

LISSAH JOHNSON

You're listening to the Beauty + Justice podcast where we talk with folks from a variety of fields about what it will take to create a more clean and equitable future beauty for everyone. These conversations are led by Dr. Tamarra James-Todd, a trailblazer at Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health and head of the Environmental Reproductive Justice Lab. And I'm your host, Lissah Johnson, a PhD candidate at Harvard Chan.

Hey, listeners, thanks for tuning in to the latest episode. In this and the next few episodes, we're going to be focusing on advocacy and working with affected communities to achieve beauty justice. In today's episode, we'll be revisiting Black hair and beauty product use with a specific focus on the intersection of science and community-centered research.

DR DEDE TETEH

Having conversations with these Black women that could be my aunt, my mother, my sisters, and even my brothers, really just it completely changed me in a lot of ways, but specifically it changed my directory of my research career.

LISSAH JOHNSON

That was Dr. Dede TeteH our featured guest on the podcast today. She is an Assistant Professor of Health Sciences at the Chapman University Crean College of Health and Behavioral Sciences, and her research centers around working with the community to better understand the relationship between identity, hair product use and breast cancer risk, particularly for Black women. This is a wonderfully honest and illuminating conversation between Dr. TeteH and Dr. Tamarra James-Todd about social pressures on hair, best practices for working with communities, and the limits and nuances of individual action in reducing toxic exposures. Dr. TeteH drops a lot of gems in this conversation, so let's get into it.

DR TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

So, I am so excited to have a friend and colleague join us today, Dr. Dede TeteH who is joining us to tell us all about her story around this research that really deals with the intersection of Black identity, hair product use, community-based participatory research and all sorts of other things. So, thank you so much for joining us and welcome.

DR DEDE TETEH

Thank you. Thank you so much for having me. It's such a great honor to be with you.

DR TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

So, you know, as a part of this story that we're telling, which is really trying to better understand the issues around beauty injustice and Black hair. I just want to get a sense and share with our audience a bit about how did you start researching in this area? Can you tell us a bit about your story and what brought you to this?

DR DEDE TETEH

So, it's kind of a long but short story, as how did I become a researcher specifically and then how did I end up in this area. I think for me it was I reluctantly fell headfirst into research, kicking and screaming.

So, I really started out my research career started out as a bench scientist and my goal essentially at that point in life was to go to medical school, so, I did an internship around my junior, senior year in public health and that completely opened my mind's eye to other aspects of making an impact in from a community perspective, specifically on different populations of people. And that's really because of funding that I had received to get my masters as well as my PhD, I kind of directed my path towards not focusing on treating individuals but really focused on how can I support communities of people that are dealing with issues, around health disparities, etc. So that's kind of how my path was shifted to research, but specifically how I fell into and I literally meant fell into doing the work that I'm doing now at the intersection of Black identity, hair product usage and specifically breast cancer risk was when I was hired as a focus group and key informant interview facilitator for the Cost of Beauty Project. And Cost of Beauty was a collaboration between nonprofit organizations in Riverside County, so Healthy Heritage Movement, Quinn and academic institution Loma Linda University, and one of my really good friends who was a part of the DRPH program at Loma Linda reached out to me and say, hey, there's this opportunity for you to participate in community-based participatory research and it's a really great project, all of these great things, right, and I was basically, I was like, I need the money. I don't care what the topic is—haha—just being honest here, you know, college, you know, graduate student, I left a full time job in Atlanta, GA, moved to California. I needed the money, so I was like, sure I will be a, you know, a focus group key informant facilitator. And then the project literally took a hook on me, like it tugged at everything that is within me as a Black woman, as a scholar, as a member of a community that has been impacted by breast cancer and having conversations with these Black women that could be my aunts, my mother, my sisters and even my brothers, really just it completely changed me in a lot of ways, but specifically it changed my directory of my research career at in this area and in this field and that's kind of the path that I'm still on today. So, I really credit me going into this field with the community members that allowed me to interview them, to share their stories about black identity to share their stories about health and their hair and how all of this has to be included as a part of the dialogue when you're having conversations about health disparities and health for Black women.

DR TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

One of the things that you just mentioned, wow, like the importance of the community members. Also, the importance of how kind of just this idea of you can become, you know, passionate about things that really connect with your own life experience and still be able to have significant scientific impact. I think sometimes people feel like, oh no, I need to separate my science from who I am. But you know what, what I'm hearing is definitely and I resonate with this idea that we can actually do this work and utilize the experience as a part of, you know, in in the in the community as an experience experts, you know these are these are opportunities to really collaborate and contribute to the scientific field. That's that's amazing—thank you for sharing your story.

DR DEDE TETEH

Yeah, of course. I I feel like, especially as women of color, especially as Black women, if we're we, it's hard for us just to disconnect our work from who we are it's going to creep in there one way or the other so just allow it to happen because it makes the work richer, it makes it even more impactful. And as you talk about it, people can hear your passion because at the end of the day I have nieces and nephews that my hope and prayer is that the work that I'm doing will improve the next generation's health outcomes, right? So that they don't have to deal with the same issues that that we're dealing

with. So, research is deeply personal, or at least the research that I do is deeply personal to me, and I think any researcher that tells you that their research is devoid of bias, their own personal biases, I don't wanna call anybody a liar, but like, it's kind of it's very, very difficult for you not to have certain biases, especially when it's about your community and people that look like you, that you interact with on a daily basis, etcetera. So, anybody that's out there that wants to do research and feel like you have to disconnect who you are from that process. I will encourage you not to and it will actually be helpful in the long run. I just, I love the work that we're doing and I'm not and I and I love the work that we're doing because it's it's community-led, it's community driven and what is so awesome about what what I did previously like is we still had questions that the community were asking. An important aspect of CBPR is going back to the community after you collect the data to share what you found.

LISSAH JOHNSON

This type of research that Dr Teteh is describing is known as community-based participatory research, or CBPR, and its approach, an approach to conducting research that emphasizes equal partnership between the community being researched and academic researchers, and recognizes that community members are experience experts. It values building long term relationships based on transparency, trust and respect between the different stakeholders, and also recognizes that marginalized communities have a reason to be distrustful of researchers because of unjust and unethical interactions and practices historically.

DR DEDE TETEH

As a part of my post doc, I went back to the churches, the community centers, the community events and, you know, conferences, just having conversations with people to say, hey, this is what we found. What are your thoughts about it? What do you think we should do next, etcetera and that really the ideas from the community jump started a completely different but similar focus to what I was a part of seven years ago when I moved out to California. And so, we, you know, now we have coined it's kind of like what I'm doing now as a part of this process, the Bench to Community Initiative, where I'm partnering with a bench scientist, her name is Dr. Lindsey Treviño. She is like my my brown sister from another mother and a different father, and I just love her, she is a an assistant professor at City of Hope Comprehensive Cancer Center, doing amazing, amazing work and we are partnering together to really continue to answer the question of the community as it relates to are the hair products that I'm using increasing my risk for breast cancer. So, my role with this particular project it's really exploring the social context of product selection and usage and all of those social cultural contexts that such as discrimination, racism, how does you know, fatalism, how does all of all of the things that are occurring in life, how does that determine your product selection and usage, and really learning some unique things about behavior patterns, right, and then at the same time, what Lindsey is doing in the laboratory is we're actually taking different types of parabens, which are preservatives, found in personal care products.

LISSAH JOHNSON

Just a note about parabens. It's a group of manmade chemicals that are commonly added to products as preservatives because they're really good at preventing the growth of mold, fungus, and bacteria. But unfortunately, they're also endocrine disrupting chemicals, or EDC's for short. And EDC's can be natural or man-made, and have been shown to interfere with processes controlled by hormones in our body. If

you're interested in learning more about endocrine disruptors, do check out our previous episode three with Dr Robin Dodson.

DR DEDE TETEH

And we're testing them on breast cancer cell lines in the laboratory. And the whole point of us collecting this data again is because the community is like, okay, what are these chemicals actually doing from a biological perspective? And then secondly. I have this strong connection of my identity to my hair, which determines how the world sees me, and then the world is telling me to look a certain way. Like what, what am I supposed to do with this? So, we're bringing all of our disciplines together in hopes that we can develop interventions for the community, with the community to help them kind of resolve some of the questions that they have as it relates to exposures and EDCs and their personal care products and potential risk factors as relates to breast cancer. So that's kind of a little bit of what we're doing. Ohh and and I'd of course have to like shout out my Community Advisory Board members like I again, like I said, this this the work that I'm doing, the community has been right alongside with us and our Advisory Board members have been instrumental in really guiding our project and where it is right now.

DR TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

I mean, what's really phenomenal about that and critically important as we sit in this moment in time where I think there's a lot of scientific mistrust and distrust is that you're kind of, you're hitting the nail on the head with, you know, thinking about the importance of being able to communicate your findings and being able to have the Community, you know, the folks that this affects most be involved in the process, not just at the end, right? Not asking just what you want to ask, but you're, you have them involved throughout the process and I'm just kind of blown away by the importance of trust, building and transparency that you are building into your scientific research that that really, you know.

DR DEDE TETEH

No, I appreciate that. I I don't know how to not do that, let's just put it that way, right? So, I am I'm a product of Morehouse School of Medicine and PhD program instruction and training where I failed miserably in community engagement, so I just want to put that out there that again my background was biology, bench scientist and then I really didn't like people like that. I still kind of don't like people like that, but, I love people and I love the work that we're doing right so if you are, I am what you call, I'm a functional introvert, right? So, if there are any introverts out there trust me you can do the exact same thing, this work that I'm doing, because the passion for your community is gonna be your driving force. And I just, I don't know how to do, I don't know how to do research without engaging community. It's kind of ingrained in my DNA from my Morehouse School of Medicine training days, and it has served me very well as I've progressed through my career path and I just, it's not easy. So let me just put that caveat out there. It's not an easy process.

DR TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

Absolutely, and I don't think necessarily that, that we always do a great job as scientists, making sure that we have this, the involvement of our community members. For which we really are doing this work on their behalf and it's it's very important. So no, thank you so much for sharing that and I'm going to pivot us a little bit because I want to really highlight some of the work that you've done in this space of thinking about Black identity hair products and hair product use and breast cancer. And you know,

there's been some phenomenal work that you've done that has really spoken to that. And I'm wondering what were some of the findings from some of the work that you've done.

DR DEDE TETEH

So, I love qualitative research. I would consider myself a mixed methods researcher, but my heart is really in qualitative and you know, quantitative gives us the numbers so qualitative gives us the stories behind the numbers and when you put them both together, we have a complete picture. And we did a number of interviews with both Black women from young, old individuals that have survived breast cancer, as well as individuals without a history of the disease, hair stylists, etc. and their partners, right? So, I love, love, love this part of the project because I was laughing, crying, all of the emotions during these interviews, and so were the interviewees and what was very seminal I guess is the term or very important aspect of what we found for the Black woman that we spoke to was really again the intersection of my hair and my identity are synonymous. Period. My hair and my identity is one of the same, my beauty, my individuality and my identity are all connected to my hair, and it wasn't necessarily that we were saying anything new, we all in the community know that in some respects. Right. And you'll have women, for example, as a part of this manuscript, they're like you don't walk out the house looking any kind of way. Essentially, like you don't walk out the house with the ponytail on because somebody in the community is going to see you and then it's going to go back to your grandmother. It's gonna go back to your mother. It's just like just see how she was looking today and it's almost like, you know, women were essentially just sharing with us, like the culture, our culture in terms of hair and what it means to Black identity, what it means to Black culture, is one and the same. And when you introduce the context of the hair products that you're potentially using to craft that identity, maybe putting you at harm—I would just put it this way, it was fighting words for a lot of women.

DR TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

It is, it is!

DR DEDE TETEH

It's fighting words. They were like says what? OK, so this is what the research is saying, that there's a potential and then they didn't hear the potential piece. It was like what? What you're trying to take away from me now like it was literally a knee-jerk reaction from Black women, almost like ready to fight me on just providing any type of context that's different from, so you want that you want me to now let go of my products, why, like what's happening? And it was even a a lot of the young women specifically we're just like, well, everything causes cancer, like, I'm gonna die from something. The older women were just, you know, even the ones that have survived the disease, etcetera were like, I'm just gonna, I'm gonna die from something. So, don't take away my products and this we published this paper in 2017. The data was collected a couple of years prior to then and people had very, very emotional connections, attachments to their hair and then as a result, the products that help them craft that particular hair to their identity and it it was for me, it was mind boggling. But one of the kinds of one of the sad aspects of the project and one of the findings where people were not willing to let go of their products, even if it's gonna potentially cause them harm. And that's something that we as researchers have to, you know, we can sit back and question that, but if you really look at the context behind what hair means, what these products are helping to provide for these women, then it does make a lot of sense. And then you as a researcher or for me as individuals that's building an area, an intervention, you

have to consider the cultural aspect of what this entity that is, you know, people may see it as an accessory, and Black women are saying no, this is actually a direct connection to who I am and who and who I am, my beauty, my individuality and my and my identity and take that into consideration when we're developing interventions to do so because essentially at the end of the day, they told us they're not letting go of the products.

DR TAMARR JAMES-TODD

They're so inextricably linked to each other's identity and hair, you know, from the work that that our group has done, that we, we and others that these chemical concentrations for some of these environmental chemicals that we know are reproductive toxicants, are asthma-associated chemicals are, you know, are associated with obesity, diabetes, all sorts of other things that we know are more prevalent in the Black community. And yet we're hearing from, you know, our qualitative research that you know what you just said, that your work is showing people aren't willing to change what they're using because it is so linked to who they are and how they see themselves and not just beauty, it sounds like it's even more, it's more of a core issue. So, what do you think it might take cause it also sounds I know that you didn't get to talk a bit about this and maybe you wanna go into this a little bit, but it also sounds like you know this idea that, oh, it's about how other people see it, which you know, from your work, it doesn't sound like it's just about how other people see us. It doesn't sound like that's what Black men, for example, are thinking about Black women. So, do you want to say a little bit more and what what you think it might take to make that shift to that would really help to maybe improve exposures?

DR DEDE TETEH

So, I'll answer that question in this way. I don't know what's what it's going to take, but I I do want to focus a little bit on how other people see us there. There was a Black woman, a beautiful Black woman, I and I remember even though it's been about five years, I remember this interview the focus group intimately because beautiful sister who was suffering from alopecia and she broke down, literally in tears when she thought about her relationship, her failures in her relationship, and she and made the connection that it's it was because her hair was falling out was because she wasn't successful in relationships, right? So, and speaking to how other people see and and all these, you know, Black women rallied up, you know, around her really just started speaking life into her to say, sis, you were beautiful no matter what. Girl you can put a weave on it. You can do this. You can do that. Like if it's that you know that much of an issue, but we don't, you know they were they really just encouraging her to say we don't think it's your hair. So that kind of gave us an idea per say, a hypothesis sort of seems to say, well, maybe it's the Black men in their lives that are pushing them to wear their hair a certain way or use a particular product to make their hair look a certain way because it's the partners, it's the men in their lives that are pushing this agenda. That was my hypothesis, and I was wrong. I was wrong!

DR TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

I would, I you know what, I would have thought the same thing so.

DR DEDE TETEH

I was so I was wrong and I actually I went to I had a conversation with my partner, and I was just I think these men are lying. Again, researcher I have my own biases I'm like, no, I gotta be the men, but no, it's not the men in their lives cause the men were essentially saying however they wanna look, it's fine with

me, like we're good. And what was very interesting about that particular body of work that we published a couple of years ago was even the men were saying the relationship of Black women to their hair is so ingrained culturally and community and individually that they're not going to let go of products that could potentially be killing them. And I and I was floored by that and I really don't honestly know what it's going to take from an individual behavior perspective, but what I could say is manufacturers need to do better, policymakers need to do better and in terms of because at this point, what people have told us is these products are helping me do helping me with something that is ingrained in who I am as an individual and how I show up in the world. But then we also have to consider there are societal pressures. I mean, we live in the United States. It's racist. Let's just be honest about that and have to accommodate a Eurocentric or you have to adopt a Eurocentric ideal of beauty in order to be accepted.

DR TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

I think what is at the core of what you're you know, what you're bringing up now is you know something that, you know, Dr. Camara Jones speaks a lot about we know that there's institutionalized racism and so when we think about structural racism, oftentimes we're we think about that in the context of things like institutionalized racism and certainly also thinking about personally mediated racism like what you just mentioned and certainly we've all experienced that, oh, you look pretty today when I straightened my hair. Well, was I not pretty yesterday like, what does that even mean?

DR DEDE TETEH

Exactly, exactly. Right.

DR TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

But I think what we forget sometimes is internalized racism, and so to your point about the systems that are in place. So, I think your point is so well taken about the need to kind of really figure out at the crux of this when you mentioned this, this woman who had really internalized the systems that were at work that made her feel less than not enough because of her hair, and oftentimes these are the same individuals that are using more product, doing much more, right? And and then and then some real health implications there. And I mean to that end say a bit about, you know other, you know, I'm thinking about things like, you know, the Crown Act or, you know, other, you know, laws that are in the works or, you know, California's done an amazing job they're kind of leading the charge, right. But then how might those intersect with perceptions of beauty and do we, you know, or do you feel like they have the ability to make real impact given these issues with internalized racism that may be at the crux of the products we use and the harm that we may put ourselves in?

DR DEDE TETEH

So, I think things are changing, you know, I don't have the evidence per say, I would love to replicate the study now and add, you know generational context looking at various different women and men etc. And so I think at the at the end of the day, Black is, you know, Black hair is a political statement. Period. And I you know, I love this quote by one of our Black men that we interviewed and I think this says a lot about where we are as a society, even presently, right. And so I'll read the quote out loud and it's it's also as a part of our manuscript and I I love using this particular quote because it speaks for itself. So, and it goes if the majority of commercials and ads that we saw look like Lupita from 12 years a slave,

everything will be flipped on its head, even White women will be trying to get their hair nappy. You'll have hair products that turn straight hair nappy, right? So, it you know, it's mainstream and and I feel like it's happening, but it's happening very, very slowly. There was a time last year where there were so many individuals, Black women professionals that were posting their hairs with their Afro, with their braids, and then they would write like this laundry list of paragraph explaining why they finally arrived at this at this realization, like my hair is my Black hair is professional no matter how I wear it. And then you think to yourself, I love it, I applaud you sis. But then at the end of the day it's just like who else is doing this? Like what was the last time you saw a White woman, for example, or a non-person of color post a picture of their curly hair and was just like I have now come to the realization that my curly hair is professional like who else is doing this like let's be real about it. Right. So, I I say all of that to say yes the Crown Act is enormously important and for individuals out there that don't know what the Crown Act is, it's it stands for specifically Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair. And I just wanted to share a little bit on some statistics that are on the Crown Act's website, just type in Crown Act and this information will pop up and it's like Black women are 1.5 times more likely to be sent home from the workplace because of their hair and 80% of women agree with the statement that I have to change my hair from its natural state to fit in at the office. Like you know, similar to what we just shared and talked about with our own personal examples of our hair and colleagues and how they, you know, they say that you look professional now that are and the other. And I think federal regulation, local regulations are going to be important because this issue runs deeper. Again, it's in, you know, racism is in the fabric of our of our country and policy is one area where it can benefit all of us across the board and I think on the advocacy front, we have to support local and federal policy initiatives. It's going to take, yes education is important and we are doing a lot of that with the work that we're engaged in the Bench to Community, but at the same time, we also have to put policies, local and federal policies in place to help support interventions for this as well.

DR TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

And I I just you know what I hear you reiterating is the importance of a multi-pronged approach that this you know, oftentimes we like to think of it as kind of a single, you know, approach and we hyper-focus on the individual. We do a lot of blaming and this isn't about just the individual indeed it's going to require you know multiple levels to have effective and sustainable change, right? Because I, you know, sustainability matters, you have to reform the systems that are in place. It was a delight to speak to you and I just wonder if there are any other points that we didn't get to.

DR DEDE TETEH

Just want to also encourage every single individual on this line whether you want to be a part of our political system or not. This is not a political podcast, however, whether you want to be a part of it or not, you are a part of it, and if you have the capabilities to vote, exercise that voting right in every single election, both local and federal. And all of it. Because at the end of the day, the individuals that are making decisions about what goes into your personal care products, for example bringing it back to the conversation that we're having are individuals that you are electing or not electing into office. So just keep that in mind as well. So, in closing. You're beautiful. Period. And then vote in every election. That's all I got.

DR TAMARRA JAMES-TODD

Dede you are awesome. Thank you so much. This was a delight, and you know, we're gonna have to do something like this again. So, I really appreciate it, and I'll call that a wrap!

DR DEDE TETEH

Yay, I appreciate you too.

LISSAH JOHNSON

Dr Teteh's Bench to Communities approach made it clear how much we need folks from a variety of fields in this work, including first and foremost community members, and also laboratory scientists and epidemiologists working with and alongside folks with different experiences than us not only enriches our research, but also enables us to develop truly impactful and lasting solutions. Community members who are directly affected by environmental and beauty and justices should have a prominent seat at the table in every aspect of the research process. Thank you all again for tuning in to this episode of Beauty + Justice. We hope Dr. Dede Teteh's words, enlightened you and inspired you and just reminded you of your work and value. Be well and join us for the next episode where we'll dig deeper into some of the first-hand experiences of Black women and having natural hair with Dr. Teiahsha Bankhead. And don't forget to tell a friend about the show and leave a rating and review wherever you listen to podcasts.

This episode was produced and edited by Marissa Chan, Lissah Johnson, and Felicia Heykoop, with assistance from Ilkania Chowdhury-Paulino. We received funding from the Environmental Defense Fund.