WOMEN AND THEIR HAIR
Seeking Power through Resistance and Accommodation

ROSE WEITZ
Arizona State University

This article explores how women seek power through both resisting and accommodating mainstream norms for female hair and delineates the strengths and limitations of these strategies. The data help to illuminate the complex role the body plays in sustaining and challenging women's subordinate position, how accommodation and resistance lie buried in everyday activities, the limits of resistance based on the body, and why accommodation and resistance are best viewed as coexisting variables rather than as polar opposites. Finally, these data suggest the importance of defining resistance as actions that reject subordination by challenging the ideologies that support subordination.

Hairstyles serve as important cultural artifacts, because they are simultaneously public (visible to everyone), personal (biologically linked to the body), and highly malleable to suit cultural and personal preferences (Firth 1973; Synott 1987). In this article, I argue that women's hair is central to their social position.[1] I explore how women use their hair to try to gain some power and analyze the benefits and limitations of their strategies. More broadly, I use these data to explore how accommodation and resistance lie buried in everyday activities, how they are often interwoven, and why resistance strategies based on the body have limited utility (Dellinger and Williams 1997; Elowe MacLeod 1991). Finally, I use these data to suggest the importance of defining resistance as actions that reject subordination by challenging the ideologies that support subordination.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I would especially like to thank Myra Dinnerstein for her help and support throughout this project. Also thanks to Kathy Davis, Kirsten Dellinger, Dan Hilliard, Judith Lorber, P. J. McGann, Cecilia Menjívar, Karen Miller-Loessi, Irene Padavic, Mindy Stombler, George Thomas, and Christine Williams for their comments on this research project. In addition, I would like to thank Jennifer Mata, Sophia Hinojosa, Dana Gray, and Jami Wilenchik for assistance in data collection. Finally, I would like to express my appreciation to Arizona State University (ASU) for granting me a sabbatical leave to pursue this project and to the Western Alliance to Expand Minority Opportunities and the ASU Women's Studies Program, both of which provided needed research funding.*

REPRINT REQUESTS: *Rose Weitz, Arizona State University, Box 87-2101, Tempe, AZ 85287-2101; e-mail: rose.weitz@asu.edu.*

GENDER & SOCIETY, Vol. 15 No. 5, October 2001 667-686

INTRODUCTION

Power and Bodily Disciplines

Power refers to the ability to obtain desired goals through controlling or influencing others. Power is embedded in relationships, waxing and waning as relationships evolve. Similarly, power is not absolute but is relative to a given relationship and situation. Thus, for example, a middle-class woman may have the power to obtain from her maid both housecleaning services and personal deference even though the woman herself must provide services and deference to her husband (Rollins 1985). As this suggests, power comes from multiple sources, including both ascribed and achieved characteristics, and takes many forms, some of which are more effective, long-lasting, and broad reaching than others.

That the body is a site for struggles over power should not surprise us. As Michel Foucault (1979, 1980) described, to carry out the tasks of modern economic and social life, societies require "docile bodies," such as regimented soldiers, factory workers who perform their tasks mechanically, and students who sit quietly. To create such bodies, "disciplinary practices" have evolved through which individuals both internalize and act on the ideologies that underlie their own subordination. In turn, these disciplinary practices have made the body a site for power struggles and, potentially, for resistance, as individual choices about the body become laden with political meanings.

The body is an especially important site for power struggles between men and women. For millennia, women's subordinate position has been justified by an ideology that labeled their bodies and brains as inferior (Weitz 1998) and has been reinforced by a unique set of disciplinary practices aimed at creating a submissive and "feminine" body (Lee Bartky 1988). In turn, the centrality of the body to women's subordination has put the body at the center of explicitly political struggles to improve women's status, such as the battles to gain reproductive rights and to end violence against women.

For the most part, sociological studies of power and resistance focus at this explicitly political level, where social movements arise. Yet, as James Scott (1990), Paul Willis (1977), and others have argued, open political resistance is far rarer than the informal, unorganized, and often covert forms of resistance embedded in everyday life: pilfering from factories, enjoying jokes that ridicule those in power, or "performing" gender in subtly subversive ways. Some postmodernists, such as Judith Butler (1990), seem at times to suggest that such actions play a more important role in social change than does open political resistance. By extension, these writings suggest that we cannot understand the nature of power, accommodation, and resistance in women's lives without looking at women's daily bodily disciplines of femininity.

To date, research on the disciplines of femininity has focused primarily on dieting and cosmetic surgery, underscoring the extraordinary lengths to which women will go to meet cultural norms of femininity (e.g., Bordo 1989; Davis 1995). I have

chosen instead to study hair as a means of exploring the ordinary ways in which women struggle daily with cultural ideas about the female body.

My research also differs both from those studies that understate women's resistance and highlight their internalization of social norms and from those studies that fall into the opposite trap, highlighting women's agency and resistance and downplaying the constraints within which women make their daily decisions.[2] Instead, by describing the strategies women develop to seek power using their hair, I will show that women are neither "docile bodies" nor free agents; rather, they combine accommodation and resistance as they actively grapple with cultural expectations and social structures. By so doing I hope to encourage scholars to adopt a more balanced picture of social life that neither ignores nor valorizes everyday forms of bodily resistance, whether used by women or by men.

Defining Resistance and Accommodation

To date, the term *resistance* remains loosely defined, allowing some scholars to see it almost everywhere and others almost nowhere. One way that the latter group limits their vision of resistance is by defining actions as resistance only if they are effective. Such a definition seems far too narrow, however, for even failed revolutions would not qualify. Moreover, as Stombler and Padavic (1997) suggested, even small acts with no obvious effects on the broader system may affect individuals and pave the way for later social change. At any rate, defining resistance based on effectiveness leaves open the question of what effectiveness means: Is a strategy effective if it improves an individual's life without creating broader change or if its effects are only short-lasting? Taken together, these problems suggest both that measuring the effectiveness of an action is difficult if not impossible and that effect, in any event, is a poor measure of resistance.

Another possibility is to define an action as resistance if its intent is to reject subordination, regardless of either its effectiveness or the extent to which it also supports subordination (Stombler and Padavic 1997). Under this definition, how do we know the intent of an action? Stombler and Padavic suggested relying on actors' assessments of their intent. Yet, individuals' stated intentions often bear little relationship to the nature of their actions, because individuals often either cannot or will not articulate their motives; Black slaves, for example, routinely denied (for obvious reasons) that their spirituals asking God for freedom reflected anything other than religious longings. Because of these problems with assessing intent, Willis (1977) suggested that researchers rather than actors should determine the intent of an action. Unfortunately, as Davies (1995) and Ringelheim (1985) have noted, researchers sometimes read their own political agendas into the motives of their respondents and define resistance so broadly as to make it meaningless. At any rate, intent alone seems a weak measure of resistance: By this measure, for example, women who wear "sexy" clothing to gain power in relationships with men are engaging in resistance against male domination, even though their actions reinforce sexist ideologies and foment competition between women.

The problems with using either effectiveness or intent as definitions of resistance leave us no choice but to try to assess the nature of the act itself. Scott (1990) suggested defining resistance simply as actions that "reject subordination" (with *subordination* defined as any ideas, practices, and systems that devalue one social group relative to another and place the first group under the domination of the second). For example, low-paid workers who pilfer goods from their factories to sell on the black market fit this definition of resistance because they reject a system that considers their work worthy of only minimal financial compensation and that denies them control over the products of their labor.

When factory workers pilfer, however, their actions and motives remain largely invisible both to their fellow workers and to factory management. As a result, while pilfering benefits individual workers, it neither challenges the ideological basis of the system of subordination nor offers the potential to unite workers as a group in a movement for social change. Moreover, because factory owners recognize that pilfering goes on, interpret it as an indication of workers' low moral values, and use it as an argument for keeping wages low (to counterbalance financial losses caused by employee theft), pilfering unintentionally bolsters the system that keeps workers undervalued and underpaid.

This example suggests the dangers of defining resistance too broadly. In this article, I use examples from women's hair management strategies to suggest that we need to more narrowly define resistance as actions that not only reject subordination but do so by *challenging the ideologies that support that subordination*. For example, factory workers' collective efforts to raise wages through union activity challenge the ideological basis of class subordination by arguing that factory workers have as much right as factory managers and owners to a decent wage. Similarly, and as I will show, some women consciously adopt hairstyles (such as short "butch" cuts or dreadlocks) in part to challenge the ideology that women's worth depends on their attractiveness to men and that women's attractiveness depends on looking as Euro-American as possible. Like slaves' rebellious songs, women's rebellious hairstyles can allow them to distance themselves from the system that would subordinate them, to express their dissatisfaction, to identify like-minded others, and to challenge others to think about their own actions and beliefs. Thus, these everyday, apparently trivial, individual acts of resistance offer the potential to spark social change and, in the long run, to shift the balance of power between social groups.

Of course, whether an act rejects subordination or challenges ideologies of subordination remains open to interpretation, but at least this definition moves us toward a more empirically useful measure. By extension, *accommodation* refers to actions that accept subordination, by either adopting or simply not challenging the ideologies that support subordination. The data I present in this article, however, suggest that we should not think of resistance and accommodation as polar opposites but rather as coexisting variables, so that any given action might contain elements of accommodation *and* elements of resistance. As I will show, conceptualizing resistance and accommodation in this way gives us a far richer and more nuanced picture of social life.

METHOD

This article is based on interviews collected between 1998 and 2001 with 44 women, all but five of whom live in Arizona. Respondents were obtained primarily through word of mouth. To avoid biasing the sample toward women who were unusually invested in their hair, I asked for referrals to women who "like to talk in general and are willing to talk about their hair." In addition, in three cases, I obtained respondents by approaching women in public places who had specific, unusual characteristics: a store clerk whose hair had the same simple style but a different color each time I saw her, a middle-aged woman with a wild mass of shoulder-length graying curls, and a woman with an American accent wearing full Moslem garb including face veil. Because the sample is nonrandom, it is appropriate for exploring the range of attitudes among American women but not for calculating the proportion who hold such attitudes.

Although nonrandom, the sample is highly diverse. Respondents ranged in age from 22 to 83. Twenty-nine were Anglo, 8 Mexican American, 4 African American, 2 Asian, and 1 half-Chicana and half-Anglo. Twenty-two were raised Protestant, 17 Catholic, 1 Jewish, and 1 Moslem; the remaining 3 were not raised in a religion. Twenty-one of the women are single, 14 are married, 7 are divorced, and 2 are widowed. Four of the 37 describe themselves as lesbian, the rest as heterosexual. As is true nationally (U.S. Department of Commerce 1998), the employed women in the sample are almost equally divided between those who hold professional/managerial jobs ($n = 10$) and those who do not ($n = 11$). Five women are retired, 4 are housewives, and 14 are students (almost all of whom work part-time). The women in the sample disproportionately are middle-class: 46 percent of those older than 25 hold college degrees, compared with 21 percent of similar-age U.S. women (Costello, Miles, and Stone 1998). However, 57 percent of the women come from working-class backgrounds (i.e., their mothers did not attend college, and their fathers held nonprofessional jobs).

The interviews—35 collected by me and 9 by my research assistants—took between 60 and 90 minutes to complete. Except for background demographic questions, the interviews focused solely on hair, including questions such as "What are your first memories about your hair?" "Do strangers ever make comments about your hair?" and "Do you ever leave your home without fixing your hair?" Questions focused specifically on hair and power (such as whether their hair either increased or decreased their power at work or in intimate relationships and whether they had ever used their hair to obtain or assert power) were asked only after the more general questions about hair and its impact on their lives. Interviews were taped and transcribed in full, then entered into NUD*IST software for analysis. Following standard procedures for qualitative data analysis, I read the early interviews several times to identify theoretical themes and used these themes in my first attempts at coding the data. As interviews were collected, I continued to add, combine, and otherwise refine the theoretical themes.

FINDINGS

In this section, I will describe the ways women use their hair to seek power in both their personal and professional lives. Analysis of the data revealed two strategies women used to accomplish this task: traditional strategies that emphasize accommodation to mainstream norms for female attractiveness and nontraditional strategies that emphasize resistance to those norms. I begin this discussion with traditional strategies (since they create the context that gives meaning to nontraditional strategies) and end the section with a brief discussion of why some women do not link their hair to power.

Seeking Power through Traditional Strategies

The most common way women use their hair to seek power is through strategies that de-emphasize resistance and instead emphasize accommodation to mainstream ideas about attractiveness. Ideas about attractiveness, of course, vary both regionally and by social class: The "big hair"—curled, teased, blow-dried, and sprayed—still popular among southeastern whites evokes ridicule elsewhere, and the simple, short hairstyles considered fashionable on white professional women often are considered unacceptably "mannish" on other women. Ideas about attractive hair also vary by ethnicity and age of both viewer and wearer; Latino and African American men, for example, seem more often than white men to link long hair with attractiveness for women of all ages (Craig 1995; Rooks 1996).

Nevertheless, and reflecting the social and economic dominance of middle- and upper-class Anglo-Americans in the United States, certain ideas about attractiveness and female hair appear deeply and widely embedded in American society. First, to be most feminine and hence most attractive, women's hair should be long, curly or wavy, and preferably blonde (Clayson and Maughan 1986; Rich and Cash 1993). It should most definitely *not* be gray (Kerner Furman 1997) or kinky (suggesting either African or Jewish heritage). Second, women's hair should look intentionally styled—explaining why even women who adopt tousled hairstyles like those sported by actresses Meg Ryan and Winona Ryder typically use hair gels or sprays to maintain the desired "tousle." Similarly, there is widespread agreement that women should spend time, effort, and money on making their hair attractive (Synott 1987); even Moslem women who cover their hair outside the home typically strive to make their hair attractive whenever their hair is uncovered. Finally, women's hair should look different from men's hair (Synott 1987). For purposes of convenience, I will refer to those who meet these norms as "conventionally attractive."

There is widespread agreement that conventionally attractive hair gives women power or at least makes them feel powerful—a point made by many women in this study.[3] For example, Darla, a married woman in her 60s, with a part-time professional job, explained how her striking silver hair gives her power: "This culture is too strong and too dominant about looking good, and having something being

beautiful, [so] if we have something that we consider about ourselves that's beautiful, that does give us a sense of power." Cecilia, a 20-something student, single and heterosexual, said more bluntly:

> Some days I have good hair days, and some days I have bad hair days. On good days I feel like, you know, my hair does make me powerful. If my hair looks good, I feel beautiful. And if I look beautiful, and another man is attracted to me, then, ha, ha, ha, I have got power over him.

Results from numerous research studies (summarized in Jackson 1992 and Sullivan 2001) suggest that conventional attractiveness is, in fact, a realistic route to power for women, in both intimate relationships and careers. Attractive women are less lonely, more popular, and more sexually experienced, both more likely to marry and more likely to marry men of higher socioeconomic status. Compared with similarly qualified unattractive women, conventionally attractive women are more often hired, more often promoted, and paid higher salaries.

The following story, told by Cecilia, the young woman who earlier explained how her hair gave her power over men, demonstrates the conscious and rational decision-making process women may use to get power through conventional attractiveness:

> I can think of an occasion where I changed my hair while I was dating this guy. I had this feeling that he was losing attraction for me and I'd just been feeling the need to do something to my appearance. And my hair is always the easiest way to go. It's too expensive to buy a new wardrobe. There's nothing you can do about your face. So your hair, you can go and have something radically done to it and you'll look like a different person. At least that's the way I see it.
>
> So I remember I was dating this guy, and I was away at school when I was dating him, and I went home for the weekend, and he was going to come down that weekend. . . . So I went home and I got my hair cut off. I cut off about seven or eight inches, and it was kind of a radical haircut, you know shaved, kind of asymmetrical again, and I put a red tint on it. . . . And when he saw me, when he walked into my house, it was like, "Whoa!" You know? And he said, "Oh, my God, look at it!" And he just couldn't stop talking about it. He made a comment saying that he felt differently about me. He said, "I don't know, there's just something about you. I don't know. I really want to be with you." (Cecilia)

When I asked Cecilia how she felt about his rekindled interest in her, she replied, "I was pretty pleased with myself."

Although this may seem like a limited form of power compared to, say, winning election to a government office, this power embedded in doing femininity well (Bordo 1989) is power nonetheless: With a minimum investment of money and time, this woman obtained a desired goal and influenced the behavior and emotions of another person.

Once a woman adopts this strategy, she can use her understanding of cultural ideologies surrounding women's hair to increase its effectiveness. Certainly women who dye their hair blonde are well aware of American cultural ideas that link blondeness to sexuality and beauty. For example, Roxanne, a divorced woman in her 40s with dyed blonde hair vowed she would "dye until she dies." When asked why, she responded by singing the 1960s advertising ditty "Is it true blondes have more fun?" Other respondents similarly mentioned that they dye their hair blonde because they believe men find blondes more attractive. (Interestingly, none mentioned any concerns that, as blondes, they might be subject to the common stereotype of blondes as unintelligent [Kyle and Mahler 1996]. I did not ask why these women were unconcerned but would hypothesize that they believed that these stereotypes were not widely held, that their intelligence would be obvious regardless of their hair color, or that looking attractive would benefit them more than would looking intelligent.)

Even women who are uninterested in male attention may find that meeting norms for conventional attractiveness works to their benefit: For example, Erica, a young lesbian, explained that her long hair allows her to pass as heterosexual and thus has helped her get and keep jobs (in the same way that using makeup benefited the lesbians interviewed by Dellinger and Williams [1997]). Similarly, and regardless of sexual orientation, female athletes often wear their hair long, curled, and dyed blonde as part of a "feminine apologetic" that enhances their attractiveness to men and protects them from being stigmatized as lesbian (Hilliard 1984; Lowe 1998).

Dyeing hair red can be an equally effective, if somewhat different, strategy, drawing on traditional stereotypes of redheads as wild and passionate. This was explained to me by Brenda, a quiet, petite young woman who began dyeing her hair red in her early 20s:

> I thought the red hair will let people know I'm a competent person, independent, maybe a little hotheaded—or maybe a lot hotheaded. So it was just conveying, fiery always comes to mind, although that's kind of romance novelish. (Brenda)

When asked if dyeing her hair succeeded in making people see her differently, Brenda replied,

> Yeah. Actually it *made* people see me. . . . Before I dyed my hair, my sister [who has blonde hair] and I, we would go out and all these guys would ask her to dance and talk to her and ask for her number and I would just be standing there. And after I started dyeing my hair, I started getting noticed a little bit more, but I also stopped waiting to be asked. . . . And around the time I started dyeing my hair, I decided I was going to quit being what I thought other people wanted me to be, and I was going to just be who I was. And it gave me power because, I don't know, I guess just being myself made me feel more powerful. (Brenda)

Brenda, then, used traditional ideas about women, hair, and attractiveness to change not only how others saw her but also how she saw herself. This, in turn, opened up possibilities for action and affected the responses she received from others, giving her greater control over her life. (Again, like the women who dyed their hair blonde, none of those who dyed their hair red expressed concern that they might be handicapped by stereotypes of redheads as oversexed, easily angered, or clownish [Clayson and Maughan 1986; Heckert and Best 1997; Kyle and Mahler 1996].)

In sum, the women described in this section are neither blindly seeking male approval nor unconsciously making decisions based on an internalized ideology of femininity. Instead, like women who use cosmetic surgery (Davis 1995) or makeup (Dellinger and Williams 1997), they are actively and rationally making choices based on a realistic assessment of how they can best obtain their goals, given both their personal resources and the cultural and social constraints they face. Yet, can these strategies be considered resistance? On one hand, each of these strategies is an intentional course of action designed to resist subordination by helping members of a subordinate group increase their power—or at least sense of power—relative to the dominant group. On the other hand, most of these strategies pose little if any challenge to cultural ideas about women or to the broader distribution of power by gender, for they implicitly support the ideology that defines a woman's body as her most important attribute and that, therefore, conflates changes in a woman's appearance with changes to her identity. Because these strategies do not challenge the cultural ideologies supporting subordination, at best they can improve the position of an individual woman, but not of women as a group. If anything, these strategies both reflect and sustain competition between women for men's attention, thus diminishing the potential for alliances among women.

The only traditional strategy that challenged cultural ideas about women was that described by Brenda, the woman who dyed her hair red. Although that strategy supported the ideology that appearance defines a woman, it rejected the assumption that Brenda herself either was or should be meek, submissive, or the passive object of a man's desires. Thus, only this strategy fits the definition of resistance proposed earlier. At the same time, however, this strategy does nothing to improve the situation of other women. Rather, by using her hair color to denote her personality and views, Brenda implies that women with other hair colors lack her independence. As a result, she simultaneously resists and accommodates, resembling those Arlene Elowe MacLeod (1991) described as "accommodating protest" because they simultaneously express dissatisfaction with and acquiescence to current power relations.

The Limits of Power Obtained through Traditional Strategies

Not surprisingly, given the accommodations embedded in traditional strategies, women often find that power obtained through these strategies is circumscribed, fragile, bittersweet, and limiting. The power to attract a man, after all, is not the same as the power to earn a living independently—although a man can provide

economic support, at least for a while. Similarly, women who attract men and increase their power through appearance can at best experience only a modest sense of accomplishment, since they receive attention only for physical characteristics at least partly outside their control. Moreover, women may find that attracting men through appearance is a hollow achievement if the men they attract have little interest in them as persons and, consequently, lose interest in the relationship in the long run.

Power based on conventional attractiveness is also fragile, achieved one day at a time through concentrated effort and expenditures of time and money. Linda, a 40-year-old Asian American woman, pays to have her hair permed every few months because she thinks otherwise it looks "too Asian." Because her hair straightens out when it gets wet, she always carries an umbrella, never swims with friends, and dries her hair after showering before letting anyone see her. Her concern proved justified the one time a lover (of four years) saw her with wet straight hair and told her never to wear her hair straight.

Even those who look attractive on most days still face the occasional "bad hair day"— a true catastrophe for those who consider their hair a significant source of power. Felicia, a Chicana in her 20s, remarked, "If I'm having a bad hair day, I'm having a bad day in general. . . . My day is just shot." Moreover, conventional attractiveness must decline with age (although it can be fought with face lifts, hair dyeing, and the like).

This power is bittersweet, too, for it is only partly under the individual's control: A woman who seeks attention and power through her appearance cannot control who will respond, when, or how. As explained to me by LaDonna, a young African American woman whose long and wavy hair attracts considerable male attention:

> It's kind of funny because I know [my hair] will get me attention, and I do things to make it look nice that I know will get me attention, but sometimes I don't wear my hair down because I *don't* want the attention. (LaDonna)

Nor can she control which men will be attracted to her (will it be her handsome neighbor or her married boss?) or for what reasons (will he think she is pretty because he simply likes long hair or because he thinks anything that looks "white" is superior?).

Transforming oneself into someone considered conventionally attractive is also bittersweet if it requires a woman to abandon what she considers her true self, which by definition is alienating. The bittersweet nature of this process comes through clearly in Cecilia's story:

> [My friends] would talk about my hair because there wasn't much else they could do with me. I wore glasses, and I had braces, [and] there wasn't much else you could do about that. But they were trying to turn me into a sexy thing, like, you know, they aspired to be. And you want to make all your friends [sexy] like that because you want to go out together to the skating rink or to the mall. I was willing to go along with it, so I let them fix me up. (Cecilia)

When asked if she liked the process, she replied,

> Not especially. Because I felt like I was being transformed into something I just wasn't. [But I still did it] because I felt that perhaps there was a need to be transformed, because obviously what I was, was not getting me where I wanted to be. I had no boyfriend, and I didn't have that many friends. I wanted to be who I was and have what I wanted. But I didn't feel I could have what I wanted unless I changed. (Cecilia)

Finally, power obtained through traditional strategies is not only circumscribed, fragile, and bittersweet but also limiting, since increasing one's power in these ways may *reduce* one's power in traditionally male realms. Most basically, the same hairstyles that identify a woman as conventionally attractive and increase her power in intimate relationships highlight femininity. Yet, our culture links femininity with incompetence (Glenn, Wiley, and Crittenden 1992; Valian 1998). Thus, although men can only benefit from attractiveness, women can also be harmed by attractiveness if it leads others to regard them as less competent. For example, Laura, now in her 30s, described how from a very young age she hated it when her mother would curl her hair or put barrettes or bows in it because she realized that in her

> very male-dominated family, if I looked like a girl, I lost power. . . . I recall feeling that I had a different experience as a person depending on how I was dressed. . . . It was hard to be perceived, I felt, as competent [if I looked girlish]. . . . If you wanted to have power, you needed to be like a boy, because when you acted like a girl, you didn't get—, well, I didn't get what I wanted, I'll say that. (Laura)

Seeking Power through Nontraditional Strategies

The problems inherent in traditional strategies lead some women, either additionally or instead, to seek power through nontraditional strategies in which elements of resistance to mainstream ideas of attractiveness outweigh any elements of accommodation.

The meanings and implications of the strategies described in this section vary considerably depending on women's ethnicity. Reflecting the broader tendency for individuals to change hairstyles as a way of marking status transitions (McAlexander and Schouten 1989), white women often choose new hairstyles that highlight professionalism and downplay femininity as a first step toward entering professional training or work. For example, Tina, a young graduate student described how, after college, she cut her hair as

> sort of like the completion of transition to adulthood. . . . I felt like I needed to make some sort of definitive statement about if I was going to get through life . . . , this was the way I was going to do it. . . . I'm not going to get through life by being girly. I don't want to live that way . . . , relying on the attention, specifically of men, but also relying on people's responses to your appearance. And, particularly, [on] an appearance that is feminine by stereotypical social convention. (Tina)

She now has a short, spiky haircut that, she said, "makes me feel more powerful because it's like I've beat the system, you know? . . . The system's trying to take [my power] away and I've succeeded in not letting them."

Somewhat similarly, Darla, who had married at age 15 and had four children in quick succession, talked about the first time she cut her hair short, when she was in her 30s:

> That change in my hairstyle was indicative of that resolve [to change] from . . . sort of dependent and actually thinking there was no way out of that. And . . . I did not know how I was going to do it, [to change] from someone who had been raising children all her life, and still had a little girl [at home], someone who really felt kind of trapped and used physical attractiveness as a sense of security, to a person who was going to become different. . . . And I think the hair was a symbol of that. I never did let my hair grow long again. (Darla)

Once in the world of work, other haircuts often follow, as white women learn to believe—or learn that others believe—that femininity and professional competence are antithetical. In such situations, women may consciously use their hair to defeminize themselves. Stacy, a bicultural (Anglo/Chicana) graduate assistant who typically pulls her long hair back into a ponytail when she teaches explained,

> If you have really long hair, people tend to see you as more womanly. . . . Particularly when I teach, I don't want people to look at me as more womanly. That's why I wear my hair back: to be taken more seriously, to look more professional, to just be seen as a person as opposed to like a woman. (Stacy)

Even more than my white respondents, the college-educated Chicanas I interviewed underscored the necessity of "professional" haircuts for success in the work world. Coming from communities that valued long hair styled into large curls and heavily sprayed to meet distinctively Chicana images of femininity, they realized that, as Paloma explained, "having lots of long hair intensifies the fact that you are a woman and that you are Chicana too, [both of which] make it more difficult to get jobs." As a result, she adopted a shorter hairstyle to meet mainstream ideas of professionalism. Others found themselves unable to take what seemed to them a drastic step, although some of these did take the intermediate step of binding their hair back or eliminating large curls while still leaving their hair long.

African American women, on the other hand, are far less likely to adopt any strategy that might downplay their femininity. Faced with a dominant culture that already defines them as less attractive and feminine than other women (Hill Collins 1991, 67-90; Weitz and Gordon 1993), they are more likely to seek out a style that looks "professional" but still meets mainstream norms of femininity. They thus typically rely on wigs or on expensive formulations for changing the natural texture of their hair and avoid both hairstyles that others might associate with radical political stances (such as dreadlocks or Afros) and the elaborate hairstyles often favored by working-class African American women (Fernandez Kelly 1995).

In addition to emphasizing professionalism, women can attempt to increase their power in nontraditional ways by avoiding or rejecting male attention. For example, Wendy, a traditionally pretty white woman, described how she had worn her hair long, straight, and dyed blonde throughout high school but cut it drastically short in college when she came out as a lesbian. In her words,

> Definitely, my haircut was a way of protecting myself. It was shielding me, I felt, from men looking at me, from men being interested in me. It made me feel stronger to not be viewed in a traditional feminine way. (Wendy)

Most dramatically, Susan, a conventionally attractive, outgoing, young Anglo-American woman who had married an Arab immigrant and converted to Islam, described how she began covering her hair in traditional Arabic fashion while visiting her husband's relatives in the Middle East. Even though her husband regarded hair coverings as ugly and "backward" and none of his relatives wore them, Susan nevertheless chose to cover her hair to convince others that she was a chaste Moslem (cf. Elowe MacLeod 1991) and thus to protect herself from dangerous sexual harassment when her husband was absent. In this way, she both limited others' power over her (they no longer felt free to harass or touch her) and added to her own power by convincing others to take her more seriously. Against her husband's strenuously expressed wishes, Susan continued wearing the head covering after returning from the Middle East, not only as protection against unwanted male attention but also because it made her "feel empowered" by reminding her of her religion and the presence of God. Tellingly, she noted that in the United States, women "use their body and their beauty as their power. Now my power comes from within, and I don't have to use my body."

Other women remain interested in attracting men, but not based on the traditional norms of submissive femininity that underlie mainstream attractiveness norms. Stacy provided a dramatic example:

> My boyfriend . . . used to say that . . . what made me attractive was my hair was so pretty. So I deliberately kind of cut it off, a little bit spitefully, but kind of just to say I'm more than my hair. I felt powerful when I cut my hair off. Like maybe in the sense that I feel that [men] prefer long hair, that I wasn't ruled by that and I could like set my own standards. And sort of like, it's being in control of your hair gives you somewhat of a power. (Stacy)

Still other women find a sense of power not through rejecting attractiveness per se but through broadening the definition of attractiveness to include appearances that occur more naturally within their own ethnic group (Banks 1997; Craig 1995). These new definitions explicitly challenge the ideology that defines minority women's appearances as inferior and that encourages minority women to engage in time-consuming and painful disciplines to conform to dominant appearance norms. Thus, three of the four African American women I interviewed described their past decisions to wear an Afro, braids, or dreadlocks as explicitly political statements

about their identities. (The fourth woman, LaDonna, came of age after the Afro went out of style and had relatively straight hair naturally.) For example, Norma, who described herself as having grown up in an isolated rural area with little understanding of race politics and who first adopted an Afro simply because it was fashionable at the time, described how

> after a while, I began to understand that, wait a minute, if I wear my hair in an Afro, I'm going to have a lot of people looking at me, and thinking about what it is that I'm trying to say, what statement am I trying to make. And . . . it didn't take long for me to catch on that wait a minute, there's a lot wrong here [with race relations]. And so yes, I *intentionally* wore Afros just to upset the system. I *wanted* to. (Norma)

Another African American professional, who now wears dreadlocks, explained that her hairstyle

> expresses my individuality as well as my value of my heritage and my pride in what is distinctly me, distinctly mine. . . . I consider myself in a constant state of protest about the realities of cultural alienation, cultural marginalization, cultural invisibility, discrimination, injustice, all of that. And I feel that my hairstyle has always allowed me, since I started wearing it in a natural, to voice that nonverbally. And that has been a desire of mine, to do that. (Jenny)

In sum, like the traditional strategies described previously, the strategies described in this section are intentional actions designed to resist subordination and increase the power of members of a subordinate group. Unlike most of the traditional strategies, however, each of these strategies challenges the ideology that underlies subordination, even though only some of the women frame their actions in ideological terms. Thus, all these strategies contain elements of resistance.

At the same time, however, these strategies contain elements of accommodation. Because it is difficult to analyze everyday actions taken for granted within one's own culture, most Americans can probably most easily identify the elements of accommodation embedded in the actions of the Muslim convert, who had to cover herself in a physically constraining, hot, and uncomfortable garment to ward off unwanted male attention and convince others to take her seriously. Although more difficult for most Americans to recognize, there are also elements of accommodation embedded in the other strategies described in this section. Most important, using the body as a political tool continues to place women's bodies at the center of women's identities. Moreover, like the woman who dyed her hair red, the women who cut their hair short to declare their competence or independence imply by extension that women who do not do so lack those qualities. Thus, only those strategies that promote a hairstyle as a group aesthetic or political statement (such as Afros and hairstyles that are meant to be recognized as "dyke" haircuts) have at least the potential to unite rather than divide women and to help women as a group rather than simply helping some individuals.

The Limits of Obtaining Power through Nontraditional Strategies

Given these problems, it is not surprising that, like traditional strategies, nontraditional strategies also offer only limited effectiveness. Whereas those who emphasize conventional attractiveness and femininity risk unwanted male sexual attention, those who defeminize their appearance and/or adopt more professional hairstyles risk desexualization (Lee Bartky 1988) and the loss of desired male attention. After all, just because a woman wants a professional job does not mean she does not want a boyfriend or husband. Although some women enjoy no longer being seen by men in sexual terms, others find this a steep price to pay. This issue seemed especially salient for Chicanas: The eight Chicanas I interviewed all believed they had to have long, waved hair both to attract Chicano men and to maintain their identity as Chicanas, but the six who had attended college also believed they needed shorter, more subdued hair to succeed as professionals. None had fully resolved this dilemma. (Although these numbers are small, this sentiment was shared by numerous other college-educated Chicanas who have commented on versions of this article.)

Moreover, if a woman adopts a look that others consider not only less feminine but frankly unattractive, she may find that professional success also eludes her, for, as described earlier, conventionally attractive women receive more job offers, higher salaries, and more promotions than unattractive women. And regardless of a woman's sexual orientation, she risks discrimination if her hairstyle leads others to label her a lesbian—experiences shared by several short-haired respondents.

The stories told by African American women, meanwhile, emphasize the very real consequences paid by those who reject mainstream ideas about attractiveness—even if they still strive to look attractive by their own definitions (Banks 1997). As Norma described:

> I remember I went to interview for a job and the guy wouldn't hire me because I had an Afro. A white guy. He said, "It's your hair. I don't like your hairstyle. You've got to do something about your hair." I didn't change my hairstyle, of course, I just walked out. I figured I didn't need that job that much. (Norma)

She went on to explain:

> I think that both white and Black employers, especially men, expect African American women to have straight hairstyles as opposed to their own natural hairstyles. That one guy rejected me right off the bat. But I see people treated differently depending on their hairstyle. Especially women who wear dreads; I see they have to fight for respect, demand it. It's almost a constant struggle. As opposed to women who wear their hair straight [and] are perceived to be more intelligent and professional. (Norma)

These comments were seconded by the other African American women I interviewed. Similar remarks were made by a woman with wildly curling "Jewish" hair and by an immigrant who viewed long braided hair as a valued sign of her Pakistani

identity but incompatible with American professional norms. For all these women, any aspect of their appearance that called attention to their minority status reduced their perceived competence and their social acceptability in the workplace.

A Final—Partial—Strategy: Ignoring Power Issues

Despite the links between women's hair and women's power, on a day-to-day basis, few women think of their hair as a way to get power. Moreover, even when asked directly, many women reject a language of power to describe their actions and declare that they rarely even think about their hair.

Given all we have seen so far about hair and power, how is it possible for any women to avoid linking their hair to power or even thinking about their hair very much? I would suggest that this is possible for *some* women *some* of the time because they have settled on a hair management strategy that best matches their resources and goals. For example, women with established professional careers may not need or allow themselves to think much about their hair, having long ago concluded that professional goals were more important to them than relational goals and that they could best meet their professional goals by adopting a simple, easy-to-maintain haircut that projected professionalism more than femininity. Similarly, well-dressed white women whose slim figures and even Anglo-looking features meet dominant norms for attractiveness and who can afford to have their hair dyed and cut in expensive salons can, in fact, spend very little time on their hair while still meeting norms for both attractiveness and professionalism. In contrast, none of the women whose hair, skin, or features marked them as members of minority groups and thus kept them from ever fully meeting dominant norms for attractiveness suggested that hair was unimportant. These women simply cannot afford to consider hair a trivial issue. Moreover, almost all respondents who stated that hair is unimportant or who rejected an explicit language of power in talking about their hair can and do articulate how their hair affects their efforts to achieve control over their lives and influence over others —which by definition is power. It seems, then, that although issues of power and hair are more visible in the lives of some women than of others, the issue is inescapable for all women.

CONCLUSIONS

Findings from this study suggest that far from being "docile bodies," women are often acutely aware of cultural expectations regarding their hair. Yet, rather than simply acquiescing to those expectations, women can consciously seek power by accommodating to those expectations, resisting them, or combining these two strategies. Nevertheless, we must not overstate women's agency in this matter, for their options are significantly constrained by both cultural expectations and social structure. Consequently, the hair management strategies women adopt to increase their power in some realms often decrease it in others. As a result, women do not so much

choose between the available strategies as balance and alternate them, using whichever seems most useful at a given time.

The inherent limitations on the power available to women through their hairstyles raise the question of why women continue to seek power in this way (or, more generally, through their appearance). As we have seen, women consciously use culturally mandated appearance norms to achieve their personal ends. To say that women consciously use these norms, however, does not mean that they are free to ignore them. No matter what a woman does or doesn't do with her hair—dyeing or not dyeing, curling or not curling, covering with a bandana or leaving uncovered—her hair will affect how others respond to her, and her power will increase or decrease accordingly. Consequently, women use their hair to improve their position because they recognize that not doing so can imperil their position. Of course, the power and any other gains achieved through hair or other aspects of appearance are circumscribed, fragile, bittersweet, and limiting. Yet, the power achieved in this way is no less real. Moreover, for many women, appearance remains a more accessible route to power than does career success, financial independence, political achievement, and so on.

The same constraints on women's options and agency that make seeking power through appearance a reasonable choice also explain why, although some of the strategies women use to gain power through their hair contain elements of resistance, *all* contain elements of accommodation (cf. Elowe MacLeod 1991). Compared to resistance, accommodation offers women (and any other subordinate group) a far more reliable and safer route to power, even if that power is limited. As a result, the strategies women typically use can help individual women gain power, or at least a sense of power, in some arenas but do little to improve the situation of women as a group. Rather, these strategies unintentionally lend support to those who equate women's bodies with their identities, consider women's bodies more important than their minds, assume that women use their bodies to manipulate men, or assume that femininity and competence are antithetical (thus handicapping visibly "feminine" women professionally and visibly "professional" women socially). Moreover, all these strategies inescapably foment competition between women. Finally, even the most explicitly radical actions described in this article—the adoption of Afros, dreadlocks, or visibly "lesbian" haircuts—have only temporary utility as tools for social change because of the inherent instability of fashions. Such styles can certainly help to spread a new and radical idea, help members of an incipient social movement identify each other, and spark social change. In the long run, though, even if a style is initially intended to challenge existing power relationships, the more people adopt it, the more likely it will lose its original meaning and become simply another fashion (Craig 1995). As the style goes out of fashion—as all styles do—those who continue to wear it look merely dated and unfashionable, as their hairstyles lose their political meanings. Thus, both Afros and the spiky, asymmetrical haircuts once found only on radical lesbians and punks are now merely styles that occasionally appear on fashion runways. (By extension, it is even less likely that the transgressive gender performances of lesbian femmes, male drag

queens, and transgendered persons can lead to meaningful social change, as Butler [1990], Bornstein [1994] and others have claimed, for most observers undoubtedly view these actions as personal aberrations devoid of any political meaning.)

As this discussion suggests, it is difficult to identify factors that facilitate resistance because the possibilities for resistance are so constrained and because resistance and accommodation are so intertwined, both in any given action and in each individual's life. Certainly resistance is easier if supported by others, such as husbands or friends, who place little emphasis on meeting appearance norms. Resistance to appearance norms is also easier when an alternative ideology exists that can provide a basis for challenging dominant ideologies, especially if that alternative ideology is supported by a broad social movement (as was the Afro during the late 1960s). Finally, resistance is most feasible when individuals can count on other sources of power and status unrelated to appearance (such as a career, education, or inherited wealth) and thus need not worry as much about any loss in power or status that might come from a nonnormative appearance. Similarly, resistance against norms for women's hair may be easiest for those who are naturally tall, thin, and blonde and thus otherwise meet appearance norms.

In sum, this research helps us understand both the meaning of resistance and the pitfalls of defining the term overbroadly. It also sheds light on how resistance can be embedded in women's daily lives and highlights the limitations of resistance strategies based on the body. Despite these limitations, however, these strategies are not useless. For example, whenever women abandon time-intensive, difficult-to-maintain hairstyles, they gain both time and physical freedom and thereby contribute to changing ideas about, and opportunities for, women, regardless of their intentions and of how their intentions are interpreted by others. Future research should pay close attention to the interwoven dangers and benefits, opportunities and limitations, of resistance centered on the body.

NOTES

1. Hair and appearance also affect men's social position, but to a much lesser extent (Jackson 1992; Sullivan 2001). In addition, because the parameters for acceptable male appearance are both narrower (allowing less experimentation and less pressure to adapt to fashion) and broader (allowing much more natural variation), most men can obtain a socially acceptable haircut with little time, energy, or cost. The exceptions are, truly, exceptional: actors and models, gay men whose communities emphasize appearance, middle-aged middle managers whose companies are downsizing, the recently divorced, and so on.

2. For discussions of the dangers of understating resistance, see Mikel Brown (1998), Davis (1991), and McNay (1991). For discussions of the dangers of overstating resistance, see Davies (1995) and Ringelheim (1985).

3. I do not distinguish in this article between actual power and a sense of power because all the data are based on women's perceptions, and the distinction between a woman feeling that she has power or feeling a sense of power is slight at best.

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Rose Weitz is a professor of sociology at Arizona State University. She is the editor of The Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, and Behavior *and is currently writing a book on what women's stories about hair tell us about women's lives.*