experiences (Petsko et al., 2022; Steele, 1997). Therefore, such intersectional stereotyping from others results in negative consequences for Black women as they form their identity.

## **Theory and Propositions**

### **Hair Microaggressions and Identity Threats**

Microaggressions come in three forms: microassaults which are blatant, deliberate

slights or affronts (such as touching a Black women's hair), microinsults which are rude comments that disrespect a person's race or identity (such as being told their hair reminds them of an alpaca), and microinvalidations which are attempts to discredit or minimize the experience of a minority group member (such as saying hair texture does not matter) (Sue et al., 2008). Microaggressions, which often take place as interpersonal interactions within organizations, come in the form of hair-related incidents which then present identity threat for Black women.

Based on SIT, which states that people derive their identity from the social groups to which they belong (Hogg & Abrams, 1988), we propose links between hair microaggressions and personal and professional identity threat for Black women. We note that microaggressions can threaten both personal and professional identity for Black women. An overlap exists between personal identity and professional identity, as both encompass aspects of an individual's self-concept shaped by internal and external factors (Gecas & Burke, 1995). Personal identity threat occurs when an individual's core characteristics or sense of self are challenged or devalued, often in relation to social identities such as gender or ethnicity (Dalton & Huang, 2014). Professional identity threat, conversely, pertains to challenges or devaluation specific to one's occupational or professional role, such as barriers to entry or questioning of professional competence (Mitchell et al., 2011; Zikic & Richardson, 2015). The primary distinction between these threats lies in their focus: personal identity threats target broader aspects of self-concept, while professional identity threats specifically relate to work-related identity and occupational roles (Mitchell et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2023).

We propose that Black women navigate the workplace and their own identity as professionals, in part, by conforming to social standards of Eurocentric beauty which allows others to see past their hair and only see them for their professional skills. Thus, Black women are compelled to engage in image management where they attempt to create positive

perceptions in others that they are professionally competent (Roberts, 2005). Black women sometimes attempt to conform to Eurocentric standards of beauty at work to avoid being stigmatized (Goffman, 1963) and to encourage the likelihood that they would be treated as the usual employee with the typical hair style rather than potentially facing stigma and discrimination due to a natural hair style (Abbey et al., 2011; Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Despite that, a study conducted by Dawson et al. (2019) reports that even in cases where Black women wear hair styles that would be considered professional when worn by other races, the texture of Black hair seems to make the hair style unacceptable. People who are aware of such societal devaluations or believe they hold a stigmatized identity experience identity threat (McGonagle & Barnes-Farrell, 2014).

A vivid example of hair bias is illustrated in the documentary “Hair Tales” where Oprah Winfrey was interviewed about her own experience with hair bias during her early career as a news anchor.

"... shortly after I came to Baltimore with my lovely wash and set that everybody thought was a wig, I was told that my hair was too thick. ... I said, well, this is my hair, and he said ... Is there any way you can get it straighter?" Oprah Winfrey (2022).

Oprah Winfrey further described that they wanted her to go to a French salon to have them “fix” her hair. The rejection of her natural hair by her producer not only threatened her broader aspects of self-concept (i.e., personal identity threat), but also shook her confidence as a professional in the news anchor role and demonstrated doubts as to whether she was considered an appropriate anchor. Her hair had nothing to do with her ability and expertise, but the producer could not see past her hair style. This is an example of how hair bias is positively associated with Black women’s individual identity threat both personally and professionally.

Hair microaggressions in the workplace can significantly impact Black women's personal and professional identity, leading to increased identity threat (JOY Collective, 2021;

Trusty et al., 2023). Research has shown that experiences of racial microaggressions create a hostile work environment, encouraging Black women to engage in identity shifting to navigate predominantly white organizations (Dickens & Chavez, 2017). This constant pressure to alter their behavior and natural appearance to fit in threatens their personal and professional identity (Dickens & Chavez, 2017).

*Proposition 1: Microaggressions rejecting Black women's natural hair will be positively related to Black women's personal identity threat (a) and professional identity threat (b).*

We now turn our attention to factors that may exacerbate the relationship between hair microaggressions and both personal and professional identity threats. This includes skin color, gender identity, racio-ethnic identity, and the combination of these two identities.

### **Moderators (Individual Differences) that Can Exacerbate Identity Threat**

**Skin color.** Warner et al. (1941) described that attractiveness stereotypes and color preference are more pronounced against women with darker skin. Chaney et al. (2021) report double jeopardy for Black women, as they are stigmatized for both their racial and gender identities. Furthermore, Thompson and Keith (2001) argue that darker-skinned Black women experience “triple jeopardy” due to their racial, gender, and skin tone identities, which all adversely damage their self-esteem.

Colorism is a classification of Black people that privileges lighter skin over darker skin (Glenn, 2009; Hunter, 2002). Skin color categorization takes place through the evaluation of light skin over dark skin and perceiving certain facial features positively and others negatively (Hunter, 2002). Given that light skin is closely attributed to Eurocentric skin, which is associated with competence, lighter-skinned Blacks are perceived as more appealing and thus generally more advantaged educationally and economically compared to darker-skinned Blacks (Hunter, 2002). A study by Harrison and Thomas (2009) illustrates that the privilege

one receives extends beyond one's race but is deeply rooted in one's skin color, where darker skin equates to less access and fewer privileges. In other words, colorism creates identity groups that have an impact on opportunity (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Skin color is highly correlated with other physical features such as hair texture, lip fullness, nose broadness, and eye color (Glenn, 2009; Thompson & Keith, 2001). Individuals with multiple stigmatized identity dimensions will likely have a heightened identity salience and identity threat (Petriglieri, 2011), because they report experiencing significantly more unfair treatment and more significant stereotype concerns than individuals with one stigmatized identity dimension (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Chaney et al., 2021; Hogg & Abrams, 1988).

The effects of colorism on Black people have been well documented. For example, Hunter (2007) discusses how, during slavery, Black people with light skin and straighter hair were often afforded privileges not extended to Black people with darker skin or naturally textured hair. Hierarchies based on skin color were then developed where organizational leaders, teachers, and ministers were inordinately men and women with light skin and straight hair (Hunter, 2007; Rabelo et al., 2021). The influence of colorism persists today, and we anticipate that it will exacerbate the effect of both hair microaggressions on personal and professional identity for Black women because it heightens identity salience (Petriglieri, 2011). If hair is a woman's stamp of beauty, often described as their "crown and glory" (Clarke-Jeffers et al., 2024), Black women with natural hair get almost none of it, and the darker their hue, the more likely they are typically perceived as the least beautiful among women (Powell, 2018). Indeed, hair beauty standards that elevate Eurocentric straight hair combined with societal rewards for lighter skin makes it particularly challenging for darker skinned Black women who elect to wear their hair in a natural fashion (Randle, 2015).

*Proposition 2: Having a darker skin color will strengthen the harmful effects of microaggressions rejecting Black women's natural hair on their personal identity*

*threat (a) and professional identity threat (b).*

**Gender identity, racio-ethnic identity, and the combination of these two identities.**

Another factor determining how much identity threat one experiences because of hair bias and/or microaggressions is one's level of gender and racial identity. Identity means an individual's answer to the question, "who am I?" and helps them understand how work-life demands affect their individual and collective self-conceptions and self-representations (Atewologun & Sealy, 2014). Racio-ethnicity is a term coined by Cox (1990) which indicates the membership of biologically or culturally distinct groups reflective of differences in privilege in society that affect performance, satisfaction, or progress in organizations.

With respect to gender identity and racio-ethnic identity, SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), would predict that a significant portion of one's self-concept and self-esteem are derived from group memberships. People generally wish to associate positive characteristics with their in-group (those who are like them) and negative characteristics with their out-group (those who are different from them). For people who identify strongly with their gender or their racio-ethnic background as Black women, the importance of those characteristics will make the situation more salient (Wilson & Liu, 2003). Therefore, we propose that Black women who have strong gender and racio-ethnic identity are more likely to detect a threat to their personal and professional identities when they experience microaggressions rejecting their natural hair (Hogg & Abrams, 1988).

Microaggressions, as subtle forms of bias and discrimination, can erode an individual's sense of security and acceptance in various environments (Bullock et al., 2023). The constant need to monitor others' perceptions of their identities prevents individuals from truly expressing themselves, hindering their ability to fully engage in their surroundings (Bullock et al., 2023). For individuals with multiple marginalized identities, microaggressions can ultimately lead to increased stress, exacerbating feelings of inauthenticity and diminishing their

sense of belonging (Hall et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2021; Shore & Chung, 2022). Thus, identity threat should be stronger for those who care deeply about being a woman, being Black, and being both (a Black woman), compared to others who do not put a heavy emphasis on these characteristics. The following propositions emanate:

*Proposition 3: Gender identity (a), racio-ethnic identity (b), and both gender and racio-ethnic identities together (c) will strengthen the harmful effects of microaggressions rejecting Black women's natural hair on their personal identity threat.*

*Proposition 4: Gender identity (a), racio-ethnic identity (b), and both gender and racio-ethnic identities together (c) will strengthen the harmful effects of microaggressions rejecting Black women's natural hair on their professional identity threat.*

### **Identity Threat as a Mechanism between Microaggressions and Perceived Inclusion**

According to Pearce and Randel (2004), workplace social inclusion refers to the degree to which one experiences a sense of belonging and feels included by others in the organization. This concept encompasses not only an individual's perception of their place within the organization but also their interactions with colleagues and leaders. Furthermore, social inclusion encompasses an employee's sense of being valued within their work group (Shore et al., 2011). This valuation satisfies their fundamental needs for belongingness and uniqueness, while providing them with opportunities to express authenticity (Randel et al., 2018; Shore et al., 2021). Perceived inclusion and exclusion, while manifesting differently in employee behaviors and outcomes, fundamentally represent opposite ends of an employee's sense of belonging in the workplace (Rezai et al., 2020). The measurement of inclusion and exclusion often relies on similar dimensions and scales, further supporting the idea that they are part of the same continuum (Rezai et al., 2020).

Racial minorities are especially sensitive to environmental cues that signal inclusion given the historical legacy of them being either denied access to companies or provided

limited access through occupational segregation (Emerson & Murphy, 2014; Pettigrew, 1975; Steele, 1997). Given the intersectional nature consisting of both their race and gender, bias expressed as a form of microaggression becomes particularly salient for Black women as they try to appraise the work environment for evidence of inclusion or the lack thereof (Petriglieri, 2011). For Black women experiencing hair microaggressions from someone with hair bias against them, it is indeed a powerful signal that their identity is devalued (Donahoo, 2021; Opie & Phillips, 2015; Pitts, 2021). Given that such microaggressions—caused identity threats— are harmful to intergroup dynamics (Bagci et al., 2023), we expect them to negatively impact Black women with natural hair's subsequent perceived inclusion at work.

The link between Eurocentric beauty and professional aesthetics, the absence of textured hair from mainstream cultural representation, and the negative stereotypes associated with natural Black hair have socialized an automatic 'othering' of Black textured hair (McGill Johnson et al., 2017; Trope & Liberman, 2010). This creates identity salience (Petriglieri, 2011) and results in the categorization of Black women in the out group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). From an early age, most Black girls mention their hair as a part of their identity in a society that pressures them to adhere to customs where Eurocentric hair is considered more beautiful than Afrocentric hair in its natural form. Thus, Black girls must navigate a complex world that characterizes the straight hair of White girls as the gold standard (Rogers et al., 2022). These perceptions do not go away in adulthood, and, in fact, the ramifications of these negative perceptions tend to increase as Black girls develop into Black women. Black women receive feedback that their natural hair is “nappy” and unacceptable and must deal with the outcomes of such perceptions (Robinson, 2011). According to SIT (Hogg & Abrams, 1988), when a Black woman's hair does not align with social norms (i.e., straightened Eurocentric hair), their hair will likely result in negative social comparisons that threaten their identity (Breakwell, 1983; Griffiths & Haughton, 2021; Jaspal & Breakwell, 2014).

Given that hair is a major factor comprising Black identity (Williams, 2019), this ongoing diminishing of Black women's identity related to their natural hair in the form of microaggressions results in heightened levels of identity threat. It is through this experience of identity threat that signals to Black women with natural hair are transmitted. These messages communicate that they are perceived to be of low status by the biased individual (often of higher status) and that they will be excluded (Bataille & Vough, 2022). After such a microaggression that rejects their identity, it comes as no surprise that experiencing an identity threat will typically cause Black women to feel a sense of exclusion rather than inclusion (Leary, 2001, 2010; Slepian & Jacoby-Senghor, 2021). This sense of exclusion can have profound implications for Black women's professional experiences and self-perception. The identity threat created by hair microaggressions can establish barriers to authentic self-expression, as Black women may feel compelled to conform to dominant Eurocentric workplace norms (Donahoo & Smith, 2022; Pillemer, 2024). This struggle often incurs a personal cost, with Black women reporting a "personal price for authenticity" as they navigate Eurocentric standards of beauty within their professional environment, resulting in feelings of isolation, marginalization, and a lack of belonging (Acosta, 2018; Dortch & Patel, 2017; Iheduru-Anderson et al., 2020). These experiences can erode feelings of acceptance and value, particularly in achievement-oriented contexts such as educational institutions and workplaces, where social identity plays a crucial role (Walton & Brady, 2017). The undervaluation of a significant aspect of one's identity in the workplace, such as hair, can compromise self-perception, self-acceptance, ultimately undermining feelings of belonging (Donahoo & Smith, 2022; Good et al., 2012; Smith & Griffiths, 2022). This aligns with research demonstrating the adverse effects of racial microaggressions on students' sense of belonging in academic settings, which can be extended to professional environments (Sarsar et al., 2023; Walton & Brady, 2017). The challenge of balancing authenticity and

belongingness with professional expectations leaves Black women vulnerable to feelings of isolation and exclusion in their work environments (Hall et al., 2011; Iheduru-Anderson, et al., 2022). In sum, we assert that Black women with natural hair experiencing identity threat will show subsequent low perceptions of inclusion (i.e., exclusion) at work because they fear that they will not be accepted and/or they seek to avoid potential perpetrators of microaggressions that caused the identity threat in the first place.

*Proposition 5: Personal identity threat (a) and professional identity threat (b) will be mediating mechanisms between microaggressions rejecting Black women's natural hair and perceived inclusion.*

Next, we rely on COR theory to present a set of moderators that can mitigate the harmful impacts of identity threat on perceived inclusion. These moderators include organizational acceptance of natural hair, allyship, previous career success, and coping strategies.

### **Moderators that Lessen the Harmful Effects of Identity Threat on Perceived Inclusion**

Identity threat is a psychological process in which individuals anticipate others devaluing or treating them differently based on their social identity (Dahm et al., 2019; Leigh & Melwani, 2022). In the previous section, we described how identity threat can reduce perceived inclusion for Black women. We now focus on identity safety factors that can serve as resources (Hobfoll, 1989) which allow Black women to overcome the stressor of identity threat at work (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), thereby attenuating the damaging effects of identity threat on perceived inclusion. We start with organizational acceptance of natural hair.

**Organizational acceptance of natural hair.** Social identity research states that organizations and their workgroups also have an influence on an individual's identity formation (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Organizations serve as a basis for categorization and thereby have an impact on their members' social identity and self-concept (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Therefore,

a worker's perception that a company should be afforded high status and is different than other companies in terms of its goals, principles, policies, and practices will often impact an organizational member's positive sense of self (Hogg & Terry, 2000).

An important boundary condition to examine regarding natural hair bias is whether the organization follows CROWN Act principles to practice acceptance toward Black women's natural hair. Organizations that accept natural hair provide Black women with a source of social support in the event that they experience hair bias and/or microaggressions and the resulting identity threat (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Such beliefs in acceptance of natural hair would send cues to Black women that their hair is beautiful and accepted so that they can bring their full selves to work and feel good about their identity (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). This is consistent with more recent identity work around identity safety, or the ability for racial minorities to bring their full selves and thrive in the workplace without being derailed due to concerns around their personal identity (Emerson & Murphy, 2014). The CROWN Act views Black hair as beautiful and professional (CROWN Act, 2022) and recognizes that Eurocentric beauty standards sow the seed of bias against Afrocentric hair (Donahoo & Smith, 2022). For organizations that recognize that hair bias and/or microaggressions place a burden on Black women, we expect that the interactions within workplaces will be more accepting of Black women as opposed to interactions within organizations that do not embrace natural hair. To the contrary, if an organization implements a policy or fosters a climate that is not supportive of Black women's natural hair, we argue that the identity threats Black women experience (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Petriglieri, 2011; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) will reduce their perceived inclusion (Branscombe et al., 1999). These identity threats compromise Black women's sense of belongingness and create an inability to express their authentic selves at work, resulting in a struggle to balance being true to themselves while maintaining a professional image (Pillemer, 2024; Shore et al., 2021; Verkuyten et al., 2019).

The CROWN Act (2022) provides legal support to Black women and Black men to wear their natural hair within institutions such as schools and workplaces (Donahoo, 2021). For that reason, organizational support for CROWN Act principles (e.g., acceptance of natural hair) will create a more inclusive environment for Black women with natural hair. To the extent that organizations accept natural hair, they provide resources to mitigate the harmful identity threat effects stemming from hair bias on Black women (King et al. 2023). We predict:

*Proposition 6: For organizations that do embrace acceptance toward natural hair, Black women's personal identity threat (a) and professional identity threat (b) will be less negatively associated with perceived inclusion than for organizations that do not embrace acceptance toward natural hair.*

Next, we describe additional factors that provide identity safety and thus attenuate the effects that Black women's personal and professional identity threats have on perceived inclusion.

**Allyship.** The definition of allyship has evolved over time. Traditionally, allies are individuals from privileged groups who actively engage in efforts to promote the well-being of marginalized communities (Preston et al., 2022). Allyship involves actions taken by individuals belonging to the majority group to eliminate oppression in their personal and professional lives by extending support and advocating for the marginalized group (Washington & Evans, 1991). For example, "Black female leaders found they perceived allyship from their White female counterparts when they explicitly engaged in discussions about race, highlighting that the experiences of Black women are unique and different from their own, (Domingue, 2015)" (Johnson & Pietri, 2022, p. 456).

More recently, research has proposed that anyone can be an ally. For example, Preston et al. (2024) explain that beneficiaries of allyship can receive support from others in solidarity with them (whether the ally is from a privileged group or from a minority group themselves).

Moreover, the minority group member serving as the ally can be from some other marginalized group or possibly from the beneficiary's own group (Jun et al., 2023; Preston et al., 2024). Allies can also come from any part of the organizational hierarchy. It can be any individuals speaking out against bias (e.g., leader, coworker, third party bystander) who can create identity safety (Hilderbrand et al., 2020) and bolster resources (King et al., 2023).

Leaders can also make powerful allies (Creary, 2024). Leaders possess structural power, making them potential allies for marginalized groups by providing identity safety (Emerson & Murphy, 2014; Preston et al., 2022). A Black woman with natural hair might be impacted less by identity threats if their supervisor supports them wearing natural hair and serves as an ally for them when others make derogatory comments that lead to the identity threat. Black women leaders wearing natural hair themselves will also serve as both allies (i.e., in solidarity) to other Black women as well as role models given their structural power (Preston et al., 2024). When a leader exhibits allyship, it can have a profound impact on not only the victim of bias, but also on those who observe the situation. By showing appropriate behavior, a leader can serve as a catalyst for change within their sphere of influence and promote a culture of respect and inclusivity (Emerson & Murphy, 2014; Warren et al., 2022). This can lead to a positive shift in attitudes and behaviors (Warren et al., 2022).

We propose that true allyship behaviors will weaken the negative relationship between identity threat and perceived inclusion by increasing Black women's sense of authenticity and belongingness at work. If a company has leaders who wear natural hair or support natural hair and are allies to Black women, this provides an identity safety cue that there is social support for Black women who experience identity threat due to hair microaggressions (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Emerson & Murphy, 2014; Hobfoll, 1989; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Thus, we make the following prediction.

*Proposition 7: For Black women who have allyship toward natural hair in the*

*organization, personal identity threat (a) and professional identity threat (b) will be less negatively associated with perceived inclusion than for Black women in organizations that do not have allyship toward natural hair in the organization.*

**Previous career success.** Another buffering factor that may reduce the degree to which personal and professional identity threat for Black women damages perceived inclusion is the amount of career success those women have already had. Career success strengthened by personal resources like confidence, the support of one's network, and material resources such as wealth tends to help people be better equipped to handle stressors (Hobfoll, 1989; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Career success is evident when the desired work-related results are obtained at a specific point during a person's work-life (Guan et al., 2019). Additionally, it is characterized by the level of contentment individuals derive from both their professional and personal lives, with a particular focus on the pursuit of growth and freedom (Briscoe & Hall, 2006).

According to Ashforth and Schinoff (2016), various cues can prompt identity construction and reconstruction, including identity threats, disruptive, and/or critical events. As such, organizations can play a significant role in shaping an individual's self-perception by influencing their comprehension of themselves and their surroundings (Wu et al., 2022). The interplay between professional and personal identities is characterized by a dynamic tension, as individuals strive to belong to a group while also asserting their individuality (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel, 1981). This struggle is further complicated by situational pressures that may promote inclusion (exclusion) (Brewer, 2012). Therefore, not only do individuals explain themselves to others, but they also engage in self-explanation as they negotiate with others to establish their identities and seek affirmation (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Wu et al., 2022). However, Sherif et al. (2020) found that individuals who attain career success by possessing a high level of expertise and exhibiting good citizenship

behavior tend to be satisfied with their accomplishments and have confidence in their contributions to the profession to the point that they may not seek external affirmation and may assert their individuality. For Black women, we posit that such professional accomplishments build a sense of assuredness which can reduce the negative relationship between identity threat and perceived inclusion, leading to less detrimental experiences.

According to Rosette and Tost (2010), women who have reached the top positions in an organization are not likely to be perceived as seeking approval from other organizational members. A good example of this is Ursula Burns, the former CEO of Xerox, who is a Black woman. During the time that Burns was CEO, she always wore her hair in a relatively short Afro and was clearly not investing any time in modifying her hair to meet Eurocentric standards of beauty. Burns, a career-long Xerox employee (Ignatius, 2021), worked her way to the top, and by the time she was CEO, it was as if her hair was simply not relevant (implying identity safety; Emerson & Murphy, 2014). Thus, we make the following prediction.

*Proposition 8: For women with greater previous career success, personal identity threat (a) and professional identity threat (b) will be less negatively associated with perceived inclusion than for women with lower previous career success.*

**Coping strategies.** When experiencing identity threats in the workplace, Black women with natural hair can use various coping strategies to deal with the unpleasant event (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). We argue that microaggression-sparked social identity threats that diminish perceptions of inclusion can be weakened when they employ specific coping strategies. We propose that problem-solving focused coping strategies which are directed at addressing the social identity threat will be more effective than emotion-focused or disengagement- focused (i.e., avoidance) strategies which fail to directly confront the threat (Callan et al., 1994; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Whereas emotion-focused strategies are utilized when one feels the situation causing the identity threat is unlikely to change (e.g., continued threats to identity)

and disengagement-focused strategies involve distancing oneself from the source that triggered the identity threat (Menéndez-Espina et al. 2019, Sadeh et al., 2004; Skinner et al., 2003), problem-focused coping strategies involve adapting to the context by formulating a plan internal to the organization that includes constructive ways of handling the problem such as talking to a colleague, trying to address the problem by seeking advocacy from human resources, or confronting the source of the problem (Carver et al., 1989; Knapp et al., 1997; Jaspal et al., 2020; McFadden, 2015).

Like everyone else, Black women with natural hair seek belongingness and positive relationships at work which shapes their perceptions of inclusion (Baumeister et al., 2007). To foster a sense of inclusion in the face of social identity threats, we emphasize that an active approach to coping is an effective strategy for dealing with social identity threat events, so they do not have such detrimental effects (Mara et al., 2021; Veldman et al., 2021). Specifically, we believe problem-solving coping strategies such as involving other employees in the fight against workplace hair bias or confronting the perpetrator of hair bias themselves in an attempt reduce future discrimination will restore internal resources (Mara et al., 2021; Hobfoll, 1989) that mitigate the negative effect of social identity threat on perceived inclusion by conferring identity safety which reduces the identity threat's impact (Emerson & Murphy, 2014). In contrast, we propose that coping strategies that involve avoiding the problem (i.e., emotion-focused, disengagement-focused) will do little to diminish the negative impact of social identity threats to the perceived inclusion for Black women with natural hair (Knapp et al., 1997; Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). Thus, we make the following prediction.

*Proposition 9: For Black women who practice more problem-solving focused coping strategies, personal identity threat (a) and professional identity threat (b) will be less negatively associated with perceived inclusion than for Black women who practice emotion-focused or disengagement-focused coping strategies.*

### **Inclusion as a Mechanism Between Identity Threat and Outcomes**

Similar to a meta-analysis of the outcomes of racial discrimination at work, we grouped various individual outcomes of hair microaggressions into four major categories (Triana et al., 2015): (a) chronic stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), (b) well-being as both a psychological and a physical outcome (Pascoe & Richman, 2009), (c) job attitudes and behaviors such as performance (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990), and (d) expected career trajectory, which have important consequences for employees. Once a Black woman's personal and professional identity have been threatened at work due to hair bias expressed in the form of a microaggression, research shows that a lack of perceived inclusion is linked to higher chronic stress (Mashhady, 2025), lower well-being (Jaiswal & Dyaram, 2020), reduced job attitudes and behavior (e.g., job satisfaction; Shore et al., 2010), and diminished expected career trajectory (Chummar, 2024).

First, social identity threat can have a mental and emotional toll on those who perceive their identity as threatened (Emerson & Murphy, 2014; Kahn et al., 2017; Steele, 1997). The transactional theory of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) suggests that an individual's experience of stress depends on a continual cognitive appraisal process in which individuals are "constantly appraising stimuli within their environment" (Biggs et al., 2017, p. 352). We propose that identity threat creates low feelings of perceived inclusion which, in turn, can lead to chronic stress due to the loss of resources (Hobfoll, 1989; 2018). Inclusion, which encompasses elevated belongingness and high regard for individual uniqueness and authenticity, allows employees to maintain their distinct identities within the collective while being accorded insider status (Shore & Chung, 2022; Shore et al., 2011; Jans et al., 2012). Sadly, when social identity threat occurs, Black women often feel isolated or excluded at work which will bolster stress levels (Hall et al., 2011; Mashhady, 2025; Zambrana et al., 2021).

Second, consistent with Leigh and Melwani (2022), we propose that identity threats

also reduce identity group members' well-being. Pascoe and Richman's (2009) meta-analysis defined psychological health as an employee's ability to function at a satisfactory level of emotional and behavioral adjustment, and physical health as an employee's ability to function physically and perform daily activities without restriction. Findings show that perceiving bias at work has harmful effects on employees' mental and physical health (Pascoe & Richman, 2009). Furthermore, Emerson and Murphy (2014) state that workers experiencing identity threat have concerns about confirming the negative stereotypes held against them; this leads to increased anxiety, blood pressure, and depression which are all forms of resource loss (Hobfoll et al., 2018). The lack of perceived inclusion does not allow individuals, particularly those with marginalized social identities, to bring their authentic selves to work (Shore & Chung, 2022). When the social identity needs of perceived inclusion of stigmatized groups are undermined due to social identity threats, the implied devaluation will tax the targets' well-being (Cvetkovska et al., 2021). In sum, we propose that identity threat creates low perceived inclusion which, in turn, reduces well-being (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). However, the identity threat impact extends beyond well-being to affect job attitudes and behaviors.

Third, meta-analyses have shown that employees who experience work bias are more likely to have negative job attitudes, such as lower commitment and job satisfaction, as well as greater withdrawal behaviors, such as absenteeism and turnover intentions (Jones et al., 2016; Triana et al., 2015). Furthermore, suppression of feelings toward identity threat leads to unfavorable avoidant work behaviors in both task and interpersonal spheres including lower engagement at work (Leigh & Melwani, 2019), but we propose that this relationship can be explained by perceived inclusion. Disengagement results from exclusion (Pearce & Randel, 2004). Such exclusion in the workplace is characterized by an inhibition of authentic self-expression and a lack of belongingness (Shore & Chung, 2022; Shore et al., 2011). Consequently, Black employees holding comparable management positions as their White

colleagues report feeling less accepted (i.e., they feel excluded) by their organizations (Emerson & Murphy, 2014). Moreover, research by Triana et al. (2012) showed that feelings of inclusion in a team were positively associated with actual participation (words spoken) in the team. This is consistent with conceptual work by Cox (1993) predicting that experiencing interpersonal bias in organizations leads employees to experience lower affective attachment to organizations, higher absenteeism and turnover, and lower performance. Thus, perceived inclusion (which represent resource gains of psychological resources; Hobfoll et al., 2018) is a mechanism between identity threat and job attitudes/behaviors.

Finally, research focusing on women in the workplace has revealed that Black women face unjustifiably higher barriers in the workplace than women of any other racial group by almost every measure (Bhattacharyya & Berdahl, 2023; Ponce de Leon & Rosette, 2022; Krivkovich et al., 2022). As a result of the bias in opportunities for upward mobility, Black women have reported fewer workplace advancement opportunities (Krivkovich et al., 2022; Maddox, 2014; Rosette et al., 2018). Their experience of an identity threat when wearing natural hair at work can contribute to a lack of perceived inclusion (Jones et al., 2021). This exclusion can lead to resource loss and diminish one's expectations of future career trajectory (Hobfoll 1989; Reis et al. 2016). Conversely, when Black women's identities are accepted, embraced, and they feel like they belong, they experience a greater sense of perceived inclusion (Emerson & Murphy, 2014; Shore & Chung, 2022), which we propose mediates the relationship between identity threat and expected career trajectory. Research indicates that inclusiveness, comprised of authenticity and belongingness, is associated with resource gains (Hobfoll, 1989; Katsaros, 2022; Reis et al., 2016) and positive employee career results (Chummar, 2024). Therefore, a lack of perceived inclusion (i.e., perceived exclusion) is likely to mediate the relationship between identity threats and expected career trajectory. Thus, we predict:

*Proposition 10: Perceived inclusion will be a mediating mechanism between personal identity threat and chronic stress (a), well-being (b), job attitudes and behaviors (c), and expected career trajectory (d).*

*Proposition 11: Perceived inclusion will be a mediating mechanism between professional identity threat and chronic stress (a), well-being (b), job attitudes and behaviors (c), and expected career trajectory (d).*

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### **Discussion**

We have developed a comprehensive HAIR model that discusses Black women's hair and its ramifications. The HAIR model offers a theoretical framework to understand the experience of hair bias as it relates to Black women through an intersectional lens (Browne & Misra, 2003). This model is primarily grounded in the theoretical underpinnings of SIT but carefully utilizes tenets of COR theory. SIT is key as it provides the concepts that allow this work to explain the critical role that social groups play in the formation of an individual's self-esteem. The context of hair bias manifests as microaggressions which influence the personal and professional lives of Black women, resulting in strained experiences that threaten their social identity. These experiences then result in outcomes that we have discussed in Figure 1. We have reviewed these realities as well as highlighted critical factors that can further inhibit bias from prevailing against Black women and offer some much-needed identity safety. Thus, this work provides a theoretical foundation and key constructs that help to extend theory and research in this area of study.

### **Theoretical Implications**

We provide a comprehensive HAIR model on the consequences of microaggressions with a focus on Black women's hair since they are the targets of microaggressions for reasons

that include both their racio-ethnic status and gender status (Rosette & Dumas, 2007; Rosette et al., 2018). Moreover, we employ SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) to illuminate the downstream effect this has on their workplace experiences. To account for how intense experienced microaggressions are on identity threats for Black women with natural hair, we adopt the notion of identity salience in our social identity framework (Petriglieri, 2011). However, we depart from previous research that emphasizes contextual/social factors that directly trigger identity salience, such as a colleague asking a Black woman if they live in a neighborhood with many residents with her professional background (Diamond, 2020; Marin et al., 2009). Instead, we highlight the individual characteristics of the Black women with natural hair (e.g., skin color) that will interact with a microaggression to further activate an identity within her self-concept in such a way that will more likely result in an experienced identity threat after a hair bias related microaggression occurs. While we acknowledge individual differences of the microaggressor are relevant (e.g., White male) and warrant attention, we seek to extend theory by modeling how the individual differences of Black women with natural hair are critical contingency factors in need of consideration.

Although we consider social identity threat effects on outcomes (with inclusion as a mechanism), we further employ COR theory to offer boundary conditions in which resource gains (losses) provided by the organization, coworkers, or embedded within the recipient might help reduce (enhance) the negative impact of identity threat. The conditions serve as identity safety cues (i.e., resources) that contribute to whether Black women with natural hair will appraise a context as having more identity safety even after a microaggression has resulted in a social identity threat (Emerson & Murphy, 2014). Like Davies et al. (2005), we propose that identity safety cues are an effective tool for buffering negative social identity threat effects, but we highlight the critical role of inclusion as a mechanism in our model. In a nutshell, the perceived inclusion of Black women wearing natural hair is what impacts their attitudes and

behaviors, so it is important to understand how identity safety cues in the environment shape these inclusion perceptions in instances when they experience social identity threats. Specifically, based on COR theory, individuals who encounter social identity threat will experience resource losses when they are faced with hair bias because individuals seek a favorable identity at work to maintain their psychological resources and, when possible, even have gains in their resource pool (Hobfoll et al., 2000). Consistent with those who recommend organizations take a proactive stance in policies that embrace the CROWN Act (Koval & Rosette, 2021; Trusty et al., 2023), we posit that organizational acceptance of natural hair restores resources and buffers the downstream negative outcomes associated with social identity threat. In sum, bolstering one's resources provides identity safety and buffers the downstream negative outcomes associated with social identity threat (Emerson & Murphy, 2014). Our comprehensive approach showcases perceived inclusion as a missing mechanism that contributes to SIT while identity safety cues are informed by SIT but reinforced by COR theory's introduction of resources gains.

### **Future Research Implications Related to the HAIR Model**

Our investigation using SIT and COR theories can be extended in several important directions. In this section, we assess how the HAIR model may generalize to Black men and how it may apply to various hairstyles such as braids, twists, or Afros. Given that Black men typically have a higher social status than Black women, it is important to study whether they receive the same types of microaggressions as Black women and how that affects them in a work setting. Furthermore, COR theory would imply an extension to the general well-being of Black women to more specific health outcomes due to frequent use of hair relaxer. The harm caused by chemical exposure and the limitations that it imposes on the activities of Black women (i.e., to not ruin their hair treatment) is depleting of resources such as money, time, energy, and personal freedom (Hobfoll, 1989). Finally, researchers should examine SIT

impacts at the societal level to see how societal beauty standards imposed by the history of colonialism affect us today.

**Generalizability of the conceptual model.** Our model also applies to hair bias against men. Black men face hair bias within organizations (Mbilishaka et al., 2020). Black men face pressure to conform to Eurocentric hair styles, particularly regarding leadership roles in sports and other settings. On the field, natural hair might be more noticeable for Black men, such as in the National Football League (Gill Jr., 2016). Indeed, Afrocentric hair styles such as dreadlocks are more prevalent on the football field than the coaching staff and administrative offices, where professionalism norms are defined in a Eurocentric way (Cashmore & Cleland, 2011). For example, would the Houston Texans football team's head coach, DeMeco Ryans (Alexander, 2024), have advanced if he wore his hair in dreadlocks? It would be interesting to examine the characteristics of Black men or women who wear braids or twists and assess whether those who wear Afros or dreadlocks experience more microaggressions since those hair styles tend to be the most stigmatized (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014; Kennedy, 2020).

**Examine the harm that hair relaxer treatments cause Black women.** Although we focus on natural hair in our model, future research also needs to examine how straightening hair impacts physical well-being. Hair straighteners damage the structure of the hair fiber, which causes scalp inflammation and scarring alopecia (Wise et al., 2012). Hair straightening chemicals also cause burns to the scalp, allowing hair relaxers to enter the body (Wise et al., 2012). Regular use of chemical hair straighteners leads to allergic reactions, hair loss, thinning, itching, burns, and scars (Miranda-Vilela et al., 2014). Furthermore, the frequency of use and number of burns are positively associated with the risk of uterine leiomyomata, a benign fibroid/tumor (Miranda-Vilela et al., 2014). A longitudinal study following 59,000 African-American women also found that frequent use of hair relaxer chemicals is associated with breast cancer (Bertrand, 2021).

Research testing the HAIR model should examine how the choice of hair style affects future health because of the limitations on physical activity that certain hair styles impose. The reality is that the hair style a Black woman selects impacts whether or how she can exercise as moisture (e.g., sweat, steam) negatively impacts straightened Afrocentric hair. Thus, intense workouts, spas, and saunas may be out of the question when seeking to maintain a Eurocentric hair style. The reality of less exercise and the use of hair chemicals can negatively impact women's health in both the short-term and long-term.

**Macro-level boundary conditions.** Moreover, future research should examine the role of the family and the community in which Black women live as a societal factor that influences hair bias (Roberson et al., 2017). Others may encourage Black women to alter or straighten their natural hair as research has demonstrated that groups which are traditionally considered lower status can behave against their own interests (Umphress, Simmons, Boswell, & Triana, 2008). They may even recommend a silk press (i.e., a time consuming straightening technique without chemicals) as it provides a more “classic professional look” (Audrey, 2024), because (a) they are influenced by the society around them and the prevailing Eurocentric standards of beauty or (b) they recognize that their loved one is surrounded by a vast population driving Eurocentric standards of beauty and will be more easily accepted in organizations if they conform to such standards (Patton, 2006). A prime example is the Olympic gymnast, Simone Biles, who was attacked on social media with regard to her hair looking too natural even by those within her own community (Yates, 2024). Scholars can consider the role of the family, significant others, and community in perpetuating negative stigmas related to “good hair” versus “nappy hair” (Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly, 2018; Robinson, 2011).

Another societal-level influence on Black women's experiences with hair bias is the colonization history of the country. For example, our HAIR model could unfold differently in countries that have experienced settler colonialism versus non-settler colonialism (Odukoya,

2018). Settler colonialism involves permanent occupation by the colonizing community (Veracini, 2019). This form of colonialism entails tensions and scuffles over scarce resources and land between the settlers and the native population (Odukoya, 2018) and the strongest hierarchy of racial categories and identification (Martiny & Nikitin, 2019). Examples of settler colonialism occurred in Canada, South Africa, and the United States. Under non-settler colonialism, an indirect rule system is adopted, in that the colonizers hold power over and accumulate resources of the colonies from their own home countries through appointed bureaucrats (Odukoya, 2018). Non-settler colonialism is described as "dominated but not settled," meaning that oppression through administrative control is only practiced sustaining colonial hegemony (Odukoya, 2018). Ghana, Nigeria, and Togo are examples of non-settler colonialism. Thus, effect sizes in our model may be stronger under settler colonialism, because racism is more pronounced under settler colonialism than non-settler colonialism.

### **Practical Implications**

Most Black women experience implicit biases from external sources against their natural textured hair, and those experiences and indoctrination of race-based hair bias start as early as five years old (JOY Collective, 2021; Trusty, et al., 2023). In anticipation of hair bias and hair microaggressions, a significant number of Black women alter their hair, an expensive treatment, for job interviews, with 66% doing so (JOY Collective, 2019; Koval & Rosette, 2021). If Black women have internalized (rather than rejected) European standards of beauty, they may not recognize, resist, or report hair bias in the organization if they expect it as part of the professional environment. As a result, Black women may feel an inability to present their authentic selves due to an environment that is not welcoming of who they are and perceive a lack of belonging (Walton & Cohen, 2007). This suggests that employers and educators have a critical role in championing inclusive and racially relevant grooming policies in workplaces and schools (Pitts, 2021). It is essential for workplaces and schools to establish an approach

which challenges the biases in grooming policies directly (Pitts, 2021). It is crucial to emphasize the importance of training on implicit and explicit hair bias through sustained leadership support and commitment to ensure its effectiveness (Hite & Mc Donald, 2006). Furthermore, this training should be provided to colleagues to raise their awareness of the role they play in perpetuating hair bias against Black women (Kreiner et al., 2022; Roberson et al., 2024). Moreover, by exhibiting the resources accessible to Black women, leaders can effectively demonstrate their allyship and convey to both the women and external observers the organization's recognition and acceptance of the exceptional qualities of diverse individuals. This action communicates the organization's commitment to fostering an inclusive environment, where everyone's distinct strengths are valued and utilized to achieve shared objectives (Warren et al., 2022). Furthermore, carrying out the CROWN Act and having it be a source from which inclusion and diversity are valued will create an opportunity for Black women and girls to thrive in the workplace and at school.

Moreover, allies in leadership positions can pursue intervention strategies whereby they foster social belonging by providing in-group role models who wear natural hair. For example, when entry level and middle level Black women see other Black women (whom they deem as role models at the executive rank) with natural hair, they will likely see an organizational signal that wearing natural hair is acceptable and consistent with their personal identity, representing an identity opportunity rather than an identity threat (Bataille & Vough, 2022). The impact will be even stronger if there are several Black women with natural hair in the upper echelons, as a critical mass sends a strong signal that natural hair is acceptable (Avery et al, 2008; Inzlicht & Ben-Zeev, 2000). An organization that sends out company literature with a front page of a Black woman with natural hair among a racially diverse group of people on the cover signals to everyone that the company is truly multicultural in nature rather than colorblind or assimilation-minded (Leslie et al., 2020). Such examples should diminish the potential for

identity threat through reducing normative pressures for Black women to conform and by fostering overall inclusion (Stevens et al., 2008). However, we want to emphasize that actions must be consistent with words because having promotional materials that signal one thing and an organizational environment (or leadership action) that is in stark contrast to those materials results in perceptions of hypocrisy that could be detrimental not only to Black women but also to the organization (Greenbaum et al., 2015). An organization's actions to support natural hair must be consistent with what they say in their media and statements.

### **Conclusion**

The repercussions of how hair is worn in society are significant, particularly for Black women with natural hair. There are historical factors that have an impact on how people perceive hair that may be passed down in both spoken and unspoken ways. This can result in dispositions about what is socially and professionally acceptable regarding hair and what is not. For Black women, there are pressures to conform to what is expected with regards to one's hair style. If interventions are not implemented, the bias that places White and European hair at a higher status than Black and Afrocentric hair will persist. Further, if Black women are not adept at coping, the risk of being stifled or harmed in personal and professional levels is high. Sadly, hair bias can lead to chronic stress, burnout, and other damaging personal and professional outcomes. This research provides an important framework to help move forward as we seek to overcome this unfortunate conundrum related to the workplace experiences of Black women with natural hair.

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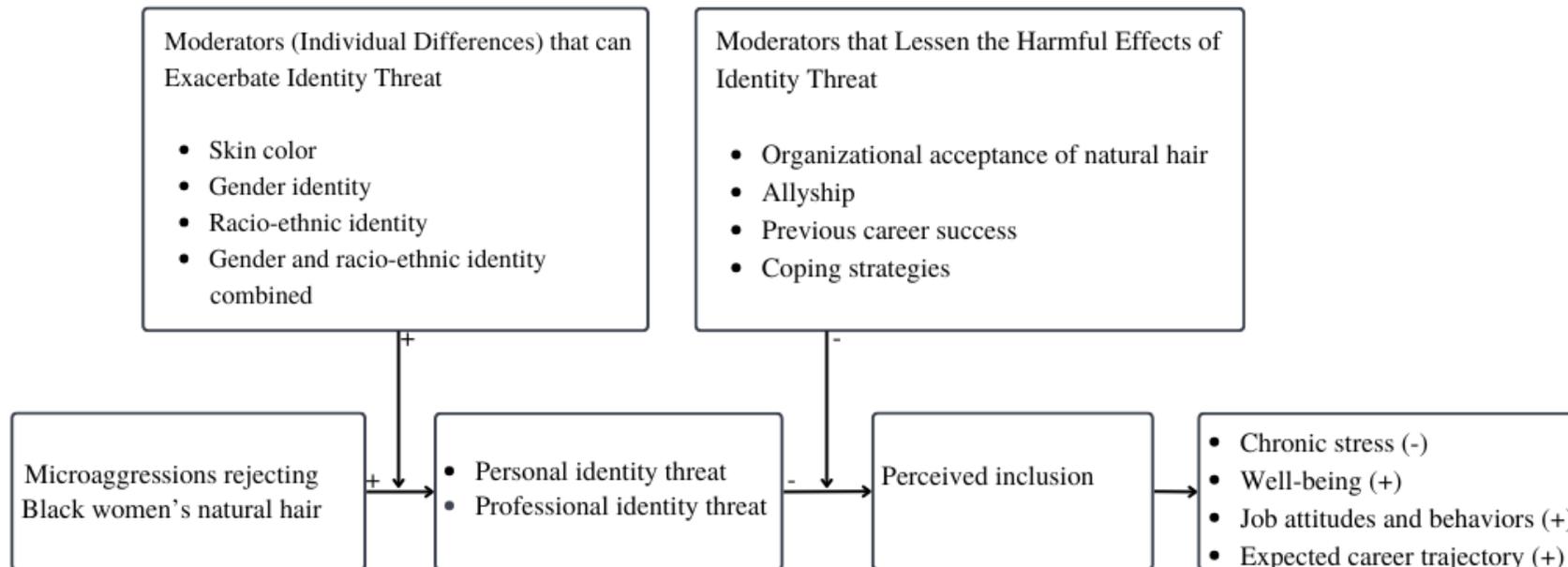
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**Figure 1***Hair and Its Ramifications (HAIR) Model*

Note: An assumption of this model is that hair bias is present.