

# Information Encounters in the Beauty Salon

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## INTRODUCTION

The beauty salon is a small world in which information is given and shared on a daily basis. Studying information encounters that occur in the beauty salon can further our understanding of information seeking, giving, sharing and use within the context of everyday life. Pendleton & Chatman (1998) tell us that

...information is how practical lives are played out. It is the act of forming a worldview that determines what is important and what is trivial. Information is what brings meaning, purpose, order and predictability to a social world. p. 749.

Most people spend some time in either a beauty salon or barber shop on a regular basis. While receiving the services of a hairstylist or a barber, many make conversation and interact according to their comfort level with the stylist and the social norms of the shop.

We know that hairstylists' work involves creating an emotional bond with their clients (Gimlin 1996; Hocschild 1983). The emotional bond, developed during the interaction between stylist and client, helps stylists to portray themselves as their clients' friend, confidante or therapist (Gimlin 1996; Hocschild 1983). These interactions have been examined to understand how this emotional connection is used in the negotiation of beauty ideology and professional identity (Gimlin 1996), job satisfaction (Cohen & Sutton 1998), and socialization and kinship ties (Smith 1998). Due to the nature of the relationship between stylist and client, encounters in the beauty salon have been targeted by social agencies and health promotion agencies as a link to the HIS these agencies provide. (Forte 1995; O'Toole 1999).

To date, research that has been undertaken in the context of the beauty salon has focused on socialization and identity. While these are two important areas of research, the current study examined the types of information shared and whether the transfer of human services information (HSI) from the hairstylist to the client was part of this sharing. Human services information was defined broadly to include any human services such as tutoring help, babysitting services, health care, transportation, recreation or any other service that could be accessed either publicly or privately. The process of linking individuals to HIS is often a daunting task; even for the professionals involved in the delivery of these services. If hairstylists do give their clients HSI, perhaps the efforts of private and public service agencies to provide hairstylists with information and guidance in the provision of this information would be a worthwhile investment in promoting their services. In doing this, service agencies may then be able to reach further into their communities.

## THEORY, METHOD & ANALYSIS

The method and theoretical framework used was loosely based on that of Pettigrew (2000). She found that Granovetter's (1973, 1982) theory of the strength of weak ties helped explain the rich information ground that existed in the transfer of HSI between community health nurses and the elderly. This theory was chosen because of its dependence on the exchange of information as a key measure of the strength of ties between the members of a social network. The ties between members of a social network are either strong (e.g., family and friends) or weak (e.g., acquaintances or distant friends) depending on the flow of new information. According to Granovetter, weakly tied people interact with different individuals from whom they access new information. Strongly tied individuals tend to interact with the same people on a regular basis and share the same information. Weak ties help to connect individuals from different social networks, while strong ties are used to check the validity of the information gained through weak ties (Granovetter 1982). Strong ties are used in this manner because they tend to be more available and provide emotional assurances that are not always obtainable from weak ties.

Based on Granovetter's theory, it was not really possible to hypothesize that the hairstylist is a weak tie who provides clients with HSI that can not be obtained through strong ties. The reason being that previous research suggests that hairstylists use emotional connections to gain the trust of their clients. Therefore, it is not clear whether the client will act immediately on the HSI given or confer with a strong tie before using the HSI.

Data were collected through observation and interviews in three salons in two Southeastern cities in the United States. The salons that were approached for participation in this study were selected based on referrals from colleagues and Turning Point, a social service agency that serves women who have experienced domestic violence. I made initial visits to each salon in order to assess whether they would be serving a "middle class" clientele. I approached five salons and received permission to observe and conduct interviews with stylists and clients from the owners of three salons. Two of the participating salons were owner/operator shops. Once permission was gained from the owner, permission from individual stylists working in each salon was obtained. Over the course of five months, eight stylists were interviewed in connection with information sharing incidents with their clients. The stylist interviews included questions about their backgrounds, education and their interactions with client that day. Short interviews/discussions were held with the remaining six stylists.

During site visits, clients were informed of the nature of the study and individual permission was sought from clients that were interviewed. Twenty-eight interviews were conducted with two groups of clients 1) clients to whom a stylist gave HSI (18 clients) and 2) randomly selected clients who shared information with a stylist (10 clients). The client interviews included questions about their backgrounds, education, and their interaction with the stylist that day. Clients who received HSI were contacted by

telephone (approximately 40 days later) to establish whether they had acted on the information given them and whether they had discussed this with a relative or close friend.

In order to ensure reliability and validity of the data collected I interviewed, took notes and varied the times and days of data collection. I collected data in three different salons and compared the themes that arose in the data to previous research (Lofland & Lofland 1985). During the field observations, I tried to meld into the salon environment as smoothly as possible so that I could reduce observer effect. The techniques I used varied according to the culture of the salon. Initially I would sit in a place where I could hear the stylist-client conversation without making eye contact or making it seem as if I was listening in. Later on, once the stylists and clients became accustomed to my presence, I occasionally folded towels or passed the stylist perm rod papers while she was rolling a client's hair. Many times during my observations conversation involved the entire salon. At these moments, I made a point of joining the conversation in a minimal way. Had I kept silent, the lack of my participation may have made the clients and stylists notice me more. All of the interviews were audio-tape recorded. Descriptive and interpretative coding procedures followed the model explained by Lofland and Lofland (1985).

## **The Salons**

Shelly's Salon, the salon in which I spent the most time (70% of data collection time), is a small two-stylist salon (see Appendix A for a layout). Shelly, the owner and Pam, a stylist that rents a chair from Shelly, are the only two people who work in this salon. It is located in an older commercial building on a very busy main road that runs through a small southeastern city with a current population of approximately 17366. The building houses another small business, a long vacant space, and an African American beauty salon. The salon is small and modestly furnished. It can accommodate three stylists but during the time I spent there, Shelly and Pam were the only stylists working there. At one point in time, they did have a third stylist however, Shelly and Pam said that this person did not have the same work ethic as they did so the relationship didn't work out. Both Shelly and Pam work hard, each seeing an average of 15 to 18 or more clients a day. Although they work hard, Shelly describes the salon as a "laid back" place and often remarks that she and Pam are always "havin' fun".

Private Beauty is a very different salon than Shelly's Salon (see Appendix A for a layout). I spent approximately 20 percent of my data collection time at this salon. This salon is located in a large strip mall where you will find a large grocery store, several specialty shops, a gourmet coffee shop, and fast food places. It is located on another main thoroughfare in the same southeastern city as Shelly's Salon. It is a slightly more up-scale salon where each stylist works in their own small studio. The owner, Ellen, said that the design of this shop is one of its best features. She feels that this design makes clients feel like they are getting more personal and private attention from the stylist. A total of nine stylists work at Private Beauty and they serve an average of 15 to 18 plus clients per day.

Hair fantasy is a small shop co-owned by Loy and Sara. The remaining 10 percent of my data collection time was spent at this salon. They both work in the shop as stylists. This shop is very similar to Shelly's Salon. Loy and Sara consider it to be a friendly, "laid back" place. They make a point of saying it is not like the more upscale "full-service" salons found around the city. This salon is located in a small strip mall with specialty shops near the campus in a city with a population of approximately 96,000.

## The Stylists

When we think of the image of a hair stylist, we often draw on the cultural images presented to us through literature and movies. There is the all knowing smart talking Leota in Eudora Welty's short story *Petrified Man*, the poofed-up and painted hairstylist who provides gossip and advice in the movie *Steel Magnolias* and the swinging George Roundy in the movie *Shampoo*. As Gimlin (1996) points out, these images are rarely flattering especially with respect to women who work in the beauty salon.

As in the study performed by Gimlin (1996), the stylists participating in this study seem to embrace and reject the stereotypes given us by popular culture. They are definitely very conscious of their outward appearance. They dress nicely, but not in a "posh" way and wear make-up. As one might expect, their hair is always beautifully coiffed. In fact, I observed that many stylists use the brief breaks between clients to fix their hair. In conjunction with their beauty consciousness, they all view their job as providing an important service that goes beyond haircuts or perms. Mary said "in many cases we are the first person clients talk to about what happens in their lives and the problems they have. I'm always here to listen." Some view the job as a type of "calling." Pam believes that she was always meant to be a hairstylist. She and other stylists recalled that as a teenager she always liked to "do hair."

The stylists in this study are all licensed to practice and received their training either through high-school or a cosmetology program run through a community college or a private institution. Five of the 14 stylists attended either university or community college. All but 4 are married, 3 are divorced and the other is single. Their ages range from 26 to 50 with the average age being 34.6 years.

## Gaining Trust

All of the clients interviewed (28) said that they either trusted or felt comfortable with their stylist. In addition, 14 (50%) also included the other stylist or stylists in these comments. Mary-Ellis, said "I just feel very comfortable here. All the girls here are wonderful. I really like coming here." As I observed the stylists interactions with their clients and through analysis of the interviews with the clients and stylists, five important strategies for gaining this trust emerged. The single most important strategy the stylists used was being a good listener. When asked what is the most important aspect of the service they give their clients, besides a good hair style, all of the stylists mentioned being a good listener. The fact that hairstylists are good listeners does not go unnoticed

by their clients. When asked about their visit with the stylist, a total of 20 clients (71%) said that their stylist always listened to them. Miss Gray said of her stylist, "Mary is always interested in what this old lady has to say. I always feel better after our chats."

Another strategy involved making the client feel comfortable at the beginning of the interaction with a friendly greeting. These greetings helped the clients know that the stylist was ready to serve him or her and often served as a conversation opener. Greetings seemed to take on two forms 1) a simple acknowledgement such as "How are you today Miss May?" or "What's up?" or even a simple southern "Hey!", 2) a recall of something about the client (his/her health, family, friends, work or activities) example "How is your back do' in these days Mr. Ford?" or "Did you have a nice visit with the grandchildren Mrs. Silver?" These recall greetings could also involve recall of something in their last conversation like "Did you bring those pictures of the baby Rob?" As you might expect recall was used only with returning or regular clients. The simple greeting was used with new clients and was always accompanied by a negotiation of what the stylist would do for them during that visit. Of the 80 visits examined in this study, 42 (52.5%) began with a recall greeting by the stylist, 31 (39%) were simple acknowledgements and 7 (8.5%) occurred where I could not hear them. Many of the regular clients of the stylists said things like "Shelly knows everything about me." or "I just feel comfortable with her, like I have always known her. She is my friend."

The third strategy stylists use to gain the trust of their clients involves keeping the conversation going and, in doing so, revealing to their clients personal information or feelings. The stylists I observed were not afraid to tell clients very personal information. By sharing their lives with their clients, the stylists foster and nurture the emotion work they do for their clients. Emotion work is conducted when the stylist tries to create a close personal relationship with the client and is completed through techniques such as "listening to and remembering the intimate details of their lives, and claiming emotional attachment to them" (Gimlin 1996, 514). In the interactions examined, stylists discussed topics of a personal nature in 71 of the 80 visits (88.8% of the interactions). Personal revelations were either prompted by the client and the topic of conversation (49 interactions) or were not prompted but volunteered by the stylist as a new topic for conversation (22 interactions). For example, a client began discussing how she was experiencing hot flashes and told her stylist Pam what medications she was taking. In response Pam said "Oh, I have been experiencing hot flashes for the last three months." In fact, many times during my visits Pam would tell a client or the whole salon that she was "having a flash." Lori, a stylist at Private Beauty, described why she talked about her pregnancy with a client "

The last time she told me she was pregnant... We've both had miscarriages, and that's how we got to talking about it. So we just keep up with what's going on with each others' pregnancy. Last time she was in here she was very sick. I asked how she was doing and she showed me her belly and all that stuff...

Unprompted sharing of information from the stylist's personal life tended to involve something new like Shelly telling a client she had spent Sunday in the hospital because

her husband hurt his back. When asked how important sharing this information is, the stylists echoed Shelly's comments. She said "My life's an open book, I don't mind telling my clients what I am up to. Clients like to hear this and then they tell me stuff about their lives."

The stylists seemed to recognize when their clients needed a little bit of extra special attention or care. In 16 (20%) of the visits examined the stylist gave the client extra special attention or care. This occurred when a client was trying to get over an illness, had been in the hospital, or just seemed to be a bit down emotionally. In these cases the stylist would pamper the client physically by using a special conditioner, massage the clients shoulders or scalp, or end the session by giving the client a hug. While working with these clients, the stylists would listen and occasionally ask "How does that feel?" Special attention also involved knowing when to offer advice or support. A comment made by a client who was asked whether her stylist has ever given her good advice or information, illustrates this kind of emotion work:

"Yea, probably, she always reminds me that I bounce back real well. Sometimes when I'm down and I'm feeling real dreadful, she says this too will pass. ... Instead of telling me what to do, she's very supportive"

In two of the visits that involved some extra care, the stylists offered the client human services information. One stylist recommended a book on pregnancy to a client who was having difficulties in her pregnancy and the other stylist recommended a prayer to a client who had a very sick relative.

The techniques used above all helped the stylists develop trusting relationships with their clients. Part of this relationship depended heavily on listening and personal information sharing. When clients talked to me about their trust or comfort level with their stylist, this commonly occurred in the context of describing what they talked about in their visits. Trust building strategies seem to be connected to information sharing.

### **Information Sharing and Conversation Flow**

During the 80 visits incidents of information sharing occurred around ten conversational topics. These topics were recorded during my observations of stylist-client interactions and through the interviews with clients and stylists. In addition to discussion of hair and beauty, many incidents involved family, friends or pets (31%), current events including vacations/holidays (19%), health (14%), home and cars (9%), employment/work (9%). Other categories included media and the Internet (3%), religion (3%), exercise and recreation (2%), and shopping (2%). Multiple topics were discussed in all but seven visits. The conversation flowed in a two way direction between the client and stylist (41% of the visits), and in multi-way directions (59% of visits) either in a three-way flow from client-stylist-client, or client-stylist-stylist, in a four-way flow from client-stylist-client-stylist, or a larger group (usually all that were present) took part. In 24 of the 80 visits (30%) the stylists reintroduced or carried over topics of conversation from one client to the next.

Through conversation, the stylists gain a great deal of knowledge about their clients and the communities in which they live and work. In the interviews and discussions with the stylists, they all commented about how much they learn from their clients that is not just “gossip.” Lori told me that

“You learn so much from your clients. Yes, you get all the gossip and usually forget most of it. Lots of the time, you get real interesting stuff. I have learned a lot from my clients, and I hope that I have shared that with other clients, and hope that I’ve helped somebody else out.”

Although the stylists said that they learn a great deal from their clients. They are usually very careful about what kind of information they pass on to their clients. Most (65%) said that they think carefully about giving certain advice or information. The giving of advice or information depended on the situation, how long they had known the client, and the comfort level of their relationship. Sara’s comments on her approach to information giving or advice illustrate this

“I might say, this is my opinion, I would never tell them what to do, or anything like ‘you should do this’ or ‘this is what you need to do.’ If they ask my opinion, I might, but I usually just let them talk. In a lot of situations, I don’t know what they are going through, so I don’t even try to comment. I try not to give too much advice. Unless they ask my opinion and it is something I can talk about.”

The layout of each salon helped facilitate the conversation flow (see Appendix A). At Shelly’s salon, the couches for waiting clients were placed across from the stylists’ chairs. This encouraged multi-way conversations between the clients who were waiting to be served, the stylists, and the clients being served. Although this set-up encourages multi-way conversations, it also makes it easy for others to overhear conversation. This lack of privacy sometimes affected what was said when the client sat in the stylist’s chair. Some clients were less likely to talk about serious problems that they don’t want others to hear about (e.g. health of family problems) when others were nearby. To compensate for this, Pam and Shelly used the back room to have more private conversations while they washed hair or put a client under the dryer. These approaches were common at Hair Fantasy which has similar layout except that it has a separate waiting room and thus fewer opportunities for multi-way conversation.

Privacy was purposely created in studio layout at Private Beauty. The stylists and clients both used and appreciated this high level of privacy. All of the conversations that involved religion occurred at this salon. Lori, explained that it with certain clients she can close the door and they can “have a good cry.”

Each salon provided materials (magazines, books, pamphlets) for their clients to read while they are waiting for their appointments. These materials were examined during 60 of the 80 visits (75%). In one of the HSI referrals, a stylist showed her client a

brochure detailing a babysitting instruction program he could consider for his teenage daughter.

### Human Services Information

In 18 of the 80 visits a stylist was observed giving a client human services information (HSI). Table 1 lists the gender and age of the client and the nature of the HSI given. Some of the stylists (5) did not realize that they had given their client an information referral. This was not surprising since the salon can become very busy and the stylists see several clients per day. Preoccupation with the task at hand, was also found in Pettigrew's (2000) observation of nurses serving seniors in foot care clinics. In additional five encounters, the observer was not directly present (these encounters took place at Private Beauty) but were obtained on the basis of randomly selected clients approached for interviewing. Thus, in a total of 10 encounters, the stylist gave HSI naturally, they did not do this because I was present.

In 13 encounters (72%) the stylist provided the information based on their discussion with the client. The client either brought up the topic or asked the stylist what she or he knew about this. For example, one of Pam's clients was having back trouble and felt that she needed some really good shoes but didn't know what kind to get or where to get them. She asked Pam about where she buys her sandals. She said she knew Pam worked on her feet all day and always seemed to have nice shoes. Very little probing was used by the stylists to find out more about the clients' problems or needs, the clients all talked very freely. This is not surprising since all but one of the 18 clients were regular clients. They had developed a long-standing, trusting relationship with their stylist.

<b>Table 1      Summary of Human Services Information Given by Stylists</b>		
<b>Gender (Age)</b>	<b>Nature of Information Given</b>	<b>Acted Upon</b>
Male (32)	A diet supplement	Yes
Male (36)	Babysitting classes for daughter*	Yes
Female (60)	Referred to a chiropractor	No
Female (56)	Gardening class	Yes
Female (47)	Real estate agent: to look at houses*	No
Female (67)	Ask Dr. about taking Herbal medicine (Echinacea)	No
Female (60)	Shoe store: where to get shoes for a bad back	Yes
Female (46)	Insurance agent: putting car ownership in daughter's name	No
Female (43)	Where to enroll children in swimming lessons	Yes
Male (37)	Veterinarian: sick dog	No



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Female (60)	Weight Watchers	No
Female (30)	Pregnancy book: having trouble with pregnancy	No
Male (38)	Internet ISP*	Yes
Male (44)	Internet chat room for card players*	No
Female (37)	A diet supplement	No
Female (35)	Prayer: relative was very sick	Yes
Female (34)	Child care services	No
Female (26)	Vacation condo rentals	Yes

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\* indicates information was written down on paper

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The nature of the clients' relationship with their stylists became an important factor when one considered the findings in regard to strength of weak ties theory. In eight of the 18 referrals (44%), the client acted upon the information provided, the remaining ten clients did not. The reasons for not acting upon the information were that they tried something else, they had forgotten about the recommendation, or their spouse did not think it was worth exploring. Twelve of the 18 clients (67%) checked out this information with a strong tie (close family member) before acting or not acting on the information. As discussed earlier, it was not prudent to hypothesize whether the stylists could be weak ties. The reason for this was the likely presence of strong emotional and certain physical connections between the stylists and their clients. In fact, many of the stylists and clients examined in this study were found to have developed trusting relationships. This was certainly due to the strategies stylists used to foster these relationships and due to the fact that the bond was renewed on a regular basis. The clients who were interviewed visited the salon on an average of every 6.4 weeks (min every week and max every 16 weeks)<sup>1</sup>.

When asked about the helpfulness of the information they received from their stylist, the clients felt that their stylist really cared for them and was certainly trying to help. However, many (60%) were uncertain as to whether they would act upon the information they were given. As stated earlier, only eight clients did act upon the information. Of these eight, only three acted upon the information without consulting a strong tie first. Stylists must therefore be considered weak ties.

The strength of weak ties result does not parallel that of Pettigrew (2000) who found that nurses served as strong-weak ties from whom seniors could get HSI and that very few (21%) said they consulted a strong tie prior to acting on the information. The nurses in Pettigrew's study functioned as a local bridge that "connected the senior with other people (and therefore information resources) who were not part of the senior's network" (75). The reason for this difference may be found in how the beauty profession versus the nursing profession is viewed by the general public. On a superficial level, a nurse is university or college educated and works in the health care industry where they

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<sup>1</sup> Through the observations I found that many senior women came to the salon on a weekly basis. Emily, a 67 year old retiree, said visiting the salon was "good for one's beauty and one's sole."

are seen to help save lives and nurture patients health. A hairstylist receives a license by going to "beauty school" or "cosmotology school," and is educated at either the high-school of community college level. It is likely that the professional status assigned to a service worker will raise or lower the esteem with which their opinions are held.

We know that hair stylists embrace the beauty culture (Eayrs 1993; Freedman 1986; Gimlin 1996; Wolf 1991). However, beauty culture is strongly criticized as promoting destructive and superficial physical transformations (Freedman 1986; Lakoff and Scherr 1984) and disempowering women (Wolfe 1991). By embracing the "beauty myth" stylists must work toward establishing their professional identity inside the beauty culture (Gimlin 1996). This puts stylists at a distinct disadvantage because popular culture does not support beauty being taken seriously. A client may trust or feel comfortable with a stylist but when it comes to information referral, the stylist's knowledge may be considered by some as superficial.

## CONCLUSIONS

Information encounters between stylists and clients are fostered by stylists through listening, recall of details in clients lives, personal revelations, and the special attention they give certain clients. The client interviews revealed that the stylists played a somewhat important role in linking their clients to human services information. However, most clients chose to consult a close family member prior to acting upon this information. Theoretically this distinguishes the stylist as a weak tie. Someone from whom a client will get new information but not someone who is necessarily trusted such that the client acts upon this information without consultation.

The information encounters that were observed covered a wide variety of topics. Clients were found to trust and feel comfortable with their stylist such that they revealed many private and personal occurrences, needs and feelings. They all appreciated the information they received from the stylist because it was delivered from someone they saw as a caring individual, a friend. From an information profession perspective, we know that this finding supports a principle of information seeking described by Dewdney and Harris (1994) stating that people want emotional support and understanding to come from the information sources they encounter. Compassionate sources of information are considered helpful even if the information is not accurate.

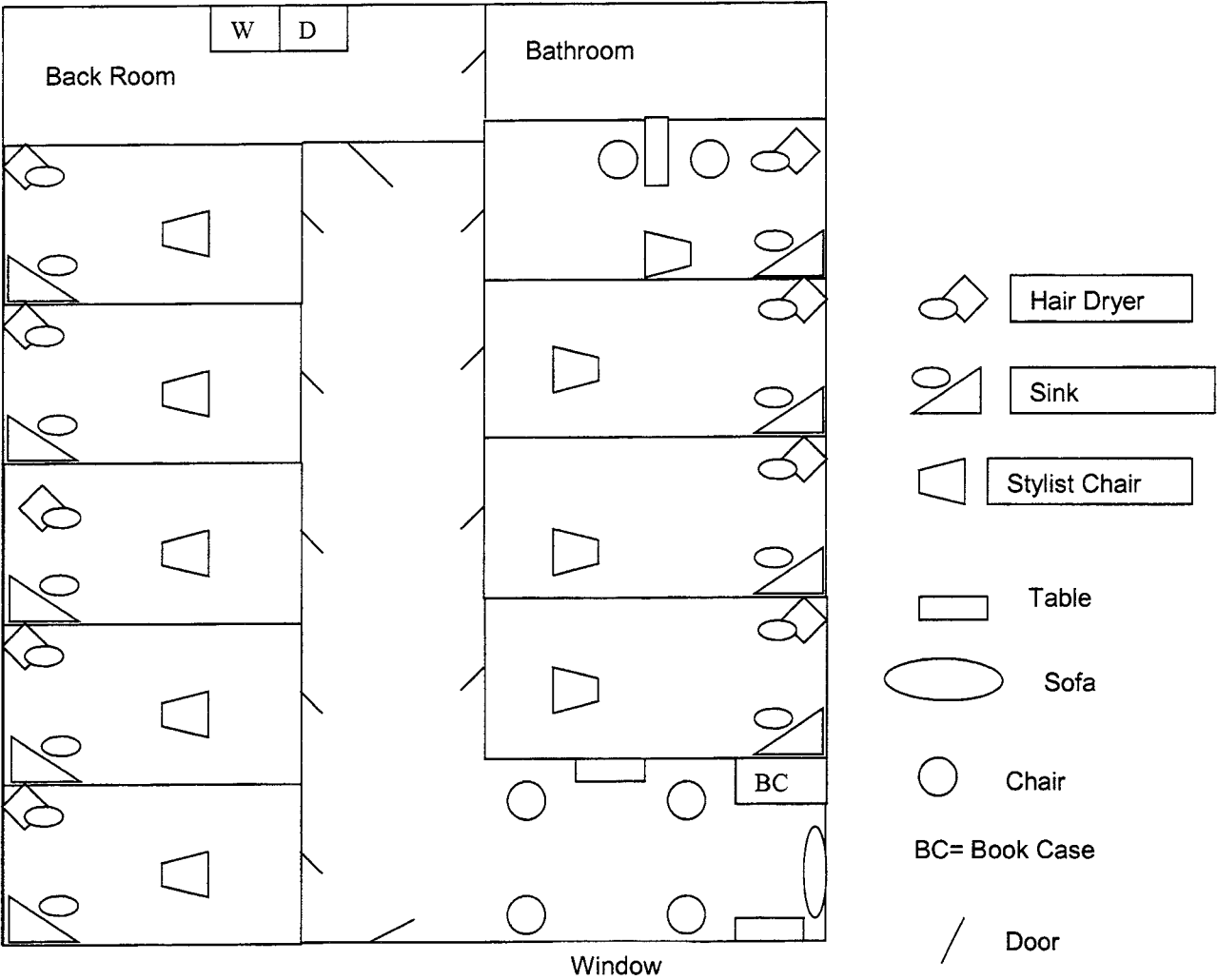
Stylists could be trained to recognize certain types of information needs and techniques for the delivery of information. Awareness and training for hair stylists has been undertaken in some communities by service agencies like Turning Point (O'Toole 1999) and breast cancer awareness groups (Forte 1995). These groups recognize and value the trusting relationship and intimate connection a stylist has with her/his clients. This connection can be used carefully and respectfully to help clients in need. Information and referral centers, public libraries and literacy groups could follow these models. If awareness training is not possible or feasible, simple contact with hair salons in town for the purpose of distributing information pamphlets or materials may have

some impact. It should be noted that 75% of the clients observed in this study perused the materials available at the salon and that these materials are also read by the stylists.

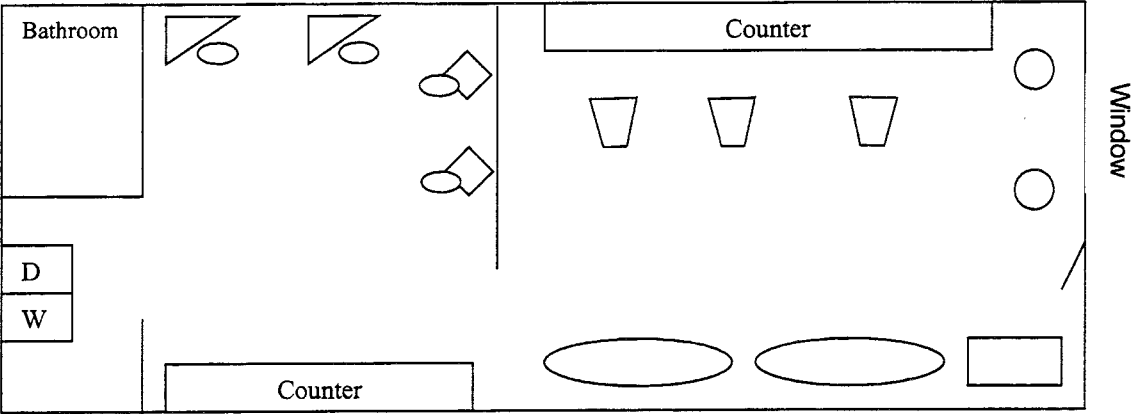
This study is a contribution designed to help further our understanding of information sharing in everyday life. I found that in the context of the beauty salon, information is shared and respected by both clients and stylists. The clients and stylists build relationships around the exchange of information. Some of this information exchange involves referral to previously unknown private and public human services. These information encounters do help bring meaning, purpose and predictability to the lives of stylists and their clients.

Appendix A

Private Beauty



Shelly's Salon



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