

*One man scorned and covered with scars
still strove with his last ounce of courage
to reach the unreachable stars;
and the world was better for this. -Don Quixote*

The Long and Short of an Ethnic Hair Salon

An ethnography exploring one man's quest to Reach the Reachable Goal
while also Influencing the Influential Factors

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7 May 2004

Hair—everybody has it, everybody has to deal with it. Yet, how do people choose to deal with it? East Africans have utilized a number of braiding techniques to keep their hair manageable and hassle-free, at least while the braids are in. Southern Africans have decided the easiest way to deal with their ultra course textured hair is to cut it short. African Americans, however, have been exposed to a whole new world, with a plethora of options in hairstyles including the option of chemically changing the texture of the hair. In the hair business, African American hair falls under the term *ethnic hair*, and for those with ethnic hair, whether kept natural or chemically changed, emphasis on hair and strategies in dealing with it become much more salient, fueling the need for stylists and barbers who do ethnic hair.

The life of an ethnic hairstylist is more than just the suds of the shampoo and the snip of the scissor. In order to be successful, the stylist has to recognize the concrete things they can do that will push them forward, yet also acknowledge that there is only a certain extent to which they can influence specific factors as they reach for their goal of maintaining a place in the business. For with every customer who walks in the door, there comes a dimension of ambiguity that goes beyond the pixie cut or fade the customer requests. This ambiguity is a result of the obvious reality that all people are different and are bringing in myriad combinations of personalities, moods, attitudes, financial situations, hair textures, wants, needs, and expectations. A continuum of the degree of influence the stylist has weaves through these two dimensions of concrete and ambiguous factors, leading to a number of cultural strategies the stylist uses to add an extension to their degree of influence.

This paper will explore what it takes to become a successful hairdresser and how to reach the goal of maintaining a place in the business. It will also examine the concrete and ambiguous dimensions involved in being a hairstylist and the continuum of influence cutting through those

two dimensions, as well as how my informant has learned to increase his influence over the ambiguous factors to feel in control of his surroundings, his profession, and his destination.

Field Work Methods

When I was in second grade, I first learned how to braid with my grandma by my side and a braided rug in front of me with three wool sections in my hand. Since then, I have picked up how to braid hair and do cornrows and a variety of other styles typically done on *ethnic hair*.

However, coming from a homogeneously White rural Minnesotan community, I was rather unaware of the culture behind this kind of ethnic hair and was very interested in learning about it.

So for my ethnographic interviewing escapade, I set off in search of an ethnic hair salon complete with an informant. This is much easier said than done in the ethnic hair salon business where there the supply does not fill the demand for services, making for very few options to even check out. Also, many people in this business are running their own salons, making very little time for them to be informants and tell me about their culture. It also happened that two salons I contacted were in the middle of moving, showing that the supply to the demands of ethnic hair stylists is increasing. That did not help my “demand,” however.

After feeling as if I would have to switch topics, I made a last bold attempt by taking a walk down a major road in St. Paul, and dropping into anything that looked promising, as well as trying to find a place that had been referred to me by another shop I had called. My first stop at an African hairbraiding shop resulted in no common language and no luck. However, my luck quickly turned when I saw a salon with a sign in the window: Black owned. Not only was it what I was looking for, an ethnic hair salon, it was also the shop I had been referred to from the other shop, whose owner started her career at this shop. I walked in with confidence, explained my ethnographic assignment, asked if anyone would be willing to meet with me seven times over the

next fifteen weeks and held my breath before hearing a voice from the back moving to the front of the shop saying, "I think I can do that." The voice ended up being that of Marc, an African American barber and stylist working in the shop, Cut it Up, started in 1986 by his sister, Betsy. He personally has been in the business for sixteen years, meaning he has a very good grasp of the cultural scene of ethnic hair salons. Once I was able to find an informant, problems were minimal. Rapport was felt early on, making the interviewing process rather enjoyable. We were able to work the interviews around his scheduled appointments, often creating an uninterrupted chunk of time. The interviews took place in Cut it Up, apart from the first and last, which were at a coffee shop and restaurant, respectively.

Over the length of a semester, Marc and I met for seven hour-long interviews where I asked him a number of questions based in the Spradley-McCurdy ethnosemantic method. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed, with the exception of the first interview. The original tape recorder was unable to detect the voice clear enough to get a transcription, however thankfully I had taken rather detailed notes as we chatted, which allowed me to replicate a good portion of the interview. Not much was lost, as a number of the topics came up again in the remaining interviews. The interviews started with broad questions as I initially tried to get an overall idea of the cultural scene and its various aspects. With the passing of interviews, I used a more detailed set of questions, moving from descriptive questions to structural, comparative, definition, and judgment questions in an attempt to try to organize and find a structure to the information passed on to me.

The Setting

Set in an urban area, Cut It Up is a center for people to gather and get their hair done. It is a place to sit back and relax, feel at home, get pampered for a bit, and leave feeling good, which

is the reputation the salon is striving for. The homey feeling starts as the doorbell next to the rich red wood door is pressed, almost instantly bringing a friendly greeting to the door by one of the stylists or the receptionist. This red door then opens into a spacious area with mirrors covering the wall immediately to the left, a receptionist's area directly ahead, and comfy chairs to the right set against a large window looking out onto the avenue, making up the waiting area.

The receptionist's area is one of the spaces specifically for employees of the shop. It is adorned with all sizes and colors of shampoo products and, of course, a large appointment book and telephone. Next to the receptionist's area is the magazine rack, covered from top to bottom in issues of Ebony, and other magazine titles of interest to the clientele. Across the way from the magazine rack is a table with a newspaper, a few magazines and loose sheets of hairstyles and designs for people to look through for fun or to find a style for themselves. Behind that table is a small post board, where there are a few posters from people in the larger community offering services such as helping to reduce housing discrimination. There is also a TV hanging from the ceiling turned toward the waiting area, usually with the latest news on. Customers feel free to mosey around in the waiting area, pick up magazines, watch the TV, or have conversations with others waiting or getting their hair done. The TV and newspaper become very important to Marc, as they bring and keep him up-to-date on the latest event, which adds more to conversations he has with his customers.

Sitting anywhere in the waiting area, one can see into the whole station area. There are a total of four running styling stations, all positioned in a way for both the stylist and the customer to see a good portion of what is happening in the shop from the mirror at the station or just by looking around. The mirrors become a very important part of the salon, allowing people to feel comfortable seeing what is being done to their hair as well as making conversation easier. They

also visually open up the shop and make it feel like everyone can be connected, addressed, and part of the conversation. It is a good strategy in building a sense of community in the shop.

The styling stations are not necessarily where the customers spend the majority of their time, but it is their ultimate destination when going to the salon. As Marc explained, “the styling station [is] where you do all your work, all your preparation, the discussing of what kind of style [the customer] is going to get.” Many deep conversations also take place between the stylist and customer or between customers in the station area. There are also individual dryers and a line of dryers in the station area. Customers are usually only in the styling station area when they are getting a service done on their hair.

The color scheme of the shop is red and silver, and the atmosphere is airy, open, and laid back. Marc said, “When people come in for the first time, they’re like, ‘Wow, I didn’t realize it was this big in here.’ ... You want to try to create a warm, comfortable atmosphere, a relaxed atmosphere right away. ... We try to welcome everybody in.” There is also a fairly large side room leading from the station area, which is the shampoo area where the shampoo bowls are located as well as where the stylists keep their shampoo products. To my surprise, when doing observation in the shampoo area, Marc showed me one of his products that had his name on it. Apparently, a number of years ago, he had worked with a chemist to develop a special conditioner with certain properties he thought would benefit his clients. The customer he was using it on also had the product at home, so it must be good.

Also, in bigger shops, like Cut It Up, there is a break room “for people who want to eat. Some clients bring food, sometimes [the shop workers] order food in and ...serve it to the clients.” The break room also stores some of the chemicals and products, in addition to housing the refrigerator and a table and chairs for the workers to relax.

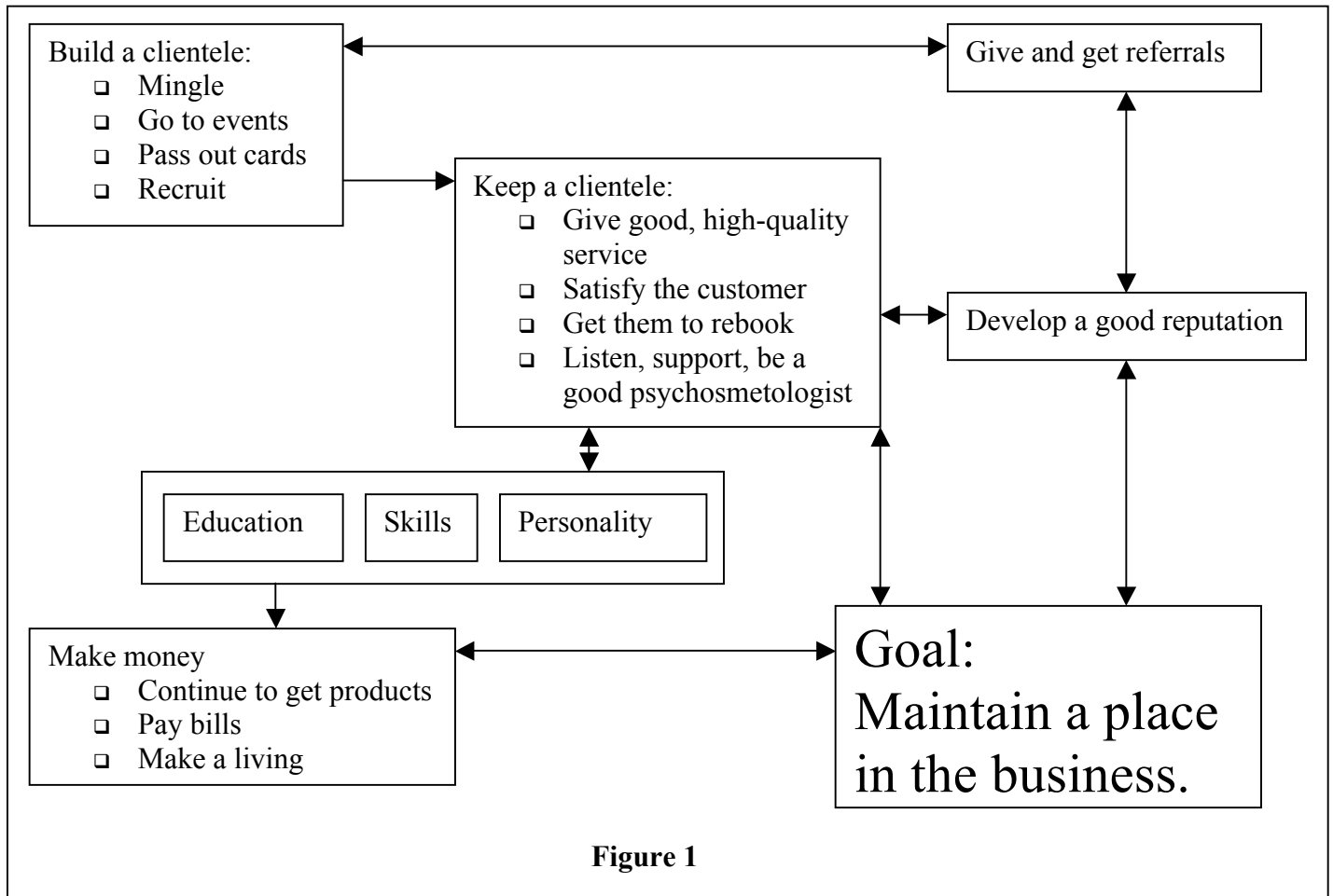
Currently about four stylists work at Cut it Up, bringing in another dimension of interpersonal relationships and possible tension. Marc said it is when the salon gets full with people coming and going, “a lot of different things take place, from people fighting over...food, who ate this and who messed with that,” to fighting over customers and wanting to be favored. He recognized that when so many different people are coupled with their personalities and moods, problems are bound to occur. However, I only briefly mention this dimension of interaction because my informant was steadfast in the claims he made: leave your problems at the door, deal with other co-workers’ personalities differently and respectfully, and “never gossip, because it can be a problem.” He said, “With interacting with people, one day they might come in in a good mood and the next day in a somber mood....It just all depends. You gotta kind of have to have an open mind, open heart about everything. You can’t walk around with everything on your shoulder cause then you’re just so entangled...You’re supposed to leave your problems at the door and [being at work] is supposed to start new.” This would be another interesting area of further analysis with a different informant, but I will only mention it briefly here.

The Cultural Description

The Bigger Picture: To Reach the Reachable Goal

In anything I did, my mom always told me to keep my eye on the bigger picture, and my informant did just that, without my mom even having to tell him twice. In the hair business, the average life of a stylist is between eighteen months and two years. The goal before that time is two fold—to build up a clientele and keep them coming back, as well as to earn enough to support the growth of customers and pay the bills. This in turn helps achieve the absolute ultimate goal of maintaining a spot in the business. In order to get to that point, it is essential to

keep in mind the bigger picture of getting there and not get caught up on just making money because that will throw off the process and stunt efforts to reach the ultimate goal. Figure 1 shows the flow or the process of getting to the goal.



Building a clientele

Building a clientele becomes one of the most important aspects in reaching the ultimate goal. When a stylist just starts out, the target is to get a full clientele, which is about twenty-five to thirty regular customers that will come back week after week or month after month. It can take between six months and two years to build to the point at which the client base is steady and somewhat predictable. In order to attain such numbers, the stylist has to go out into the community and *mingle*, getting their name out there, passing out cards, and letting people know

where they can go to get their hair done. This is especially important for Black people in the suburban areas, such as professional athletes and those working for big companies. They are all kept in the rich suburban cities and “they don’t know that in the inner city is where they can get their services.” So, if a stylist wants their business they have to go into those areas. These suburban areas generally only have a 1 to 2 percent Black population and so when some of those residents have met my informant, they were surprised, saying, “You’re the first Black people [we’ve] seen in a long time.” Marc says, “You just gotta be out and about, around where the people are at,” going to functions, going to malls, passing out cards at the grocery store, whatever it requires.

To get a jump-start on learning techniques for ethnic hair, my informant was smart and began recruiting an ethnic clientele while he was still in school, getting his name out earlier and having an edge in styles and techniques.

Normally, you’d go through school dealing with a lot of Caucasian hair and then you’d get out of school, and have to go and be retrained in another salon all over again.... I was lucky. It’s nothing harder than to be retrained over again, because you’re used to doing something a certain way and then you gotta go back and do it a different way. It’s no fun.

Additionally, this helped get his name out into the community he wanted to have as his clientele, again getting him to his goal faster and more efficiently.

Yet another way Marc and other stylists get their name out there is to do promotional work, such as giving free haircuts. The radio and word of mouth become the avenues for spreading the news. During the Million Man March several years ago, Marc gave away free haircuts all day. Giving away free services does not necessarily help build a clientele, but as my informant said, “It’s a way of giving back to the community and saying thank you.” It also

becomes a reward in itself because it gets some people in the shop who have never gotten their hair cut professionally, which satisfies the customer, in turn making the stylist happy.

Building a good clientele becomes especially important in promoting the business and fueling the process of reaching the goal. Looking back at Figure 1, it can be seen that reaching the ultimate goal does not complete the process. The goal can be reached from building and keeping a clientele as well as making money, but in order to hold on to the goal, the process has to continually be refueled, developing a good reputation that will cause people to give referrals, and for those who get the referrals, will cause them to actually make an appointment to come in to get their hair done. This continues building and keeping a clientele and bringing in money. The customer becomes very important in this process.

You want the kind of customer that's willing to share information because that helps your clientele build. ... It's about satisfying your customer. If you can satisfy your customers, they're gonna go out, they're gonna promote your business, and they're going to help your business to grow, and that's what we rely on. Without referrals, we're dead in the water.

Once a steady flow of customers is achieved, though, it can become exhausting, so it is up to each stylist to decide how high of a clientele they would like to maintain. Marc explained, "Once I got [my clientele] built, feeling that constant flow of people every day, every day—it wears on you." However, even getting to the point of feeling that constant flow requires keeping the clientele coming back, hoping they will become regulars.

Keeping a clientele

Keeping a clientele is dependent upon a number of things. The stylist can influence some things, but other things are out of his power. One concrete thing the stylist can do to encourage customers to come back is to make it a positive experience for them. This might include getting

them in and out of the shop quickly, listening and being supportive of the personal stories they divulge, finding out exactly what they want done to their hair, and giving high quality service.

My informant said that customers' biggest complaint is that it takes too long to get their hair done. Weekends become the time that people try to get everything done, so Saturdays become very busy at the salon. But even though "[people are] freer with their time, they still don't like to spend hours and hours in the salon.... So you want to try to get them in, work them through, and get them out."

While they are there, it is important to make each customer feel important and listened to. Marc says,

People like to come to the salon because they want to relax, to get away from the kids, the husband, the boyfriend. That's their refuge. They want to conversate with the other women, talk about current events. It's a meeting place.... Then after they get their hair done, they go about their lives.

In addition to current events, customers get talking about some pretty heavy stuff. For this reason, hairstylists also have to take on the role of psychometologists. Leading up to licensure, they are given books on psychometology that help them deal with situations that come up in the salon.

Some customers tell you their innermost, deepest secrets, something they don't never tell their husbands, boyfriends, sisters or brothers. You're almost like a confidante.... All of a sudden they can come in and just wanna talk to you.... There's a lot of things you hear that are very surprising. And that's the things we carry around, the stylists.

While being a psychometologist is very important, the main role is being a hairstylist. Doing a good job on the hair and making sure it is what the customer wants is vital. Satisfying the customer will keep them as a client as well as giving the stylist a better reputation, resulting in both more referrals and the continued building of the clientele. If the customer has been to the shop two or three times before, Marc says, "You kind of know

what they want, what they don't like, if they're willing to change." Yet he still always asks questions such as, "What are we doing today? Are we cutting? Are we doing a different style? You got something special that you're going to do tonight or this weekend?" For new clients, he will ask all different kinds of questions to find out exactly how the customer usually wears their hair and how they would like it done. "You gotta really get specific because my short and your short might be two different short, so you gotta try to find a happy medium ... or get a good understanding before you start cutting." He told a story about a father and son who came in several years ago. Usually it was the mother who brought the boy in for his cuts, so the father was not really sure how the mother normally got it cut. The father just told Marc to go ahead and "cut it real low." A couple days later, the mother called back in a huff that her son's curls had been cut off, hurting his modeling career. Even though Marc was not to blame, it was a reminder to always ask detailed questions when people are getting cut what is potentially precious to them or someone around them—their hair.

Hair in the African American community holds great importance. Talking with the founder and curator of an upper-class spa and hair salon for Black people, Antonio, I learned how beauty manifested itself differently in the White concept of beauty than in the Black concept of beauty, and hair came out on top. Figure 2 shows the parts of Concept of Beauty revealed to me by Antonio.

Parts of Concepts of Beauty	White beauty	Body	Boobs
			Butt
			Being thin
		Features	Small
			Blonde hair
			Blue eyes
	Black beauty	Hair	Straightened
			Permed
			Natural
		Skin color	Light-skinned
			Dark
	Societal beauty	“Universal woman”	Ambiguous features
			Merging of ethnicities
Body		Thin	
		Tall	

Figure 2

He told me the White concept of beauty is centered on the body itself, with a desired look of thinness. The Black concept starts with the hair, followed by skin color and clothing. Three to five times more money is spent on personal care in the Black community than in the White community. He said, “The beauty and self-concept changes a culture and personality of a people.” More generally, Marc adds to the importance of hair: “When you meet somebody out on the street, the first thing they look at is your face and your hair. They don’t, more or less, look at how you’re dressed, because ninety percent of the time, people don’t remember what you’re wearing. They remember what you look like and what your hair was like.” So, to mess up the hair is a big problem. Giving high quality service becomes essential, as well as personally gratifying for the stylist.

Giving high quality service incorporates many things. When a style request is made, the stylist must be able to take the customer’s face shape, hair texture, and image all into consideration before giving the cut and style, because “one style doesn’t fit all and everybody can’t wear the same style.” The media highly influences the style requests that come in, and

oftentimes that puts the stylist in a bind because styles that work on Halle Barry, Michael Jordan, or BowWow will look nicest on people who have a similar face shape, hair texture, and image, putting the stylist's reputation on the line if it does not look good on the person. The important thing is to make the style look good on the person requesting it so they like it, encouraging them to rebook. By getting a client to rebook, "you kind of get a sense and feel of how and if they liked what you did."

To give high quality service, Marc also thinks educating his customers on taking care of their hair and body is important. He says,

Our motto is to try to get the hair in good condition. It's not just conditioning the top of the head. It's conditioning inside your body too. Whatever goes into your blood comes out through your hair. We try to get them on vitamins and a balanced diet.... Everything that runs through the blood system runs out through the hair, so if you got a healthy system, then you're going to have healthy hair.

He also encourages the customers to use a variety of shampoos and conditioners to help get the hair in good condition. He draws a parallel between hairstylists and doctors: a sick person goes to the doctor and gets a prescription for medicine to get better; someone with unhealthy hair goes to the hairstylist to get to the root of the problem and return their hair back to health. One way a hairstylist does that is by making suggestions as to what products are necessary. Some salons are more interested in the overall health of the customers' hair. Cut It Up is one of those, and this extra caring also has a payoff for them. They "use so many different products on one head to make that hair look and feel good, not only good for the customer, but for our reputation." In addition to helping the customer and the salon's reputation, selling products also helps bring in revenue, which leads to my next section.

Money

Money becomes important to the stylist for three main reasons: to benefit the customer by buying products and updated equipment, to pay the bills required to stay in the business, and to make a living. This money is earned through service and style charges set by the stylist, as well as through products sales, which more or less have a fixed price. Setting a price for a service is a challenge for many reasons. Each individual shop or individual stylist can set their own price. The price set can depend on speed, precision, creativity, years of experience, specific specializations of the stylist, and the stylist's overall ability. I can also depend on the state of the economy, other stylists' prices, and customers always trying to get a deal.

The state of the economy has a big effect on hair salons and other small businesses. Marc says, "We get customers complaining about the prices we have right now, but in actual reality, our prices should be higher and *their* wages should be higher. And their wages should be able to afford them to get their hair done and live at the same time." It becomes a bit frustrating for the small businesses, because as their business expenses increase, their customers expect their service prices to stay the same. My informant mentioned, "We try to keep [our prices] at a minimum because we don't want to lose our clients, but we try to make reference to our clients that every year you work, you want a rate increase on your salary. So...we want a rate increase on our services too." The risk of losing clients is very real. Ten years ago there was only a handful of ethnic salons around the area, allowing the stylists to charge whatever they wanted for their services. Now with more shops, people have the opportunity to call around and try out different shops. This has led to *undercutting* of prices, where some shops charge \$15, \$20 less than average in order to get more clients. This takes away from all the other shops who are trying to provide quality service and still charge what is necessary to make a living and maintain their

spot in the business. Undercutting hurts everyone in the end, giving the customers the idea that wage increases do not occur in the hair business, bringing in all sorts of complaints to the other shops about how high prices are.

Another obstacle in earning money is that “everybody wants a deal. That’s the way it is.” The cheaper, the better as far as the customer is concerned. And customers will do their best to get the cheapest price they can. While conducting an interview, I witnessed this first hand. A wedding party of six was in need of getting their hair relaxed and perhaps styled for a wedding coming up in a few days. They were asking Marc to do all six ladies’ hair starting at five o’clock in the morning to be ready by the wedding. Marc agreed to it, even giving them a \$5 discount off what he usually charges since they were a large group. Even with the discount, his willingness to come in early, and scheduling at the last minute, they complained his price was too high and did not give him their business. Marc says, “You’ll find people trying to barter. There’s not much room to barter when you’re paying a lot for your products, a lot for your water, your electricity; a lot of costs go into it.” Marc tries to keep his prices pretty steady, factoring in his time, the cost of the product, and how much the service costs elsewhere. For the last ten years his haircuts were \$16, but realizing the need for an increase to go with inflation, he recently made them \$19. “People see this business and they think that you got a lot of money.... You just have enough money just to carry you over from time to time.”

Figure 3 is a paradigm looking at the contrast set of services offered in an ethnic salon. In reference to these services, it looks at the factors of cost, amount of time booked out, texture of hair the service is done on, if it is done at Cut It Up, if it is a chemical process, if there are variations to the service, if it is done with other services, as well as other things customers should consider about the service.

Services*	Cost	Amount of time to book out	Done on what hair texture(s)	Done at Cut It Up?	Chemical process?	Variation(s) to specialty	Done sometimes with what other services	Other things for customer to consider
Consultation	Free	Varies	Curly and straight**	Yes	No	Individualized	A regiment that may include a number of services	Stylists hope to do before doing anything on the hair
Wash: a shampoo and conditioner	\$35	1-1.5 hours, "basic time"	Curly and straight	Yes	No	+\$10 for deep conditioner	Press, Cut, Blow dry, Curl, Condition, almost all services	Type of shampoo and conditioner are important for the hair, Cut It Up uses a variety of products catered to customers
Relaxer	\$65	1-1.5 hours	Curly	Yes	Yes	+\$5-\$10 depending on length and texture of hair	Cut, Style, Wrap, Shaping up, Repairs	Has to be done on curly hair before getting several other services done, Chance of over processing hair
New Vogue Wave	\$85	Can be 3+ hours	Curly and straight	Yes	Yes	None mentioned	None mentioned	Top of the line curl
Carefree Curl	\$75	Can be 3+ hours	Curly and straight	Yes	Yes	None mentioned	Silking when curl is growing out, Relaxing after it's grown out	Nothing mentioned
Color	\$40-\$55	2 hours	Curly and straight	Yes	Yes	One-color, two-color, Bleaching, Frosting	None mentioned	Basic colors on hand at salon
Haircutting	\$19	About 30 minutes	Curly and straight	Yes	No	Trendy cuts made popular by athletes or movie stars, trimming or severe cuts	Relaxing, Silking, Finishing, Shaping up, Styling	Face shape, Hair texture, Finishing and Shaping up are very important
Styles	Varies some	Depends on individual style	Curly and straight	Yes	No	Ponytails, Afro, Dreads, Bald, Short, Tapered, Flipped, Fanned	Shampooing, Conditioning, Roll up, Put under dryer	Face shape, Hair texture, Image
Weave	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Straight	Yes	No	Sew-in or Bond-in	Cut, Style	Consultation important
Wrap	\$35-\$40	Average of two hours	Straight	Yes	No	Individualized style	Put under the dryer, Curled, Combed out, Style	The drying takes a long time, Possibility of singeing hair while curling
Twists	Depends on time	1.5-3 hours	Curly	No	No	Bigger or smaller twists	Shampooing, Conditioning	Size of twists, Length of hair
French braids	Varies	1-1.5 hours	Curly, straight sometimes	No	No	Corrows, Basic French braids	Wash, Style	Design of braids, Length of hair
Braids	\$90-\$300	5+	Curly and straight	No	No	Microbraids	Consultation, Extensions	Size of braids, Length of hair, sometimes done in a two-day process
Silking	Not mentioned	3-4 hours	Curly and straight	Yes	No	None mentioned	Curl, Cut	Presses hair without chemicals, Done when growing out Carefree Curl
Doing repairs	Varies a lot	Put on weekly/monthly regiment	Curly, damaged hair	Yes	Sometimes	Individualized, Done on hair that has stripping, dryness, breaking	Consultation, Wash	Can't jump shops while trying to restore hair to health, Very rewarding for stylist

*A shampoo and conditioner is done with every service, except the haircut

**Straight includes both naturally straight hair and relaxed or silked hair that has become straight

Figure 3

The Influence Continuum: To Influence the Influential Factors

Economists since the beginning of time have been creating models of how to make the world more efficient. However, they have been creating these models in “an ideal world,” pushing aside extraneous factors to prove their model. The reason they can get away with this and still make significant contributions is that when “real world” factors are put back into the equation, the model still works, just not as well perhaps. In the same way, the hair stylist, as a single entity in an ideal world, can work very hard and have great social skills, as well as technical ability. The stylist can also put a lot of energy into getting a holistic cosmetology education, run on an efficient schedule, and charge prices that reflect what went in to building their skill, at the same time earning themselves a living, and offering a fair price to keep clients in their chairs. That is in an ideal world, though, and once the “customer factor” is added in, the factors listed above may not carry the same significance or affect. Once the customer walks into the shop, varying degrees of power, control, and influence are handed over to them. They want some service being offered, but they can take their business elsewhere if they are not satisfied. To keep the customer, the stylist has to make it a good experience for them and satisfy their needs, allowing them some flexibility and control, while also still holding on to some degree of influence.

Figure 4 shows the continuum of the degrees of influence present in a hair salon. It divides the more concrete from the more ambiguous dimensions hairstylists encounter. Towards the top of the spectrum are factors where the stylist is highly influential. As it moves down, the stylists influence tapers off. Also, although it looks as if I have made a definite line between the two dimensions, in reality, the definition is not that cut and dry.

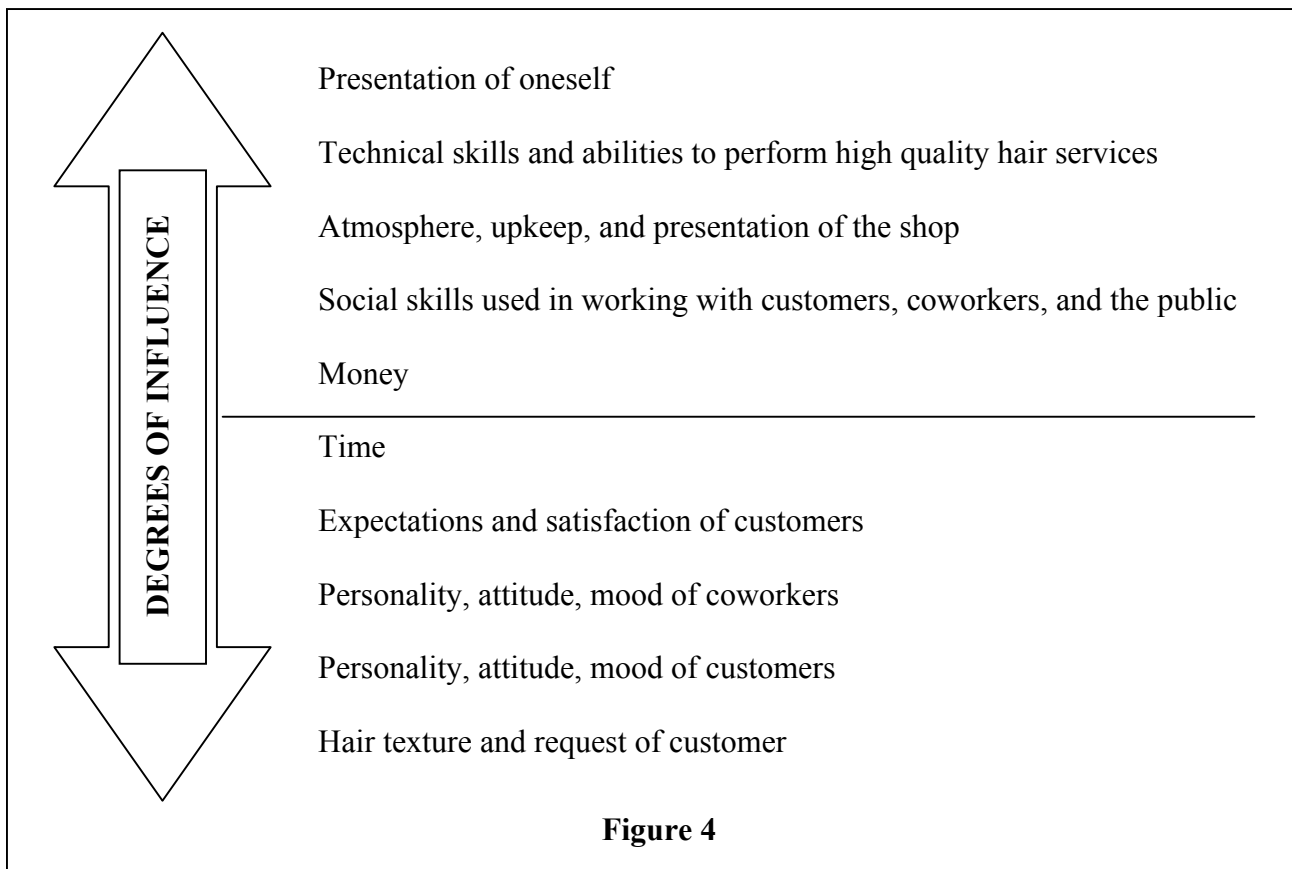


Figure 5 goes one step further, giving more information on the influence the hairstylist carries and who the key players are in changing the influence dynamics. It will lead into a more detailed discussion on how my informant has colored his own world and in what ways his style has been crimped.

Important Factors in the Hair Biz	Degree of influence	Who all holds the influence	Dependent on
Presentation of oneself	Very high	Stylist, person who does stylist's hair	Money for hair services and general upkeep of self
Technical skills and abilities to perform high quality hair services	Moderately high	Stylist	Money for education, opportunity to practice/work

Atmosphere, upkeep, and presentation of the shop	Moderately high	Stylist, Manager/Owner, Coworkers	Help and contribution of time from other stylists
Social skills used in working with customers, coworkers, and the public	High	Stylist, Customers, Coworkers, Public	Skills both learned and given, Reception from the other players
Money	High	Stylist, Customers, Other stylists in the area	Economy, Time of year, Undercutting
Time	Medium high	Customer, Stylist, Time of year	Customers' value of time, Holidays, Time of year, Time of week, Flexibility
Expectations and satisfaction of customers	Moderately medium	Customers, Stylist	A good referral, How well the stylist performed
Personality, attitude, mood of coworkers	Medium low	Coworker, Family, Customers, Stylist	What is happening in their life, If the customers are difficult, How the stylists get along
Personality, attitude, mood of customers	Medium low	Customer, Family, Stylist	What is happening in their life, Habits of the individual, How the stylist responds to them
Hair texture and request of customer	Low	Customer, Media stars, Stylist	Hair texture of parents, What styles are popular in the media

Figure 5

Coloring his own World: Higher Degrees of Influence

For Marc, how the stylist looks and presents themselves is quite important, saying, “I think hairdressers need to make their hair look good.... If someone walks into your shop and your hair isn’t lookin’ good, they’ll think, ‘Well, who does *your* hair?’... I think [hairstylists] need to make time. It makes it more professional.” He has made sure to do this, getting his hair shaped up week or biweekly. He also places a lot of emphasis on education and continuing to build skills. He started his education in 1988, and knew he needed to be dedicated since he was starting so much later than the 18- and 19-year-olds in the program. He knew his goal from the beginning and worked very diligently and efficiently toward it, going to school and also working part time at his sister’s salon to “learn some of the lingo, some of the techniques.” He also took

an extra step to recruit ethnic clients, saving himself from having to be retrained later. He now continues his education by attending classes, shows, and demonstrations. He has a great deal of influence in these two aspects of the business.

Further down on the continuum comes the atmosphere, upkeep, and presentation of the shop. The owner controls a good portion of the shop's presentation, but the workers also play a part in creating a friendly atmosphere. Also, each stylist leases their own station, which they get to set up as they would like adding their own touch to the shop. The customer does not carry any influence that affects the stylists except perhaps their individual perception of the shop and if they like it. I found the shop to be a very inviting, friendly, comfortable place to be. Marc believes the same to be so for the customers, saying, "Overall, people like the shop. Because it's a big shop, it's not a small shop. Everybody [ain't stacked up] on everybody." Marc does not believe that presentation is something to overlook. He says, "It's a competitive business. It's almost like selling cars. You gotta be out there passing your cards out telling 'em you're over here. You don't have cars on display, but you have a shop on display." And so making sure that shop look as good as possible is essential.

Social skills used in working with customers, coworkers and the public is the stage where the stylist's concrete ways of holding influence start to get passed off a bit to others in the social setting. Marc can use his current skills and his personality to the best of his ability, and can also continue to build on interpersonal skills, but the "customer factor" ultimately comes into play here. One way he stays on top of his game is by keeping up-to-date with the news, which he can do while waiting for customers by watching the TV and reading the newspaper. Each different person who comes through the shop brings a vastly different set of interests and knowledge, and by staying up on the news, Marc can better connect with a wider variety of customers. He also is

good at remembering details, saying, “There’s something about a person that I just remember about them.” The details follow from there, which gives him a cutting edge in the business. It allows him to manage more social relationships and keep track of what is happening in his customers’ lives when they come in to get their hair done. A big challenge in the hair business is being able to manage so many personal, yet professional relationships, and Marc does this by finding a balance and dealing with situations as they come. He sees himself as a juggler, tossing around all the things he does, knowing if he focuses on any one ball too much, they will all come tumbling down.

Moving down the continuum, money pops up once again. Although Marc still has a fair degree of control over what he charges, more factors begin to play in, diffusing some of that power. The economy takes a bit of the diffusion affecting employment and wages, as well as other stylists through undercutting, customers trying to bargain and make a deal, rounded out by the fluctuation of time, both the cycle of the year and the cycle of the week. At this point on the continuum, a shift occurs where the stylist does not have primary influence, crimping his styles a bit.

Crimping his Style: Lower Degrees of Influence

Leading right from money on the continuum is time. Time revolves in two cycles: weekly and yearly. Because a hair salon provides services for those who are running on a typical 9-5, five-day workweek, their work schedule becomes a little skewed. During the week, the salon is only open Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, with a steady increase in customer flow as the weekend approaches. Wednesday is the exception, with such slow business that the shop does not even open. In regards to the year cycle, the busy season starts sometime after April 15th, when people get their income tax back and goes all the way til the kids are back in school. Marc

says during that time “business is going to be booming because it’s going to be good weather. People are going to get out, want to be seen.... Now if I was in a warm climate..., people would be getting their hair done every day. You’d have clients coming in just to get their hair styled every day, or get their hair washed every day.” But because we are in Minnesota, the weather becomes a big factor in whether people go and get their hair done often. After school starts, things do not start to pick up until around November when people start planning parties “and trips to Grandma’s for Thanksgiving,” as well as Christmas and New Year’s parties. Come January 1st, though, and business freezes. Customers do not want to be out and about nor do they have money to spend on hair when they are paying off Christmas bills. It becomes especially important that a good clientele was gathered and stored away for the winter, because “If you got a steady clientele between [the slow periods] then you’re able to obtain through those periods because then you got people that work, managing money, have to look good for their jobs.” Business begins to thaw again come April 15th, starting the cycle all over again.

On a more day-to-day level, time is money, and with the values placed around time in the Black community, a conflict arises between the hairstylist trying to run their business and the customers wanting to be served at their leisure. Marc says,

You gotta gear people in on, ‘If you’re going to be late, then I’m going to take my next customer, and then I gotta work you in.’ You’re relying on that money, and you have to try to make up that money. Then you got some people that come in late, and they expect to get in your chair right away.... Then you got some people that claim that they’re always on time and then when they’re late, they don’t say anything, but when you hold them up, they’re like, ‘I don’t like waiting.’ There’s going to come a time when you’re going to be late. Ain’t nobody ever run on time [all the time.] ... The stylist’s time is important too.

Moving away from time and down the continuum we hit expectations and the customers’ satisfaction. An expectation is completely dependent on what the customer hopes to get out of the interaction and service. If the stylist does not fulfill that expectation, the customer’s

satisfaction will be low, and alternately if the stylist meets the expectation, satisfaction will be high. Although the stylist can do a great job, the satisfaction the customer feels is ultimately their decision to feel, leaving less influence for the stylist. Marc told a story of a lady who came in for a consultation, picked the hairstyle, came back some days later, got her hair done, said she liked it, then called back after the weekend and demanded her money back. It had been messed up in the shower or because of the humidity, but she still claimed she deserved the money back. Marc had met her original expectations and she had been satisfied, but in light of these new circumstances, Marc thought the best solution would be to give back half what she paid. This, in a sense, gives him a little more influence, as well as keeping a good reputation with his name.

Ambiguity begins to run rampant with the next two factors down on the continuum, dealing with the personalities, attitudes, and moods of both the customers and the coworkers. All three intangible concepts are so different for each person that it makes it hard to have any concrete way for stylists to discover a way that will work to get along with everyone's personality, attitude, and mood, especially since these are not static traits. Since coworkers have a more invested relationship through working in the same proximity with each other than stylists and customers, there becomes the need for teamwork to get things done, as well as the give and take of responsibility. Marc explained if someone quits, it is like a wheel falling off a car—a newcomer can come in, but they might not be a perfect fit or even a good fit, in which case the car might drive funny for a while. It becomes a challenge to continually replace the tires and try to get the car running smoothly again. It is in this ambiguous stage where everyone is contributing what they can and offering who and what they are to get to the destination together of maintaining their spots in the business. That is the ideal situation, but of course there are always numerous other factors acting on peoples' lives, and "on any given day, somebody's

personality might change or they might come in in an upbeat mood and leave out in a bad mood. It all depends.”

“It all depends” is not an understatement in looking at the myriad personalities of the customers coming in, as well as their moods and attitudes. Just to come in to the shop, the customer has to be in the right mood and feel up to going outside. Marc says people are creatures of habit and follow their feelings. The weather, he says, is one thing that has a great effects on peoples’ moods, which in turn affects if they come in for their appointment or not. And once they are in, the stylist has to figure out how best to create rapport. Marc says, “You gotta figure out what you’re dealing with, who you’re dealing with, what personality you got sitting in your chair.” The customers are in control of themselves, giving the stylist little influence over having an affect on them, but still the stylist does their best to use concrete tools they have stored in their toolbox, such as knowing up-to-date news or remembering what their customer told them before to connect with the customer. It is the customer that is paying for the service and keeping the stylist in line to achieve the goal of maintaining a place in the business, so it behooves the stylist to do all they can to satisfy the customers.

Coming in at the bottom of the influence continuum with a very low degree of influence for the stylist is the texture of the customer’s hair as well as the customer’s request. The former is completely devoid of stylist influence initially. The customer comes in with the texture of hair they genetically inherited or chemically changed. Figure 6 shows the different hair textures stylists identify: straight and curly. Although there are varying degrees of both, with huge variations of degrees of curliness, the main thing the stylists sees is straight or curly in assessing how to go about doing the hair and figuring out if a specific style is possible to do with the hair in the texture it is in currently. In an ethnic salon, the hair textures most often seen are naturally

curly, however, a good percentage of the people who have naturally curly hair and go to ethnic salons have their hair relaxed, making its texture straight. Commonly in ethnic communities, Black in this case, the curly hair left natural is braided into cornrows, microbraids, French braids, twists, locks, or cut fairly short. Since the salon I was studying was not a braiding shop and since my informant was not trained in braiding, I did not learn much about that.

Hair textures	Straight	Natural
		Chemically straightened
	Curly	Wavy
		Really, really curly
		Loose curl
		Curl with just a little movement
		Naturally curly
		Real, real curly ringlets
		Loose ringlets
		Real loose ringlets
		Reeeal loose ringlets

Figure 6

Because the stylist can chemically change the texture of the hair, they are able to hold a bit more sway, granted that is what the customer wants done. The latter has more leeway for stylist input and offering of alternatives, but there is a certain point to which a stylist can give suggestions without the client leaving to go elsewhere. Marc says, “If they wanted purple hair and you can do it, ...give them purple hair. That’s just the way it is. They’re in control of their money, ...so you’re trying to make a living and they’re trying to get a service.” Even having said this, Marc also said there were, in fact, some services he will not perform because his work becomes connected to his name and a bad style or customer request could damage his reputation.

Conclusion

So, there you have it folks, the long and short of the ethnic hair salon. You have traveled along with Marc on the tireless journey as he made the ethnic hair salon world better for himself

and those around him. He was able to reach his reachable goal of maintaining a place in the business by building and keeping a clientele and by earning money. He was also able to influence the influential factors in his microculture, finding ways to increase his degree of influence and satisfy the customer. He strove with his last ounce of courage, and though not covered in scars, he was successful in his goal and will continue to make a permanent place for himself in the business. He sees the bright side, saying,

I always know that there's always going to be somebody that wants to get their hair done for some reason or another and that's a demand that will never go away. Never. They can't have a computer do your hair. They can't have a device they put on your hair and all of a sudden you got a hairdo or your hair is cut. [Knowing how to do hair], you got something that man and woman has done and will be able to do for the rest of the days.

He is determined to get to the root of what it is to be a good hairdresser, not allowing himself to be shafted by things he cannot control. He found ways to color his world while not letting other factors crimp his style.