A Case of Environmental Ethics

Personal Care Products and Precocious Puberty in Black Girls

Shawnee M. Daniels-Sykes, S.S.N.D.

Endocrine-disrupting chemicals in many personal care products marketed to black women are disproportionately causing early puberty and later health problems in black girls. This form of environmental racism needs to be addressed strategically through a Catholic environmental ethic that can lead to personal and social transformation.

Growing out of a concern to protect species and natural resources from abuse, the environmental ethics movement in the United States extends back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (see Faber and O’Connor). In the late 1960s and 1970s, this movement began to put more concerted efforts toward environmental quality and human health. Federal government organizations, including the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), and the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) were put in place, along with laws

Shawnee M. Daniels-Sykes, R.N., Ph.D., is a member of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, assistant professor of theology at Mount Mary College, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and an adjunct assistant professor at Xavier University, The Institute for Black Catholic Studies, New Orleans, Louisiana. She is also a volunteer faculty member at the Medical College of Wisconsin Center for the Advancement of Underserved Children in the Department of Pediatrics.
and regulations to guide each organization’s work. While these safety nets exist today, some personal care products containing less than 10,000 IU of estrogen per ounce are not regulated by the FDA (see Zimmerman and Francis). Still one must make the case that hormones are drugs and thus require specific approval, especially given the frequency and long-term use of these personal care products and the scientific research showing that the use of some of these products results in precocious puberty in black girls.

It remains no secret that people of color, namely, African Americans or blacks, Native Americans, and Hispanics, are disproportionately affected by industrial toxins, dirty air, and drinking water (see Bullard). This raises the issue of environmental justice or environmental racism. As Bryan Massingale explains, this entails that environmental hazards are not randomly or evenly distributed across population groups, but rather are borne disproportionately by people of color and the economically poor (Massingale, 234–250). A Catholic environmental ethic that applies key principles of Catholic social teaching is well positioned to make a positive contribution toward speaking about this notion of environmental racism. Intrinsically to a Catholic environmental ethic is a deep sense of God, the Divine Creator of everyone and everything on earth. Human beings are cocreators, and thus, stewards of what God has given to us. God created everything and everyone good (Gen 1:31), and thus everyone and everything must be respected and protected from harm or destruction.

The use of some personal care products, especially those marketed before 1994, resulting in precocious puberty is an issue of environmental racism (on the effects of the products, see Li et al., 2002a and 2002b). Environmental endocrine-disrupting chemicals such as placenta tissue extracts and estrogens mixed in these personal care products remain popular and continue to be used by black people, especially parents and their daughters. For example products such as B&B Super Gro, Henna ‘n’ Placenta, and Perm Repair with Placenta (Donovan et al.) are known to contain environmental endocrine-disrupting chemicals or widespread synthetic environmental chemical substances that are present in the environment and are absorbed through human skin and fat that may influence the endocrine system in a harmful manner (see Parent et al.). When these chemicals are absorbed in the body, they may mimic or block hormones and disrupt

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the body’s normal functioning, thus affecting human disorders of sex differentiation and of reproductive organs and functions.

In a capitalist country like the United States, consumers have the right to participate freely in the market, to purchase, and to use personal care products that contain endocrine-disrupting chemicals, such as testosterone and estrogen creams, hair tonics, and shampoos with estrogen, if they choose. In fact, according to Sam Ennon, chairman of the Black-Owned Beauty Supply Association, African-Americans spend approximately $9 billion per year on personal care products or about $150–$300 per person per month (see www.rachelsfriends.org). Scientific reports reveal that the more frequently one uses hormone-containing products over an extended period of time, the more likely that early breast development in girls, even as young as 18 months will occur (Donovan et al.).

This article discusses a very special issue of environmental racism that, I argue, needs to be addressed continuously and strategically through education, while brought more and more into the public square. Both in the private and public sector, I believe that a Catholic environmental ethic has some important reflections to contribute to this process of education, leading to personal and social transformation. This is especially given the fact that over the last fifteen years research has shown that the issue of precocious puberty can potentially lead to breast cancer in premenopausal black women (Tiwary; Li et al. 2002a; Wilson et al.). In addition,

. . . precocious puberty is a condition that has a profound impact on growth, development and psychosocial well-being. . . . From studies of untreated patients the long-term outcome is known to include short stature, body disproportion and obesity. . . . In addition . . . there is the risk of sexual abuse due to premature sexual development. . . . Pregnancies in very young children have been described. (Partsch and Sippell, 292)

To examine further this environmental ethical concern, I first briefly share the story of Madame C. J. Walker as a springboard for this topic. She was a black woman who invented black hair care products and facial skin cream. Then, I discuss the problems around precocious puberty in black girls, especially as they relate to the use of black personal care products. Third, through the lens of Catholic social teaching, I offer some suggestions as to what needs to be done to effect change regarding this environmental ethical issue.

Before proceeding to a brief introduction on the contributions of Madame C. J. Walker, it is important to stress that issue of personal care products for black women in and of itself is not a new one (Anonymous 1859) and it is not morally wrong or unethical to use these products, especially if they have been evaluated and determined as not harmful for human use.
As far as recorded black history on this topic is concerned, the personal care product industry focusing on black women was launched in the late 1800s to early 1900s when Sarah Breedlove, who later came to be known as Madame C. J. Walker, became the manufacturer of these products. Like many black women in late nineteenth-century rural America, initially, Sarah was ignorant of the most basic hair care hygiene. However, as a child, she was made cognizant of the value placed on hair texture and skin color. For example, Sarah learned that white skin and shiny straight hair was considered “good hair” and was valued more than black skin and coiled, kinky hair. These distinctions between blacks and whites created and enforced a social hierarchy between the two races. White people were deemed superior, while black people were considered inferior to whites; hair texture and skin color played a huge role in sustaining these differences. Even among black people, hair care—or the lack of it—was a carefully calibrated indicator of social and economic class status.

By the time she was in her late thirties, Sarah was contending with hair loss because of a combination of stress, seborrhea and psoriasis, and damaging hair-care products. For her, clean hair equated with a clean body. After experimenting with various methods, she developed a formula of her own that caused her hair to grow again quickly. In addition, she manufactured facial skin cream for black women. A champion of black personal care products, Madame C. J. Walker launched a million-dollar industry, which today has mushroomed into a multi-billion-dollar industry. Black women then and now appreciate and enjoy personal care products designed for them. Today, however, care must to be taken to protect the quality of human life and health of those who purchase and use these products so as to not become one of an environmental ethical concern.

**Personal Care Products and Precocious Puberty in Black Girls**

I begin this section of the paper with a very common definition of puberty. According to C-J. Partsch and W. G. Sippell,
Puberty is the period during which human development progresses from the first pubertal sign to full sexual maturation. Within this period, the capacity for reproduction is achieved. Puberty includes the development of secondary sexual characteristics as well as growth, development, and maturation of primary sexual organs. (293)

Precocious puberty is generally defined as the appearance of secondary sexual characteristics before age 8 in girls or menarche before age 9 years (Partsch and Sippell, 292). These characteristics include breast development, growth of pubic hair and underarm hair, increased growth rate, and menstrual bleeding.

Studies of racial differences pertaining to normal puberty reveal that by age 8, nearly 50 percent of black girls, but only 15 percent of white girls, had begun pubertal development (see Freedman et al.). In addition to racial differences, it is important to note that the onset of puberty can be influenced by maternal menarche, low birth weight, or excessive weight gain or obesity in infancy and early childhood, and after international adoption (Carel and Leger).

Public health specialist Chandra M. Tiwary affirmed that the use of estrogen or placenta-containing hair care products on African American girls can lead to their undergoing precocious puberty. Other scientific researchers discovered from a survey of parents at four southern U.S. Army hospital clinics that 64 percent of African Americans parents and 6.9 percent of European-American parents used hormone-containing hair products, and 55.5 percent of those parents used them on their children (Li et al. 2002a). They found that there was a significant difference between the mean age of onset of puberty in European American compared with African American girls (Li et al. 2002a). They concluded that it is possible that the use of hormone containing hair products may contribute to earlier onset of puberty in African American girls (Li et al. 2002a).

Below are two true cases of environmental concern that illustrate parental reactions and responses over the discovery of early puberty in their daughters, stemming from estrogenic endocrine-disrupting chemicals and the potential health problems that could arise.

In an article entitled, “Reaching Puberty Early,” by Susan H. Shane, she wrote:

Just after my daughter turned 7, she came to me and nervously announced that she had bumps on her chest. I felt beneath her nipples, and indeed, there were prominent, hard lumps. A friend had gone through this with her 7-year-old, so my first fleeting panic about cancer was replaced by an alarming realization that my little girl was developing breasts. I made an appointment with our family doctor, but it was two weeks off. In the meantime, I googled “premature puberty” and discovered the literature on environmental causes of early puberty. I also found that family history, prenatal and early postnatal exposures were key. When I looked into the environmental causes, however, a clearer picture began forming.
Environmental influences such as pollutants, plastics, and personal care products with estrogen base can be the hidden cause of early puberty, especially in black girls.

In a second article entitled, “Eight Going on Eighteen: Our Daughter and Early Puberty,” Elizabeth Arndorfer wrote:

I have a beautiful, high-spirited, thoughtful eight year old daughter. She loves Harry Potter, rainbow sherbet, and desperately wants a dog. And as an eight year old she has breasts. When I first noticed that she had breasts, I found out everything I could about puberty—wasn’t this a little young? I talked to our pediatrician; I talked to other parents; neighbors, and work colleagues. I combed the internet. What I found out didn’t make me happy. In a fascinating—albeit alarming—report commissioned by the Breast Cancer Fund . . . I learned that girls get their first periods today, on average a few months earlier than did girls 40 years ago. More shocking, they get breasts one to two years earlier. In thirty years, the onset of puberty has fallen to just under 10 years for U.S. white girls and just under 9 years for black girls. Wow!

. . . The Breast Cancer Fund commissioned the report because early puberty is a known risk factor for breast cancer. But that’s not all. Early puberty has been shown to raise the risk of a variety of other conditions including polycystic ovarian syndrome, high risk adolescent behaviors such as smoking, drinking, drugs, crime, and unprotected sex, eating disorders, depression and anxiety; and lower academic education. . . .

Endocrine disruptors are prevalent in our everyday lives—cosmetics, shampoos, cleaning products, baby bottles, children’s toys, pesticides, vinyl shower curtain[s] and the list goes on. . . .

As a result of my research, I made significant changes in our lives. (Arndorfer)

Of course, it is very important that parents of girls react in a constructive way to the issue of some personal care products that cause precocious puberty. It is not the time to dismiss or make light of the issues surrounding precocious puberty in girls in general and in black girls in particular. Given that the research shows that black girls are disproportionately affected by environmental endocrine-disrupting chemicals in some personal care products, it is time to declare that attention to the primacy of human beings in light of this environmental ethical concern. This particular environmental ethical issue is not about the devastation of the earth, per se, but the potential health problems that adversely affect human life as a result of breast cancer, etc. Research has shown that black people suffer disproportionately compared with whites in most measures of health in the United States, and very early puberty in black girls joins this alarmingly long list (Centers for Disease Control). Every risk factor for early puberty affects black girls more than white.
Principles of Catholic Social Teaching

The Catholic Church’s social teaching is a rich treasure of thought and wisdom that discusses why we must view the whole of creation as sacred and demanding of reverence and respect. A distinctly Catholic contribution to contemporary environmental justice arises from this understanding, as human beings are integral to nature but not solely limited to it. Human beings as social beings are called to holiness amid the challenges of modern society. In addition, human beings are called to be good stewards of all that God has given to them. Derived from the teaching of the popes and bishops, the principles of Catholic social teaching, the heart of the Catholic social tradition, also implies that the promotion of environmental justice is integral to human flourishing and human dignity.

The Principle of Human Dignity

The church proclaims that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God; therefore, all human life is sacred. How human life is respected has much to say about what society thinks of human dignity (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 27). In many ways, the value of human life is threatened, including those who are adversely affected by endocrine-disrupting chemicals in personal care products. Human dignity refers to the belief that every person is precious and that people are more important than things. Since some personal care products are the culprits in the problems of precocious puberty in black girls, the need arises to protect and respect the vulnerable lives of these young members of society. Their human dignity it upheld when care is taken to keep them away from these harmful chemicals.

An Option for the Poor, Vulnerable, and Marginalized

Passages in Sacred Scripture recall the message that God has a special place for human beings who are poor, vulnerable, and marginalized in society. This “option” does not mean that the poor, vulnerable, and marginalized are better than anyone else, but it does mean that we must strengthen the entire community by assisting those who are most vulnerable (Paul VI). We live in a society that prizes the consumption of material goods, forgetting that some material goods are dangerous and make some vulnerable when using them. Hence, we are called to assess lifestyles, policies, social institutions, and manufacturing companies in terms of their impact on the poor, vulnerable, and marginalized. We are called to ask about
ways to shape laws and public policies to regulate, for example, the amount of environmental endocrine-disrupting chemicals like placental extracts and estrogen contained within some personal care products. As an integral part to the common good, black girls are vulnerable to harm and need to be protected.

The Principle of the Common Good

As aforementioned, human beings are not only sacred, they are social beings created to live in the context of integral communal relationships. How society is organized in terms of laws, the market, industries, economics, and the environment directly affects human dignity and the capacity to grow as part of the common good (John Paul II 1987). The cosmetic and beauty supply industry must care about how individuals can flourish in community. This challenges the market to work more concertedly toward social justice and the advancement of the common good, especially in light of the environmental ethical concerns surrounding endocrine-disrupting products and little black girls. These products must be investigated and regulated by federal government agencies such as the FDA and the EPA. If not, the notion of steward of creation is potentially threatened as well.

The Principle of the Stewardship of Creation

One main requirement of Catholic Christian faith is that we are to be good stewards of what God has given us, such as the protection of people and the environment (John Paul II 1990). As previously noted, some personal care products containing estrogen or placental extracts when unintentionally inhaled or ingested, applied to the breast area, or used as a topical treatment for diaper rashes or scalp conditions have resulted in the early development of secondary sex characteristics. When girls enter into early puberty as a result of the use of some personal care products, this raises concerns about the possibility of breast cancer in later years, teenage pregnancy, and psychosocial challenges, among others. The principle of stewardship, in this case, requires a constructive role for government. In essence, the continual regulation of personal care products by federal government organizations such as the EPA, the FDA, OSHA, and the CEQ is vital. Also, consumers of these products must become more aware and knowledgeable about the potential risks that they pose in girls.

The Principle of the Constructive Role for Government

As social beings, the state is natural to the human person, giving it a positive moral function in helping to sustain the dignity of human life, human rights, and to build the common good (John XXIII). Previously noted in this paper are various environmental agencies and organizations that have established laws and regulations to assist citizens in fulfilling their responsibility to others in society. Manufacturers and users of personal care products that contain even small levels of hormones such as estrogen, or placental extract, and/or synthetic environmental
disrupting chemicals that are potentially harmful to black girls need to redress this environmental ethical concern. Citizens not only need the government to play a constructive role in regulating the manufacturing and sale of these products, they also need the ongoing cooperation of those who make these products and sell them in beauty supply or cosmetic stores and/or use these products in hair care or beauty salons.

**Call to Address Environmental Ethical Concerns**

In summary and conclusion, the issue of the use of personal care products among black people can be crystallized in the story of Madame C. J. Walker, who was a primary inventor of hair care products and facial cream for black women. There is nothing morally wrong or unethical about using these products. However, when some of these personal care products have been found to contain synthetic environmental endocrine-disrupting chemicals such as placental extract and estrogen, environmental ethical concerns emerge and need to be addressed. Two true stories were recounted from parents as consumers of personal care products. They discovered that their young daughters had entered into precocious puberty. Discontinuing this use of these products slowed down the situations of early puberty in their daughters.

Even though research shows that black girls enter puberty earlier than white girls, for parents to have their seven- and eight-year-old daughters developing secondary sex characteristics at such young ages poses potential health problems. The principles of Catholic social teaching have something direct to offer this discussion on the issue of environmental racism and precocious puberty in black girls. We are called as people of God, co-creators and caretakers of what God has given. We must be attentive to those things that potentially threaten human dignity and human flourishing.

**References**


