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*‘Emotional labour and  
Professionalism in the Hair Salon*

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- Focus : professional status and issues of customer service and emotional labour in the work of hair stylists in 'up-market' UK salons
- 'Professional status' – constructionist, interactionist approach – 'professional' status as social and discursive achievement
- Lit: Debra Gimlin (1996) 'Pamela's place: Power and negotiation in the Hair Salon':
- Argues - Hairstylists can neither claim or be seen to be 'professional' due to the commercial, service-oriented nature of the job

- Stylists display knowledge/ expertise about styles and procedures - but nullified by emotional labour – ‘compelled’ through service ethos to give customers what they want
- Contributes to negative perception of hairdressing
- Two main problems :
  - 1. Limited to small ‘backstreet’ and independent salons
  - 2. Limited conceptual treatment of customer service ethos/practices underpinning the work of hair stylists – ‘giving clients what they want’ - too simplistic

- ⦿ Argument of this paper:
- ⦿ In up-market hair salons - customer service discourses/practices constitute complex set of 'resources' for stylists which can be used by them to :
- ⦿ Enhance both personal and organisational performance
- ⦿ Exercise influence in relationships with clients - maintain authority and expertise and achieve a 'professional' status in relation to clients.

## ◎ **Methodology**

- ◎ Literature: occupational training, business development
- ◎ Empirical work - North of England, involving:
  - ◎ Four 'upmarket' hairdressing organisations: business training provider, franchised chain salon, two medium sized independent salons
  - ◎ Informal 'observations' of hairdressing work
  - ◎ Interviews with 4 directors, 1 hairdressing academy trainer and 6 stylists
  - ◎ Interviews with clients of 'up-market' salons

# UK hairdressing industry: characteristics

- Growing industry - approximately 36,000 salons in UK (Habia, 2006)
- Mainly small independent low priced salons but franchising salons and 'up-market' independents increasing
- Feminised occupation: low status, low-skilled and low paid work
- Long tradition of vocational training and CPD. NVQ level two (minimum) level 3 usual for up-market salons, can take up to 3 years to qualify
- No licence to practice

# The Research: 'upmarket' hair salons

- Business development literature and interviews indicate: upmarket salons more complex discourse of customer service than Gimlin outlines
- customer service - not simply what customers want (good haircut) but 'luxurious service' that delights and 'wows' clients - 'exceeds' their expectations - main way in which to compete:



- Tim, Business Dev Director:
- ‘Upmarket and aspiring upmarket, quality oriented salons understand that they’ve got to give an experience not just cut someone’s hair’
- Overall aim: gain competitive advantage - establish and maintain client ‘trust’ and regular client base
- The Fantastic Hairdresser - create ‘raving clients’ who ‘spread the word’ and recommend to others.

- ◎ How? High standards across:
- ◎ Servicescape : Salon Interior etc.
- ◎ Workforce development: Quality training
- ◎ Appearance/demeanour – ‘aesthetic labour’, ‘looking the part’ (Nickson et al, 2001)
- ◎ Importantly, emotional labour – management of emotions and their appropriate display (customer oriented) (Hochschild, 1983).

- Alan Austin-Smith : encourage 7 key characteristics of the 'fantastic hairdresser'
- 1. passion
- 2. delight : 'wow', 'exceed expectations' of clients, 'be constantly looking to make a difference'
- 3. inspire— inspire/excite people
- 4. ambassador: for the business, salon, self, industry
- 5. performer
- 6. alive inside –self-motivated
- 7. always learning – 'the only way to stay the best at what you do is constantly learning, constantly changing, creating, innovating all the time'.

- Qualities suggest that service excellence requires stylists to be knowledgeable, motivated, responsible and successful – engage in an active, influential form of emotional labour (rather than a passive, subservient form) in relation to clients.
- **Rhetoric or Reality?**
- Evident in interviews around central work practice:  
Consultations
- every visit – consultation provided to all clients - involve discussion about what style/ hair treatment the client would like and establish what the stylist will do :

- ◎ Sarah, Salon Director:
- ◎ ‘The consultation, it’s massively important ... it should take place every time a client walks in, it doesn’t matter whether it’s for a cut, blow dry or fringe trim, we have to make sure that we’re both on the same page’
- ◎ ‘Being on the same page’ –‘negotiation’ of service between client and stylist.
- ◎ Asking clients what they would like is the starting point - does not determine the final service product. E.g. ...

- James, senior stylist:
- ‘I can spend 20, 25 minutes talking to someone before I even touch their hair, you know, and it is really important you know about their lifestyles ... there’s so many things that contribute towards having the right hair do, it sounds daft, but things like if you’re swimming, do you wear a cap, have you got a deep cleansing shampoo to wash the chlorine out, you know.’

- stylists discuss and make clients aware of:
- relevance and importance of their lifestyle upon hair style/treatment choices
- health and quality of hair
- suitability in terms of lifestyle, facial appearance, fashion, style and colour.
- That products matter - have impact on hair treatment choices as well as hair health and style

- Consultations - stylists demonstrate knowledge and expertise through discussion of hair quality, type, products etc (as Gimlin also argues) – but this is not nullified through emotional labour process, e.g:
- Tim, Business Dev Director: ‘the customer relationship, it’s a compromise between what I know and what you want’
- Final product – result of negotiation, not just client request:



- Emotional labour –involved ‘changing the mind’ of clients when requests went against their professional judgements:
- ‘you generally say “oh I’ve got to be honest, that aint going to work. It’s either not going to work on your hair or it’s not going to work for you”, then you can say “but have you thought about having that instead” or “doing a bit of this instead”? ‘. (James, senior stylist)
- ‘you say well I don’t think it’s, you know, why don’t we try this, and try and get them to change their mind but make it sound like it’s their decision as well’. (Maria, salon director)

- Exerting influence over clients – reinforced (not prevented) through commercial nature of hair salons: clients seen to be ‘adverts’ for salons
- Also, reinforced through customer service ethos that emphasises ‘delight’, ‘wowing’ and ‘exceeding the expectations’ of clients
- Achieved through doing something different - ‘educating’ the client :

- Gill, hairdressing academy trainer:
- We make sure that the clients are at least educated in what we can tell them ... even just teaching someone how to shampoo their hair [and] educating them on how a product works and the difference between salon products to products on the open market. And then educating them how to use the correct products, yeah I'm very, very big on educating clients.'

- ⦿ Educating clients to ‘delight’ and ‘wow’ - way to:
- ⦿ Gain trust of clients
- ⦿ Retain clients, as they would be more likely to re-create their hairstyle at home,
- ⦿ increase product sales :

‘it’s explaining to the clients why you’re doing what you’re doing ... 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 [we have showed them] instead of what they’ve been doing. They’re like “oh yeah, you know, it stayed in its shape a lot longer”’ (Maria, salon director)

- work practice enabled stylists to become 'teachers' and 'educators' of ideas, techniques, products etc., rather than simply 'service providers'
- 'educator' – stylists move away from stereotypical images and establish themselves as 'professionals' in relation to clients:
- '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, and it gives the person who's done it a buzz, you know, it makes them feel, you know, they're passing their knowledge on and someone's getting some knowledge out of it.'

(© Jill, hairdresser and salon trainer)

- Conclusions:
- research in 'up-market' salons indicate a different picture to that portrayed by Gimlin
- customer service/ 'influential' form of emotional labour - comprise resources (rather than barriers) for stylists':
- enhance their overall performance and establish a professional status in relation to their clients. – 'professionalism' part of what is sold.

- ‘dark side’ of service work literature:  
‘Professionalism’ – way in employees can be  
‘controlled at a distance’ and which ‘appropriate’  
work identities can be foisted upon them?  
(Fournier, 1999).
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- This paper - foreground the ‘light side’:
- ‘appropriate’ work identities may offer better  
financial, occupational and social opportunities  
than previously – especially for women.
- challenges stereotype of hairdressing as wholly  
low status, low skilled (and necessarily low paid)