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Theoretical Framing

Most of the literature on nail technicians has focus on Korean nail salons in New York City. The few studies on Vietnamese nail technicians have only focused on women's roles but have not addressed Vietnamese men who also work in these spaces. On the other hand, studies on gendered work have looked at men in feminized occupations such as nursing, librarianship, elementary school teaching, and social work. But these occupations have not taken race into account. In order to bridge this gap, my research focuses on Vietnamese women and men working in nail salons. Therefore, this study provides a glimpse into gendered work, insight that has not been previously studied by other scholars.

In addition, West and Zimmerman's concept of 'doing gender' will be useful in understanding some of my findings and in particular, the way Vietnamese men talked about their work. They explain *doing gender* as how "participants in interaction organize their various and manifold activities to reflect or express gender, and they are disposed to perceive the behavior of others in a similar light" (127). I find that men perform gender according to the characteristics that match their self identity rather than their work identity. Thus, doing gender is a part of their everyday interactions with others, a performance that is continual rather than temporary.

Introduction

Some of the major changes in the nail salon industry are the professionalization and gendered perception of nail salon work. Instead of being referred to as manicurists, nail salon workers are now referred to as nail technicians¹, a term that is more gender neutral and signifies a trained or skilled worker. These changes seem to occur following the entrance of Vietnamese men, but it is unclear if Vietnamese men are the reason that these changes occurred. On the other hand, it is evident that nail salon work is no longer an occupation exclusively for women but an occupation employing both women and men. Therefore, does the entrance of Vietnamese men change the gendering of the work? And does nail salon work become more gender neutral because men are now nail technicians?

Research Question

For this research project, I look at the gendering of nail salon work in Vietnamese salons, especially how men may be changing this female dominated space. This paper is part of a larger project focusing on the work experiences of first and second generation Vietnamese nail technicians in Northern California. In this presentation, I summarize my preliminary findings on the ways in which nail salon work is gendered and highlight how Vietnamese men cope with working in a feminized occupation.

METHODOLOGY

In the United States, there are over 340,000 nail technicians and 43 percent of these nail technicians are of Vietnamese descent (*Industry Statistics:2007*). While males represent only 4% of the population of nail technicians, Vietnamese men, in particular, embody a substantial portion of this population.

¹ Throughout this paper, I will refer to manicurists as nail technicians because I feel the term is more inclusive of males.

For the past year, I interviewed Vietnamese nail technicians throughout Northern California. Though my sample was not random, it included people of different backgrounds including age, class, sex, generation and location. In total, there were 18 participants, 10 females and 8 males. Their ages ranged from 18 to 57 including 7 first-generation, 5 1.5 generation and 6 second-generation Vietnamese. Their work experiences varied from one year to 20 years. Conscious of the state of the economy's impact on the nail salon industry, I offered to pay each participant \$25 for their interview.

FINDINGS/RESULTS

Through my research, I focus on the perceptions of Vietnamese women and men and how they understand and discuss nail salon work. My findings show that nail salon work becomes gendered in a number of different ways. First, Vietnamese women and men continue to construct nail salon work as women's work. Secondly, the work becomes gendered through the presence of gender in interviews with Vietnamese men and absence of gender in interviews with Vietnamese women. They also use gender stereotypes to argue and support the appropriateness of nail salon work for women and vice versa. For example, some nail technicians believed women have the innate qualities to do nail salon work while other nail technicians argued that men embodied the necessary qualities for nail salon work.

Furthermore, the work is gendered through the ways in which technicians talk about the work itself. They discuss how they initially resisted nail salon work and how it was a threat to the masculinity of Vietnamese men. But if Vietnamese women and men are constructing the work as women's work, why do men continue to do nails? One of my participants offers some insight on how Vietnamese people feel about men in the nail salon. She states the following:

From how Vietnamese people view this, this job in nails is not a man's job. They have to do it like I said earlier. They have to do it. But the truth is, you already know. Vietnamese people think a certain way. A man can do this and that but a man cannot sit there and doing nails. They see that it's really embarrassing for men but they have no other choice, they have to do it.

Linda points out that these men have no other choice but to become nail technicians. Similar to why women become nail technicians, many of these men lack the education and skills for other occupations. Also they are a part of strong networks of family and friends already in the business, which provides them easy access into the occupation.

My next question was "So now that men have to do nail salon work, how do men continue to work in a feminized occupation?" I find that male nail technicians use coping strategies to alleviate their concerns of gendered work.

Assertions of Heterosexual Masculinity

First, men feel the need to assert their own masculinity when talking about nail salon work. This gendered space provokes men to question their masculinity and their sexuality. David's response illustrates how gender engulfs his work life when he describes the following situation:

I question my manhood cause I sit there and talk to you know when you talk to ladies all day you know all work what do you talk about? The girly stuff. It just throws you off sometimes you know sometimes you gotta go hang out with your friends again just to get back, back to yourself sometimes. It's weird.

The idea of doing gender in the salon would not be an issue, unless these men felt that their masculinity was being threatened. At times, these assertions of masculinity are very direct. For example, one male states "It's not really a bad job you just sometimes, you get some hot chicks in here, you know, keep you company talk to them all day. It's better than hard labor". Here, he emphasizes the aspect of socializing with women rather than focusing on the nature of the job. Other times, assertions of masculinity are more discrete. In another example, one male states that his friends do not say anything about his occupational choices. But as an afterthought, he

states, “better not I’ll whoop their ass”. He expresses his masculinity through being tough even while working in the nail salon. Most often, masculinity reveals itself in the comments males make about being men and their manhood. While many men demonstrate their need to assert their masculinity, some of these statements also express their need to present themselves as heterosexual men. One male describes his first work experience when he says, “it’s like uh kissing a girl for the first time. You know you’re really nervous. And you’re scared and you’re really shaky you don’t know what to really do? You know and you don’t know what to say.” This response may seem out of place but makes his sexuality known.

As an Art Form

The industry itself has opened more opportunities for nail technicians to express themselves or explore their creative abilities through nail salon work. While nail technicians talk about how both women and men as highly skilled, technicians always emphasize how men do nails beautifully because of their artistic abilities. In my conversation with David, he discusses how nail art design is endless. He explains, “it’s up to your imagination, you know. Kind of like art, you know, painting your nails and stuff. It’s all up to your imagination”. Another male talked about how he liked working with his hands, almost in a sense of molding and shaping nails. Thus, the work seems to be more gender appropriate and discussed in masculine terms. One of the female technicians agreed with this perspective. She believes that men are better with nail art design however; she no longer considers nail art design as nail salon work. She seems to focus on the technical aspect of the work, where technical work also appears to be more masculine. Therefore by framing nail salon work as an art form men can distance themselves from the gendered aspect of the work.

A job is a job

Lastly, there are many nail technicians who describe nail salon work as just a job. In these situations, these males do not have any other choices but to work as nail technicians. Instead of depending on their wives or public assistance, they are willing to do what is necessary to provide for their families, even work in a feminized occupation. For one first generation male, he offers the following perspective:

So how I see it is, the job I think a *job is a job*...being a *nail technician*, when we decide to commit to the job then a *job is a job*. *Male or female it's the same*...it's not any different. It's not different because...I think like right now, I do nails or how I go to work and if I come to work in any type of field, then it's just only a job. We have to do what we can as long as we can.

By emphasizing his willingness to work and perceiving nail salon work as another job, he also distances himself from the gendered aspect of the work. Another male demonstrates how he ignores the gendered aspect of nail salon work all together and focuses on the idea of making money. He states, "It just making money you know that's you know you put all the whatever you feel away. You know it's like here and that's what it is. Now you're doing nails you're just making money." These types of responses from men demonstrate how they choose to see themselves as independent, self sufficient and breadwinners, highlighting masculine traits rather than the gendered work.

Furthermore, there are many second generation males who talk about their work as temporary. They see it as an opportunity to make some extra money but never view nail salon work as a full time job or career. By stating that their work is part-time or only temporary work, these male nail technicians are able to reconcile their work identities with their masculinity. Thus, I argue that Vietnamese nail technicians frame nail salon work in these different ways to compensate or to alleviate men's struggles with gendered work. These strategies help many

male participants with their struggles to fit their work identities with their perceptions of gendered work.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, my study finds that when men enter the nail salon, there is the possibility that these men are transforming nail salon work by making nail salon more gender neutral. Nevertheless, this is not the case. Vietnamese nail technicians continue to refer to nail salon work as gendered work, more specifically as women's work. Unlike other feminized occupations, Vietnamese men do not work in nail salons because they want to but out of necessity. Most of these men initially refuse to enter nail salon work. Like women, they have no other choices but to work as nail technicians and Vietnamese women are willing to accept their necessity to work. But I find that women still maintain this space as a women's space even when men visibly work in these salons. Instead of resisting the gendering of nail salon work, men perpetuate this gendering. Furthermore, Vietnamese men will actively perceive nail salon work in different ways that deemphasize the femininity of nail salon work. Therefore, I find that men and women enforce gender norms by stating that women are more appropriate for nail salon work. In the future, I plan to conduct more interviews to understand the impact of men in the nail salon industry. I also want to highlight the significance of ethnicity in my research especially understanding masculinity within the nail salon.