Tristan Morse

Dr. Ortiz

Intro to Sociology

Saturday, September 18th, 2016

Good Hair: Movie Review

After watching most of the documentary *Good Hair*, directed by Jeff Stilson in Sociology class last Thursday, it wasn’t very hard to see what they were trying to convey in a sociological perspective. *Good Hair* is narrated by Chris Rock, showing how hair has influenced African American individuals, groups, organizations, companies, and overarching social themes that connect African American culture to other cultures. With the movie itself, I didn’t really have much of an opinion on it, since I wasn’t too interested in the concept. Still, I tried to watch it with no judgements, but found it to be lack-luster due to the actual quality of the documentary. Since I didn’t quite like the actual cinematography of this movie, I tried to pay more attention to its actual themes.

The overall premise of this documentary was trying to find out “what is good hair?” Rock goes around talking to people of African American ethnicity, more specifically women, and discusses with them their opinions on the matter. When he was asking around, it seemed that everyone he spoke to had come to the same mindset of women wanting to use chemicals for their hair or expensive weaves. The men, then, are supposed to know that if they are wanting to date an African American woman, it will cost a lot of money because of these factors. To women, “good hair” was defined as “white hair.” This is the reasoning behind using chemicals in order to make the hair look like Caucasian hair. To the men, they think that good hair is natural hair. Although it seems that having fake hair is very common in the female African American community, the men seem to prefer real hair over fake because it is more natural and less of an investment, as shown in the film. The concept of this is a prime example of Material Culture in societies, which is described in the textbook as, “any physical object to which we give social meaning: art and artifacts, tools and utensils, machines and weapons, clothing and furniture, buildings and toys… Any physical thing that people create, use, or appreciate might be considered material culture.” (*The Real World,* pg. 80) In this case, women’s hair in the African American community are shown as social objects of high value and are a major part of the culture.

A trend that seems to pop out to me on this subject is how hair is presented. In society, people usually judge people on their hair, as it can indicate several things. We tend to have assumptions and make categories for people with different hairstyles according to legitimacy, class, race, gender, and even sexuality. No matter who or what you are, you have the natural inclination to judge people on the way their hair looks, which is a reason why most people are so critical about it. Specifically, however, it can get a lot more complicated, as there are many subcultures where different values are upheld for all sorts of reasons in their own respects. When in the circumstances of this movie, it seems that the African American community wants to look more Caucasian, as this appears to be what is wanted in a professional settings and the mainstream beauty culture.

The whole reason why individuals want to maintain certain appearances corresponds to what society deems as the way people should look like. This is more prominent in some places as it is not so prominent in others. Generally, people do fall into the “norm of fashion” in order to have a feeling of belonging. People want to be a part of groups, be accepted into institutions for jobs, and many other things that have to do with human interaction and the betterment of their lives as they see it. This is due to the fact that being accepted will open up all sorts of personal opportunities, getting somewhere in life and making something of yourself. This builds up an “embodied status,” which is described by the textbook as, “a status generated by physical characteristics.” (*The Real World,* pg. 116) In this case, hair is a determining factor for this sort of status, as it shapes how others look at you based on your appearance, making you seem more professional, more beautiful, or the opposite, depending on what your hair looks like. This serves as a double-edged sword, since it is society pushing for people to act a certain way but letting people do things that they benefit from in return, making an endless cycle between society and the individual. So, following social trends with looks, and in this case hair, is both a personal decision as well as something that is heavily pushed by society on the individuals themselves.

When the makers of this movie were trying to think of a way to show social behaviors and trends such as looks in relation to hair, they may have thought that showing the audience the African American community’s side of society would be the best example. Since this community in particular seems to have heavy influences on it and contributions from two separate cultures, this could have been why the African American community may have been the best choice for this documentary. Also, this movie could of just been about this community instead of other ones in order to get coverage on a culture that doesn’t seem to receive as many documentaries as Caucasian culture. Another possibility is that the producers wanted to educate white people on how much of an influence they have on the African American community as well as cultures that are tied to it like India, for instance. A final possibility that this idea came about could be that men wanted to show how much culture can affect women of color. This could have been a completely different case, or even quite similar, if it were directed by women, since this documentary was directed by men. Personally, the movie probably wouldn’t change much besides how it may have been conveyed or approached when documenting their findings.

References:

Ferris, Kerry and Stein, Jill 2014. *The Real World: An Introduction to Sociology.* W. W. Norton.