Doing Identity with Style: Service Interaction, Work Practices and the Construction of 'Expert' Status in the Contemporary Hair Salon

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Abstract

This paper contributes to a growing body of scholarship concerned with hairstyling as an occupation and, more broadly, to sociological discussions concerning contemporary forms of service work. As an occupation hairstyling is largely under-researched, with the majority of existing studies restricting their focus to small low-profile salons situated in the 'backstreets' of rural areas or small towns. Hairstyling in larger high-profile salons, such as those in city centres, has only recently begun to be explored and critical discussion of existing knowledge in light of these environments has yet to be fully developed. The aim of this paper is to stimulate such discussion by examining how the work practices and service interactions of hair stylists in high-profile salons within the UK impact upon their status and identities in relation to clients. Research undertaken in low-profile salon settings has found that the service-oriented and commercial features of the work position stylists as subservient to clients and undermines their 'expert' status. Drawing on empirical qualitative research this paper shows how in contemporary high-profile salon environments, which need to manage a tension between the high cost of the service being provided and a poor 'low-skilled' occupational reputation, stylist-client dynamics are differently configured. It highlights how service orientated norms and practices underpinning the work of stylists are informed by discourses of customer service 'excellence' which promote employee proactivity and discourage customer deference. Discussion of the data shows how stylists working in high-profile salons are empowered to be directive in their service interactions with clients and engage in range of work practices which facilitate, rather than undermine, the establishment of their expert status. The relevance of the research findings to understandings of status and identity construction in service work jobs within similar high-profile settings is also highlighted in the paper.

Keywords: *Hairstyling, Hairdressing, Customer Service, Emotion Work, Expert Status, Identity, Service Work*

Introduction

1.1 Contrary to the public perception of hairstyling as, 'a simple, unskilled or low-skilled occupation, that can be done by "anybody"' (Eayrs 1993: 32), existing studies consistently show that stylists engage in complex forms of technical, interpersonal and interactive work which require various types of skill, knowledge and expertise (see, *inter alia*, Notkin 1972; Eayrs 1993; Gimlin 1996, 2002; Lee *et al* 2005, 2007; Cohen 2010, Yeadon-Lee *et al* 2011). As well as the technical 'know-how' of cutting, colouring, perming and styling hair, stylists carry out a number of service-oriented tasks within their work, including carrying out consultations and sales (Soulliere 1997; Gimlin 1996; Yeadon-Lee *et al* 2011; Cohen 2000). In the course of this work, stylists perform several 'roles'. Chief among these are 'friend and confidante' (Soulliere 1997; Lee *et al* 2007), 'informal help giver' (Cowen *et al* 1979) and 'fashion icon/coach' (Lee *et al* 2007). These involve the stylist establishing a relationship with clients whereby they listen to their problems and anxieties and, where needed, offer sympathy and support (Gimlin 1996, 2002; Eayrs 1993). Further roles include the 'caretaker' and 'risk-bearer' (Eayrs 1993) where, to ensure clients can relax and enjoy their treatments, stylists take personal responsibility for both the service process and the risks involved in the techniques used (i.e. colouring or perming). Finally there is the role of 'income maximizer', (Lee *et al* 2007) where stylists seek to increase their takings via sales strategies and 'upgrade' services.

1.2 The above tasks and roles, characteristic of hairdressing work, involve considerable 'emotional labour'

(Hochschild 1983) on the part of stylists. The term emotional labour, originally coined by Arlie Hochschild, refers to the ways in which employees in service work occupations manage their feelings and display appropriate emotions in order to induce particular feeling states in customers and clients. The emotional aspects of stylists' work is of particular significance for many commentators concerned with hairstyling (Parkinson 1991; Eayrs 1993; Gimlin 1996, 2002; Cohen 2010; Lee *et al* 2007; Yeadon-Lee *et al* 2011). In a discussion of the emotional work involved for stylists in establishing and maintaining trust with clients, Eayrs (1993, p.31), for example, argues that as well as being 'technically complicated', hairstyling work involves a 'complicated management of clientele, both physically and psychologically ... qualities usually associated with high-status professions'. Eayrs berates sociologists for failing to emphasise these qualities within hairstyling, arguing that this is due to an uncritical assumption of its much maligned public reputation (p. 31-32). However, in a study of 'Pamela's', a small low-profile independent hair salon in the USA, Gimlin (1996, 2002) contends that conceptualising hairstyling work as 'professional' in any sense is problematic due to the emotional, service-oriented and commercial features of the job. She argues that the need for stylists to nurture their clients consistently undermines rather than supports their claims to an expert or 'professional' occupational identity.^[1] In her observations and interviews with stylists at 'Pamela's', Gimlin found that although stylists saw themselves as experts in their work, they were ultimately compelled to defer to clients and to forfeit their expertise in order to comply with their clients' wishes and demands. She asserts:

[This] was evident in the many instances when beauticians cut hair in a requested style they saw as unattractive, ugly, or unfashionable. Hairdressers provide these styles because first, they are financially dependent on their clients' satisfaction and second, because they claim to be genuinely concerned with their customers' needs. (1996, p. 515)

1.3 For Gimlin, the imperative to make money *and* provide good customer service meant that stylists were placed in a subordinate and servile position in relation to clients whereby their emotional labour became 'self-sacrificing' in nature (p. 516). She argues that this position limited the possibilities for stylists to be directive and/or to exert influence over clients within the service encounter, and prevented their identities as experts or 'professionals' from being established.

1.4 Gimlin does acknowledge the specificity of 'Pamela's' as a research site. However, whether there are similar dynamics between stylists and clients in higher profile salon environments has yet to be explored.^[2] Given that the industry has fragmented over recent years (Skills Active 2008), such a project is clearly now required and would be useful in raising sociological awareness of the diversity of salons and their working practices across the industry as a whole. The aim of this paper, then, is to begin this project. Drawing on interviews and observations, it will examine the interplay between service discourses, work practices and the construction of hair stylists' status in salons within the high-profile segment of the industry. It is hoped that the discussion provided will contribute to developing existing knowledge of hairstyling work, which has largely grown out of research carried out in small low-profile salons, and stimulate more sociological enquiry into a broader range of hairstyling environments. The paper will also, however, contribute to sociological discussions of other similar high-profile service jobs where, like hairstyling, there is a tension between a poor 'low-skilled' occupational reputation, which for the majority is due to the work being feminised (Kerfoot and Korczynski 2005), and the high cost of the service being provided.^[3] For example, while the high-cost 'style' labour market is a growing area within services employment (Nickson *et al* 2004; Warhurst and Nickson 2007, 2009) and requires 'feminised' competencies such as emotional and aesthetic work (Adkins 2001; McDowell 1997; Crompton 1997), gaining formal recognition of these as constituting 'skilled' forms of work is proving difficult to achieve, even in otherwise 'expert' service occupations which require vocational education and/or apprenticeship, such as hairstyling (see, *inter alia*, Belt 1992; Bolton 2004; Hampson and Junor 2005; Grugulis and Vincent 2009; Cutcher 2001). In view of this tension, insight into how issues of status and identity are being managed within such settings is therefore useful and timely.

1.5 The discussion of hairstyling presented here employs a constructionist 'interactive' approach to identity (Goffman 1959) and focuses specifically on how the status of hairstylists is constructed within their service interactions with clients via service discourses and practices. In so doing, it builds upon and complements recent ethnographic work that has been carried out in several service work settings. This has highlighted how conceptions of status, 'skill' and expertise are not just dependent on formal recognition structures at institutional and industrial levels (Cutcher 2001; Warhurst *et al*, 2004; Grugulis 2007) and through government policies (Payne 2009; Lloyd and Payne 2009), but may also be recognised in, and accomplished through, localised social interaction. Studies of personal trainers (George 2008), bridal shop workers (Corrado 2002), therapeutic massage (Oerton 2004) and hotel workers (Sherman 2005, 2007), for example, show that in the absence of being formally recognised as a 'true professional', employees continually negotiate their authority and construct their 'expert' status through social interaction with customers and clients. In this process, workers are able to distance themselves from any negative perceptions of their occupational role and generate more favourable understandings of their work and occupational identities for both themselves and their clients or customers. This paper adds to these insights by emphasising how service interaction and opportunities for status and identity construction are often tightly structured through specific 'customer service' discourses and practices. The discussion will show how, in high-profile salon environments, service norms and work practices are driven by discourses of customer service 'excellence' which promote employee proactivity and discourage customer deference. Through interviews and observations the paper will demonstrate how, contrary to Gimlin's (1996, 2002) findings, stylists in these setting are thus empowered to be authoritative and directive in their service interactions with clients and engage in range of work practices which facilitate, rather than undermine, the establishment of their 'expert' status. Due to confines of space, the discussion here will not focus on the gendered aspects of hairstyling work practices and service interactions, although these are relevant line of enquiry in their own right and worthy of investigation (see for example, Nordberg 2002;

1.6 The paper will begin with a brief overview of the discourses of 'the customer' and customer service which typically inform the practices of high-profile and high quality service organisations. This outlines the ways in which 'the customer' is conceptualised and approached and also how, in providing service 'excellence' (Peters and Waterman 1982), commercial service organisations create service structures which require employee discretion and autonomy, promote customer enchantment (Ritzer 1999, 2001) and demand instrumental empathy (Korczynski 2005). It will then move into an overview of the research undertaken. The remaining sections will then discuss the empirical data. This will focus on several main features of the stylists' work where opportunities for status and identity construction were facilitated and carried out. These include salon and stylist aesthetics, the salon service structure, and also the working practices and service interactions within consultations, processes of informing and educating clients and dealing with 'challenging clients'.

Customer Service and the 'Customer'

2.1 The growth of the service economy and the ideology of 'enterprise culture', where market forces and 'entrepreneurial principles' are increasingly permeating all spheres of social life (duGay & Salaman 1992, p. 628), have led to an acute managerial (and indeed sociological) concern with the 'customer' (Macdonald & Sirianni 1996; Sturdy *et al* 2001; Rosenthal *et al* 2001). The primary image of the customer promoted in service management discourses is that of the 'sovereign customer', whereby customers are seen as, 'autonomous, self-regulating and self-actualizing individual actors, seeking to maximise the worth of their existence to themselves through personalized acts of choice in a world of goods and services' (duGay & Salaman 1992, p. 622). For commercial service organisations, the key to ensure business success is, therefore, to identify and satisfy customer needs and desires and, as advocated within management texts, to become more 'enterprising'. This involves becoming customer focused by continuously improving the services being provided, or personalising/stylising services in line with the requirements of customers (Sturdy 2001). For organisations who wish to improve service quality and become high-profile the advice is to strive towards 'customer responsiveness' and 'service excellence' (Peters & Waterman 1982) in order to 'add value' to services. This is understood as achieved by providing high quality physical service environments – 'servicescapes' (Bitner 1992), as these are influential in communicating company image and purpose to customers (Korczynski and Ott 2004; Brown 2004) and also by 'empowering' employees – that is, granting them discretion and 'responsible autonomy' whereby they can be creative, make decisions and become enterprising in order to deliver a more flexible and personalised service (Peters & Waterman 1982; Rosenthal *et al* 1997).

2.2 Building a high-profile customer-responsive workforce thus requires these employers to move away from simple directive and/or bureaucratic forms of management control, which are seen to result in standardised and/or routinised services, and instead reconstruct their service 'into a dynamic enterprise in which empowered, 'enterprising' employees use their personalities to delight the customer by anticipating and exceeding their expectations' (Rosenthal *et al* 1997, p. 487). The very nature of 'customer service' is, therefore, fully transformed into a forward looking process where delighting and exceeding the expectations of customers, what Ritzer (1999, 2001) terms processes of 'enchantment', replace the more traditional aim to achieve customer satisfaction (Chandler, cited in Oliver *et al* 1997, p. 313). As noted by Patterson (cited in Torres and Kline 2006: 291) 'customer delight involves going beyond satisfaction to delivering what can be best described as a pleasurable experience for the client' and, as Wayne (2010, p. 42) outlines, 'delight occurs when a customer receives a service or product that satisfies but also provides an unexpected value or unexpected satisfaction'.

2.3 Many commercial service organisations may be characterised, then, as focused upon and driven by the needs and desires of the 'sovereign customer'. However, it is well documented by critical observers of customer service processes that customer sovereignty and the independence and authority that is often associated with it, is largely illusory (Korczynski 2005; Sturdy *et al* 2001; Pettinger 2011). This is due to a structural contradiction that lay at the heart of these service organisations, where the aim of being customer focused exists alongside the commercial aim to make money. This places both the organisations and their employees in a position of 'instrumental empathy' in relation to customers, a position which is managed by promoting the consumption of 'the enchanting myth of customer sovereignty' where customers may feel as though they are in charge while employees are in fact exerting influence over them (Korczynski, 2005, p. 74). Indeed, as Korczynski (2005, p. 71) observes, 'contemporary service management, it seems, is relying more and more on direct interactions between sales workers and customers to encourage demand for products'. Thus, establishing service excellence and delighting customers empowers employees to be authoritative and directive in the service interaction and does not require employee deference to customers, even though at first sight this is what such discourses suggest.

2.4 How customer service 'excellence' operated through the environments, working practices and service interactions within the participating salons are discussed in the empirical sections below. However, before turning to this discussion an overview of the research carried out will first be provided.

The Research

3.1 The empirical work that informs this paper was funded by the Innovation Fund at the University of Huddersfield and took place throughout 2009, primarily in the North of England. The research was qualitative in design and involved semi-structured interviews, supplemented with informal observations of hairstyling work. All interviews were fully transcribed and were analysed using a thematic approach, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Ryan and Bernard (2003). Field notes of the informal observations were written up at the end of each period of observation and these were also analysed using

the thematic analysis method. In both cases this involved examining the accounts for representations of service interaction and the interactive features of stylists' status and identity construction. In order to preserve anonymity, all names and any other identifiable information has been changed.

3.2 The salons that participated in the research were randomly selected from a pool of identifiable 'high-profile' salons in the Northern area. These were salons who offered high cost services in luxury salon environments in city/town centres and other affluent areas. Five salons participated in the research. Three of these were medium sized, having eight to ten stylists in each salon and two were large sized, with approximately twenty stylists in each. The salons included: one medium sized salon belonging to large high-profile chain (salon one), situated within a busy health and fitness club approximately four miles from the city centre; two medium sized salons (salon two A and salon two B), each belonging to one owner and both situated in busy high streets in two different town centres; two large sized salons (salon three A and salon three B), belonging to the same owners, where one (salon three B) was based in a busy city centre high street and the other in an affluent and cosmopolitan suburban area near the city centre's edge.

3.3 Semi-structured interviews were carried out across the five participating hair salons and one national hairstyling business academy based in the south of England, but which operates nationally. Together, this involved interviews with three female salon owner/directors, one male business academy director, one female salon academy trainer, five female stylists and two male stylists. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes to an hour. Semi-structured interviews of similar length were also carried out with five female 'clients'. However, as the participating salons only agreed access to their stylists and managers, none of the 'clients' interviewed were from the participating salons themselves. Rather, they were 'clients' from a range of other high-profile salons in the area and were selected through the snowballing technique (Atkinson and Flint 2004; Browne 2005). The decision to carry out interviews with clients, alongside informal observations, was made in order to facilitate an analysis which could be *informed* by, and *include*, a 'customer' standpoint (see the overview of this below). Carrying out interviews with clients of the participating salons would, of course, have had the advantage of enabling investigation into how specific service practices and forms of service interaction within each salon were perceived and experienced by *their* clients. Interviewing 'clients' from other salons, however, still had some advantages. For example, they assisted in developing awareness of processes and procedures during the informal observations, and also provided useful points of comparison in the analysis of the observation notes (see below for details). Further, these interviews also enable what Williams (2000, p. 215) terms 'moderatum generalizations', which in this instance is a broader indication of the shared characteristics of service provision and customer 'experience' across the high-profile 'style' market as a whole.

3.4 The informal observations that were carried out took place within the participating salons, where approximately 45 hours were spent observing the work of stylists and their interactions with clients. For approximately 30 of those hours I was a 'participant observer' (Angrosino 2007; Delamont 2007), experiencing the work of stylists and the service being provided by the salon *as* a client. This took place in salon three A and salon three B over a series of twelve visits. As stated above, these observations, together with the 'client' interviews, were chosen in order to facilitate analysis which could be *informed* by, and include, a 'customer' standpoint. In the majority of studies of service work, knowledge *about* service provision, customers and their experiences of these processes tend to be drawn from the accounts of employers and employees and from organizational literature (Bolton and Houlihan 2005; Pettinger 2005, 2006). Views of services from and/or informed by the perspectives of customers are surprisingly absent.^[4] Given that a 'service' requires both a service worker to produce and provide the service and a customer to engage in the process in order to receive it, designing the research to incorporate *both* standpoints was considered to be appropriate and useful for extending current debates (see also Pettinger 2005, 2006; Bolton and Houlihan 2005). The participant observation involved engagement in various 'hair' services provided in the salon, including consultations, cutting, colouring and styling, where informal conversations were also held with stylists, receptionists and trainee stylists. The length of the individual visits depended on what I was having done to my hair and so tended to vary from an hour or so to up to approximately three hours.

3.5 The remaining sections of this paper will discuss the findings from the empirical research. This will examine the main features of hairstyling work where stylists' status and identities were negotiated and constructed within their service interactions with clients. The discussion will begin by providing a brief overview of how customer service 'excellence' was conveyed through salon aesthetics.

The Hairstyling salons: the aesthetics of 'service excellence'

4.1 Customer service is recognised throughout the hairstyling industry as a main source of competitive advantage and as crucial to salon success (Skills Active 2008). Within the high-profile segment of the industry the principles of 'service excellence', as discussed above, are particularly promoted, as these are seen as essential to the provision of good quality high cost services (Austin-Smith 2003, 2011). Features of service 'excellence' are, typically, conveyed visually through salon aesthetics, which suggest stylish quality services and an exceptional customer experience (Chugh and Hancock 2009), and by communicating the training, skills and knowledge of their stylists in promotional materials, such as salon web sites, though as will be discussed later, this is also done within stylists' actual working practices and service interactions.

4.2 All of the five participating hair salons projected a high quality, stylish aesthetic image which suggested individualised and luxurious experiences for clients. This was achieved through the 'servicescape' (Bitner 1992) of the salons which included client facilities, such as plush and stylish waiting areas. All of the salons were spacious in design and presented a clean, fresh and stylish image through décor that signalled their particular brand. The salons all housed new, high quality equipment and had carefully arranged display areas for the products on sale, all of which were attractively packaged and

from very well-known hair product providers. These displays added to the overall stylish and yet quality 'look' of the salon. The general mood of each salon was also established through the music being played, which varied depending on the time of day and also the day of the week.

4.3 As well as the stylish and luxury feel to the 'servicescape', each salon had noticeably high forms of service etiquette. For example, throughout the observations it was noted how clients would always be greeted by their stylists upon arrival, as well as by the receptionists. The reception desks were always staffed and junior stylists and receptionists were continually on hand to take clients' coats, show them to the waiting areas and workstations and offer them a variety of free drinks, which included specialised coffees, teas and an assortment of soft drinks. The waiting areas were plush and stylish in design and housed a large assortment of up to date lifestyle and hair magazines. Large plasma television screens were also installed in these areas and, at low volume, these screened films of various photo-shoots and competitions that stylists within the salon had participated in. Salon three A also provided clients with free access to client PC work stations where they could drink coffee and surf the Internet whilst waiting for their appointments or during treatments, such as having their hair coloured. The workstations, where hair cutting, colouring and styling took place, were similarly trendy in design and were always clutter-free and clean. In all the salons, the luxury environment and individualised treatment of clients were geared towards 'delight' insofar as these went beyond what would be expected and experienced in lower profile salon settings.

4.4 The general high quality aesthetics conveyed through the salons also extended to the appearance of the stylists. It is now well documented that the aestheticisation that takes place within high quality 'style' organisations also extends to incorporating the embodied 'aesthetic labour' of employees as this can convey and indeed promote an organisation's identity and brand (see, *inter alia*, Witz *et al* 2003; Pettinger 2004, 2005). This was evident in all of the salons as the stylists presented a stylish self-image that fitted in with their working environments. The stylists in salon three B, for example, were visibly more 'cutting edge' in appearance compared to the stylists in the other salons and tended to have more unconventional though 'stylish' hair styles. None of salons had a uniform, as often found in routinised and lower profile salons, but all had strict dress codes concerning clothing colour that stylists were expected to adhere to. Being able to individualise their appearance within the dress code and 'look the part' was considered an essential attribute as this meant they would demonstrate to clients that they had fashion-sense and were knowledgeable about issues concerning style and image. As Catherine, the salon owner/director for salon three A and B remarked: 'if your stylist approached you and she was dressed frumpily, you know, you would think to yourself well, has she really got her finger on the pulse, does she really know what's happening, what the latest thing is?' The appearance of the stylists, then, was an important signifier of the salons' fashionable 'leading edge' status. However, this meant that stylists were required to do more than 'look right' in their role (Witz *et al* 2003). Throughout the observations, for example, stylists were seen to regularly change their hair style and colour, often on a monthly basis. This would sometimes involve making striking changes, such as moving between a long and short hair style by using hair extensions. Such noticeable changes were often commented on by clients and on several occasions clients were observed asking stylists about whether they could have something similar. Thus, as well as conveying that stylists knew what 'the latest thing' was, the aesthetic body work (Wolkowitz 2006) undertaken by the stylists served to stimulate demand (Korczynski 2005) and so had an important role to play in increasing business.

On the Salon Floor: Establishing Status and Constructing Identity in work practice and service Interaction

5.1 The impression of service 'excellence' was not only conveyed through the visual aesthetics of the salons, including the aesthetic labour of stylists, but also through stylists' working practices and service interactions and it was through these processes that stylists were able to construct, establish and assert their 'expert' status. These were shaped by, and took place through, the general service structure within each salon.

Service Structure

5.2 In all the salons generalised services, such as being greeted in reception, shown to waiting areas and being served drinks, were also accompanied by highly personalised interactions and practices such as consultations, hair washing, cutting, styling and other hair treatments. These services, which in combination with the aesthetic impressions conveyed were designed to enhance client experience and generate 'delight', all took place through each salon's service structure, commonly referred to as the client's 'journey'. As Sean, the salon director of salon two A, explained:

The [salon] experience is a journey, it's from when you visit, to when you go, to when you pay your bill. The client should, first of all, from actually touching the mat, be taken through and given a five minute consultation through style, through cut and through colour, then offered a head massage and to actually have product advice and to actually be shown, what we call hands-on, which is how to dry their hair, how to do their hair, what's best to use on it, what's best not to use on it. And then obviously the finishing off of it, how to finish it, how to make it look good. And then when you get into reception, you know, saying goodbye, which is re-booking them and it's that journey.

5.3 The 'journey' through the salon, where stylists would accompany clients to hair work stations, basins and other treatment areas, gave order and structure to the visit but also enabled stylists to exercise autonomy and direct the service encounter. Stylists would often be attending to several clients at the same time, for example, and so would pace each client's movement through the journey in order to

complete tasks and enable the smooth running of appointments. Different procedures took place in different locations within the salons. Salon three B, for example, had two floors, where colouring took place on one floor and hair cutting on the other, and salons two A and B and salon one each had dedicated consultation areas and various sections or rooms for particular procedures. In moving through the 'journey' in the salon, clients were physically guided through the different working spaces and technical processes involved in having their hair done and so any awkward or uncomfortable moments for clients, in terms of not knowing where they should be, were avoided. However, the 'journey' did more than simply ensure client comfort and thus enhance the client experience. For example, it also enabled clients to see the range of treatments and services being offered in the salon and, further, observe stylists engaging in a multiplicity of procedures and techniques in the course of their work. The 'journey', then, operated in ways that could facilitate service interest and stimulate demand, and also served to showcase the 'know-how' and levels of expertise involved in hairstyling work.

Consultations

5.4 Stylists' capacity to be directive and influence clients in the service encounter and establish an 'expert' status was particularly visible in the 'consultations' they carried out with clients at the beginning of each visit and during the time spent doing their hair. Consultations with clients, where stylists and clients discussed hair styles and/or colours and any other hair issues, typically lasted between five to fifteen minutes and were considered by the stylists to be the most important part of a client's visit. In consultations, stylists sought to find out what clients wanted to achieve with their hair. However, this did not mean simply asking clients what they wanted. As Lisa, a trainer in salon Two B, explained, 'the haircut is a very important thing but we try and sort of help the clients, like you go to a doctor and get help and advice first'. The very term 'consultation', as well as Lisa's equation of her role with that of a GP, suggests knowledge and an 'expert' if not 'professional' status. Such an image was similarly invoked in the accounts of the other stylist interviewees, who also likened themselves to dentists and opticians. Like these professionals, a gentle form of authority and control was assumed and exercised in relation to clients in the consultation process. Stylists spoke in detail, for example, about how consultations involved assessing clients as Sophie, a junior stylist from salon two A explained:

What we do first in the consultation, they don't wear a gown, so you can see what they're wearing and you'll ask them about like what music they listen to and, you know, their face shape and make-up type, you know. It's just general things, when you're doing a consultation you've got to look at like, what they're actually wearing and the make-up cos sometimes with your skin tone as well, putting a dark colour on someone with really pale skin tone just won't suit them.

5.5 Here, Sophie reveals how stylists take the lead and work to develop an overall perception of the client, based on their appearance and sense of character, in order to gauge the 'suitability' of styles and colours. In the observations it was noted how questions about lifestyle were also asked in consultations, for example, whether the client went swimming or used the gym, what colour clothing they liked to wear and the amount of time they generally spent doing their hair. With this information stylists would then discuss clients' ideas and requests and advise them accordingly. This process thus enabled stylists to convey a general sense of authority through which they could establish confidence and trust (Eayrs 1993; Soulliere 1997) and, in so doing, establish their expertise as practitioners. 'Expert' status was further reinforced, moreover, as most clients actively sought stylists' knowledge and expertise within this process. In the observations, for example, clients were regularly seen and/or heard asking stylists for help and advice and indeed all the client interviewees recounted how stylists' knowledge and expertise was an important factor in their willingness to pay the higher charges for their haircuts and treatments. Suzanne, who had been a client of the same high-profile salon for over five years, for example, stated that, 'one of the things I quite like is the idea that they're exuding their knowledge the entire way through the process, I like that'. Similarly, Sonia, who had only recently started to go to a high-profile salon, remembered what she had liked about the consultations when first visiting:

...I mean what I liked about it was their confidence and the way that they kind of took charge of the situation and would say 'well that will suit you', or that, you know, 'that's right for you', it was the sense of, you know, somebody knowing what they're doing really.

In the accounts of the client interviewees, then, 'delight' and 'good service' did not involve 'getting what you ask for' when visiting the salon but rather receiving 'expert' advice and creative ideas from authoritative and proactive stylists.

Informing and Educating

5.6 The importance of stylist's knowledge and expertise to clients was also recognised by the stylists and senior salon staff. All the salons kept clients informed about any achievements, such as winning competitions or awards. This was done via 'news' areas on the salons' web sites, newsletters and leaflets left at hair workstations and client waiting areas, and also verbally through general conversation in the salon. In several of the participant observation sessions in salon three B, for example, I was given detailed accounts from my stylist regarding her participation in photo shoots and competitions, which included being shown photographs of her work that were published in trade and other hair magazines. Although, arguably, her knowledge of the research may have had an influence upon her actions, similar interactions were, nonetheless, observed between other stylists and clients across the participating salons. On a number of occasions stylists were observed keeping their clients up to date regarding their own personal achievements and plans, which included attending advanced training courses as well as

entering or winning competitions.

5.7 From the standpoint of the salons and stylists, informing clients about these issues was a technique to generate 'delight' that had particularly favourable outcomes. As well as functioning as a 'wow' factor, for example, it also served to affirm the 'professional' image of the salon and, at the same time, enabled stylists to construct and convey a strong sense of their own individual expertise. This process was similarly evident in the stylist's practices of 'educating' clients about their hair type, styles, hair procedures, products and techniques. This occurred through special events, such as 'consultation evenings', 'blow-dry nights, and other 'complimentary sessions', but also through working practices which took place within consultations and throughout the hairstyling process. Client 'education' was considered to be one of the key ways in which the salons offered a better and more 'professional' service than that provided in lower profile salons. Simone, the salon manager in salon one, for example, described the process and the particular benefits this has for clients:

It's explaining to the clients why you're doing what you're doing. When they go to other salons they don't get the whole understanding of why we cut dry or why we cut wet. Like say, I dry cut a lot, so once I've dried their hair, I always say 'I'll put the wet cut in, I'll put your basic cut in now, I'm going to dry it off' using whatever product for these reasons ... So it's just kind of being like that with them rather than just talking about day-to-day stuff really and they gradually start to understand and see the difference as well when they go home and use the products that we've recommended, or when they're drying it, different techniques instead of what they've been doing. They're like 'oh yeah', you know, 'it stayed in its shape a lot longer' so they do eventually pick it all up.

5.8 Prominent in Simone's description is how practices of educating clients were seen to operate at two levels: helping them become knowledgeable about products and proficient at techniques that they can try at home; and helping them become aware and/or understand the technical processes and techniques used by stylists. While the former can be seen to have distinct benefits for clients, insofar as they are then able to recreate their hair themselves in between visits to the salon, both levels had particular benefits for stylists. Throughout the observations it was noted that the process of 'educating' clients enabled stylists to influence them in their choices of hair style/colour and product buying. On a number of occasions, for example, stylists were observed showing clients the latest new products and educating them (via verbal explanations and demonstrations) about new techniques which oftentimes enabled them to 'convert' lower cost services, such as standard haircuts, into higher-cost ones, such as hair colouring. While such practices could be characterized as a sophisticated form of selling, as through such activities the stylists were able to increase their takings, this did not, however, appear to threaten or undermine the stylists' constructions of their expertise but rather, enhanced it. For example, clients were regularly observed appearing interested and visibly impressed when stylists 'recommended' or demonstrated products or techniques, which was evident through their questions and comments to stylists throughout the interactional exchange. Clients were thus active rather than passive participants in this process and were open to, and even encouraging of, stylists' 'recommendations'. Positive reactions to, and perceptions of, these types of practices were also littered throughout the accounts of the client interviewees.^[5] These did not suggest, however, that they lacked critical awareness of what the practices involved. It was recognised, for example, that the practices enabled stylists to increase their takings but, nonetheless, each considered that as consumers they also benefited from the process. Louise, who has been a client of several high-profile salons, explained how she appreciated what she had learned and did not consider that the main driving force behind such practices was 'making money':

I've learnt that I suit a warmer hair colour than a darker one ... it's just quite a nice experience, somebody showing an interest in your hair and actually an interest in you as a person rather than just saying 'oh yes I'll just do, same as before' ... I think those recommendations show that they're not just trying to make money. They're doing it because they care about your hair basically and you and they're making a recommendation that will help you rather than trying to just make money out of it.

5.9 As Louise's account illustrates, as long as client 'education' is perceived by clients as being driven by occupational, 'professional' concerns, rather than by organisational values and/or the 'calculative' actions of stylists, it operates as a form of 'delight'. Ways in which this particular perception may have been ensured within the salons was suggested, via both the stylist interviews and the observations, to involve discretion concerning who was 'educated' and how. Such practices largely involved regular clients rather than new ones, for example, and the nature of the educative practices appeared to vary across the client base, where activities would be detailed and lengthy on some occasions, where it appeared that the stylist knew the client fairly well, but short and relatively superficial on others. 'Educative' activities were thus structured through particular stylist-client 'relationships' as well as through the salons' norms concerning methods of 'delight', both of which helped to ensure harmonious stylist-client dynamics. Client, 'education', then, was treated as an important aspect of the service, as it contributed to the establishment of service 'excellence' and constituted a way in which the salons could differentiate themselves from those within the lower-profile segment of the industry. However, as Lisa, the trainer in salon two A and B explained, it also had particular advantages for stylists themselves, for clients not only learned about products and procedures, but also learned to recognise the 'skilled' nature of stylists' work:

Our clients know a lot about their hair. We talk them through the haircut and what we're doing, so it's making people feel comfortable and also showing that there's so much more involved in a haircut than picking three pieces of hair up and cutting them off. We teach them to let them have a bit of an insight of what's going into their hair, and nine times out of ten the client says 'wow I didn't realise there was so much involved in it', you know, and they're impressed.

'Challenging' clients

5.10 Like the clients, the accounts of the stylist interviewees also downplayed the commercial aspect of their working practices which, similarly, was achieved by appealing to matters concerning 'delight'. Interestingly, this was also evident in their accounts of how they managed 'challenging' clients who requested a cut, style or treatment that they considered to be inappropriate and/or harmful in some way and which went against their professional judgement. Contrary to Gimlin's (1996, 2002) findings, none of the stylists reported that they felt obliged to fulfil the client's request on such occasions as she/he was a paying customer, or that they were expected to do so contractually. Although no instances of 'challenging' clients were observed during the course of the observations, most of the stylists recounted during interview of having had at least one experience of refusing to do someone's hair.^[6] Jason, a senior stylist in salon two A, for example, recalled one particular instance:

There was one occasion in particular that I remember, someone wanted this particular hair do and I just said 'no', you know, 'it's not going to happen, it's not going to work' [laughs]. I was chatting to her for a good half an hour, I said 'look', you know, 'I'm not prepared to do it for you. Someone else might, but I am not prepared to do it for you'

5.11 As Jason illustrates, stylists were thus able to exercise considerable discretion when dealing with clients and, when confronted with requests that they felt were inappropriate, were directive and proactive within the service interaction, even if this meant losing a 'sale'. Examples of refusals given by the stylists and also the client interviewees, largely involved instances where clients had wanted chemical hair treatments, such as bleaching and colouring which would have damaged their hair or would have not led to the result they had hoped for. In these instances, stylists exercised firm authority in order to protect the client and indeed also themselves, as poor results could potentially have adverse consequences, such as litigation. As Simone, the salon manager in salon one, remarked:

... if it's going to ruin their hair like perms or they want it bleached enough that their hair's not going to take it, we can refuse to do it, cos if anything does happen to the hair and it falls out or breaks, we're liable for it.^[7]

5.12 Instances of outright refusing clients were, however, infrequent. On occasions where stylists considered that a client was requesting a cut, style or colour that would not suit them, stylists aimed to avoid outright refusals by dissuading clients instead. As Craig, the business academy director explained:

Everybody you ask will say the same thing, it's a compromise between what I know and what you want ... I'm not just going to do what I know is gonna look good on your hair because you might cry, but equally I'm not doing my job if I just do what you want, you know, if you say you want a fringe and I think a fringe is gonna make you look awful because of the shape of your face', I'm gonna do everything possible to dissuade you.

5.13 'Dissuading' clients involved steering them away from what they had initially requested by advising them what would suit them and making alternative suggestions. The aim of the stylist in these instances was to persuade the client to 'change their mind' and choose something else but, as Simone, the salon manager in salon one, emphasised, 'make it sound like it's their decision as well'. Thus, the main task for stylists when faced with such situations was to turn a situation of client 'disenchantment' into one of 'delight'. This was achieved by exercising authority but also using skills of sensitivity, tact and diplomacy whereby they could be directive but in a subtle manner. This enabled them to avoid upsetting clients but at the same time assert their expertise. Being unwilling to produce 'unsuitable' styles, cuts and colours was seen to be responsible and 'professional' as ultimately this was in the best interests of clients. However, it was also seen to be in the best interests of stylists and the salons too, as Simone went on to highlight:

When someone comes in and says I want this, that and the other and you look at their face, you think it ain't going to work, you need to tell them, cos if you do it and it doesn't work for them, they think it's your haircut, not the fact that it doesn't suit them ... you've got to be honest with them and then you come to a compromise and do something different, they go out loving it.

5.14 Techniques through which stylists could avoid complying with clients' requests that went against their expert judgment were, then, similarly structured through the operation of 'delight' and were a necessary part of hairstylists' working practices. Thus, they not only ensured that stylists could act in the best interests of clients, and transform a situation of disenchantment into one of enchantment, but also protected the reputation of the salon and prevented the 'expert' status of stylists from being undermined.

5.15 Contrary to Gimlin's (1996, 2002) findings, then, the discussion above has shown that the stylists in these high-profile settings did not occupy a position of servitude in relation to clients, due to the commercial and service-oriented features of the work, and nor did they become 'self-sacrificing' when faced with requests from clients that went against their expert judgement. Unlike the small low-profile salon in Gimlin's study, customer service did not rest on the maxim 'the customer is always right' or simply involve giving clients 'what they asked for' but, rather, on principles of 'service excellence' where the key aim was to 'delight clients' by exceeding their expectations. This was achieved through customer oriented norms and practices such as the aesthetics of the salon, the client's 'journey' through the salon, client consultations and processes of informing and educating clients, including those who challenged stylists' expertise, all of which required stylists to be directive rather than deferential in their interaction

with clients. These practices facilitated stylists' construction and establishment of 'expert' status as within them stylists were required to mobilise their knowledge and skills and also exercise authority in their work. In the context of the high-profile salons discussed here, being an 'expert,' was thus a service requirement, a way in which stylists could 'delight' clients and also justify service costs. Thus, rather than existing in opposition to customer service practices, as Gimlin found within a low-profile salon setting, the 'expert' status of stylists was itself an integral part of the service being sold. For the stylists in these high-profile salons an 'expert' status was, therefore, a required as well as acquired occupational status.

Concluding Remarks

6.1 This paper has examined the construction of stylists' 'expert' status in high-profile salons with a view to countering the risk, due to the dearth of research in this area, for the image of hairstyling presented through Gimlin's findings to be treated as representative of, or applicable to, the hairstyling industry as a whole. It is hoped that focusing on the work practices and service interactions of stylists in high-profile settings has highlighted the need for future research to consider the diversity of contexts in which stylists work, and also the significance of customer service discourses and practices in shaping stylists' work practices and opportunities for status construction vis-à-vis clients. The research discussed here, set alongside Gimlin's findings, suggests that stylists in high-profile salons are able to challenge the perception of hairstyling as a low-skilled and 'low-status' job and that such environments provide better 'occupational identities' for stylists. However, the extent to which such settings can be seen to offer 'better jobs' to stylists, as well as better identities, remains open to question. A useful avenue for further research, then, is whether the 'better' impressions of hairstyling conveyed within these settings are accompanied by better pay, working conditions and also training and development opportunities for hairstylists.

6.2 The discussion within the paper not only contributes to diversifying current understandings of hairstyling, however. It also sheds light on how occupational status may be managed and constructed in other similar high-profile service occupations within the 'style' labour market where, like hairstyling, there is a tension between a poor 'low-skilled' occupational reputation and the high cost of the service being provided. The research presented here has suggested that such a tension may be reduced through the adoption of high quality customer service discourses and practices which facilitate the construction of an 'expert' status, as this is a requirement in generating 'delight' and also in justifying costs. Whether, how and/or the extent to which this occurs in other occupational settings is, therefore, worthy of study. For example, to what extent might an 'expert' status be seen as a commodity across high-profile and 'style' labour market occupations? How might an 'expert' status be constructed and utilised in other settings and what impact does this have upon employees, customers and clients? It is hoped, then, that as well as stimulating discussion and new research in relation to hairstyling, that this paper goes some way towards stimulating future research into other similar occupations and related areas.

Notes

¹Gimlin's use of the term 'professional' is used in a broad sense to refer to social perceptions of high status and expertise and does not engage with sociological discussions concerning the nature of 'professionalism'.

²Recent research by Cohen (2010) examines the relationship between emotional labour and the structures of employment within a range of hair salons, successfully pointing out other important dimensions in understanding the emotional labour of hairstylists. However, questions concerning the generalizability of Gimlin's (1996, 2002) arguments regarding stylist-client service interaction is not addressed.

³Hairstyling remains a feminised occupation. Although since 2001 there has been a slight increase in the number of male entrants, approximately 90 per cent of the total hairstyling workforce are women (Skills Active & HABIA, 2008).

⁴As noted by Pettinger (2005, 2011) while there are some ethnographic studies of consumption from a customer's view, these accounts are also partial as they tend to sideline the role of employees in the consumption process.

⁵The lack of critical voices in relation to the commercial aspects of hairstylist's work could, of course, have been due to the snowball method adopted in the research, as often this increases similarity among participants. I am grateful to one of the reviewers for this observation.

⁶The only interviewee who had not had this experience was Sophie, a junior stylist in salon two A, who was still in training.

⁷The dangers of some hair treatments are not only cosmetic. At the time of writing, a woman from West Yorkshire had a severe allergic reaction to a chemical in a home hair dye which resulted in her falling into a coma and developing brain damage. For details, see <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leeds-15828266>>.

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