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THE WELL-COIFFED MAN

Class, Race, and Heterosexual Masculinity in the Hair Salon

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This study explores how men make sense of their participation in the feminized practice of salon hair care. By placing white, middle-class, heterosexual men at the center of analysis, I investigate the meaning of beauty work for a population that has been overlooked in research on gender and the beauty industry. Specifically, I demonstrate that men embed their purchase of salon hair care in the need to appropriate expectations of white professional-class masculinity. Ultimately, these men reproduce raced and classed gender differences in the hair salon by resisting feminization while at the same time transgressing gender boundaries.

Keywords: beauty work; metrosexual; masculinity; doing difference; hair salon; barbershop

“With all the money modern man has begun to spend on pampering and coiffing himself . . . we might be forgiven for thinking that traditional masculinity has entirely given way.” (Salzman, Matathia, and O’Reilly 2005, 38)

Few people know what exactly to make of the metrosexual, a man who turns himself into a project (Brumberg 1997) in the seeming pursuit of the body beautiful. Traditionally associated with women and with gay men, the body beautiful has been tightly linked to the concept of femininity. In
her book on *The Male Body*, Bordo (1999) suggests that the media now positions men as sexualized objects of the gaze, just as it has done for women. She claims that women, for the first time in recent history, are now encouraged to consume the beautified male bodily form. As a result, Bordo and others (e.g., Salzman, Matathia, and O’Reilly 2005) contend that the sexualization of men in the media and their participation in appearance-enhancing practices destabilize traditional gender dichotomies. This seeming subversion leads Bordo to exclaim, “I never dreamed that ‘equality’ would move in the direction of men worrying more about their looks rather than women worrying less” (1999, 217).

Scholars who study the meaning of women’s body work help us understand that participation in beauty culture is not rooted solely in gendered relationships, it is tied up with interlocking systems of race, class, gender, sexuality, and age (Battle-Walters 2004; Bordo 1993; Candelario 2000; Clark and Griffin 2007; Cogan 1999; Craig 2006; Furman 1997; Gimlin 1996; Jacobs-Huey 2006; Taub 1999). That is, for women beauty work is often about more than beauty, it is about appropriating and expressing a particular social status by grooming the body in a particular way. Few scholars have examined the meaning of men’s participation in beauty culture, however.

In this article, I use a case study of Shear Style, a small hair salon in a Southern California suburb, to explore how men hair salon clients make sense of their participation in beauty work. I find that men at Shear Style empty beauty work of its association with feminized aesthetics and instead construct it as a practice necessary for them to embody a class-based masculinity. But as the quote that opens this article suggests, not all men are able to participate in the beauty industry. Rather, it is men with enough disposable income, “all the money,” who are able to purchase beauty work and beauty products—or “grooming products” as they are often called for men—that promise to deliver aesthetics compatible with social standards. For the men at Shear Style, preference for “stylish” and “superior” hair embodies expectations of white professional-class masculinity. These men use beauty work to “do difference” (West and Fenstermaker 1995) in a way that distinguishes themselves from white working-class men, while at the same time distancing themselves from the feminizing character of the “women’s” hair salon.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Race, Class, Gender, and the Body**

In West and Fenstermaker’s (1995) work on “doing difference,” they describe difference as a methodical, ongoing, and interactional
accomplishment. That is, differences along the lines of race, class, and
gender are simultaneously experienced and rendered as “normal” and
“natural” ways of organizing social life. The body is often a central mech-
anism through which people appropriate, perform, and negotiate differ-
ence. The clothes we wear, the way we style our hair, how we walk, talk,
and gesture are all tied up with doing difference. For example, the
Mexican-American girls in Bettie’s study “wore makeup and tight-fitting
clothing” (2003, 58) to emphasize the difference between themselves and
their white, “preppy,” middle-class counterparts. Similarly, in her study on
exotic dancers, Trautner (2005) found that the body was a central tool with
which the women dancers were able to accomplish classed expectations
of feminine sexuality. Dancers dressed and groomed their bodies in ways
that expressed either working- or middle-class expectations of beauty. The
women, mostly white, who worked in clubs that catered to middle-class
men, emphasized a body type that was tan and thin, with long blonde hair
and breast implants; they covered their bodies and accentuated their eyes.
The women of color and white women in working-class clubs often had
more robust figures, wore less clothing, and used makeup to accentuate
their lips. In these clubs, “beauty” was defined in terms relative to the
expectations of the men customers. As a result, the women came to
embody raced and classed femininities evoking “different amounts of cul-
tural and educational capital” (Trautner 2005, 774).

The beauty industry generates services and products with which women
groom their bodies according to social expectations of raced, classed, and
sexualized femininities. The hair salon is a key space in the perpetuation of
women’s body projects. Hair is a social symbol that allows people to asso-
ciate themselves with others along the lines of race, class, gender, sexual-
ity, and age. Women cut, shape, and dye their hair in ways that express
social location (Weitz 2004), and talk about their hair in ways that define
their relationships with other women (Gimlin 1996; Jacobs-Huey 2006).

The Hair Salon as a Gendered Space for Women

Feminist scholars who study the hair salon are often interested in shift-
ing the analytic focus away from masculine representations of the world
and refocusing on the everyday experiences of women. The hair salon is
understood by these scholars as part of a larger “women’s culture” in
which women shape their perceptions of self and body, as well as form
relationships and social networks (Black 2004; Furman 1997), participate
in informal therapy (Black 2004; Sharma and Black 2001; see Kang 2003
on emotional labor in the nail salon), create entrepreneurial opportunities,
resist dominant racist frames (Harvey 2005; Harvey-Wingfield 2007), and produce representations of femininity mediated through class (Gimlin 1996), race (Battle-Walters 2004; Candelario 2000; Craig 2006; Jacobs-Huey 2006), and age (Furman 1997). Purchasing beauty work in the salon is one way women accomplish difference and participate in the “naturalizing” of social arrangements.

One of the ways women in the hair salon negotiate their relationships with one another is by expressing or denying a sense of beauty expertise. For example, in Jacobs-Huey’s (2006) look at the Black beauty shop, she finds that some women customers share their knowledge of straightening and styling techniques with their stylists, who also sometimes enlist the clients as co-experts in hair care. In a study on women in a predominantly white beauty shop, Gimlin (1996) finds that customers often refuse to take the beauty advice of the “beautician,” and instead direct their stylists to produce appropriate hair styles for women of their social class. In both examples, women negotiate their status and relationships with their stylists by situating themselves as experts on raced and classed expectations of beauty. Still, other research (Battle-Walters 2004; Furman 1997) shows that some women deny a sense of expertise in beauty, and instead rely on their women stylists for an appropriate cut and style.

The hair salon is a space in which women create bonds and form friendships with each other. These relationships emerge out of “women’s talk” (Alexander 2003) and touch (Furman 1997), which are both implicated in the care work performed by women beauty workers. This emotional labor is often not interpreted by customers as work, however. This is because people feel relationships are less legitimate if mediated by economic exchange (Zelizer 2005) and since this labor is already gendered, it comes to be understood as an essential aspect of women’s characters—as something they are rather than something they do (Hochschild 1983; Tancred 1995).

Feminist scholars interested in women, beauty, and the body find that women’s participation in beauty work is about relationships, pleasure, and “achieving a look, and sometimes also a feeling, which is regarded as ‘appropriate’ in relation to categories of gender, age, sexuality, class and ethnicity” (Black 2004, 11). The hair salon is one space in which women shape their bodies and relationships with others in ways that mark them as members of particular social groups. Since we have long associated beauty work and the hair salon with “women’s culture,” the hair salon is a space in which men do not venture, or do so infrequently. In this way, “the salon both reflects and reinforces divisions along gender, [as well as] ethnicity and class lines” (Black 2004, 11). Hair salons are for women,
barbershops are for men (Lawson 1999). Under this ideological regime, a heterosexual man in a hair salon is an anomaly who transgresses gender boundaries by moving into a women’s space and by participating in a beauty practice traditionally associated with women.

**Men: From the Laboring Body to the Flannel Suit to the Well-coiffed Man**

During the Fordist-era of industrial production, definitions of masculinity were attached to men’s ability to perform laborious tasks. We continue to see this today as “scarred and weathered men are seen as more ‘manly’ and thus socially valuable in many working-class settings and venues” (Paap 2008, 101; see also Paap 2006). For the working class, the literal sweat and blood of men are outward signs of the appropriate performance of masculinity. However, postwar America between 1945 and 1960 saw rapid economic growth, and with it came the corporation and an exponential increase in white-collar jobs. While men’s identities continued to be bound up with their jobs, opportunities for intellectual work grew. Many middle-class white men flooded into corporations, trading in their denim work-jumpers for grey flannel suits. As it became necessary for the corporate man to interact with customers and clients, interpersonal skills, personality, and appearance became essential hiring and firing criteria (Luciano 2001).

Luciano (2001) describes how the emphasis on the appearance of middle-class white men emerged from capitalist notions of who a successful professional-class man is. Corporations encouraged these men to package their bodies and personalities for success. Employers correlated softness with Communism, fatness with laziness, and saw baldness as a detriment to sales. Marketers quickly produced sales gimmicks that attached the accomplishment of “professional success” to products such as toupees and pomade, products that had long been considered symbols of vanity, narcissism, and, thus, femininity.

It is no longer enough for some men to work hard, they must also look good. In their discussion of the metrosexual man, Salzman, Matathia, and O’Reilly note the way occupation is tied up with appearance: “In a 2003 poll of American men, 89 percent agreed that grooming is essential to the business world” (2005, 36; emphasis added). Despite this reported need for businessmen to groom their bodies and to “look good,” there remains little empirical work on men’s beauty practices (though for a discussion of Japanese men and beauty, see Miller 2006).
Thus far, most research on men and hair care has focused on the Black barbershop. This research reveals Black barbershops as spaces for community and the socialization of Black boys into Black men (Alexander 2003; Williams 1993; Wright 1998). In a society that marginalizes Black masculinity, the Black barbershop acts as a safe place for men to congregate, socialize, and reject oppressive stereotyped notions of masculinity. In the Black barbershop, appearance and the cutting of hair are often secondary to the conversations that are important in perpetuating culture and community (Alexander 2003). Research on the Black barbershop and the women’s hair salon shows us how race, class, and gender are constructed differently in different spaces.

Unlike the barbershop, the hair salon is not an obvious place in which men participate in the reproduction of masculinity. Certainly it is not a space in which men could create community with other men. Hence, for those men who choose the salon, it is their participation in feminized beauty work that becomes salient. In this article, I seek to address three questions. First, how might men’s participation in beauty work be wrapped up with their social locations? Second, how are the men at Shear Style hair salon involved in appropriating an identity that is simultaneously raced, classed, and gendered? And finally, how is their participation in salon hair care tied up with distinction and the doing of difference?

THE STUDY

In this study, I employed both ethnographic methods and in-depth interviews to explore the roles of class, gender, race, and heterosexuality in the purchase of beauty work by men in a small Southern California hair salon, Shear Style. From October 2006 through February 2007, I conducted 40 hours of observations, 15 formal in-depth interviews with men salon clients, and a group interview with three of the four salon stylists. The small size of the salon, with only four work stations in close proximity to each other, made it an ideal space for me to observe client/stylist interaction, talk with men patrons, and recruit interview respondents. I had a number of informal conversations with men as they waited for their appointments or exited the salon. These conversations allowed me to quickly probe men about why they were at the salon and what it was about the salon that retained them as clients. These informal conversations also helped me to structure and refine my questions for the formal interviews.

Of the 15 men I formally interviewed, 14 are white and one is Mexican. Over the course of the study, I saw only one Asian man and two Latino
men with appointments for haircuts. Thirteen of the men identify as heterosexual, while two did not disclose their sexual orientation or marital status. Of the heterosexual men, 10 are married, two are single, and one is divorced. Their ages range from 30 to 63, with the average being 49. While one of the men I formally interviewed is a stay-at-home father, the rest are professional white-collar workers (see Table 1).

The salon’s services are priced as follows: A woman’s haircut costs $65, dye costs $65 per color, and a man’s haircut costs $45. This price for a man’s haircut is more than three times as much as the cost at the Supercuts and the barbershop which are located right across the street from the salon. While women often purchase a cut and a color, which can take several hours to complete, men’s haircuts usually take half an hour. I observed only one man have his hair colored; he declined to be interviewed for this study.3

The interview questions revolved around the men’s opinions of the salon and their perspectives on why they and other men choose salon hair care. I asked the men to describe the salon, talk about why they came to the salon, and tell me about other places they had gone for a haircut. I transcribed each interview before coding. To analyze the interviews, I first used open-coding to look for emerging themes on why the men said they patronize the salon and how they made sense of their purchase of beauty work. As solid themes emerged, I turned to more focused coding to see how the men agreed and diverged on their perceptions and experiences.

THE SALON

The context of Shear Style is important to an understanding of what it means for men to enter the gendered space of the “women’s” hair salon. Shear Style is a feminized space marked by pink walls, fresh flowers, and regular cookie samplers. The men at the salon transgress gender boundaries and risk feminization (Kimmel 2001 [1994]) to enter the salon and get their hair cut there. Eleven of the 15 men I interviewed had followed their hairstylists from a prior salon to Shear Style. With its white walls and clean lines, the atmosphere of the previous salon is much more androgynous and, in contrast, Shear Style is understood by the men as “feminine.”

Inside the salon, long thin lights snake down from the ceiling. The floors are a dark glossy wood and the walls are painted a dusty pink. On the back wall are old kitchen cabinets that display products for sale such as mousse, hairspray, and hair-wax, as well as jewelry, purses, and Suzanne Somers self-help books. Below these shelves are drawers that
TABLE 1: Interview Participant Demographic Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Occupation*</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>60/70,000</td>
<td>Educational consultant</td>
<td>Divorced/heterosexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>150,000</td>
<td>Animator</td>
<td>Married/heterosexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evan</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Stay-at-home father</td>
<td>Married/heterosexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>85,000</td>
<td>High school administrator</td>
<td>Married/heterosexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neil</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Engineer</td>
<td>Married/heterosexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrick</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>500,000</td>
<td>Corporate official</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>500,000</td>
<td>Lawyer</td>
<td>Married/heterosexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andy</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Orthodontist</td>
<td>Married/heterosexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coby</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>120,000</td>
<td>Realtor</td>
<td>Single/heterosexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamilton</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>78,250</td>
<td>Investment manager</td>
<td>Married/heterosexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>100,000</td>
<td>Architect</td>
<td>Married/heterosexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerry</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>157,000</td>
<td>Marketer</td>
<td>Single/heterosexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mack</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>125,000</td>
<td>Art director</td>
<td>Married/heterosexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>250,000</td>
<td>PR consultant</td>
<td>Married/heterosexual</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Three of the men were not comfortable reporting their annual incomes. The forth, Evan, is a stay-at-home-father and, therefore, had no income to report. However, he did report his family income to be approximately $100,000.

**This data is indicative of men's reported marital status and sexual orientation. Two of the men, Steve and Patrick, did not report their sexual orientation or their marital status.
store curling-irons and blow-dryers. On Saturdays, the salon is usually at maximum capacity with women everywhere: sitting on the waiting bench, having their hair cut, and working. The salon rings out with the laughter of women as they talk about what is going on in their lives and which celebrity is wearing what.

The men are keenly aware that they are outnumbered in this gendered space, reporting that they rarely see other men in the salon. Hamilton, a 57-year-old white investment manager, points to the women around him as he describes his aversion to the salon, “It’s jammed full of housewives . . . and there are bimbos walking around chatting.” Hamilton trivializes the salon and the practice of beauty work in the salon by associating it with “bimbos” and “housewives.” His privileged position as a white upper-middle-class man likely allows him to feel he has the authority to make such disparaging remarks. Many of my respondents recommended steps the salon could take to better serve its men clients. For example, two men proposed that flat screen televisions be affixed to the walls and tuned to the sports and the news channels. Also, many of the men would like to see available reading material other than “gossip” and bridal magazines. Evan, a 37-year-old white stay-at-home-father, says that men’s magazines would be “kind of nice to see . . . Maybe I’ll suggest that next time I see her [his stylist].” He laughs, “Where’s my *GQ*? Where’s my *Esquire*?” Evan’s laugh implies that asking for “men’s magazines” is not appropriate since the salon mainly belongs to women. By recommending magazines such as *GQ* and *Esquire* (magazines targeted to middle- and upper-middle-class white men), instead of *Ebony* or *JET* (which are aimed at Black audiences), Evan suggests that he and the other men at the salon are interested in appropriating a particular kind of professional-class whiteness.

The pink walls, throw pillows on the waiting bench, fresh weekly flowers, and cookie samplers further feminize the salon in the eyes of the men. Neil, a 43-year-old white engineer, describes the salon as a “fairly feminine atmosphere.” When I asked him what it is about the salon that makes it “feminine,” he told me that you have to “perch” on a cushioned bench while waiting, “and men don’t perch.” He then gestured toward the maroon, purple, and gold tasseled throw pillows that decorated the bench on which we sat and exclaimed that the “the pillows, food, [and] décor” make him feel he is in a “woman’s space.” Relying on my assumed reading of him as a man, this description allowed Neil to situate himself in contrast to the feminized character of the salon.

The gender composition of the salon’s clientele, the lack of amenities for men, and the décor of the salon provides clues to the men that they are
in a “women’s” space. By articulating an understanding of the space as feminine (see Craig and Liberti 2007), the men set themselves against and create distance from the potentially contaminating “feminine” character of the salon. They contend the salon is not an appropriate space for them, as men, despite their regular visits. While the men enter the salon to purchase beauty work from the stylists, they simultaneously maintain a sense of masculinity by distancing themselves from the “feminine” salon and by situating themselves as anomalies in this space.

**MEN’S MOTIVATIONS FOR GOING TO THE HAIR SALON**

Three themes emerge from this study that help us to understand why the men at Shear Style purchase beauty work in a “women’s” hair salon: (1) Because they enjoy the salon as a place of leisure, luxury, and pampering; (2) For the personalized relationships they feel they form with their women stylists; and (3) To obtain a stylish haircut they conflate with white professional-class aesthetics. As I discuss these themes in turn, what emerges is a picture of how the men at Shear Style understand the salon as a place important to the appropriation of a white professional-class embodiment, how they contrast the salon and the barbershop to differentiate themselves from white working-class masculinity, and how they resist feminization while transgressing gender boundaries.

**The Pampered Heterosexual Man: Leisure, Luxury, and Touch in the Hair Salon**

Bodily pampering, which includes attention to appearance and which takes place within a traditionally feminized space, could be considered a feminized form of leisure. However, the class and race privilege of the men at Shear Style allow them to access this leisure and pleasure without marginalization. The men also maintain a sense of masculinity by marking the salon services as less feminine than those offered by nail salons and spas. While they can afford to pay for stylish hair, they would not pay for nail care, for example. Finally, by heterosexualizing the touch that accompanies this pampering the men resist feminization and instead position themselves as heterosexually masculine.

Many of my respondents described the salon as a place of leisure, where they go to relax and pause from their hectic daily lives. The men at Shear Style are professionals who live in a speeded-up metropolis where
work and family life collide and compete, and where people’s social lives often lose out to the occupational expectations of white-collar “success.” The 45 minutes they spend at the salon, waiting and getting their hair cut, is time for themselves, and time to relax and enjoy the services the salon provides. For example, Coby, a 30-year-old Mexican realtor, says,

> You know, I don’t have a lot of time; I’m really busy during the week. I have a son, I have a five-year old, [and] so I don’t have a lot of time to do things for myself. So this is cool. I like to just come out and get some coffee or something . . . It’s kind of relaxing; it’s something I do for myself.

While Coby is pleased with the haircut he receives at the salon, it is the wait for the haircut he seems to enjoy most. As work becomes increasingly demanding, the salon serves an important function in the lives of the men at Shear Style; they pay for space in which they can escape from their busy lives. This is despite the feminized décor of the salon and the “girly” pillows which decorate the waiting bench.

While many of the men described the salon as a place of leisure, there are any number of places they could go to find time for themselves. So, why do these men choose the gendered space of the “woman’s” hair salon? Shear Style provides the men with services that are unique to the salon experience, services that make many of the men feel “pampered” and taken care of. Sharma and Black’s interviews with women beauty workers show that “‘pampering’ was seen as a service which the stressed and hardworking (female) client deserved and needed” (2001, 918). This pampering comes in the form of paid touch, which is a key aspect of the hair salon experience (Furman 1997). As I observed,

> When Rosa was done cutting Evan’s thick brown hair, she took him to the other room to wash and rinse off the fine bits of hair that had fallen around his neck and were nestled in his hair. When she was done washing his hair, she brought him back to the seat and toweled off his head and neck. She proceeded to blow-dry his hair while ruffling her fingers through it. (Fieldnote: 10/21/2006)

In addition to this more mundane touch, the men especially enjoy the pampering aspect of the “scalp massage” which is included in the shampoo. They describe this massage as “nice” and “lovely.” Don says, “They’re going to wash your hair. That’s really nice; they put you in a chair, flip you back, [and] wash your hair . . . It’s just a lovely experience.” Mack, a 39-year-old white art director, echoes this sentiment:
You know, there’s nothing like putting your head back and getting a little head massage while you’re getting your hair washed, it feels good. Sal’s [a hypothetical barber] not going to do that . . . That more than anything, it’s one of those things where it just feels good. You get a little pampered; you get detail.

Mack notes that it is in the hair salon where beauty services include physical pleasure. He suggests that the men’s barbershop does not include touch that can be described as pleasurable or pampering. In his work on the Black barbershop, Alexander (2003) describes being touched by the barber as secretly pleasurable. That is, while he enjoys having the barber touch his scalp, this touch could never be discussed openly as pleasurable since doing so might be interpreted by other men as homoerotic. Comparatively, the heterosocial interactions the men have with their women salon stylists allow the men to access paid touch without their presumed heterosexuality falling under suspicion.

By couching paid touch in heterosexuality, the men position themselves as heterosexual and resist the potential feminization of pampering in a hair salon. They clearly receive pleasure from the scalp massages and shampooing; but state that they enjoy this aspect of pampering solely because they are being touched by a woman. “It’s like when you go to get a massage [and] they want to know if you want a man or a woman [masseuse]; I’m like, ‘a woman sounds nice,’” Don told me. Sam, a 53-year-old white architect, agrees, “I would say I prefer women. It’s kind of like a massage too. They ask, ‘do you want a man or a woman?’ I always prefer a woman.” Don and Sam suggest that a massage from a man would be uncomfortable for them, presumably because it does not fit with their sense of themselves as heterosexual. Therefore, touch in the salon is possible and pleasurable for the men because it is done within the context of a heterosexual interaction. If the men were shampooed by another man, such as a barber, they might not enjoy, or at least discuss, the pampering aspect of paid touch because it could compromise their association with privileged heterosexuality.

Although some of the men classed their hair salon experience by describing it as akin to a “mini spa day,” they had not, and declared that they would not, enter a spa. These men define the spa as a place where people (presumably women) purchase services such as pedicures, manicures, facials, massages, body-wraps, and mud-baths. They counterpose their more utilitarian haircut to spa and nail services, which they describe as not a “priority” for them. As one man notes, “I think it’s one of those things where I value my spare time so much that it’s like when I look at my priorities and things I want to do in my time, [the] spa isn’t there.”
spoke with a man who was leaving the salon after his haircut; he said that
the salon is a nice way to “sneak pampering in while doing something you
would have to do anyway.” He elaborated by telling me that for profes-
sional-class men, paying $45 for a haircut is more acceptable than spend-
ing money in a spa or a nail salon because it can be veiled as a necessity.
Many of the men admitted that it would probably feel good to get a pedi-
cure, for example, but said such services do not serve a utilitarian purpose
and, therefore, cannot be adequately disguised as masculine.

Personalized Relationships and Gendered Care Work

The relationships the men have with their stylists involve both touch
and the exchange of personal information. Many of the men at Shear Style
have grown attached and loyal to their stylists partially because of rela-
tionships they believe they share. For example, Don describes his relation-
ship with his stylist,

It’s like totally a relationship . . . It’s a person you talk to on a regular basis,
and they’re really good listeners . . . Rosa always says, “So where are you
going this weekend?” . . . It’s like this is Rosa, this is my friend; I’ll tell her
what I’m doing this weekend. It’s like another kind of relationship that’s
really important.

While I often observed friendly familiar bantering between the clients
and their stylists, many of the men also shared intimate details of what
was going on in their lives; they talked about spouses, children, and trav-
eling. The men pride themselves on their familiar relationships with their
stylists, a relationship that they say makes them feel genuinely cared for.

Building relationships with clients is an integral part of the workers’
tasks in many body service occupations. Sharma and Black (2001) show
that when “beauty therapists” draw customers into a conversation, they
often ask questions regarding the customer’s family and recent events in
the customer’s life. The men perceive their stylists’ interest in their fami-
lies as sincere and mutual. Patrick, a 61-year-old white corporate official,
reports that he and his stylist have “become kind of friends . . . She tells
me about [her daughter] and stuff, and I tell her about my sons and daugh-
ter.” This personalized relationship motivates the men to come back to get
their hair cut by the same stylist time and time again. For example, I asked
one man why he comes back to Rosa for his haircuts and he said, “She’s
very friendly and she knows my kid’s, my son’s name. We keep kind of
going on what happened last time, if something happened in my personal
life, we talk about it.” Another man said that he patronizes the salon because, “You know my daughters have come here, my wife has come here; so we [my stylist and I] can talk about our families.”

The men appreciate their stylists’ seemingly genuine interest in their lives. During my observations, I witnessed the pleasure many of the men receive when their stylists ask them to share what is going on in their personal lives. For example, during my fieldwork, I noted that,

[A man] was already in the chair when I arrived at the salon. Rosa was cutting his hair and they were chatting away. He seemed comfortable as she talked about her husband and daughter. She asked him about his new baby boy, who was only two months old. I spoke with this man briefly after his haircut. He described the salon as a space in which he felt authentically cared for. He said that it is “fun” to talk with his hairstylist and that they “talk about life.” “At the barbershop, they don’t care about you,” he said. When he left the salon, Rosa pleaded with him to bring his baby with him the next time he came to the salon. He beamed with pride and assured her he would. (Fieldnote: 2/16/2007)

This client reinforces the notion that care work is gendered by claiming that the men in the barbershop “don’t care about you.” A barber is assumed to not provide care work or emotional labor; instead the men make a distinction whereby the women salon stylists are sincerely interested in the clients’ families and want to talk with the men “about life.”

Unlike the men, the stylists perceive their relationships with their clients as simply part of the job. They confided that they are not always interested in their clients’ lives or families. This demonstrates the way in which beauty work involves the physical labor of cutting and styling hair as well as emotional labor (Black 2004; Sharma and Black 2001). The stylists recognize the care work they perform, as well as the fact that it is not valued as such, claiming that their men clients come to them for a haircut because “it’s cheaper than a psychiatrist.” The men clients, however, do not see their relationships with their stylists as one-sided; nor do they understand their stylists as paid informal therapists. This is because emotional labor is often taken for granted and naturalized as part of women’s essential character (Hochschild 1983; Tancred 1995). This is analogous to domestic employers who see their nannies and housekeepers as part of the family rather than as employees (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001). Furthermore, the men believe their relationships with their stylists are genuine, not “marred” by economic exchange (Zelizer 2005). By personalizing these relationships, they make invisible the fact that they are paying for body
labor: both the physical and emotional labor of women beauty workers (Kang 2003).

In the men’s discussions of their relationships with their stylists, they not only appropriate women’s body work, they also establish themselves as members of a particular class. The men position themselves as “classy” by comparing “salon talk” to barbershop talk and by describing the barbershop as a place for the expression of working-class masculinity in which men talk about “beer and pussy,” sports and cars. While the men explicitly class the barbershop and the hair salon, they also implicitly racialize these settings. Though these men do not discuss race, by setting up the barbershop as a place for the expression of a masculinity that differs from their own, they define the barbershop as a space for a white working-class masculinity. One man describes the difference between the salon and the barbershop as “night and day” and explains that, “You have garage talk [read as barbershop talk] and you have salon talk.” By describing the conversation in the barbershop as “garage talk,” the man genders the two spaces and suggests that traditionally “masculine” topics, which do not include feelings and family, are the only things discussed at the barbershop. Many of the men I spoke with contend that the gendered difference between the barbershop and the hair salon lies in conversation. “[T]he masculine view is that you’re supposed to go to a barbershop and get a standard haircut from a man, talk about football, locker rooms, [and] sex,” Mack reported. The men prefer the more personal and intimate conversations they have with their stylists to those that take place in the barbershop.

While the men at Shear Style have the option of getting their hair cut in a men’s barbershop, they describe the barbershop as a place that does not provide them with caring relationships. The value the men place on women as sincere care workers is not surprising given the expectation that women perform emotional labor while providing services. However, by comparing the salon to the barbershop, the men indicate that the barbershop acts to uphold “traditional” notions of masculinity by informally discouraging the sharing of intimate information (Bird 1996). Consequently, they differentiate themselves from what they describe as the white working-class masculinity of barbershop men, whom they say prefer to talk about “beer and pussy,” to successfully situate themselves as progressive, professional-class white men.

A Stylish and Classed Haircut

The men at Shear Style also set themselves apart as members of a particular class by describing salon hair care as important to the accomplishment of a “stylish” white professional-class embodiment. They conflate
salon hair care with “stylish,” customized, and contemporary haircuts. For example, Mack notes, “[If I] want something a little more stylish, I’ll come to the salon because the salon develops more current styles [and] different techniques [that are] more relevant.” The men understand the salon as a space in which they are able to purchase current trends in hair, and they attribute the ability to deliver this style to the women hairstylists whom they suggest have a “high taste level” and are highly skilled. The men trust their stylists and take comfort in knowing they will get a “good” haircut each and every time they come to the salon. “I know that I’m going to have a consistently good haircut every time I go [to the salon],” one man told me. This consistency gives the men “peace of mind,” and alleviates the worry and the stress they feel when they have their hair cut elsewhere.

The men’s desires for aesthetic enhancement are potentially threatening to their masculinity since, as men, their sense of self-worth is not supposed to be tied to how they look. To counteract this potential threat, the men claim they do not want to look stylish for themselves; rather they need to look good to succeed professionally. They construct their purchase of beauty work in the salon as a practice that helps them to compete in the workplace and to persuade their clients that they are professional, responsible, and will do the job well. Tom says,

I mean, you know, I have clients. That means before they become clients, I have to win them over. Now who are they going to go with? The person who has . . . this great appearance package [pointing to himself] including grooming, style, professionalism, mannerism . . . Who are they going to go with, that person, or are they going to go with somebody who looks like they came in and dressed by accident or [that they are] indifferent about their hair?

Tom equates appearance with professionalism, explaining that he has to look a particular way, which includes “grooming [and] style,” to be successful with his business clients. Hamilton also feels pressured because he works with “wealthy clients.” “When you walk in a room and there are billionaires sitting there, you need to uphold the same appearance,” he told me.

These men suggest that there are unwritten appearance rules in the workplace for men as well as women (Dellinger and Williams 1997) and that these rules require them to purchase beauty work in the hair salon. This resonates with Luciano’s (2001) study, which links men’s appearance standards to the work that they do and describes professional men as likely to invest in appearance-enhancing practices because of their interactions with clients and customers. Like the women in Gimlin’s (1996) research,
the men at Shear Style embed the meaning of their beauty work in professionalism. That is, their purchase of beauty services in the hair salon becomes about fulfilling what they interpret as expectations of white professional-class masculinity.

Few of these clients directly acknowledge the role class and occupation play in both their desire for and ability to purchase beauty work and “style” in the hair salon. Kerry, a 50-year-old white marketer, first describes the typical male client in the salon as “somebody who has more money than somebody who can only afford 10 dollars.” However, he quickly reassesses his answer and decides, “It doesn’t matter how rich or how poor you are, you have budgets and you have allocations. And some people who make less money will spend more on entertainment than people who make a lot of money. What’s your priority[?]” In this way, Kerry marks himself, and the other men at Shear Style, as distinct in “priority,” not privilege. This works to erase class privilege, although the purchase of salon hair care is made possible by the men’s income and is rooted in the ability to succeed in a professional white-collar occupation.

The men also solidify their class status by again distancing themselves from the masculinity they associate with the “old school” barbershop. They reject the barbershop as a place where men purchase mass produced hairstyles by an out-of-date barber. For example, one man told me, “I think there is a difference; I think she [his stylist] cuts hair a little bit better [than a barber].” A good, stylish haircut is one that is current and modern, and is in contrast with the haircut the men feel they would receive from “old barber[s].” “The male barber is just bad,” Hamilton exclaims, “80-year-old barbers who can’t see just chop your hair.” These men believe that white professional-class men do not need to get their hair cut at the barbershop since they can afford the “superior” and “customized” work of a salon stylist. Rather, they claim that working-class men purchase what they consider the inferior haircuts of the barbershop. As Evan says, “I can’t see a mechanic working at, or a grease-monkey working at a Jiffy-Lube, or something like that, going to a shop that charges 65 bucks for a haircut.” Evan differentiates the clients of the salon and barbershop in terms of class, and also sets the men salon clients up as superior by derogatorily referring to white working-class men as “grease-monkeys.”

The men clients at Shear Style contrast the salon with the barbershop to justify their presence in a “women’s” space. They refer to the barbershop as “old” and out of date, allowing them to position themselves in contrast as contemporary stylish men who rightfully seek the beauty work of women. Both the haircuts and the space of the barbershop are associated
with an out-of-date style. For example, in justifying his preference for the salon, Mack again connects the barbershop with a passé aggressive and misogynist masculinity,

[The barbershop’s] got the owner’s old boxing gloves up on the wall, black and white photos from being in the war, the naugahyde seats, [and] the pile of *Playboys* in the corner . . . I guess it just depends on how machismo I was feeling at the time, if I wanted to go “Grrr” [pretending to be “machismo” as he furrows his brow, grunts, and shakes his head from side to side] and go old school [to the barbershop] or you know, if I wanted to come here [to the salon].

Mack genders the barbershop and describes it as a place of the past with its “black and white photos from the war” and “old school” haircuts. He classes the barbershop by associating it with the cheap material of “naugahyde seats” and with a working-class masculinity that is involved in the physical aspect of war and the aggressive sport of boxing. Neil also classed the barbershop and its customers by describing it as having “no music, vinyl flooring, and *Auto Week* magazines.” By contrasting themselves with the traditional “machismo” barbershop which they say does not deliver its supposed working-class customers with “style,” the men at Shear Style construct themselves as a class of “new men”: progressive, stylish, and professional.

**DISCUSSION**

In this article, I investigate how men at Shear Style make sense of their participation in salon hair care and how they reinforce a class-based sense of masculinity while within a space defined as feminine. By situating salon hair care as necessary for the appropriation of a professional-class whiteness, the men “do difference” in a way that distinguishes them from the white working-class masculinity they associate with the barbershop. The concept of “doing difference” helps us to understand how the men at Shear Style are involved in “naturalizing” the social order along the lines of race and class, and how their purchase of beauty work is tied up with status maintenance. The men at Shear Style “naturalize” the social order by suggesting that working-class men are misogynist and do not value or prioritize style. The men at the salon contrast themselves with this supposed barbershop masculinity to reinforce their status as white middle-class men, and use the hair salon to mark themselves as progressive and stylish men.
In talking about the salon, the men create a binary that pits professional-class white men against working-class white men. They report that they must purchase the beauty work of salon hairstylists to appropriately embody and “do” a particular classed-whiteness. As a result, the men’s participation in salon hair care does not compromise their masculinity; instead, their stylish hair becomes an outward sign of professional status which sets them apart from white working-class men. The men use “taste” and “priorities” to describe themselves as different from the “mechanic” and the “grease-monkey” whom they claim are the typical clients of the barbershop. The men disdain the barbershop and the class status it represents. They describe the barbershop as “old school,” traditionally and conservatively masculine, situating salon hair care as for the “new” progressive man. The men create a contemporary, white, professional-class masculinity by transferring traditional masculine characteristics onto, and thus othering, white working-class men (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner 1994).

The exchange of personal family information with their women stylists makes the men feel their relationships with their stylists are more intimate and “caring” than those they would form with barbers. The men enjoy a particular kind of bonding that exists most often within women’s spaces, not men’s (Bird 1996). By differentiating the “beer and pussy” talk which they presume takes place in the working-class white barbershop with that which takes place in the “women’s” hair salon, the men both set themselves up as progressive modern men and consumers of gender care work. Like the customers of luxury hotels (Sherman 2007), the men at Shear Style ignore the fact that their seemingly intimate and personal relationships are mediated by economic exchange and are made possible through the emotional labor of the stylists.

Pampering which involves attention to appearance and takes place within a “women’s” space is a feminized experience. The salon serves as a place for men to indulge in pampering services while at the same time veiling this indulgence and marking it as more masculine than other forms of beauty work. The men heterosexualize the touch that accompanies this pampering and situate salon hair care as utilitarian; one has to have a haircut after all. The men construct salon hair care as necessary for professional success and thus are able to enjoy the pleasures involved in practices that are considered feminine and have been traditionally “off-limits” to men. The necessity of a haircut, its professionalizing character, and the rejection of the feminine allow the men to enter the “women’s” salon and purchase beauty work. The men at Shear Style suggest that as long as feminized beauty routines serve a utilitarian purpose, and reinforce race and class privilege, they can be folded into meanings of white professional-class masculinity.
Like the women in Bettie (2003) and Trautner’s (2005) research, the men at Shear Style—through the purchase and consumption of beauty work—appropriate embodied symbols of educational and cultural capital that distinguish them as raced, classed, sexualized, and gendered. While within a space defined as feminine, the men maintain a sense of masculinity by situating themselves as anomalies in a “women’s” salon and by heterosexualizing their interactions with the women hairstylists. This research allows us to see how race and especially class privilege are reproduced by men through the consumption of beauty work, and how this privilege both allows men a “pass” to enter into a “women’s” space while protecting them from the powerless aspects associated with the feminine culture of beauty.

NOTES

1. The names of the salon, the stylists, and the clients have been changed to protect the privacy of those involved in the study.
2. The fourth stylist did not cut men’s hair.
3. A number of men declined to be formally interviewed because of family and work engagements.

REFERENCES


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