

Hair Raising Humor:  
A Critical Qualitative Analysis of  
Humor, Gender, and Hegemony in the Hair Industry  
by  
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## ABSTRACT

This critical qualitative research study explores the discursive processes and patterns by which humor is gendered in hair salons and barbershops, in support of or resistance to hegemony, through an in-depth analysis and feminist critique of the humorous exchanges of hair stylists and barbers. This study extends prior feminist organizational research from Ashcraft and Pacanowsky (1996) regarding the participation of marginalized populations (i.e., women) in hegemonic processes, and argues that, despite changing cultural/demographic organizational trends, marginalized (as well as dominant) populations are still participating in hegemonic processes 20 years later. A focus on gendered humor via participant narratives reveals how various styles of gendered humor function to reinforce gender stereotypes, marginalize/exclude the "other" (i.e., women), and thus privilege hegemonic patterns of workplace discourse. This study contributes to existing feminist organizational scholarship by offering the unique juxtaposition of humor and gender from a diverse and understudied population, hair industry professionals.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	Page
1 INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE .....	1
Vignette: “You’re Just Fat” .....	1
Context and Rationale .....	3
2 LITERATURE REVIEW .....	14
The Hair Industry .....	14
Juxtaposing Humor .....	28
Humor Theories .....	29
Superiority Theory .....	29
Incongruity Theory .....	31
Cognitive Relief Theory .....	33
Organizational Humor Features and Functions .....	34
Gendered Humor Patterns and the Workplace .....	39
Masculine Humor Patterns .....	40
Feminine Humor Patterns .....	41
Gay male Humor Patterns .....	43
Research Questions .....	46
3 METHODS AND PROCEDURES .....	47
Site: Hair Salons and Barbershops .....	50
Participants: Hair Stylists and Barbers .....	50
IRB and Recruitment Procedures .....	52

CHAPTER	Page
Data Gathering.....	53
Field Observations.....	53
Member Diaries.....	54
Participant Interviews.....	55
Data Analysis.....	57
NVivo and Coding Procedures.....	57
Sensitizing Concepts.....	58
4 HUMOR, GENDER, AND HEGEMONY.....	60
Feminine Humor: Girls Being Girls.....	60
Rapport Humor: “A Rope, a Ski Mask, Some Lye”.....	62
Parenting Humor: “Public Lice”.....	65
Sexual Humor: “Heating Up”.....	70
Humor as Gossip: “Joe Dirt and Red Tornadoes”.....	76
Risky Humor: “Girls Hold Grudges”.....	82
Summary.....	83
Masculine Humor: Boys Being Boys.....	84
Visual Humor: “We Got Playboy!”.....	86
Sexist and Sexual Humor: “We’re Losing Another Soldier” and “Violet and the Vaseline”.....	90
Teasing and Ridicule: “Counting the Bulbs”.....	99
Physical Pranks: “It’s a Fart Machine”.....	103

CHAPTER	Page
Summary .....	107
Gay Humor in the Industry.....	109
Sexual Humor: “Ok, Slow Down!”.....	111
Critical Humor: “You Need to Lose 5 Pounds”.....	113
Feminine Humor qualities: “Gossiping, Gabbin’ BFFs”.....	116
Masculine Humor Qualities: “Not a Magician”.....	118
Flamboyant Humor: “Over the Top” .....	121
Summary .....	124
5 CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, FUTURE DIRECTIONS, LIMITATIONS	126
Conclusions: Humor and Gender .....	129
Gendered Distinctions .....	130
Stereotypical Humor.....	133
Gender Exclusionary Humor.....	135
Targeting the Other.....	136
Stereotypical Humor and Gendered In/Out Groups.....	138
Conclusions: Humor and Hegemony .....	142
Heteronormative Humor.....	144
Sexual Humor .....	146
Theoretical Contributions .....	150
Practical Applications.....	155
Methodological Contributions.....	163

CHAPTER	Page
Future Research and Study Limitations .....	166
Concluding Remarks and Reflections .....	169
6 UNEXPECTED FINDINGS: A COLLECTION OF PERSONAL STORIES AND LESSONS LEARNED .....	168
“I Can Last Longer”.....	171
“Are Those Mirrors On Your Shoes?” .....	175
Part One: “Way Over the Top” .....	180
Part Two: “And These!” .....	183
Protocols and Rationale .....	185
Personal Reflections .....	189
Practical and Methodological Implications.....	190
REFERENCES .....	193
APPENDIX	
A PARTICIPANT INFORMATION LETTER.....	206
B INTERVIEW GUIDE.....	209
C PARTICIPANT PSEUDONYMS AND DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS.....	213

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

“You’re just fat”

I am no stranger to hair salons, or the hair industry. I have been cutting and dying my hair in salons across California since I was 18 years old, and most recently, sitting in my husband’s salon chair as we dream up creative hair styles for each new season. My husband Shaun is a hair stylist, a fact that often perplexes friends and family members due to the stereotype that all males in the hair industry (and arguably other “feminine” professions) must be homosexual.

Needless to say, I am always eager for another visit to the hair salon. Today, I’m with my mom on a visit to her stylist, Melanie, for a simple shape-up.

As we walk into Shear Perfection Hair Salon, located in Folsom, CA, my mom wastes no time in locating Melanie’s chair, which happens to be nearest the door. Melanie is with another male client and politely asks us to wait just a few more minutes in adjacent bright orange chairs. The salon is quiet, but it is still early, only 10:00am on a Saturday morning. Melanie finishes blow drying her client’s hair, gives him a gentle pat on the back, and says, “I think it looks great, what do you think?” The man nods and smiles, showing his agreement and begins writing in his checkbook. Meanwhile, Melanie comes over and gives my mom a giant hug. Melanie is a parent in my mom’s second grade classroom, so they have a longstanding rapport. The casual conversation starts flowing soon after my mom sits in Melanie’s chair, draped in a long black cape.

“You want to hear something funny?” Melanie asks. “There’s this one client, who is so clearly jealous of me but still wants me to do her hair! I know, strange right?”

Melanie laughs, a polite chuckle, and makes eye contact with my mom and me in the vanity mirror before continuing. I smile to acknowledge her humor – gossip in the form of irony. “And I *know* she’s jealous because she always says things to me like, ‘you’re so skinny, you look so amazing. I would never look like that after having twins!’” The envious client had obviously been in for a salon visit with Melanie within the last two months, just after she gave birth to twins.

“Well, she is right, you do look amazing!” my mother chimed in support. Melanie looked fabulous – her long dark hair flowed past her shoulders in a pattern of gentle barrel curls and blonde highlights. She wore tight black jeans and a silver belt that hung loosely over her hips, her makeup artfully applied to accentuate her blue eyes. By all conventional standards, there was no evidence to suggest she recently gave birth to twins, all the evidence to suggest she spent ample time getting ready for work today.

Melanie continues, “And even when I was pregnant, this woman would say things like, ‘You are skinnier than me now and I’ve never even had kids,’ which is just a strange thing to say to someone, you know?” My mom and I smile politely and nod along as we listen. Melanie continues cutting my mom’s medium length black silky hair, snipping away effortlessly as she recalls her last appointment with this jealous woman.

Just then, the receptionist chimes in. His name is Marcus. Marcus, and his physical appearance completely contradict the stereotypical perception of a *receptionist*, much how my husband’s physical appearance contradicts the stereotypical perception of a *stylist*. First, he is a man; a large, jovial man with thinning dirty blonde hair and a vacation-themed button-up silk shirt. “That’s when you say, listen here,” Marcus shouted from behind the front desk a few yards away, adding a short pause for what I assume can

only be for dramatic effect. “I’m having twins soon and will lose my weight, but you’re just fat!” His punch line was delivered so matter-of-factly, yet when doing so, he pursed his lips, sassed his tone, and waved his hand over his head in a flamboyant, imitating gesture. It was quite the performance, one that Marcus was pleased with as evidenced by his hearty laughter.

Melanie and my mom burst out laughing! I laugh too, feeling somewhat guilty, namely because I assert myself as a feminist scholar, yet appreciate the humor in his crude joke. I can only imagine what it must be like working in the salon chair nearest Marcus everyday. He seems like the kind of guy who asserts his opinions regularly.

### **Context and Rationale**

As a feminist scholar and humor researcher, I am regularly attuned to issues of gender that surface in everyday forms of communication, such as gendered humor. What fascinated and intrigued me about this salon experience was how the use of humor delivered from the stylist, Melanie, and the receptionist, Marcus, mimicked stereotypical gender norms and patterns of humorous interactions. From my research experience, I noticed very quickly for example, that Marcus’ remark was both an expression of masculine humor (e.g., competitive and sarcastic) as well as a public critique of women’s ideal body standards/size surrounding pregnancy (Berger, 2001; Meyer, 2000; Mintz, 1985). In other words, Marcus’ humor was gendered both in the *delivery* – the way he communicated the punch line, and in *content* – his reference to and critique of the woman’s excess weight. The *delivery* and *content* of Melanie’s humor was also gendered. For example, gender and humor scholars have found that feminine humor is often

context-specific, expressed in narrative and gossip forms, and frequently engages body talk (Holmes, 2006), all of which Melanie's humor did.

To my surprise, we all actively participated in the stereotypical gendered humor sequence – whether as humorists or as audience members laughing at the exchange. I say “to my surprise” because as a feminist and humor researcher, I also know of the power potential for humor to function as resistance to dominant structures (e.g., status quo and/or gender stereotypes) (Bell & Forbes, 1994; Collinson, 1988; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006; Lynch, 2010; Murphy, 1998). “Resistance,” in this context “is the dialectic other of control” and defined as “individuals’ capacities to draw upon alternative discourses that subvert the privileged position of the dominant system of social identities and values” (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996, p. 63). Humor is one form of discourse that functions quite effectively in this way – it subverts the status quo and challenges/critiques the privileged position through various forms (e.g., ridicule, sarcasm, irony, wit), thus offering new interpretations and collective meanings to emerge (Gilbert, 2004). To illustrate further, “humor is one form of unobtrusive power renegotiation” insofar as it transmits (often hidden) messages of resistance under the guise of “it was just a joke” (Murphy, 1998, p. 514). Additionally, Mumby (1997) argued “low-profile forms of resistance” such as humor, “can lead to the systematic undermining of the dominant hegemony” (p. 17) because their transcripts are ultimately hidden and/or implied, thus minimizing the potential (corporate) consequences for those enacting the resistance (Murphy, 1998).

However, our humorous exchange did not function as resistance. Any good humorist knows that “your audience tells you what’s funny” through shared laughter (or lack thereof), and my mom, Melanie, and I found humor in the stereotypical joke. Over

time, this process – the perpetuation and maintenance of stereotypical gender discourse through humorous exchanges – carries potential to influence organizational communication trends (Dundes, 1987; Peret, 1993, p. 83). Feminist scholars argue for example, that the perpetuation of gender norms and stereotypes functions to privilege hegemonic and heteronormative values (e.g., patriarchy and heteronormativity, hegemonic masculinity) (Ashcraft & Pacanowsky, 1996; Clair, 1993; Clair, Chapman, & Kunkel, 1996; Holmer-Nadesan, 1996; Murphy, 1998; Ricciardelli, 2011). As described by Clair (1993), hegemony is “the subjugated group’s unwitting acquiescence or active participation” in another group’s dominant ideology (p. 114). Furthermore, “the socially dominant [ideology]... is hegemonic masculinity; a theoretical conception of masculinity that is used to explain the power of men over women and the hierarchy of men over women” (Ricciardelli, 2011, p. 182). In the above narrative, hegemony was evidenced in Melanie’s jealousy narrative and by our collective laughter over Marcus’ remark, “you’re just fat.” Moreover, Marcus’ flamboyant gesture coupled with a sassy, feminine tone used to deliver the joke, demonstrates a humorous attempt at mocking (thus marginalizing) homosexuals, thus implying that only women and homosexuals engage in gossip and/or body critiques. Here, our shared humor functioned to support gender norms and stereotypes, thus sustaining hegemonic organizational discourse rather than resisting it. An example of resistance humor might be, for example, if Melanie or Marcus had instead made a joke that critiqued jealousy (and thus created community) or advocated for women’s alternative body ideals (such as saying, “high five sister for looking amazing anyway!”), yet this was not the case. From a feminist perspective, it is especially troublesome when women actively participate in stereotypical/hegemonic discourse, due

to the ways that gender stereotypes have hindered women's professional success for decades. Research by Clair (1993), as well as Ashcraft and Pacanowsky (1996), has shown for example that women often do participate in hegemonic processes (such as devaluing other women and perpetuating gender stereotypes) which ultimately function to construct "confiding roles, practices and meanings that preserve asymmetrical power relations between" men and women (p. 220).

What's more, independently owned and operated hair salons and barbershops do not adhere to traditional corporate structures (e.g., restrictive policies, strict hierarchies), thus allowing hair industry professionals to engage in unregulated (or perhaps, better described as self-regulated) communication. For example, there was no general manager on duty, human resources department, or supervisor personnel regulating our conversations. The stylist was essentially her own boss. These unique workplace conditions allow for an increased opportunity for hair industry professionals (in this setting) to engage in uninhibited patterns of interactions (i.e., risky humor exchanges) without the fear of corporate consequences, making the industry ripe for the investigation of uncensored humor discourse and gendered patterns.

I will admit, I felt surprised, yet not entirely caught off guard by Marcus' joke. For a moment, I was shocked that this type of gendered commentary (derogatory humor critiquing women's bodies) would come out of a hair salon, despite the lack of corporate regulations – perhaps because traditionally speaking, we think of hair salons as feminine (even queer) spaces. I have always perceived hair salons as female-dominated (and gay-dominated), home to an eclectic group of artsy and fashion forward individuals, not a home well suited for hegemonic, masculine social norms of interaction. Given these

assumptions, I might be less surprised to hear stereotypical gendered banter in a traditionally male-dominated industry, such as a car repair shop or barbershop, occupations typically associated with heterosexual men (Stanley, 2001). After all, barbershops, to my understanding, were places for men to socialize, read *Playboy* magazines and get away for the afternoon. I was excited at the prospect of visiting a barbershop to see if this would be the case. Yet, as my study began to show, feminine spaces were not void of hegemonic, stereotypical gendered discourse, especially in the form of humorous exchanges.

My assumptions about hair stylists support prior research, which has demonstrated that the position of a stylist is typically one associated with and occupied by women and homosexual men, while the position of a barber is traditionally occupied by heterosexual men (Barber, 2008; Gimlin, 1996; Lawson, 1999; Nordberg, 2002). Yet, despite the growth of the industry over the past few years, research has also shown that men tend to make more money in the industry (than women) and hold higher positions (e.g., salon owners/executives, runway specialists, product line CEOs) (Nordberg, 2002). For example, four out of five senior level executives at Regis Corp (a Fortune 500 company, home of Super Cuts, Master Cuts, Carlton Hair International, and founder of Empire Beauty School) are men (Bloomberg, 2015; Regis Corp, 2015). Moreover, men founded multimillion-dollar product lines such as Vidal Sassoon, Paul Mitchell, Toni and Guy, and Lancôme. These statistics are not surprising given that historically, “men, regardless of their race, religion or socio-economic status, have enjoyed the privileged position relative to women” throughout the working world (Clair, 1993, p. 114). In addition, I have also heard numerous stories from my husband, Shaun, about the invisible

yet dominant role of men throughout the hair industry. Shaun explained, “it’s weird, their [men’s] names are on them [the products and salons] and resonate in the industry, but it’s the women who are out there using and selling them most of the time. Not to mention, if you look at the hair stylists of year awards over the past few years, it’s men that are winning them. It’s always a man.” I remember asking Shaun, “why?” and he replied, “I wish I knew what to tell you. I think a man is able to carry, build, and maybe even act out an industry façade, like a professional confidence and charisma, that women have not learned, or maybe they are just too afraid.”

It might also be the case that dominant organizational structures (e.g., hegemony, patriarchy) fueled by hegemonic traditions (i.e., stereotypical gender discourse) may hinder women from taking on these roles. For example, in their study of a female-dominated workplace, Ashcraft and Pacanowsky (1996) discovered that women engage in stereotypical gendered behaviors, such as backstabbing, cattiness, and gossip, as well as belittling other women’s workplace accomplishments, which not only distanced the women from one another (rather than create community) but obstructed their overall success in the company. This finding supported sexual harassment research by Clair (1993) which argued that women actively participated in hegemonic processes via discursive devices such as trivialization (i.e., downplaying harassment, using humor as coping mechanism) and self-defacing (i.e., publicly demeaning oneself in some way). According to both studies, research that is “devoted explicitly to how women participate in hegemonic processes” is largely understudied and needs attention (Ashcraft & Pacanowsky, 1996; Clair, 1993, p. 115).

With these findings swirling in my mind, more questions of my own arose as I pieced together the focus of my project: was the gendered humor exchange I experienced between Melanie and Marcus similar to the humor trends I would experience throughout the hair industry, or unique to their dynamic? Borrowing from Flyvbjerg's (2011) case study framework, I also considered whether hair salons are truly "less likely" spaces for stereotypical gendered humor trends to surface, especially given the female-dominated nature of hair salons (Flyvbjerg, 2011, p. 307)? Furthermore, thinking about the similarities between my experience and Ashcraft and Pacanowsky's (1996) findings, what is to be said about the ways that organizational members perpetuate hegemony through their uses of humor (including male-dominated workplaces, such as barbershops)? And finally, how do organizational members actively participate in the construction/reification of gender norms and stereotypes that may ultimately disadvantage their own communities (e.g., women and/or men who actively contribute to negative gendered stereotypes)? Exploring these issues may help feminist organizational communication scholars identify the processes by which traditional gender norms and stereotypes are maintained by organizational members in feminine spaces through gendered humor discourse, and how, if at all, gendered humor functions to normalize existing hegemonic structures.

The decision to study hair salons and barbershops was influenced by multiple factors: a call for (more) feminist organizational research that both extends prior studies and focuses specifically on organizational minorities/marginalization practices (Ashcraft & Pacanowsky, 1996; Clair, 1993), the case study rationale proposed by Flyvbjerg (2011), my own interest and curiosity in the industry as a whole, as well as my open

access to this industry. As mentioned, feminist organizational research by Clair (1993) and Ashcraft and Pacanowsky (1996) has identified the ways in which working women often participate in hegemonic organizational processes. However, the scholars also explained that this area is largely understudied as “little research has been devoted explicitly” to this process (Clair, 1993, p. 119). Similar studies have not been conducted over the past twenty years. Therefore, a primary contribution of this project is to borrow from their claims and conclusions, to build an all-inclusive gender organizational study focused on similar feminist ideals, such as hegemony, yet juxtaposing humor and gender in everyday organizational discourse.

Furthermore, according to Flyvbjerg (2011), critical case studies have “strategic importance in relation to [a] problem,” and follow the logic, “if it is valid for this case, it is valid for all (or many) cases” (p. 307). In other words, critical case studies select sites whereby a phenomenon is least likely to be experienced, then postulate that if it is in fact present in this space, indeed it should occur in more likely places. Borrowing this rationale, this study positioned hair salons and barbershops as critical cases for the construction/perpetuation of hegemonic humor (i.e., the problem) and followed Flyvbjerg’s logic – if gendered humor shows up here, in a traditionally feminine work environment (and in hegemonic, stereotypical, gendered forms), then it is likely to also show up in other patriarchal organizations. The purpose was to therefore make interpretations about the relationship between humor and gender in a space that does not typically conform to traditional gender norms and/or patriarchal (i.e., corporate) patterns of organizational communication. For example, hair salons and barbershops maintain “relatively flat hierarchies, with most salons and barbershops owned and/or managed by a

working stylist, interactions are rarely directly managed in anything other than an ad-hoc manner... thus stylists exercise relatively free reign over complex physical and conversational interactions” (Cohen, 2010, p. 202). These conditions created the perfect climate to investigate the nature of humor and gender in the workplace, especially as a space to support the critical case study rationale with regard to humor trends and gender norms (Flyvbjerg, 2011). The hierarchies in a hair salon/barbershop do not represent traditional patriarchal organizational structures, nor are the conversations regulated by corporate (hegemonic) standards of practice.

To this point, ample research has been conducted on the functions of humor in our daily communication (Linstead; 1985; Lynch, 2002; Meyer, 1997, 2000), including a focus on gendered patterns of humor in a variety of social and workplace settings (Collinson, 2002; Ford, Boxer, Armstrong, & Edel, 2008; Porcu, 2005). Organizational scholars have also worked to expose the functions and patterns of workplace humor (Collinson, 2002; Frecknall, 1994; Holmes & Marra, 2002; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006; Rowe & Regehr, 2010; Tracy, Myers, & Scott, 2006). Some scholars have focused on critical issues such as gender (Brunner & Costello; 2002; Lynch, 2010; Meyer 1997, 2000; Mullany, 2004; Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995), and the ways that humor functions as resistance to dominant power structures (Bell & Forbes, 1994; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006; Lynch, 2010; Murphy, 1998; Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995). Yet another set of literature from feminist organizational scholars suggests that women are drawn into hegemonic discourses in the workplace that continue to reify their subordinate positions and marginalizes status (Ashcraft & Pacanowsky, 1996; Clair, 1993). Feminist scholars often seek to expose the dominant structures that privilege patriarchal patterns, and therefore

study organizations as sites for gender rules, norms, ideals, and stereotypes, among other critical interests (Ashcraft, 2004). Humor, as a commonplace form of everyday communication, is an essential part of organizational culture and a “valuable tool to communicate organizational values and behavioral norms” (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006, p. 63). By adopting a feminist approach to the study of humor and gender in hair salons, I am able to narrow the scope of humorous exchanges to those that facilitate, regulate, and/or reflect gendered processes so as to challenge normalized hegemonic (and humorous) discourse in relation to gender.

Furthermore, borrowing specifically from Ashcraft and Pacanowsky’s 1996 case study of women in organizations, this study combines their original inquiries and seeks to address “how female actors in actual organizational settings actively contribute to...organizational norms that could appear to exclude or marginalize women,” yet does so 20 years later with an eye on humor (p. 218). As feminist scholars, we must continually return to these types of studies in order to address issues about gender, to see how they are unfolding in modern organizations, and expose the discursive processes by which marginalization occurs in a variety of organizational settings. In turn, feminist scholars can see how, if at all, gender equality is changing/progressing, and if not, be able to push for more research that advocates for this much needed change. I focus specifically on the role of humor in organizational discourse in order to demonstrate the powerful role of humor for performing and maintaining traditional gender norms and stereotypes, even in a space that on its surface, appears feminine. I believe (gendered) humor in the hair industry is a topic currently understudied in gender and organizational literature, especially from a critical/feminist perspective, both with regard to the

population under study (i.e., a focus on hair stylists rather than clients), as well as the setting. Due to the rise of industry professionals entering the field each year, and the frequency with which U.S. Americans visit hair salons and barbershops, more research can valuably expose how humor and gender function in this communal space to marginalize organizational members, thus working toward a more balanced (i.e., equal in ownership/leadership/pay scale) workplace.

This study begins by reviewing gender and organizational literature, and then juxtaposes humor and organizational research, thus creating a space where I put into dialogue these two bodies of literature. Much of the critical literature under review speaks to issues of hegemony and resistance, including feminist scholarship that shows the ways in which women are often marginalized yet drawn into hegemonic discourses in the workplace.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review is divided into four major sections: an overview of hair salons, barbershops, and hair industry culture writ large, a review of gender scholarship within organizational settings (with an emphasis on critical turns and issues), a discussion of relevant humor literature conducted in the workplace, and a final section that highlights the ways in which organizational and gendered humor have been analyzed together over the past twenty years. Throughout this review, efforts are made to establish a firm rationale for my research by highlighting how a critical feminist approach to the study of hair industry humor will contribute to existing gender, humor, and feminist organizational scholarship.

#### **The Hair Industry**

A visit to the hair salon or a barbershop is a familiar cultural tradition in U.S. American society and an extremely “common part of social life” (Hill & Bradley, 2012, p. 44). Each year, millions of individuals reach for their pocket books, as they have done for decades, and retreat to their local hair parlors in order to achieve their desired beauty ideals through a variety of grooming and pampering services. Today, this desire for beauty has fueled a booming hair industry where the invention of highly sophisticated color, creative styling, and fashion forward techniques (Lawson, 1999) have given rise to more than 90,000 hair salons and barbershops nationwide (SBDC Market Research, 2012). With service work accounting for 80% of the U.S. workforce (Hill & Bradley, 2012), the hair industry stands tall generating over \$50 billion in annual revenue as more than 1.6 million Americans occupy hair industry professions (IBIS World, 2014).

However, over time a visit to the hair salon or barbershop has come to represent far more than one's desire engage in beauty rituals or vanity; but rather a cultural custom that provides opportunities for community patrons to socialize (Majors, 2001), joke around with one another, "bring themselves up-to-date on community gossip," and/or discuss the news, through a tradition of "unstrained... expression" (Thornton, 1979, p. 76). As explained by several of my participants, the tradition of free flowing, unrestrained (even taboo) dialogue comes from the absence of a corporate structure (and therefore, rules and punishments) thus allowing hair industry professionals and their patrons to engage in a broader range of uninhibited communication styles and content. Hair salons and barbershops have therefore established reputations as social crossroads for various communities –intersections ripe for the exchange of cultural messages that teach lessons about gender, class, race, family, and beauty standards, among other cultural messages (Van Devender, 1967).

This communal social function has contributed to the reputation of hair stylists and barbers as more than trade industry professionals, but rather as social authorities, health informants, teachers, counselors, and even entertainers (Abel, 1970; Davis, 2011, 2013; Luque, Rivers, Gwede, Green, & Meade, 2010; Van Devender, 1967). As stated by Van Devender (1967), "if you want to consult a fixer of broken hearts, a marriage counselor, a lawyer, a sports encyclopedia, a military strategist, or a political authority, don't hire a panel of skilled experts. Go to your barber" (p. 48). Moreover, Barrie (2015) explained, "the hairdresser is the fairy godmother to the modern woman, forever clad in chic, all-black attire, whose scissors are a magic wand... we trust them with our lives!" (para. 18). This unique social quality has often been studied within the African American

community and barbershop culture, whereby clients spend hours laughing, joking and teasing one another, “talking shop,” and exchanging marriage/dating advice with their barbers during elaborate hair procedures (Alexander, 2003; Davis, 2011; Lawson, 1999; Thompson, 2009; Thornton, 1979). In an article about Phoenix’s oldest barbershop, one customer (with a 40-year client history) stated, “a 30-minute hair cut might take an hour due to the pranks and endless storytelling” that take place during a routine appointment (Stanley, 2001, p. 1). Moreover, hair salons and barbershops are often sites of friendly “flirting and teasing,” especially during mixed sex interactions (e.g., a man cutting a woman’s hair, or vice versus) (Lawson, 1999, p. 249). Indeed, “humor, play and levity in the workplace have been shown to enhance a sense of community” among its members, and the hair industry relies on this sense of community and loyal patrons to keep it thriving amidst growing competition (Hill & Bradley, 2012, p. 43). Thus, humor, among other personalized forms of talk (e.g., self-disclosure, narrative), performs valuable relational as well as business functions for hair industry professionals (Majors, 2001). In other words, humor is good for (hair) business! Understanding the social functions that hair salons and barbershops maintain throughout our communities is important context for analyzing how gendered messages and lessons, especially in the form of (unrestricted) organizational humor, are generated, circulated, and maintained.

It is not only good humor that gets exchanged at the hair salon or barbershop, but the repetition of cultural messages that create and maintain gender norms as well. For example, the *hair salon* has traditionally been a space designated for women (Gimlin, 1996; Majors, 2001), and the *barbershop* a place for men (Alexander, 2003; Barber, 2008; Lawson, 1999). This distinction may be a matter of the semantics, sociocultural

stereotypes, or gendered connotations that have developed over time with regard to professional titles in the industry. For example, “cosmetologists” have also been called “hairdressers, hairstylists, and beauticians,” (feminine terms), whereas the word “barber” literally comes from the Latin word *beard* and connotes a professional identity that has been traditionally dominated by men since its inception (Lawson, 1999). Moreover, men’s work in the industry has frequently been identified as a professional skill set, while a woman’s work in the industry has been stereotyped and labeled as a artistic talent, even at times, as an extension of her domestic responsibilities (Nordberg, 2002). Some researchers attribute this perception to the rise of kitchen salons and the practice of at-home hair-permanents that took place after WWI, as women entered the workforce and thus desired more manageable and professional-looking hairstyles (Lawson, 1999).

These gender distinctions are also made apparent through the maintenance of gender-specific messages embedded throughout the industry in the casual conversations that occur between hair stylists/barbers and clients (Alexander, 2003; Barber, 2008). For example, scholars have described the stereotypical image of the “old school” barbershop as a place where “garage talk occurs” (Barber, p. 473), and where “girly” sex magazines and sports television are available (Stanley, 2001, p. 1). The barbershop is a place for men to ridicule each other, discuss politics, talk about sex and drinking, all while escaping the “nagging of their wives” for the afternoon (Stanley, p. 2). The image of the barbershop as a masculine space has also been made popular through media images and the film industry in movies such as *The Untouchables* (1987), *The Barber Shop* (2002), and Chris Rock’s *Good Hair* (2009) documentary. Hair salons, on the other hand have been studied as more feminine spaces; a place for women to gossip, talk about beauty and

their social lives, and build rapport with one another “in ways that define their relationships with other women” (Barber, p. 457). As such, the hair salon functions as a space for women to forge social gendered identities with one another through feminine styles of discourse (Alexander, 2003; Gimlin, 1996). Furthermore, research by Lawson (1999) compared the role of hair stylists to that of a relational psychologist – a profession occupied by people who can listen, counsel, give advice, and practice empathy. These styles of communication are consistent with gender communication research that suggests women are socialized to engage in more collectivistic, nurturing, and other-directed forms of communication such as listening and empathy (Collinson, 1988; Holmes, 2006; Schnurr, 2008; Tannen, 1993, 1994). These findings are important in terms of the current analysis because they suggest that women are socialized to adopt and accept certain forms of gendered communication patterns as normalized, which in turn, may influence women’s workplace discourse (Lawson, 1999).

As previously mentioned, the hair stylist profession has traditionally been associated with women, but also with homosexual men (Barber, 2008; Hewitt, 1995). In fact, an early demographic study of over 5,000 gay men indicated that over 50% held jobs as hair stylists and fashion experts – occupations traditionally labeled as more creative/artistic fields. Stereotypes of women and gay men throughout the hair industry have been perpetuated and made popular through the media in films such as *Beauty Shop* and *The Salon*, as well as television shows such as *Tabatha’s Salon Takeover*, and *America’s Next Top Model* where the actors fulfill these gender roles on screen for an eager audience. Stereotypes such as “the flamboyantly gay stylist” or “gossip ridden hair stylist” become normalized through repeated mediated messages and imagery (e.g., race,

class and gender messages) and therefore carry potential to shape future patterns of discourse, such as “only women and gay men work at hair salons” narratives. Disparaging stereotypes are especially problematic for marginalized organizational populations (e.g., women) who, due in part to traditional gender stereotypes, norms and expectations, are limited in their earning potential and/or career success. For example, research by Nordberg (2002) indicated that though the percentage of (heterosexual) men working in the hair industry remains low (as compared to women), “men are found more frequently than women in the position as masters of hairdressing, in competitions, and in presenting ‘haute couture’ shows” (p. 34). From a feminist perspective, women’s contributions to the industry are muted and made hidden by the perpetuation of a heteronormative, man’s world ideology, which functions as both the public and profitable face of the industry.

Still, trends are changing; more heterosexual men are entering the profession at the ground level - as hair stylists, whereas historical patterns indicate that heterosexual men held positions as barbers or industry elites. The entire industry population has therefore become more diversified with regard to varied gender and sex identities. My husband is a testament to the growing number of heterosexual men working as hair stylists, though he is frequently teased that “*he must be gay*,” given his choice of profession; evidence that gender stereotypes still circulate within the industry. Throughout the past few years, we have also heard industry jokes that Shaun needs to “turn his gay on” in order to increase his business/profits with gay clientele, a skill he has attempted to master. From an organizational perspective, the ability to code switch (gender identities) is good for business, as heterosexual men working in female-

dominated professions are often “expected to raise both the salary as well as the status of the profession” and are therefore “treated with extra solicitude” (i.e., care or concern) in comparison to their female counterparts (Nordberg, 2002, p. 33). The practice of privileging men perpetuates patriarchal norms in an industry that remains female-dominated in its workforce. On a macro level, these patterns are also troublesome due to the way they establish profit-raising and reputation building expectations for male’s work performance, and also the way these claims help perpetuate an ideology that situates men’s work as more monetarily valuable than women’s work.

Taken together, the above literature reveals a great deal about the nature of the hair industry culture and the way it participates in (i.e., perpetuates, circulates, maintains) gendered messages. It is clear that hair salons and barbershops function as lively, interactive communal spaces with the power to shape gender norms and patterns of social discourse. Hair salons and barbershops are also socially constructed spaces where humor acts as a vehicle for transmitting powerful messages about gender identity/performance and organizational hegemony. Throughout this study, I engage in a critical analysis of gendered humor trends that ultimately function to privilege hegemonic values (i.e., heteronormativity, hegemonic masculinity, patriarchy) in the hair industry.

### **Gender and the Workplace**

Gender and organizational communication studies have undergone some dramatic shifts over the past thirty years (Ashcraft, 2014). An analysis of gender and organizational research revealed that early studies of gender in the workplace focused on gender and sex differences by conducting comparative research on men and women in various organizational settings (e.g., Baird & Bradley, 1979; MacLeod, Scriven, &

Wayne, 1992; Tannen, 1993, 1994). Scholars were interested in exposing gender (i.e., masculine/feminine) and sex (i.e., male/female) binaries in workplace communication patterns, performance, and policy, thus focusing on gendered communication and practices *within* the organization (Clair, 1993; Tannen, 1993, 1994). For example, past research has identified how women prefer more face-to-face communication than men (MacLeod, et al., 1992), and are socialized to engage in more collectivistic, nurturing, and face-saving forms of communication that extend into their workplaces (Ashcraft & Pacanowsky, 1996; Hay, 2000; Tannen, 1993, 1994). Moreover, men are often perceived as more competitive, assertive and task-oriented in their conversational approaches (Hay). Previous studies have also indicated that men tend to engage in more assertive forms of communication at work (e.g., interrupting, self-enhancing communication and masculine humor patterns) thus maximizing status differences for means of self-promotion (Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2001), while women tend to engage in communication that minimizes status differences in workplace and social settings for the sake of creating harmonious relationships (e.g., politeness, repressive and/or self-deprecating humor) (Mullany, 2004). Comparative gender studies have helped to form gender and sex communication typologies from which organizational scholars have theorized about the nature of gendered interactions (Ashcraft, 2005). This work has been useful in understanding generalized, and often stereotypic, patterns of gendered performance and communication (Baird & Bradley, 1979; MacLeod et al., 1992; Schnurr, 2008; Tannen, 1993, 1994), thus giving way to feminist organizational scholarship focused on addressing topics such as gender stereotypes, hegemonic/patriarchal workplace discourse, and how gendered communication trends often function to

subordinate marginalized members (Ashcraft, 2005; Ashcraft & Pacanowsky, 1996; Buzzanell, 1994; Clair, 2003; Murphy, 1998).

As Acker (1998) explained, organizations are sites of gender construction whereby power manifests in real, material ways (e.g., hierarchies, policies); therefore, feminist organizational theorists argue that organizations also function as sites to organize members by means of these dominant structures (e.g., hegemonic communication patterns) which often privilege men/hegemonic masculinity (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Ashcraft & Pacanowsky, 1996; Ricciardelli, 2011). These dominant structures, over time, come to define, constrain, and even push organizational expectations of social exchanges (Ashcraft & Pacanowsky, 1996) along gender-stereotyped norms of interaction. Feminist organizational research has contributed to the growing demand for literature focused on gender equality and bureaucratic reform, as well as individuals' roles in sustaining and/or resisting hegemonic organizational values and practices. Early research by Clair (1993) for instance, focused on how workingwomen used particular framing devices to discuss their experiences of sexual harassment that were often compliant with dominant, patriarchal ideologies. The study found that oftentimes, the women made use of framing devices such as trivialization and self-defacing through humorous dialogue, perhaps as coping mechanisms, yet at the risk of "disguising its [sexual harassment] deeper implications" (p. 120). Relatedly, research by Ashcraft and Pacanowsky (1996) studied the "contributions of women as active agents" in the construction of workplace communities, and "the ways in which women...participate in the devaluation of [other] women" (p. 218). Their study demonstrated that "rather than challenge the social [gender] stereotypes ... participants

accepted confining notions of what it means to do and be ‘female,’” by behaving in accordance with traditional gender stereotypes (p. 234). Finally, research by Murphy (1998) on the hidden transcripts (i.e., private dialogue) of female flight attendants revealed that the flight industry is fraught with stereotypical gendered practices that reinforce hierarchical power relations between men and women; for instance, the training areas for pilots and flight attendants were color coded blue and pink, and pilots were defined as “men” while flight attendants were often referred to (i.e., marginalized) as “girls” (p. 516). These acts, according to Murphy, “produce, reproduce, negotiate, and resist organizational meanings” yet rarely result in material change (p. 531). In short, organizational meanings are produced that exclude, marginalize, or oppress organizational members, such as gender stereotypes. Together, these studies reveal the ways that both men and women, throughout various industries, discursively contribute to and thus sustain hegemonic/patriarchal organizational values and practices.

Gender and sex studies also focused on the implications and material consequences for women and men who adopt opposing (i.e., non-stereotypical) communication patterns – women who engage in masculine speech patterns at work, and vice versa. For example, female managers who engage in “masculine speech styles” in the workplace – such as silencing strategies, assertiveness, ridicule or sarcasm – risk being “perceived as unfeminine” or faking it, due to the ways that organizational norms have historically reflected masculine and patriarchal ideals that restrict women from participating in these norms (Schnurr, 2008, p. 305). This practice creates a conflicting role for working women who obtain (or wish to obtain) leadership positions as they are often confronted with opposing professional demands – to *be* feminine, but also *be*

effective (i.e., masculine) leaders in their workspaces (Schnurr, 2008; Trethewey, 1999). Similarly, men who occupy traditionally feminine professions, such as preschool teachers, nurses, or hairstylists, face ridicule from organizational members as well. For example, Nordberg (2002) stated that “men entering female occupations run the risk of being regarded as unmanly, not conforming to the script of hegemonic masculinity, and therefore questioned in their gender identity” (p. 28). Nordberg elaborated:

Men who choose to work in female-dominated occupations must also relate to certain stereotypes and prejudices that are connected to the professions. Women entering male-dominated professions can, for example, become a mascot and emphasize femininity, or adopt the male jargon and thus become one of the guys ... Men can also find themselves in a mascot-type position, but if they try to adopt the female jargon and thus become one of the women, they are seen as a parody. (p. 33)

Hence, the lines between one’s professional and gender identity are blurred along both heteronormative and masculine standards. Past research suggests that women and men must embrace traditional and/or stereotypical gendered performances in the workplace if they want to be successful and thus avoid adverse reactions/consequences to their (gendered) work performance. Organizational gender identity and performance “rules” carry vast implications for my current study due to increasing gender diversity in the hair industry. For example, the number of men (and professionals overall) in the beauty industry has significantly increased over the past 10 years. The above studies suggest that the workplace functions as a space for gender socialization through gender norm (non)conformity and (traditional/stereotypical) gender role maintenance. These practices are carried out in both discursive (e.g., masculine/feminine speech patterns) and nondiscursive forms (e.g., one’s choice of a masculine/feminine profession).

As mentioned, the shift in focus from gender differences and binary constructions

*in* the organization, to the ways in which organizations function *as* sites for gender construction, was fueled by an increase in feminist scholarship in organizational communication studies throughout the 1990s and reflected a more critical epistemology (Ashcraft, 2005). For example, Buzzanell's (1994) work on feminist organizational communication theorizing critiqued organizations as innately masculine/patriarchal by design, and suggested that masculine norms and ideals (e.g., competition, linearity, heteronormativity, autonomous values) influence gendered organizational communication. Moreover, research has found that masculine norms remain pervasive and evident even in traditionally non-masculine (i.e., feminine) workplaces, such as a hair salon (Lawson, 1999). In a qualitative study of thirty hair stylists, competition at work (a patriarchal organizational value) remained high in most hair salons (Lawson). Not only do hair stylists compete against other salons for business, but also female and male hair stylists compete against each other for clientele, especially female clients who are considered the highest paying customers.

Competition over cross-sex clients functions to support heteronormative patterns and client preferences regarding stylist-client relationships; most female customers, the hair stylists reported, "want a male stylist because they want a man to tell them they look good" (Lawson, 1999, p. 249). Similar practices were later reflected in the male hair stylists' conversations, as they "teased", "kidded," and flirted with their female clients about making them a "hot number" (p. 251). Further evidence of stereotypic gender behaviors/attitudes was reflected in the male hair stylists' comments such as, "I think that men [hair stylists] have an advantage because women love to be handled by a man" (p. 249). As I read through this research, I noticed the similarities with Melanie's opening

narrative about the jealous client, and the spirit of competition between the women that focused on issues of body size and weight. The stereotypic gender attitude described above was further reflected in one male hair stylist's narrative:

I think that when a woman sits in a man's chair she believes anything he says. I feel that a woman in a man's chair feels like he [the male stylist] is superior [to female stylists]. They feel better with a man, so they feel like men know what they are doing. Look at all the famous stylists. They are mostly men. They do make-up and hair for the stars. (Lawson, 1999, p. 250)

Evidenced in the above claims are long-held sexist perceptions, as well as stereotypical attitudes of man's work that support heteronormative and hegemonic masculinity organizational norms and values, even in female-dominated workspaces.

Finally, embedded in the above research is the theoretical framework common to the communication as constitutive of organizations, or CCO (Ashcraft & Allen, 2009; Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Brummans, Cooren, Robichaud, & Taylor, 2014; Deetz & Eger, 2014; McPhee & Zaugg, 2000). Within this framework, gendered communication functions as a constitutive feature of organizations; gender communication is actively involved in the making and maintenance of organizational practices and patterns, such as gender stereotypes, power, resistance, and/or hegemony (Ashcraft, 2005). For example, despite the fact that men make up less than 10% of the total population of hair stylists, masculine organizational ideals (i.e., competition, heteronormativity, gender biases) have continued to infiltrate the profession on multiple levels and most often function to exploit marginalized work populations, such as women and gay men, as evidenced in the competition for clients and higher wages earned by men in general throughout the industry (Nordberg, 2002). In most hair salons today, the minority sex is heterosexual males, which suggests that they might be subject to gender-stereotyped discrimination,

and often (as my later data reveals) this is the case. However, as research has found, their presence in a female-dominated hair salon is still more revered than a female in a barbershop since barbershops remain spaces “for men only” (Stanley, 2001, p. 1).

Overall, the gendered organizational communication landscape has undergone multiple shifts – from a focus on gendered differences and speech communities (Ashcraft, 2005; Tannen, 1994), to a focus on the social construction of gender as a constitutive feature of organizations (Ashcraft & Pacanowsky, 1996; Trethewey, 1999). By focusing on critical issues (e.g., hegemony, patriarchy, dominant organizational ideologies) and the way in which these issues organizationally situate and gender individuals through discourse at work, feminist organizational scholars may tailor their research as efforts to advocate for institutional reform that promotes greater gender equality. According to Ashcraft and Pacanowsky (1996), feminist perspectives have influenced the study of organizational communication for a few decades looking at how organizations themselves are gendered – both in “structures and practices” (p. 217). Few however, have “extended abstract critiques to the study of actual practices in the modern work institutions” (Ashcraft & Pacanowsky, 1996, p. 218).

The purpose of my study is to contribute to a growing area of gender and organizational research by focusing on how humor is gendered in nontraditional work settings, as well as how humor functions to resist and/or support organizational hegemony, via actual workplace practices in a modern institution. As such, this study positions and analyzes claims about gender in the organization in terms of humor. I next review humor and organizational research, and note how the above bodies of literature might dialogue about issues of gender in the workplace.

## **Juxtaposing Humor**

Humor is a familiar and ubiquitous form of communication that performs a variety of organizational functions including increasing employee solidarity (Allen, Reid, & Riemenshneider, 2004; Hay, 2000; Holmes & Marra, 2002; Lynch, 2010), building a sense of community (Hopfl, 2007; Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2001; Ziv, 2010), and even creating organizational resistance (McLane & Singer, 1991; Lynch, 2002; Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). The following section provides an overview of relevant humor theories and organizational literature, highlighting humor's subversive nature and constitutive value.

Workplace humor can be defined as “an[y] intended or unintended message interpreted as funny” that takes place within an organizational setting (Lynch, 2002, p. 423). Working from this broad definition, humor may be understood as an inherently social, communicative phenomenon that relies on the exchange of a message between sender(s) and receiver(s), and a subsequent interpretation of the message that renders its content funny/humorous (Lili, 2012; Wanzer, Booth-Butterfield, & Booth-Butterfield, 1995). Humor is also a prevalent and essential part of everyday (organizational) life (Kangasharju & Nikko, 2009; Linstead, 1985); it is a socially normative exchange that takes place in a variety of contexts and social settings, rendering its occurrence commonplace (Lynch, 2002). Moreover, humor is often a reflection of our culture – a space for social commentary that allows individuals to negotiate cultural norms, rules, and expectations (Mintz, 1985). Given these basic functions, I am interested in exploring the humorous exchanges and gendered delivery patterns found in an organizational setting.

**Humor theories.** Humor scholars have identified three major theories that seek to explain common functions of humor – superiority theory (Gruner, 1978; Keith-Speigel, 1984; Meyer, 2000), incongruity theory (Graham, 1995; Lili, 2012), and cognitive relief theory (Freud, 1960; Perks, 2012; Perlmutter, 2002). It should be noted however, that these theories are not mutually exclusive (i.e., they often function simultaneously/in tandem, and/or any given humorous expression may encompass all three), and work to explain humor motivations, functions and collective/social meanings writ large. Also, they are not the *only* theories of humor identified by researchers, but the most pervasive in communication literature. Finally, taken together and analyzed critically, they are useful in describing the data collected during this research study.

***Superiority theory.*** First, superiority theory supposes that individuals make jokes and/or laugh *at* others’ foolishness, marginalized status, and inferiority as an expression of dominance or authority (Allen et al., 2004; Keith-Speigel, 1984; Tracy et al., 2006). The guiding motive behind superiority theory is such that the humorist creates a target, or *butt* of the joke as common vernacular suggests, and in doing so, elevates her or his own status by victimizing the “other” (Collinson, 1988; Duncan, 1985). Superiority-based humor communicates one’s power through a variety of humor styles aimed at the *other* such as insults, ridicule, slapstick, ethnic/racist or sexist humor, among other common forms. Over time, as superiority-humor trends gain popularity and cycle throughout society, the content of the humor comes to act as social commentary about the *natural order* (i.e., hegemony, patriarchal construction) of things, representing collective (though often inaccurate) ideas, attitudes, and values about race, class and gender (though not always about these topics). A classic example of superiority-based humor is the age-old

“blonde joke” whereby blondes (most often females) are targeted as stupid, naïve, and/or exploited for their sexuality (Oring, 2003). As mentioned, these jokes position (trap) the blonde as “a placeholder for joking about a particular set of values” (Oring, p. 66). Oring continued, “these are precisely the values that are antithetical to the values of the workaday world. As women have moved into the workplace and in top positions of power in the public sphere, they must be dissociated from images of ineptitude and sexuality” (p. 66). Relevant to my study are the ways superiority-based humor functions as gendered humor aimed at exposing hegemonic organizational values, such as women’s ineptitude, among other gender stereotypes.

Superiority humor tends to be understood as more masculine in nature (and therefore, often used by men) due to the ways that it functions to assert and achieve power over others (Berger, 2001; Gilbert, 2004; Meyer, 2000; Rappoport, 2005). To illustrate, Rappoport explained, “men tell more jokes deriding women than women do men... [which supports/follows] a historical pattern of male domination” (p. 105). Some humor scholars have even linked this masculine style of humor to evolutionary processes and traits, suggesting that as early groups competed for resources, those who were most successful at ostracizing marginalized group members gained greater access to those resources (Allen et al., 2004; Warner, 2011). This finding is also true of modern humor cycles; scholars have found that higher status organizational members (e.g., managers, supervisors, and often men) often employ humor to “persuade, manipulate, and control” lower status members (often women), thus achieving greater power, and successfully maintaining organizational hierarchies (Lynch, 2010, p. 135). Superiority-based humor has been shown to have devastating consequences for marginalized organizational

members who are constantly ridiculed and thus reminded of their inferior status through top-down humor (Mullany, 2004; Tracy et al., 2006). This style of humor is ripe for feminist critique in the hair industry due to its potential to create, perpetuate, and maintain the status quo regarding social (and perhaps gendered) norms of organizational discourse.

***Incongruity theory.*** Humor is also tied to the inconsistencies and incongruities experienced in everyday life (Meyer, 2000), including the mechanisms individuals use to make sense of contradictory information (Graham, 1995; Lynch, 2002; Perlmutter, 2002). The second theory, incongruity theory posits that people laugh when “disjointed, ill-suited pairings of ideas or situations” are framed as humorous and surprise the intended audience (Keith-Speigel, 1984, p. 19). According to Lynch (2002), this theory explains why people react with laughter to information perceived as nonsensical, out-of-context, incongruous, or unexpected. Humor styles such as wit, irony, and sarcasm have been studied as examples of incongruity-based humor (Graham, 1995). Incongruity humor styles have also been labeled as *smart* (or cognitive) and clever humor; the individuals involved in the humorous exchange must understand both what is perceived as normal (i.e., the status quo) in a given scenario, and also how expectations of normalcy have been violated and/or resisted (Allen et al., 2004).

To illustrate incongruity-based humor, Rappoport (2005) shared the following joke by comedian Wendy Liebman as a juxtaposition of irony and gendered humor; “I’ve been on so many blind dates, I should get a free dog” (p. 105). Implied in this joke is that Wendy, the female comedian, made eager attempts to date men (even ones she has not yet seen or met), that she should be entitled to a seeing-eye dog. This joke demonstrates

irony and sarcasm, as well as a pun (i.e., a play on the word “blind,” which in this context refers to dates with men she has not yet seen/met versus the denotative definition of “blind” as unable to see). As Rappoport explained, “such jokes stand as examples of incongruity theory...[yet] for women, the incongruity is between traditional sexist behavior standards and women’s ability to satisfy them” (p. 105). An analysis of incongruity-based humor, illustrated above, often reveals social attitudes and values about the nature of (gendered) relationships. For example, incongruity-based humor tells the audience what is considered *normal*, thus exposing traditions such as hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity, and/or patriarchy, and then disguises the violation of that norm as “just a joke.” In general, women’s (i.e., feminine) humor, in general, tends to adopt more subtle and ironic forms of humor [than men’s humor] consistent with incongruity theory, perhaps indicating the ways women have been taught to “be cautious about expressing humor” that challenges or violates traditional notions of gender norms and expectations (Rappoport, p. 107).

More recently, McGraw (2010) attempted to extend incongruity theory by introducing Benign Violation Theory, a notion that not only explains why incongruities are funny, but also why some are not. According to McGraw, “killing a loved one in a fit of rage would be incongruous, [and] it would assert authority... but it would hardly be hilarious” because it does not present a violation of a social, linguistic or moral norm as *benign*. As such, incongruity-based humor is the result of recognizing a violation that does not pose a *real* threat to individual’s or their worldview. In this way, humor “signals to the world that a violation is indeed OK” (McGraw, para. 12). From a critical perspective, this theory is particularly useful in investigating and understanding cultural

patterns and societal thresholds for gendered humor styles and trends. By identifying the dominant humor themes/discourses that a cultural group deems normative, feminist researchers can better understand the processes of marginalization embedded in humor.

***Cognitive relief theory.*** Lastly, the theory of cognitive relief, originally proposed by Freud (1960) and also referred to as the psychoanalytic theory of humor, assumes another reason people laugh to release cognitive tensions that are otherwise suppressed (Lynch, 2002; Meyer, 2000; Wilson, 1979). Relief theorists have found that laughter functions as a vehicle to rid built-up tensions and therefore aids in regaining cognitive homeostasis once a tension has been released (Lynch, 2002). In an organizational context, tensions may be suppressed in order to maintain workplace harmony, the status quo, and/or to avoid potential punishment, though often at the risk of perpetuating patriarchal systems (Allen, et al., 2004; Bell & Forbes, 1994; Brunner & Costello, 2002). One form of humor associated with the relief theory is “contextual irony, meaning that the seriousness (or lack thereof) of one’s discourse is not consonant with the gravity of a situation” (Perks, 2012, p. 124). Relief humor was evidenced via women’s sexual harassment narratives, whereby “harassers often frame[d] their actions in terms of ‘harmless entertainment,’” and used humor in the forms of sexual teasing and ridicule as way of negating the validity of victim’s experiences (Clair, 1993). Similar humor strategies were also evidenced in workplace bullying as bullying victims used humor to (silently/privately) ridicule their offenders as a means to gain personal satisfaction over a tension filled work situation (Lutgen-Sandvik’s, 2006). Finally, humor functions as a covert means to challenge the dominant ideology, yet simultaneously reduces the potential tensions and consequences that this type of resistance generates through joking

behaviors (Mumby, 1998).

In an organizational setting, the benefits of reducing tensions abound; employees may experience increased “feelings of closeness,” solidarity, and like-mindedness (Kangasharju & Nikko, 2009, p. 114), yet there are also potential consequences to creating situations of group-think. For example, collective humor/laughter may give a false impression that all organizational members accept the status quo, dominant ideologies at play, (i.e., patriarchal patterns, hegemonic masculinity), and/or organizational hierarchies (Lynch, 2010). Humor in this regard, perhaps reflecting some of its historical roots, “is an important rhetorical device” that industry elites “can employ to persuade, manipulate, and control workers” (Lynch, p. 135). Top-down humor of this nature has been shown to have devastating consequences for marginalized organizational members who are made to believe that constant ridicule of their inferior status is normative organizational behavior (Mullany, 2004; Tracy et al., 2006).

**Organizational humor features and functions.** One of humor’s unique features, evidenced in several forms (e.g., wit, irony, sarcasm) is that it is paradoxical due to the ways it exploits contradictory information/knowledge, often in the form of a punch line (Bailey, 1976). For example, humor facilitates social bonds and increases in-group cohesion (for those who are *in* on the joke), while simultaneously isolating and/or ostracizing others through differentiation strategies (those who are left *out*, or the *butt* of the joke) (Heist & Carmack, 2011; Lynch, 2002). Humor can also be used to assert power, control, and dominance over others (e.g., status quo/top-down managerial humor), yet also provides a platform of collective resistance through subversion of the status quo (e.g., subordinate humor) (Lynch, 2010; Mintz, 1985). The paradoxical feature of humor

is particularly compelling when analyzing its contradicting messages and role in organizational settings.

Among the more pervasive and paradoxical functions of organizational humor is its ability to organize in-group and out-group (gender) boundaries, rules, and norms of interaction (Bell & Forbes, 1994; Holmes 2006; Mesmer-Magnus, Glew, & Viswesvaran, 2012). For example, an analysis of the humorous exchanges between female colleagues in New Zealand found that humor exchanged between the coworkers emphasized female solidarity and promoted camaraderie via shared inside jokes (Holmes & Marra, 2002, p. 65). Solidarity was often achieved when the women would collectively gossip about and/or poke-fun at their male colleagues for their (gendered) shortcomings (e.g., “he can’t multitask, it’s a bloke thing,” p. 74). What is peculiar here, are the ways that the women’s workplace humor resisted traditional gender stereotypes about women’s communication patterns, an uncommon occurrence. For example, their humor displays were *others-directed* rather than self-focused/deprecating as research suggests (Nilsen, 1993; Tannen, 1993, 1994). Furthermore, research has also found that female employees often (collectively) engage in more antagonistic forms of humor, such as teasing and ridicule, when the target of the joke is a man, and when they are in female-only work groups (Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2001). Male-targeted humor is considered risky in mixed sex work settings, yet still acts as a way for women to bond over the “tensions of working in a ‘man’s world’” (Schnurr, 2008, p. 313). Similarly, research on all-male humor in a Sardinian fish market and found that men, like women, bonded over jokes aimed at the opposite sex (Porcu, 2005). For example, conjugal quips about the men’s wives, sisters, and daughters were made that reflected a male fascination with both the

physical body and sexuality as unifying topics for masculine discourse. This research shows that gender solidarity can be achieved via stereotyped humor that challenges authority *yet also* perpetuates patriarchal humor (i.e., ridicule, mockery, sexism).

From the above research, it is clear there are similar qualities to women and men's humor communication patterns when they are in single-sex social/organizational settings. Yet distinct differences between women and men's humor have also been reported (Allen, et al, 2004; Bell & Forbes, 1994; Brunner & Costello, 2002; Collinson, 2002; Ford, et al.; Holmes, 2006; Porcu, 2005). For example, women more often report themselves as "appreciators" of humor rather than producers of humor in the workplace, or in other words, as bystanders to masculine humor (Clouse & Spurgeon, 1995, p. 17). Moreover, a study of women with information technology jobs, a traditionally male-dominated industry revealed that women most often told jokes and engaged in laughter during moments when sensitive and culturally taboo topics (i.e., sex, politics, gender discrimination, upper management issues) surfaced in workplace discourse (Allen et al., 2004). Males, however, often engage in humor in the form of horseplay, sexual innuendos, and pranks when in all-male work settings (Collinson, 1988). To further illustrate the unique characteristics between women and men's humor trends, Rappoport (2005) explained the following:

Women's humor [may be characterized by] their tendency to dislike slapstick humor and practical jokes where individuals are injured or victimized. . . slapstick humor apparently triggers laughter in men because it evokes their feelings of superiority, whereas in women, it evokes feelings of sympathy. Second, women are more inclined to enjoy humor aimed at ridiculing the pretensions of people in powerful positions. Their jokes tend to be directed upward, against high-status people who seem insensitive to the needs of others, rather than downward. . . . Third, women are more inclined to use irony in remarks that appear to be positive, such as when they tell a boyfriend how strong he is because he can crush a beer

can with one hand. Fourth, women are more likely than men to use self-critical humor as a means of gaining acceptance and approval... typically centered on embarrassing or awkward situations.... The self-critical themes... have become practically obligatory for women [and] almost always concern their attractiveness to men. (p. 108)

Humor also functions as a powerful tool for organizational resistance, in other words, as a way for subordinate members to subvert or “challenge existing power relationships” among the organizational elites in a socially acceptable (humorous) critique of dominant power structures (Holmes & Marra, 2002, p. 70). As defined by Murphy (1998), “resistance is a process through which meanings are prevented from becoming fully fixed” (p. 505). Thus, humor carries the potential to transform dominant and/or fixed organizational ideologies to “open, partial, and contingent” to change (Murphy, p. 505). However, organizational change is not easily achieved, as resistance in the form of humor rarely sets up the conditions for material, policy, or relational transformations (Lynch, 2010; Murphy, 1998).

Still, employees have benefitted from resistance-based humor for decades, if only psychologically, and successfully used humor to “signal dissent and indicate that social tensions exist without exposing themselves to the outcomes potentially associated with a direct challenge to authority” (Allen et. al, 2004, p. 179). Rodrigues and Collinson (1995) demonstrated humorous dissent in their study of humor at a Brazilian telecommunications company. When asked to describe their workplace experience, several employees used metaphors such as slavery, working in zoo, as well as militaristic analogies, which “both reflected and reinforced employee antagonism towards excessive and unacceptable levels of control and surveillance” (p. 753). Subversive humor was also well documented in a study about women who routinely exchanged office cartoons with

images and jokes that openly criticized the patriarchal structure of their workplace (Bell & Forbes, 1994). Among those catalogued were comic strips with sayings such as, “Do you want to speak to the man in charge, or the woman who knows everything?” (p. 184). Here, the women used humor as a resistance tool and strategy in their critique of the man in charge, yet in doing so, simultaneously reinscribed “the man’s” hierarchical position in the content of the joke. The above findings render important questions for this study about the intersectionalities of gender and humor among hair industry professionals.

However, humor as resistance does little to resolve marginalized members of their subordinate positions; rather it reinforces hegemonic organizational structures through various humor styles and content. Because humor grants its users a license to subvert the status quo in playful ways (Mintz, 1985), humor often functions as a polite and acceptable form of organizational discourse that is frequently left unpunished (Lynch, 2010), and/or results in little to no organizational change (Murphy, 1998). While hegemonic (e.g., patriarchal and hierarchical) structures are being challenged through humorous exchanges, as seen above however, dominant structures also function to sustain existing gendered stereotypes if the humor does not lead to organizational reform.

Given the CCO framework described, and the ways that gender norms constitute workplace humor trends, I am especially curious about how humor constitutes *gender* in various humor content, forms, and functions in the hair industry. This study adopts the CCO framework to explore a variety of hair salons and barbershops in an effort to understand how humor is gendered, and how humor supports or resists organizational hegemony. The focus on non-corporate workplaces is of particularly important to this study in order to examine how the absence of corporate structures (e.g., hierarchies,

policies, disciplinary actions) might play a role in patterns of humor and gendered discourse in ways that have yet to be analyzed by organizational communication scholars.

### **Gendered Humor Patterns and the Workplace**

I conclude with a final literature review focused on studies of various masculine and feminine humor patterns within organizational settings. The decision to focus exclusively on these studies is fueled by my critical feminist and social constructivist commitments (Ashcraft, 2004; Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011); in order to identify and expose gendered discourses (made evident in humorous exchanges) that ultimately shape workplace humor.

Humor plays a powerful and pervasive role in the establishment, dissemination, and perpetuation of gender norms and stereotypes in a variety of social and organizational contexts (Mauldin, 2000). When these conditions are coupled with the presence and persistence of traditionally masculine workplace values in corporate America, it is easy to see how gender and humor function in tandem to create organizational patterns (Collinson, 2002; Linstead, 1985; Porcu, 2005; Roy, 1960). Indeed, gendered “humor may be used to support the patriarchal structure of most work places,” and does so by reinforcing gender norms, rules, and expectations through various joke sequences and reinforcing laughter (Brunner & Costello, 2002, p. 3). First, by focusing on masculine humor patterns in the workplace, such as self-aggrandizing and one-upmanship (Hay, 2000), gender and humor scholars may begin to understand how recurring masculine themes and humor styles ultimately reflect hegemonic ideologies about gender and the workplace. Exposing patterns between masculine humor and hegemony is especially relevant given my opening narrative featuring a man’s social

commentary, disguised as humor, about the appropriateness of women's bodies.

**Masculine humor patterns.** Collinson (1988, 2002) conducted two studies on masculine humor patterns in the workplace. The first took place in 1988 and explored the joking behaviors and rituals of an all-male engineering plant. Continuously observed was a never-ending “banter on the shop-floor, which was permeated by uninhibited swearing, mutual ridicule, displays of sexuality, and pranks” (p. 186). The men's joking behavior often acted as initiation aimed at other male employees; if a man failed to engage in the practical jokes in the desired fashion, they were rendered “feminine” and therefore made susceptible to further teasing/ridicule that publicly challenged their masculinity. Similarly, in an ethnographic study of industrial workers, men were ridiculed, teased, and their masculinity was mocked simply for communicating with their wives (i.e., taking phone calls) while at work (Roy, 1960). When one man received calls from his spouse, “he was ribbed for being closely watched, bossed, and henpecked by his wife” then subsequently teased by his coworkers as to whether he was “a man or a mouse?” (p. 163). The term “mouse,” in this context, functioned to feminize the target of the joke, clearly demonstrating how humor is gendered in both style and content. This finding mirrors conclusions drawn from barbershop observations where the trade of off-color jokes, ongoing sexist remarks, and a barbershop decorated with hyper-masculine artifacts (e.g., girly magazines, pithy sayings, and cowboy memorabilia) helped create a “men only” atmosphere at work (Stanley, 2001, p. 1). These conditions reveal stereotypical patterns of masculine humor as *other* directed in its delivery and hyper-masculine/gendered in nature and overall content.

Stereotypical masculine humor themes such as nudity (aimed at women), breadwinner status, and jokes aimed at exposing a man's/woman's place at home have also been evidenced as normative humor in blue-collar industries (Collinson, 1988). Together, these jokes revealed men's attitudes toward traditional gender roles – women as sexualized beings and men as providers (Brunner & Costello, 2002) in both the private and public sphere. Their humor also exposed the men's discursive attempts used to normalize the exploitation of highly sexualized female bodies in various forms. For example, “photos of female nudes could be found on most shop-floor walls... supplied by [a man nicknamed] the ‘Porn King,’” and known for his sexist quips such as, “Men come from the womb and spend the rest of their lives trying to get back in” (p. 191). Because the “men's gendered and sexual humor is often designed to keep women firmly in their place,” the role of gendered humor in organizational settings is significant in the maintenance, perpetuation, and/or resistance of gendered discourses and practices that shape (and marginalize) women's workplace experiences (Collinson, 1988, p. 281).

**Feminine humor patterns.** Few studies have focused on the role and function(s) of women's workplace humor (apart from resistance strategies), especially as a unique form of gendered communication. Several studies have however demonstrated the ways that women tend to engage in humor in the workplace via storytelling, joking complaints, self-deprecation among other women (most common), and/or collective forms of humor (Allen et al., 2004; Bell & Forbes, 1994; Crawford, 2003; Holmes & Marra, 2002; Martin, 2004; Nilsen, 1994; Rappoport, 2005; Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2001; Trethewey, 1999, 2001). These studies have created useful typologies for gender and humor scholars. For example, women in managerial positions have been shown to use

strategically vary their vocal tone in humorous ways as a means increase their friendliness and likeability (Mullany, 2004). Furthermore, in a study of female employees in an information technology plant, it was found that “women’s humor, generally, is not aggressive or hostile and women do not use humor to compete with or belittle others, enhance their own social status, or physically or psychologically humiliate others” (Allen et al., 2004, p. 179). Rather, the women engaged in communal laughter, workplace gossip and funny storytelling, thus creating a shared sense of community among the women in a male-dominated field. Moreover, Hay (2000) stated that women tend to “rely on the context more... and use humor in supportive and healing ways” (p. 714). The types of gendered communication patterns present in the women’s humor demonstrate how closely women’s organizational humor mimics stereotypical gendered speech patterns (Tannen, 1993; 1994). For example, female leaders tend to use more *we* language than men when delivering humorous criticism (Schnurr, 2008). This finding is not particularly surprising, as many feminist researchers would argue that women are socialized to communicate in more nurturing and communal ways (Hay, 2000; Nilsen, 1993). Other studies have shown that women tend to employ self-deprecating (Duncan, 1985; Hay, 2000) and/or denigrating body talk humor (Holmes, 2006), perhaps because women are socialized via gendered patterns and norms (Allen, et al., 2004; Barreca, 1996; Martin, 2004) to engage in collectivistic, nurturing, and others-directed face-saving forms of communication (Collinson, 1988; Holmes, 2006; Schnurr, 2008; Tannen, 1993). Coupled with humor literature, scholars have also shown that women rarely use humor to elevate their social status, to gain social/material rewards, or to assert power/achievement, especially when men are present (Allen et al., 2004; Kotthoff, 2005; Mullany, 2004), but

rather engage in collective storytelling, anecdotal humor, and witty remarks to generate future humorous dialogue (Hay, 2000).

Throughout these studies, professional women participated in workplace humor via gendered stereotypical patterns that exposed their collective nature, rather than their authoritative power (Mullany, 2004; Schnurr, 2008). Research has indicated that, “women’s humor often takes the form of play, fun and laughter when critiquing others, but rarely jokes. When women do use [humor] to express hostility, they often apologize for doing so” (Martin, 2004, p. 164). Workplace humor has also been found to function as a valuable resource for women to create or restore balance between their gendered and professional identities (Allen et al., 2004; Martin, 2004; Mullany, 2004; Schnurr, 2008). This phenomenon was further explained, “Humor enables women...to ‘do femininity’ and to achieve their [workplace] objectives... it even provides a useful vehicle for them to express their recognition and frustration about the fact that femininity is ‘marked’ in their predominately masculine working environment” (Schnurr, 2008, p. 313). This quote highlights the powerful role of the organization in the construction of gender identities and gender performance. The following section includes a review of gay male humor, an area that is largely understudied in the communication discipline, in order to further expound upon the connections between gender, humor, and the constitutive role of the organization.

**Gay male humor patterns.** Gay male humor (i.e., homosexual male humor) has been explained as a third, liminal space, encompassing both feminine and masculine speech as well as humor patterns (Gotman, Levenson, Swanson, Swanson, Tyson, & Yoshimoto, 2003; Reed, 2011). As noted by Jacobs (1996), existing gendered speech

literature has virtually ignored “lesbian and gay readers” but rather focused on stereotypical speech norms of binary-sex constructions (p. 49). After a search for literature on gay and lesbian speech and/or humor patterns, I came up virtually empty handed. A few studies have, however, attempted to explain gay male speech and humor patterns as an extension of feminine speech with masculine qualities and/or motives. For example, gay speech has been noted as having a more feminized and greater pitch variance, using more paralanguage, props, and feminine mannerisms (than masculine speech) (Jacobs, 1996; Mauldin, 2000). Yet, “the most notable characteristic [of gay male speech] is the emphasis on sexual matters,” much like stereotypical masculine humor patterns (Jacobs, 1996, p. 57). This type of assertion, however, contributes to heterosexual/heteronormative jokelore themes, and assumes gay humor is fixated first and foremost on sexuality (Mauldin, 2000). Therefore, such portrayals paint a negative and stereotypical portrait of gay and masculine humor as adolescent, animalistic and primitive by nature (Mauldin). A more comprehensive, yet still stereotypical depiction of gay humor is that it lies at the intersection of femininity and masculinity; in other words, it plays with gender instability, explores “the slippage from straight” (Reed, 2011, p. 766), insults women through a sense of play yet mocks masculinity in hyper forms, it others and outs itself from the heterosexual population, and thus invites marginalized others to participate in humor in unconventional ways (Jacobs, 1996).

From the literature cited above, organizations are clearly sites for gender construction, socialization, and performance. Humor has a variety of workplace functions that support traditional gendered norms. Lastly, the studies on masculine, feminine and gay male humor patterns demonstrate how gendered humor often mimics traditional

male/female speech patterns within our greater society. As a feminist scholar, my goal is to understand more about how humor is gendered in the hair industry and the way it supports or negates traditional hegemonic organizational discourse. Feminist scholars are “trained to make the familiar, taken-for-granted world... strange and unfamiliar through ideology critique” that challenges its socially constructed meanings (Trethewey, 2001, p. 189). I believe it is important to understand more about how communication functions within an industry that so many of us invest time, money, and relational energy into. Furthermore, feminist research “privileges discussion of issues of special interest to women and minorities as related to patriarchy” and other dominant systems of hegemony (Clair, Chapman, & Kunkel, 1996, p. 244). Given the nature of the gendered relationships that form inside hair salons and barbershops, alongside the commonplace occurrence of humor in everyday workplace discourse, this research seeks to explore the intersections of humor, gender, and hegemony in the context of the modern day hair industry.

Feminist scholars have argued that, “humor research itself is flawed” in the way previous studies have been designed to focus on single-sex (predominately male) populations (Martin, 2004, p. 151). Therefore, this study does not discriminate based on sex, and analyzes a variety of humorous workplace exchanges in order to overcome past biases. As diverse communal spaces, hair salons and barbershops are ripe for both gendered and humor interactions. By adding this unique context of analysis to existing organizational scholarship, humor and gender scholars will gain a more holistic understanding of the nature of humor and gender.

**Research questions.** The following questions guide this research. They are organized by topic and aim to reflect narrative methods of data collection.

RQ1: How is humor gendered in the hair industry?

As my guiding research question, this inquiry ultimately sets the tone for my research. In essence, it aims to explore the intersections of humor and gender in the hair industry, and more specifically, to understand how humor is gendered in both style and content (e.g., delivery/topic) in these settings.

RQ2: How does humor function to resist and/or support hegemony?

The second question emerged later in the data analysis process as findings revealed explicit communication patterns (e.g., gendered humor, stereotypical remarks) concerning the relationship between gender stereotype humor and organizational hegemony. As such, my research borrows from Ashcraft and Pacanowsky's (1996) earlier claims that organizational members actively engage in hegemonic workplace discourse, which ultimately functions to marginalize their status. My contribution to their scholarship is the juxtaposition of humor to their conclusions, and a critical feminist analysis of the role that humor plays in actively resisting and/or contributing to hegemonic organizational patterns and discourse.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS AND PROCEDURES

In order to explore the relationship between humor and gender in the hair industry, I employed qualitative research methods in the form of ethnographic field observations, member diaries, and participant interviews (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Merrigan & Huston, 2004; Radcliffe, 2013; Saldaña, 2011; Spradley, 1980; Tracy, 2013). Qualitative research methods were best suited for this investigation as they allowed for an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study through detailed accounts of humor and gender from the participants' perspective. The practice of capturing participants' first person, lived experience is unique to interpretive research designs (Tracy, 2013). German sociologists first coined the term *verstehen*, as “a methodological tool” for social scientists to generate understanding by interpreting human behaviors and meaning making from their perspective (Elwell, 1996). Furthermore, qualitative research allows researchers to adopt an emic, or inductive and contextual approach to the research process, thereby focusing on emergent data themes (Tracy, 2013). In doing so, I am better situated to make critical feminist claims about humor and gender.

The interpretive paradigm also offers researchers several organizing principles unique to qualitative research designs that align with the aims of my research. For example, interpretivist scholars adopt the notion that reality is socially constructed, often guided by social structures, and that individuals within a social scene maintain a necessary degree of agency (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011; Miller, 2000; Tracy, 2013). As an interactive social phenomenon, humor represents a form of socially

constructed communication that relies on the interplay of humorists and their audience(s). Cheney (2000) stated that interpretive scholarship also focuses on language, symbolism, and the intersubjective constitutive properties of our “humanness” (p. 25). These ideals are accomplished through careful and skilled practices of *verstehen*, multi-vocality, and critical self-reflection, all features of qualitative inquiry (Cheney; Tracy, 2013; Tucker, 1965). Finally, an interpretive approach to the study of humor and gender in the workplace allows for an intimate researcher positioning (Gonzalez, 2000). Lincoln et al. (2011) explained this intimate interpretive inquirer posture as a “passionate participant” (p. 101) and “co-constructor of knowledge, of understanding, and interpretation of meaning of lived experiences” (p. 111). This position is a natural one for me to take as an interpretive scholar because I am extremely passionate about the study of humor in everyday talk and often find myself moved (i.e., curious, inspired) by participants’ experiences of humor in their lives and relationships. Through informal participant interviews and shared stories, my data collection methods aimed to elicit this spirit of in-depth self-discovery and reflection on behalf of my participants that is both dynamic and open to new discoveries about workplace humor (Lincoln et al., 2011; Merrigan & Houston, 2004).

Throughout this process, I also exercised self-reflexivity as a practice in qualitative methods. Self-reflexivity challenges researchers to consider past experiences and personal investments in the research topic as sensitizing concepts, as well as the extent to which these experiences influence the nature of the inquiry, future analysis, and eventual interpretations (Tracy, 2013). Moreover, interpretive scholars are often encouraged to view their research as “already political in its practices and implications,”

thus rendering the value of self-reflexivity as a systematic qualitative research process (Ellingson, 2011, p. 606). As someone invested in the study of humor, while simultaneously committed to critical feminist ideals and methods of discovery, self-reflexivity is crucial to my work. I considered, for example, how Shaun's (my husband) occupation as hair stylist, alongside my investments in humor and gendered scholarship, functioned as sensitizing concepts/experiences that ultimately shaped my curiosity and line of inquiry – and thus brought me to this place. Also, in Fall 2013, I won “ASU's funniest teacher contest.” Upon receiving my award, a fellow nominee congratulated me for winning the contest and made a special point to share *his* surprise that I won the award as a *young woman*. I remember feeling offended by his compliment, and turned my academic interests to the study of women and humor.

From a critical feminist perspective, I also considered how my privilege (e.g., whiteness, heterosexuality, higher education) (McIntosh, 1989) influenced my choice of research sites and/or participants. I grew up in Northern California in a white-middle class neighborhood, and have maintained much of my social network there. As such, friends with whom I attended high school and/or knew growing up became the first people I contacted for this research project. Moreover, I am married to a hair stylist, and relied heavily on his professional network to locate participants near our (then) home in Phoenix, AZ. Lastly, being a critical scholar, I was influenced to seek participants that represented gender, class, and ethnic diversity, with the goal of performing a feminist critique. By admitting my biases, commitments, and engagements within this area of research, I engaged in ethical qualitative practices such as vulnerability, authenticity, and transparency with my participants and audience (Tracy, 2013). I also aimed for multi-

vocality throughout my research by highlighting diverse and divergent standpoints from a variety of participants to ensure that my conclusions represent the participants' voices.

### **Sites: Hair Salons and Barbershops**

The salons and barbershops selected for this study were all independently owned and operated. Sites were preferred that represented a diverse population (i.e., race, class, age and gender) and were therefore selected in both traditionally affluent and lower-income neighborhoods (e.g., Folsom and Roseville, California are middle-upper class suburbs; whereas Downtown/South Phoenix is considered a middle-lower class community in greater Phoenix, Arizona). No participants were denied access/participation to the study based on race/gender/age, etc. In all, the data includes interviews and observations from seven hair salons and six barbershops located throughout Phoenix, Arizona and Sacramento, California.

Chain salons were omitted from the research design due to their rigid corporate business structures and strict organizational hierarchies. Chain salons are frequently referred to in the hair industry as “polyopticons” (Cohen, 2010, p. 202), and compared to panopticons, or “a circular prison with cells arranged around a central well, from which prisoners could at all times be observed” (Google, 2014). This cultural reference clearly demonstrates the ways that industry professionals perceive corporate structures as unique from independently owned salons/barbershops. These conditions resulted in limited access to commercial/chain salons.

### **Participants: Hair Stylists and Barbers**

The participants in this study consisted of 30 hair stylists and barbers, women and men, from the Sacramento, California and Phoenix, Arizona greater metropolitan areas.

The sampling was initially purposeful (Tracy, 2013) insofar as I chose to observe and interview hair stylists and barbers who met the parameters and goals of my research endeavor, and who also expressed an interest and willingness to discuss their experiences of workplace humor. My sample was also convenient, due to my already existing connections within the hair industry (Tracy). I have established and worked to maintain relationships with various stylists over the years, and as such, felt inspired to reconnect and share their stories. Also, my husband is a hair stylist and works at a popular hair salon in Phoenix, AZ; he is highly connected in the industry and was able to refer several contacts throughout greater Phoenix, thus adopting a snowball sampling method in the final stages of recruitment (Tracy).

Individuals selected for this study were between 18-70 years of age and had at least one year working as a licensed professional in the industry. The hair stylists and barbers all operated in one of two employment structures: either booth rental or commission split. Under booth rental conditions, hairstylists/barbers pay a set amount to the owner of the salon per month, and keep the profits generated from their clientele. Booth rental employees are often allowed to set their own prices, and act as salespersons for salon products. A commission split structure, on the other hand, requires that all hairstylists/barbers pay a pre-determined percentage of each service they offer back to the salon. The salon owner typically determines the price of each service, with little room for flexibility. However, as a stylist/barber gains experience in the industry, they are allowed to charge extra fees for specialized processes (e.g., applying dreadlocks, color or chemical treatments).

Participants were chosen from a variety of salon and shop locations, however, it was also important to the research design to include participants that worked from within the same hair salon/barbershop. I chose participants who worked within the same hair salons and barbershops in order to gather their collective stories, and to search for patterns and/or commonalities regarding their experiences of humor from similar spaces. However, I also chose to interview participants from varied salons/barbershops in order to search for more general gender and humor organizational trends that circulate throughout the industry. In efforts to organize my contacts, I created a contact information log with detailed records of the time and date of all our conversations, as well as each participant’s place of employment, the referral contact’s name, and general demographic information (Tracy, 2013). Below is a table illustrating the number of participants and their demographics. (See Appendix C for descriptive statistics).

Table 1.  
*Participant Demographics*

Female Participants	Male Participants	Hair Stylist	Barber	Works in Phoenix, AZ	Works in Sacramento, CA
17	13	20	10	17	13

### **IRB and Recruitment Procedures**

I received approval through the Institutional Review Board to conduct participant observations, administer and collect member diaries, and record participant interviews. I first contacted hair stylists and barbers over the phone working from a recruitment script. I next contacted referred participants via Facebook, telephone, or in-person at their place of employment. Once individuals indicated their willingness to participate in the study,

they were sent an information letter asking formal consent to participate in the study, as well as the option to opt out at any time (see Appendix A: IRB Information Letter).

In order to ensure the confidentiality of my participants (Madison, 2005), pseudonyms were assigned to each participant and their respective place of employment throughout the research process. Furthermore, identifying documents were password protected and all audio recordings stored in private data files.

### **Data Gathering**

I used three primary methods for gathering data: field observations, member diaries, and participant interviews.

**Field observations.** The first method was borrowed from ethnographic field methods in the form of participant observations (Merrigan & Huston, 2004), and took place inside the hair salons/barbershops between June and October 2014. I conducted approximately 25 hours of field observations in 13 different hair salons/barbershops, resulting in 36 pages of single-spaced typed field notes. I first began by taking raw notes at the time of impromptu observations, or as spontaneous, casual (humorous) conversations took place during my site visits. While making observations, I paid close attention to both demographic and contextual information – who was working, when and with whom humorous conversations took place, etc. Often, these observations occurred while on routine visits to the various hair salons/barbershops (e.g., initial visits, distributing member diaries, checking in, and/or collecting member diaries). These raw records were later transcribed as field notes, or rich thick descriptions of the environment, dialogue and context of hair salon/barbershop humor (Geertz, 1973; Tracy, 2013). The observations served many valuable purposes. For example, they were useful in providing

contextual information about the humorous dialogue that occurred in the sites that could later be used to member check (Tracy, 2013), and to help craft future interview questions.

**Member diaries.** The second qualitative method used in this study was member diaries (Radcliffe, 2015; Saldaña, 2011; Tracy, 2013). Member diaries, or what I named humor journals, are especially useful when the researcher does not have direct access to the site or phenomena under study, such as the exchange of a joke between hair stylist and client, or the back room/closing time banter in a barbershop. As Radcliffe (2015) explained, “diaries have the ability to capture the particulars of experience in a way that is not possible using traditional designs” (Radcliffe, 2015, p. 163). In a recent organizational case study, Plowman (2010) demonstrated their usefulness by using member diaries as a methodological means to expose “unofficial” gendered organizational practices by asking workers to self-reflect on their daily experiences and jot them down each day. Their contents later generated valuable lessons about what needed to change within the organization. Moreover, member diaries provide useful insight throughout the data gathering process in the way they materially “formalize facts, events, and experiences” that represent “the author’s own experience” (Lindemann, 2005, p. 346). Member journal data represents the immediate, personal and spontaneous experiences from the participants’ perspective, thus counteracting potential oversights and the problems typically associated with gathering participants’ retrospective accounts (Radcliffe, 2015). For me, the diaries also functioned as extremely useful tools to refer back to during participant interviews, which helped prompt narrative dialogue about humor (Tracy, 2013).

Each participant was hand-delivered a generic, small black notepad (and pen) after consent was received. Included with each notebook was a brief list of detailed instructions, which asked the stylists/barbers to write down the general nature/topic of the joke/humor and who told the joke and/or participated in the humor. I asked each participant to record humorous moments that occurred throughout her or his workweek for a total of two consecutive weeks between June and October 2014. However, as mentioned by Saldaña (2011), the task of maintaining diaries “can be burdensome, especially if they are busy professionals” (p. 57). So, in efforts to minimize this burden, each participant was encouraged to only take notes if and when it was convenient and did not detract from their business and/or interactions with clientele. The humor journals were then collected at the end of the two weeks, and their contents transcribed. In total, ten participants made use of the journals, seven females and three males. Their notes resulted in ten pages of transcribed data. The humor journals were later used in participant interviews to prompt responses related to workplace humor, and finally, analyzed with regard to humor and gender content during data analysis.

**Participant interviews.** The final and principal method of data collection in this study was recorded participant interviews. Qualitative interviews were well suited for my specific research interests because they allowed opportunities for “mutual discovery, understanding, reflection, and explanation” between the researcher and participant (Tracy, 2013, p. 132). In my experience (from prior qualitative research on the topic of humor) humor is often a messy subject. Though it is difficult to communicate *about*, stories and individual experiences of humor tend to be easy to *recall*. The humor journals

therefore functioned as useful methodological tools to fill conversational gaps and remind the participants about their experiences.

I used Tracy's (2013) strategies for unstructured interviews, which allow for a creative and conversational flow. Furthermore, each individual has a unique sense of humor and interprets humor differently – some people love sarcasm while others abhor it. Participant interviews allowed for these types of discoveries, reflections, and stories to be shared in a format that encouraged open dialogue via shared experiences (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). Holstein and Gubrium referred to this style of interviewing as creative interviewing, which I then partnered with narrative interviewing strategies (Bates, 2004; Langellier, 1999; Ochs & Capps, 1996; Riessman, 2003). Narrative interviewing, according to Bates (2004), “stimulates storytelling and encourages interviewees to describe an event(s) as they saw it, in their own language, using their own terms of references, and emphasizing actions or participants...they regard as being significant” (p. 16). The role of the researcher then, is to ask questions that solicit a narrative (storied) response, whereby participants are asked to recall, recount, or retell moments from their past that show the researcher how interviewees make sense of everyday life (Bates, 2004). Before participant interviews were conducted and recorded, I piloted the questions using an interview guide with two stylists in order to search for inconsistencies or irregularities in the overall format and flow. First, I practiced each question with my husband, Shaun, who is not a participant in the study but offered valuable insight into the wording of the questions. Next, I piloted the interview with a hair stylist named Krystal with whom I attended high school. Krystal has been working as a hair stylist for over

eight years. I chose Krystal in order to gain a different perspective (both as a woman, and as someone who works as a stylist in Sacramento, CA).

Once my interview guide had been piloted and revised (see Appendix B), I proceeded to interview 30 participants; 17 females and 13 males, all of whom currently work as hair stylists or barbers. Among those interviewed were 20 stylists (both male and female) and 10 barbers (all male, as no females worked in the various shops). Once transcribed, the interviews resulted in 249 pages of single-spaced data that was later analyzed and coded.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis for this project was ongoing and occurred in multiple stages. During the initial stages, I converted my raw data records into a collection of detailed field notes while simultaneously engaging in critical self-reflection and thematic analysis of the data via analytical memos. As the participants completed humor journals, I next collected, sorted, and transcribed their contents, while searching for useful content that would help prompt future participant interviews. Finally, as the interviews took place, I transcribed the audio-recordings within 30 days of the original interview and password secured all files. Upon transcription of the interviews, I read and reread each transcript and began to analyze the data through a systematic coding process using NVivo data analysis software (Bazeley, 2007).

**NVivo and coding procedures.** The aforementioned documents were uploaded to NVivo 9, qualitative data analysis software. As described by Tracy (2013), “coding is the active process of identifying data as belonging to, or representing, some type of phenomenon,” and involves assigning “codes” – words or short phrases to the data that

capture the essence of a phenomenon (p. 189). Through NVivo software, nodes, or “codes,” are applied to the data in order to sort and cluster the data by emergent, dominant and patterned themes upon analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The codes were arranged by first and second level; first-level codes were descriptive in nature, and helped me see “what is going on here” while the second level codes were more interpretive and applied an analytic lens (Saldaña, 2009). Examples of first-level codes include “gendered humor,” “hair stylist humor,” “barber humor,” and “gendered artifact,” while examples of second-level codes include “feminine humor styles,” “masculine humor topics,” and “gender stereotype humor.” Several themes began to emerge from the data, such as: gendered humor styles, topics and processes, as well as themes surrounding humor and hegemony, giving way to my second research question. As a final step in the data analysis, I printed and read all the coded reports (i.e., data sets representing a particular code/theme) and used these documents to write my findings.

**Sensitizing concepts.** Finally, as a critical feminist scholar interested in promoting gender equality and exposing hegemonic organizational practices, I believe it my responsibility to conduct research that recognizes “inequalities and injustices in society and strives to challenge the status quo” (Mertens, 2007, p. 212). Therefore, I aimed to apply a critical feminist lens to the thematic analysis of my research in order to expose humor and gender patterns that surface in workplace dialogue (Ashcraft, 2004). For example, as I coded the data, I paid close attention to the intersections of humorous exchanges and gendered dialogue (as well as the *meanings* participants attributed to these instances) that showcased gender imbalance/inequality and/or hegemony/resistance. Acker (2006) referred to patterns of organizational practices, processes, actions and

meanings that result in continuing inequality as “inequality regimes” (p. 441). These regimes, according to Acker, function to perpetuate patriarchal bureaucracies and hegemonic organizational discourse and policies that disenfranchise and marginalize minorities. Using this framework as sensitizing material enabled me to identify and analyze gendered humor discourse through a critical lens.

## CHAPTER 4

### HUMOR, GENDER, AND HEGEMONY

The following chapter demonstrates how humor is gendered in the hair industry, in both style and content, through a critical analysis of humorous narratives told by hair salon and barbershop professionals. I apply a critical feminist lens to the analysis of the data in order to expose dominant and stereotypical gendered patterns in support of (and/or resistance to) organizational hegemony via workplace humor. My findings are organized by theme –feminine/hair salon, masculine/barbershop, and “gay male” humor patterns. Throughout the chapter, I focus the data analysis on the juxtaposition of humor, gender, and hegemony, an emergent theme that responds to, and sets the conditions for my two research questions: first, how humor is gendered in the hair industry, and second, how organizational gendered humor supports or resists hegemony. Ultimately, this analysis shows how organizational members actively participate in stereotypical gendered humor patterns that function to support hegemony (e.g., heteronormativity, gender norms/stereotypes, hegemonic masculinity.)

I begin with a detailed analysis of feminine/hair salon humor, followed by masculine/barbershop humor, and finally, “gay male” humor in the hair industry, in order to demonstrate the significant role humor plays in gendered organizational discourse.

#### **Feminine Humor: Girls Being Girls**

“I think hair salon humor is different because I think women talk about everything, from sexual stories to annoying people in their families, and men don’t talk about that.”

-Gloria, hair stylist

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Traditional gender norms and stereotypes might suggest that *girls being girls* means talking about relationships and sex, gossiping, and the occasional body talk (Crawford, 2003; Kutthoff, 2006; Wood, 1999, 2011). However, it is not often expected that these types of *girly* conversations take place at work while “on the clock.” Rather, these personal stories are better suited for a “girls night out” or over the phone private conversations (keeping in line with gender stereotypes, of course). Yet, these were indeed the gendered styles of communication commonly embedded in hair salon humor. As evidenced below, humor in this context reifies and exacerbates existing gender stereotypes.

It is important to note that feminine humor and hair salon humor were often described as one in the same by the hair stylists, as evidenced Gloria’s above quote, such that feminine humor *is* what occurs in hair salons (regardless of sex/gender identity). Therefore, in order to accurately reflect the participants’ perceptions of gendered humor in their respective workplaces, and after hearing quotes like those above, I purposefully coupled feminine/hair salon humor, and later, masculine/barbershop humor, throughout this data analysis. The following quote illustrates another comparison between feminine and hair salon humor by Jay, a heterosexual male hair stylist:

Feminine humor...is usually involved in dating, or children. It's a very sort of unchallenging, very safe, like 'I'm going to tell you what my kid did today, yada yada yada' ...Stuff to me that quite honestly is irrelevant...and if you spent an 8-hour day here [at the salon] on a Saturday in December for example, you would notice this interesting thing that happens with the girls. You can watch half hour by half hour that the volume increases, to me it's funny...I often wonder if there is a parallel, between how their humor is and if they compete with each other.

In the above quote, Jay not only juxtaposes feminine and hair salon humor, but also describes his perception of feminine humor as focused on relationships (dating and

children), often mundane (“safe” and “unchallenging” according to the status quo), yet also fueled by a competitive spirit shared between the “girls.” One of the many reasons I appreciate this quote is because it offers a male stylist’s perspective on feminine/hair salon humor as ultimately unentertaining and therefore “irrelevant” to men. Jay also projects a masculine/hegemonic lens (competition) onto the women’s humor motivations as he attempts to make sense of their increased volume; Jay’s interpretation of the women’s humor reflects patriarchal patterns embedded within organizational discourse. Demonstrated throughout this chapter are a variety of narratives that showcase how gendered humor (and perceptions of gendered humor) function to privilege and sustain similar hegemonic ideologies (e.g., gender norms/stereotypes, heteronormativity, hegemonic masculinity, patriarchy, etc.)

**Rapport humor: “A rope, a ski mask, some lye.”** Tawnee was my first interviewee. Although she had been working in the hair industry for nine years, she was a new stylist at Timeless Salon in Phoenix, Arizona. Timeless Salon is located in an upper class neighborhood and seeks to provide clients with “classy, trendy, and timeless” hairstyles (Noel). It serves predominately female clients, though offers a variety of male services, and most of the stylists (80% according to the owner) are women. When I asked Tawnee to tell me a funny work story, she told the following:

The most recent thing I can think of where we were laughing was, I was working on a male haircut, and we were talking about how my husband likes to make lists and be very organized and I am the exact opposite. So sometimes the lists annoy me...And so my client was like, ‘I love lists, I make lists!’ I think this is a guy thing. And then we started joking about how I mess with my husband’s lists and like to throw inappropriate things on his Costco list. We [the client and Tawnee] went on making a totally ridiculous list...like, ‘I need rope, a ski mask, some lye.’ Some cleaning products that will clean up blood stains’ and then handing it

someone at Home Depot and how funny that would be!

Tawnee's story begins as she jokingly discloses characteristics about her personal annoyances with her husband, and the differences between them concerning organization. Tawnee stated, "I think this is a guy thing," revealing a gendered perception of male/masculine and female/feminine tasks. The client asserted himself into the story by stating, "I love lists, I make lists," at which point the story took a peculiar shift. Tawnee's narrative transformed from a story about her playing a trick on her husband, to an exaggerated, co-created murder mystery plot with her male client. At this point in the interview, Tawnee was all smiles and sneaky laughter.

Feminine humor has often been labeled as more communal than men's, such that the humor invites audience members to participate in and elaborate upon the joke sequence (Crawford, 2003). For example, Crawford suggested, "while the collaborative self-revealing style of storytelling [humor] is not unique to women, it may serve their interests more than individualistic styles" of humor, such as joke telling or slapstick humor (p. 1423). As Noel, another hair stylist at Tawnee's salon, explained, "It seems like when we are all together, the stories just flow. And I think I have the ability to play off [each other], and we just make those stories bigger and bigger. We include everybody all around, so it is a group thing." In making the humor a "group thing" the attention is shifted from *the* joke teller, and dispersed amongst *joke tellers*, relinquishing the humorist from taking primary responsibility for the joke (in case the humor goes awry). In this way, the humor creates in-group solidarity and closeness between individuals who are in on the joke, with lessened (potential) social risks (i.e., judgment, ostracism) for the

humorist (Kangasharju & Nikko, 2009). This style of humor reflects a more communal and collective nature, typically ascribed to feminine speech patterns.

Feminine speech patterns have also revealed a focus on rapport building as central to women's overall gendered communication patterns (Barber, 2008). Tawnee's story demonstrates this practice, which one might argue is good for business and helps ensure returning clients. However, Tawnee's story also plays with stereotypical gender themes in support of heteronormativity such as the nagging wife who complains about her husband and the husband as the target/butt of the joke. Women complaining about and/or picking on their romantic partners is a familiar theme to women's stand-up comedy, and therefore, has contributed to the common stereotype that wives badmouth their husbands, especially in the company of other women. As Bonanza, a hair stylist in Phoenix, described, "A couple of the girls at least, it's funny because they are having issues with their boyfriends, so they just like to complain about them. And not necessarily in a mean way, but in a venting way, and that's always funny." Camme, the owner of a salon in Phoenix, also expressed her opinion about the way hair salon humor tends to reflect a relational focus in both content and delivery:

Gosh a lot of the time [we] are talking about relationships... their [clients/coworkers'] personal relationships. So then there might be bashing on their bad boyfriend or their bad husband, you know... Their big weekend and how many guys they went home with... We hear everything!

The juxtaposition of gender and humor in this analysis surfaces as the hair stylists make sense of these humor styles in terms of sex/gender. For example, Pearl, a hair stylist a salon in Phoenix stated, "I think women are funnier [than men] just because they are a little more dramatic than men... women just kind of play up the story a little bit more." Or

as Noel, a stylist in Phoenix mentioned, “I think women are better story tellers.” And finally, Camme, the owner of Timeless Salon explained, “I think women are funnier because they’re better story tellers, men suck” as she laughed. These three quotes illustrate the process by which specific humor styles (i.e., storytelling, wit, political humor) are gendered in an organizational context. According to their experience, women are better storytellers at work, which makes them funnier than men in this context. It can also be reasoned that the traditional setting/atmosphere of hair salons naturally solicits storytelling from its workers and patrons due to the ways that hair stylists’ work in close proximity to one another, thus fostering a more collective humor format. As Katya, a hair stylist at a salon in Phoenix described, “you could talk to your client and then you could talk to the stylist’s client right next to you, and it’s just one big open communication pot.” In this way, hair salons have adopted a physical structure in support of feminine organizational discourse, yet in doing so, also perpetuate gender stereotypes by providing (feminine) spaces for women to share personal stories, gossip and “bash” on men.

**Parenting humor: “Public lice.”** Another emergent theme in my data was the frequency with which female hair stylists told funny stories about their children. Research had indicated that women prefer humor that builds intimacy and community via funny anecdotes about their lives and “shared understandings of [its] absurdities,” (Crawford, 2003, p. 1421) which often include topics of marriage, parenting, and children (Coates & Jordan, 1997). This feminine humor pattern demonstrates the relational component to women’s dialogue, yet also sheds light on a dominant hair salon demographic – moms. As Tawnee stated, “I realize now that I have a kid, talking to clients who have kids, we relate... you can kind of tell them the nitty gritty and it ends up

being really funny.” Bonanza reiterated a similar sentiment, “we talk about kids a lot. Three of us are parents and one is an expecting parent, so we see a lot of ‘oh my kid did this’...we can all relate to it. And we like hearing about it.” However, jokes about heterosexual marriage, children and parenting also normalize a heteronormative humor discourse that has potential to exclude outsiders. What is unique about the following stories is the way they represent a layering of heteronormative “family” themes – stories about parenting/children, alongside topics of the body/sexuality (i.e., sexual humor). Both of these themes, parenting/children and sexual humor are frequent sources of women’s humor (Coates & Jordan; Crawford 1995, 2000), and according to Green (1977) serve educational and resistance functions among other women; in other words women are not supposed to talk about these things, but the hair salon provides a safe space for doing so.

The first example of this layering is taken from my fieldnotes and interview with Bonanza, a hair stylist at a salon in Phoenix, AZ and showcases a humorous retelling of a conversation between Bonanza and her daughter:

“Ok, this is funny. It's another one where we were talking about kids, but it is still a little inappropriate I guess,” she laughs and flashes me a smirk. “I was telling this story with a client of mine, she has kids and we were just talking about stuff they say. And Pearl, and I think Katya, were also in the conversation. So there was [*sic*] a few of us. I was talking about my daughter; she was in the bathtub, but two years ago. And I was like, ‘Dani, you need to get cleaned up. Clean your butt!’ And she was like, ‘ha ha,’ she goes, ‘do I clean my front butt?’ And I was like, ‘that's not a butt. That's your vagina.’ And she was like, ‘oh, ok!’ And that was it. And I was like, wow! Look at me, parenting! You know, that's a lot easier than I thought it would be,” again, Bonanza pauses to laugh.

“So then like a week later, she walks up to me, just out of the blue in the middle of the day. And goes, ‘mom, do you have a big vagina?’ And like, what do you say to that?” Bonanza’s laughter was contagious at this point. “I was like ‘who have you been talking to?’”

In this story sequence, Bonanza begins by sharing a story about parenting and her daughter's process of learning about the body. Bonanza's self-deprecating humor highlights her surprise at her own successful attempt to explain female anatomy to a five-year-old (Bonanza later told me her daughter is now seven). Again, humor is used in the final punch line, "who have you been talking to?" whereby Bonanza uses the humor to express her disappointment about the possibility of her daughter learning about vaginas from an unfamiliar source. The story was shared with two female coworkers, Katya and Pearl, who both have children, and a female client. In a later interview, I asked Katya if she could recall Bonanza's story, and she did! She then went on to say that they often swap stories about their children, "like my kid is doing something crazy, or her kid is doing something crazy." Laughing about parenting and children was a common theme among female hair stylists, demonstrated again below, and one that supports existing gender scholarship about the ways that women create solidarity by sharing humorous anecdotes about their experiences parenting and with children (Crawford, 2003).

However, repetitive joke cycles that focus on parenting and children carry potential to mute and/or absence individuals (heterosexual or homosexual) who are not parents, and therefore support gender stereotypes about women's primary role as mother (Crawford).

The second example of sexual humor is taken from an interview excerpt with Noel about a funny story she shared with her co-workers about her son. This story shows how a play on words and slight misunderstanding created a moment of shared humor among the employees:

My son wrote a journal entry, and he's in first grade. They have to write something everyday and we had some pet hermit crabs, but his journal entry just said, 'I have crabs.' So that was funny, but then we came to work and I was

telling the girls the story, and we started talking about crabs in general. And I joking said, ‘you know, most kids are at school worried about lice, my kid brings it to the table that he has crabs!’...And they were like, ‘how do you get crabs, what are crabs?’ So we Google it, and I’m reading it wrong, saying ‘it’s public lice.’ And I’m like, ‘PUBLIC LICE?’ That sounds like an endemic [*sic*], and I said public lice like 100 times, and finally one of the stylists goes, ‘are you reading PUBIC LICE?’ And then...everyone laughed!

Embedded in the above narratives are themes such as the foibles of parenting, children’s innocence concerning matters of the body (and the mother’s responsibility in this matter), as well as sexual innuendos drawn out of humorous stories (Hay, 2000). In other words, these are highly personal and familial experiences shared in an organizational setting, thus blurring the line between the personal and the professional. From the perspective of humor theories, this process is beneficial to women who may increase group cohesion among their coworkers via shared experiences, and/or relieve cognitive tensions related to their personal lives and relationships (i.e., marriage and parenting) (Crawford, 2003; Lynch, 2002; Meyer, 2000). However, from a critical feminist perspective, this practice further perpetuates gender stereotypes regarding feminine speech norms. For example, in the first narrative, Bonanza used self-deprecating humor to express her surprise (“look at me parenting”) at her own ability to teach her daughter about female anatomy. By announcing that she is surprised at her *successful* parenting skills, Bonanza discredits her abilities in front of other women. Research by Hay (2000) found that women frequently engage in self-directed/self-deprecating humor in single-sex work groups, often as a coping strategy to make sense of their everyday challenges. However, research has shown that when women humorously highlight these issues, they simultaneously create perceptions of their own incompetence at work (Nilsen, 1993). In other words, if I am always pointing out my own flaws and failures, others may adopt a negative perception

of me. Furthermore, mothers often take on the guilt, shame, and/or embarrassment of their children's wrongdoings, and/or blame themselves as the responsible party when their children fail. In Noel's story about her son, she uses sarcasm and play on words to poke fun at her son as different from all the other kids, implicitly blaming herself as she admits it was "my kid!" Ironically, Noel then commits a similar error in her misuse/misunderstanding of the word "public" versus "pubic." In this instance, she (and her son) is the butt/target of her own joke, thus illustrating another example of self-directed/deprecating humor.

The following short narrative is from my fieldnotes and interview with Jay, a heterosexual male stylist in Phoenix, shows that he too has adopted a self-deprecating style of humor in the salon:

"Part of my humor is about cutting myself down. Most male humor, by construction is like, 'I've got the biggest dick on site. I bang the most chicks...I go the opposite way around...So I'm like, 'yeah I am so average, it doesn't even matter'...like, an intentional self-defeating humor,'" Jay pauses for a brief moment, then shifts the conversation to a story about being feminine.

"So, case in point, I always push things in a gay direction [with humor]. I have found that homosexuality has become more popular and acceptable...For instance, I have this friend by the name of Steve, he is very masculine, and when I come around, he says, 'I don't know what it is about you, but I just want to hug you, you are so pretty. I would never touch another guy but you are just so, you bring out the femininity in me!'...And is it because I am in the hair industry? I know I'm feminine to a degree, but not that level."

Jay first acknowledges that his style of self-defeating humor at work is not like most men's one-upping humor patterns (further elaborated upon below) (Lawson, 1999). He then demonstrates self-deprecating humor as he makes a joke about the size of his penis being "so average," then immediately shifts the conversation to a story about his good friend Adam (who I assume is also one of his clients based on the context of the

conversation) and the way Jay plays with gay humor, femininity and sexuality. In the final line, Jay tries to make sense of these behaviors by attributing their effects to his position as a stylist in the hair industry, thus showing the influence of organizational humor on gender, and vice versus.

**Sexual humor: “Heating up.”** The juxtaposition of relational themes and sexuality/sexual humor surfaced in other hair salon narratives as well. The following three stories demonstrate this theme. First, Christine, a stylist at Above the Cut Hair Salon in Sacramento, California shared a funny story about a running joke she likes to play on her teenage clients that she has known for several years:

I don't know if this is funny or appropriate. But with my teenage [clients]...when Kristi was working there, and Lori was working there, the girls, well, you know how their [male teenage clients] heads turn and they are trying to look [at the women]? Well, I would tell them that Lori was a stripper from Centerfolds. And, that she met Cassidy [the other stylist] there. And that they got fired from Centerfolds, because no ‘touchy touchy,’ but they were touching! So, they would keep trying in the mirrors to check the girls out because they thought they were from centerfolds...I would laugh and say, ‘She worked at Centerfolds you know!’

Christine’s humorous story demonstrates themes such as adolescent lust and sexuality, yet at the expense of objectifying her female coworkers. Although her practical joke was all in good fun, and is only played on clients with whom she has a lasting rapport, the humor ultimately invites the teenage boys to gaze upon and critique the women’s bodies as objects to consume, as they fantasize about the women’s prior stripper careers and sexual misconduct at work. Christine eggs on this behavior by reinforcing and repeating the punch line, “she worked at Centerfolds” several times. Here, the professional stylists become objects of the boys’ sexual desire, rather than respected for their professional skills and creative talents. This process, over time and repeated throughout the industry,

has potential to reify existing claims and negative stereotypes about women's femininity in the workplace (i.e., the adage that women cannot be both professional and feminine). Furthermore, making light of the women's sexuality normalizes gender discourses aimed at objectifying women.

Sex and sexuality emerged as a dominant theme in several humorous narratives as well, especially as the hair stylists divulged the intimate details of their own and other's sex lives. According to Katie, the owner of Stranded Hair Salon in Sacramento, "People tell us about their recent sexcapades... some you don't want to hear and some makes you laugh." Chloe, a hair stylist at Oasis Salon in Sacramento, reiterated this assertion:

You'd be surprised what people tell you, like in the break room, it's just... 'oh, it was my husband's birthday, so I had to do the butt sex. Or, you know what I mean? And then a tornado of butt sex comes in. Then everyone tells their story!

Traditionally speaking, intercourse (and anal sex) is considered a taboo topic, even more so in the workplace, yet here, and again in the following narrative, it is the topic of shared humor in and between female stylists. As mentioned by Crawford (2003), women's talk about sexuality, "a frequent source of humor" for women, expresses women's resistance to social control and cultural rules regarding sexuality as public discourse, and as such, challenges the status quo regarding traditional gender norms and stereotypes. However, little research has been conducted to explain more about this phenomenon, and its effects, in single or mixed-sex work groups. As such, this data contributes to knowledge about women's sexual humor in organizational settings. In the above story from Chloe, for example, the women in the break room make jokes about their obligations to fulfill their husbands' sexual desires. As Chloe stated, "once one woman shares her story, the rest chime in," again highlighting the communal and collaborative nature of feminine humor

in the workplace (Crawford, 2003; Jenkins, 1994). Yet, as the women join in, they also contribute to the circulation of stories about a woman's obligation to fulfill her husband's fantasies. These discourses set up conditions for recurring humor cycles that support heteronormativity, hegemonic masculinity, and women's objectification as organizational discourse norms embedded in micro-interactions.

The second narrative is taken from Bonanza, the same hair stylist who shared the story about her daughter, and again, speaks to the level of self-disclosure surrounding sexual experiences under a common theme:

I think even in our salon, where it is 3 to 2, [ratio of females to males], the women definitely, as far as the line and what is appropriate sexually, we cross that line way more. Way more! Like the other day, I hurt my back a couple weeks ago and I was joking with Pearl that I woke up smelling like Icy Hot. She said, 'that stuff is weird, it heats up!'...And then I said, 'Have you ever tried that lube that heats up?' And she was like, 'noooooo...' And I was like, 'You know? It's ok for a while...but an ex and I, we haven't done butt sex in a while, but the only lube we had was the heated lube when we tried...[laughing] and I am telling her this story about how my asshole was in mass pain from the inside out! Like it was spontaneously convulsing. And we are going through all of this, and we are dying laughing. And I realized like, 'I am in a professional setting, and hold on a second. Lubing your...' Yeah, and that's not the first story like that that any of us has told.

In this story, Bonanza begins by sharing about her back pain and a remedy she used to ease her pain overnight, however, like several other stylists' humorous narratives, the story takes a dramatic turn toward a sexual topic through a humorous word-association. The humor surfaces in several points, first at the transition from icy-hot ointment as a back pain remedy to a heated sex lubricant, again at Bonanza's second admission of rectal pain, and finally as Bonanza laughs and realizes that she is clearly not behaving professionally in a work setting. Though somewhat implicit, it can be argued that Bonanza's humor shows signs of self-deprecation as well as she ultimately discredits her

own level of professionalism. Still, she goes on to say that this is not the first (and therefore, perhaps not the last) story that any of the stylists have told in this nature, thus highlighting the frequency with which female stylists engage in sexual humor at work.

The topic of sex/sexuality fits nicely under the “everything goes” informal rule in a hair salon that many participants articulated as unique to their industry. As Tawnee stated, “I would say salon humor is pretty hardcore... like my husband is a firefighter and they don’t even go that far.” The following mini-excerpt from my interview with Katya further reveals how “far” the humor will go in a hair salon humor, “Well Selena... one time, I don’t even know where it came from, but she found this big strap on! And she was wearing this big strap on all day in the salon” she breaks for laughter, “Yeah!” Or as Gloria, a stylist at Charisma Salon in Sacramento, explained:

I don’t really think there is anything inappropriate [to joke about in a hair salon]. I think it just depends on the client, and who is in the salon. If there is a 90-year-old woman sitting over there, I don’t think it’s appropriate to be talking about the sex you had last night. But if nobody else is in there, I think anything goes.

Furthermore, Cricket, the owner of Paradise Salon in Sacramento, CA stated, “they tell you, you are never supposed to talk about sex, or politics. But I am sorry! That is always talked about!” And Pole, the owner of a hair salon in Phoenix reiterated, “Sex. Politics. Religion. The things that I was taught in beauty school never to talk about is ALWAYS what we bring up. Always!”

It might also be argued that the stylists’ humor in the above narratives ultimately functions to resist organizational status quos by both sharing and inviting socially taboo content into the workplace. However, the focus on sexually explicit personal stories also opens the door for discourses centered on the objectification of women. For example, I

asked Christine about the types of jokes (i.e., general themes and common styles) that most often occur in hair salons. Christine has had the unique opportunity of working at a barbershop for several years before moving to her current salon. She explained, hair salon humor as “sexual, all, almost all [humor]. Actually, if you were, it if was a government job, I think we’d all lose our jobs,” she laughed, “you could probably sue every barber for sexual harassment if you wanted to!” Here, Christine first compares her position at a hair salon to one for the government, suggesting that hair stylists do not abide by the same corporate rules as government employees, and if they were held to these standards, would forfeit/lose their jobs due to the sexual (i.e., inappropriate) nature of salon humor. She next reflects on the ways that the sexual humor often affects clients, suggesting that people could potentially sue hair professionals for sexual harassment. Sexist/sexual humor, coupled with self-deprecating humor patterns, and otherwise stereotypical gendered speech themes, create conditions that contribute to, rather than resist, the dominant hegemony (Clair, 1993; Mumby, 1997).

The third story is a partial excerpt from my fieldnotes and extensive interview with Jay, and again reveals a sexual undertone to hair salon humor, yet this time from the perspective of a heterosexual male stylist. Before the story began, however, Jay shared the following information about the nature of his sexual relationships with various female coworkers:

“So I have slept with a receptionist from here, and a receptionist from the other salon I came from...I haven't pulled anything else out of the salon because most of the girls from here, and not because I didn't want to,” Jay smiles and laughs, “but most of them were all taken...But at the same time, there is that old adage, a smart guy knows what is it, don't shit where you eat? Fish off the company pier? And all that other crap.” He laughs.

I share this fieldnote excerpt because first, it was unsolicited and therefore a peculiar moment of self-disclosure in the context of humor in the workplace (perhaps he thought this information, or the way he told it, was funny); and second because it was a clear contradiction to the way Jay described his self-defeating humor in the narrative above. Rather than bragging about his penis size, as Jay suggested other men often do, he boasted about the women he has had sex with at work. I also share Jay's insights to highlight the ways that women were labeled as part of a larger practice that objectifies women: as things ("I haven't pulled anything else out of the salon") and girls, then as food and fish via humorous euphemisms; or in other words, what gender scholars refer to as trivialization/diminutive language that functions to marginalize and objectify women (DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2011; Wood, 1999, 2011). After sharing this information, Jay then admitted to dating one other female client, and finally asked if he could share the following funny story, which he titled "Story #5":

"So I have her [a client he dated] in the chair, and I do this whole...I was way over the top," Jay then gets out of his chair and stands behind me to physically demonstrate what he did to the client. He begins to tussle my hair. "So like, 'what do you want to do? What's um, what do you like and what don't you like?' And usually I am just like," he barely touches my hair to show me the difference in the way he was groping this woman's scalp versus the usual treatment/service he provides with other clients.

"So whatever, but I just wanted to see, and kept giving it to her more and more, and like, her eyes completely roll back in her head. And she's like, and the way her humor is, she's like, 'what???' Oh yeah, yeah," He mimics a moaning voice, "'whatever you want to do.' So, I took her back to the shampoo bowl, washed her hair, brought her back over and cut her hair. I found, wait! Pause there! She actually took a picture of my butt with her phone at the shampoo bowl...To this day she recognizes that."

Much like Christine's narrative above, this humorous account plays off of heterosexual lust, hegemonic masculinity, and also exhibits male-female flirting in the context of

humor. Then similar to the anal sex accounts, this story also portrays women's sexual desires as secondary and/or in service to men's sexual desires. Jay mimicked a feminine, moaning voice and said, "whatever you want to do," in his reenactment of the scene. At this moment, the female client grants (sexual) power and authority to the male in the story. Again, over time and through repeated instances whereby women are objectified through humorous accounts, either by their own doing or by men, stereotypes of women as sexualized beings are normalized in organizational discourses and support the dominant hegemonies (i.e., heteronormativity, patriarchy).

**Humor as gossip: "Joe Dirt and red tornadoes."** A third theme that emerged in the data set was categorized as jokes and quips in the form of gossip (also described as "cattiness" by the participants) about others. Gossip can be described as talk or spreading rumors about other individuals and/or their personal affairs; and cattiness can be explained as expressing mean or spiteful remarks. From a colloquial perspective, these vocabularies are often used alongside gendered terms; as behaviors or patterns of communication most often pertaining to women. (A *funny* side note on this matter – when I looked up synonyms for the word "cattiness/catty," one was "bitchy," a gendered term used to describe spiteful women/language.) In the context of humor, gossip quickly spreads in the form of funny rumors and stories that seek to make fun of others; cattiness is evidenced in other-directed jokes. Oftentimes, when I asked the stylists to share funny stories, they recounted "funny" times (rather than stories) in the salon where they had laughed over making fun of someone – either another stylist or client. "It can get gossipy," Cynthia, a hair stylist in Sacramento explained, "Like this one girl... she would tell the girls behind my back, like, 'oh, Cynthia would jump in my conversation and some

of my clients are really offended by her' just because I am loud and outgoing!" What is ironic here is that Cynthia first describes the hair salon as "gossipy" then engages in the behavior by sharing gossip about another stylist. Andrew, an openly gay male stylist in Phoenix, further elaborated and gave the following example:

"I feel like we rag on each other a lot...and a lot about how people look, I mean honestly...like with Tessa, one of the ones [stories] I wrote down was that Tessa told me that one of the stylists had the Joe Dirt of buns," he laughs and waits to see if I got the reference. I smiled back to let him know I understood. He continued, "because it was not put together very well and we laughed!"

Joe Dirt is a character from the 2001 film, *Joe Dirt*, featuring David Spade as a "white trash janitor at an L.A. radio station, whose mullet hairdo is just one of many personal oddities that make him the object of much ridicule" (RottenTomatoes.com, 2015). The reference to the movie character is an ideal offensive remark for professional hair stylists attempting to make fun of other stylists. Jill, a stylist at Timeless Salon in Phoenix, sarcastically said, "it's funny, we are at a hair salon so you should think that you would always have your hair done, at least!" Jill starts to laugh, widens her eyes and looks around the salon, inviting me to do the same.

The following story is from Noel, and demonstrates the gossip/cattiness theme in the salon narratives:

Just the other day, I made a joke...there was someone in particular that was getting on people's nerves, and we were talking about her, and I said, 'look, just so you know, when she comes up, I am totally going to be fake like I really like her, so beware...I know you all think you are going to be bitchy, but we are all going to be like, HI!!!!' And I just admit that, I kind of throw that off often to see what everybody else will do, but wont maybe admit to.

Noel begins her story with the phrase, "I made a joke," then proceeds to share about an annoying coworker and how she intends to treat the coworker superficially. Noel warns

her audience (other stylists) so they know what to expect, then shares her expectation that they too will behave in similar/fake ways. This scenario creates an inside joke among the female coworkers – Noel’s coworkers know what to look for, and humor is generated when Noel (and perhaps others) behaves according to her promise. By announcing her intentions however, Noel simultaneously discloses the moment of surprise embedded in traditional humor sequences (Bailey, 1976). A common critique of women’s humor is that it is often predictable, and therefore boring; in other words, the audience is not surprised at the punch line. As Katya later described, “To me, men [are funnier]... girls tell you something, and it’s like, ‘oh honey, I’ve heard that 12 times!’ You know? And it was funny, but been there done that.” Tawnee also described women’s humor as boring and repetitive. When I asked her who was funnier, men or women, Tawnee answered men, then explained:

I don’t want to hear the same issues that women talk about. Sometimes it’s just like, ugh! It’s boring! Let’s go on to something else...hearing about how she doesn’t like how she looks, or she doesn’t like how her boyfriend treats her...their jokes about sex and stuff, doesn’t sound as funny.

Perhaps Katya’s and Tawnee’s perceptions explain, in part, why society often perceives men as funnier than women, writ large. Several stylists, twenty-four out of thirty, shared Noel’s opinion that men are funnier than women.

With regard to gossip in the context of organizational humor, one could argue that because certain gender stereotypes set up social expectations about how women will behave, this genre of humor (i.e., funny rumors/inside-jokes, superficiality, disparaging remarks about the self and others) does little to resist the status quo regarding gender norms and expectations, but rather supports them. Chloe described gossip and cattiness in

the hair salon as the “Red Tornado,” which she detailed in the following narrative as a destructive yet common pattern of dialogue between the female hair stylists:

“They call it a red tornado. We try to avoid this. We are doing this program at my salon right now, so we are taking these big classes and everything,” Chloe rolls her eyes and I felt as though she thought these classes were a waste of time. “And they say that the break room is the problem. You are in the break room, and some one comes in and says, ‘I am so fucking slow, and the receptionist doesn't book me...blah, blah, blah.’ And then the next person is like, ‘Yeah, fuck that receptionist! She is a bitch, isn't she?’” Chloe mimics a gossipy, feminine tone in her last line, and continues, “And then the next person comes in, and is like, ‘Yeah! I hate her too. Did you see what she is wearing today?’” She points, acting out the scene and lowered her voice in the last line, as if she was gossiping in secret.

“And it's this whole negative thing...and sometimes the people that have gone to this specific class, it's like,” then using a patronizing/teacher, yet feminine voice says, “Oh, you are being a red tornado right now, you need to stop!” Chloe starts laughing and indicates that this has become an inside joke for the stylists who have attended the class.

Although Chloe did not elaborate on the long-term effects of the training in the salon (though later she did share that she was impressed by the Red Tornado trainers), it was clear that the salon management's effort to disrupt the break room gossip became a new topic of ridicule for the hair stylists. Their mocking of the Red Tornado training acts as resistance to traditional corporate structures and practices. This finding is interesting to the extent that hair salons and barbershops do not typically offer trainings (i.e., sexual harassment, diversity, ethics) to their stylists, or impose traditional corporate regulations, such as restrictions on language use, perhaps because they stylists would not take them seriously. In fact, this was one area where the hair stylists prided themselves as being unique and separate from the corporate world. Andrew explained:

“I worked for GAP for 12 years, and my first week here [at the salon], I was SHOCKED! SHOCKED!” Andrew started to laugh. “Because I was so used to being politically correct...like we were at the point in our training where you couldn't even say that someone's skirt looked hot on them...And I am so glad I

no longer work in that world because I have a lot more fun in my current job. There's no way what goes on in hair salon would fly in the corporate world though," Andrew gives off a haughty laugh, then sarcastically says, "like there is no H.R. Get over it! And I can't speak to other salons, though from what I understand and have heard, that is pretty common across the board."

Andrew articulated the abrupt transition from his experience working in the corporate world to the lax environment and rules of his current hair salon position. With the lack of corporate trainings, regulations and language restrictions, hair stylists are more free to engage in unhindered forms of communication, such as sexual humor, gossip, and "red tornadoes"; communication patterns that might otherwise be punishable by corporate standards. Jay reiterated this freedom, "We are not under a corporate umbrella... One of the things I enjoy about being in the hair industry, is the freedom to be who you are... we are a profession that is not so professional." One could argue that the break room, in most corporate environments, is a more relaxed and conversational space for employees to freely socialize, eat, and even engage in personal dialogue behind closed doors and off the clock. However, the line between break room banter and "front of the house" communication is not as clear in a salon setting where the absence of a Human Resources department and a time clock is genuinely noticeable by the hair stylists. For example, Tessa, a receptionist at Timeless Salon explained that from her position at the front desk, "It's kind of fun to be like, 'oh this client is insane' and then tell them [the hair stylists] the story," especially when the hair stylists are the ones who will be servicing the "insane" client.

The following story from Gloria illustrates a similar scenario as she retells a story about a "crazy" client:

I have a funny story. So my coworker had this client who didn't like her hair, so she came back [to the salon] and she was crazy! She [the client] looked like crap basically. And um, I heard the story about what happened, because she called me and asked what I could do. I pulled up to the salon... and I saw the lady and I knew it was her. I could tell. She was in there like running her mouth and making a scene and started screaming at my coworker. And then her dad came in, and [he] started screaming. It was like a big ole' fiasco. I don't know, it was hilarious! She was crazy, like screaming at the top of her lungs. We were going to call the cops. In the moment, it was so not funny, but people thought she was crazy! That was pretty funny!

This narrative depicts an unusual (and potentially dangerous) work scenario in which a dissatisfied client returns to the salon for color correction services. However, in the (now third) retelling of this story, exaggerated language and humor is used to gossip about the female client as crazy, frenzied, and returning at the arm of her displeased father. The story is passed along from one stylist to the next, almost as a warning or lesson to other stylists about the consequences of ruining a woman's hair. The humor in the joke changes meaning and grows over time. "Your standing jokes kind of pass on from person to person. Even if you weren't here when it originally happened, you know about it. You know, jokes from 10 years ago, 15 years ago," Tessa explained. These legendary and humorous "tales" teach lessons about the hair industry, but also carry potential to perpetuate negative gender stereotypes; for example, the crazy client was an adult female, depicted as emotionally frenzied and unable to handle her affairs without the support of her father. This gossip perpetuates classic stories of patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity as a man comes to the rescue of a woman in distress.

One final theme that emerged in the data, though not often, yet still worth sharing were the ways female hair stylists spoke of the potential risks and/or consequences of joking with other women.

**Risky humor: “Girls hold grudges.”** Several hair stylists described other women as highly emotional, unpredictable, and easily offended by humor. For example, Tessa shared, “I think we [women] are just more temperamental. The guys in here are definitely more laid back.” Chloe also explained that in her salon the “girls get offended so easily and judge so much where that means you have to be a little more careful.” These stylists warned against joking with other women unless a longstanding history of congenial rapport had been established. Other stylists gave warnings about the grudges women hold if and when they are offended by someone’s humor. Katya explained:

You know, girls hold grudges sometimes...like maybe they get offended and they don't tell you, but then they go up to computer and change your schedule or don't give you a client because they are like, ‘that was like, that was too far with that.’ So you don't really want to piss off [women].

Jay also shared his own cautions against “messing around with anyone who has the ability to bring down your entire career,” which he suggested women do. Christine later added that in the context of humor, “women are hard[est] on their own sex,” such that they are more likely to laugh at a man’s inappropriate joke than a woman’s attempt at sexual or vulgar humor. She explained, “I think it’s from, not everybody, but I guess society. I mean look at celebrities, a female does something silly or outrageous and it hits the headlines!” Embedded in these discussions (and warnings) are negative gender stereotypes directed toward women that paint them as defensive, spiteful, and revenge hungry organizational members. According to these narratives, one must take careful precautions not to offend other women with humor, otherwise their business may suffer. In this way, one might argue that women would not make a good leader, or manager, of a

salon. These damaging images of women as emotional workers contribute to lasting gendered impressions about women's work ethic and capabilities.

### **Summary**

The above analysis demonstrates several themes about the nature of hair salon humor: the perception of feminine and hair salon humor as one in the same, relational qualities (i.e., style and content) and narrative patterns embedded in feminine humor, sexual under and overtones of hair salon humor, and the frequency of gossip/cattiness embedded in various humor styles. Taken together, the data also revealed gender stereotypical humor styles (e.g., communal, self-deprecating, predictable/safe) and content (e.g., marriage/children, sex) in support of dominant hegemonies (e.g., heteronormativity, hegemonic masculinity, patriarchy). What is curious however, are the ways that women (and male hair stylists) actively participated in these stereotypical patterns, often knowingly, and in some instances even using humor to objectify women, and/or portray women as catty, overly sensitive, and/or judgmental organizational members. In other words, the exchanges demonstrate how feminine humor is organizationally constructed, negotiated, and maintained among gendered communities in ways that support, rather than resist, hegemonic ideologies such as heteronormativity and stereotypical gender norms (Crawford, 2003). Because the patterns of humor observed here functioned to sustain gender norms and stereotypes, the humor does little to resist hegemony, and rather, perpetuates gendered organizational discourses that continue to marginalize women in the industry. Further, past research indicates that men make more money than women in the hair industry, therefore, one might also speculate that perhaps hegemonic humor patterns contribute to this financial success pattern (Nordberg, 2002).

In the following section, masculine humor is critically analyzed alongside organizational hegemony themes.

### **Masculine Humor: Boys Being Boys**

“The barbershop's manly, you know? It's a place for men...and you're gonna hear a lot of stuff you shouldn't have heard!”

-Brad, barbershop owner/barber

“That is how it is, a lot of cussing going on, lots of dirty jokes. Guys talking about how many beers and shots they drank, barbers coming in hung over.”

-Marco, barbershop owner/barber

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Sports. Sex. Practical jokes. How better to sum up (stereotypical) hegemonic masculinity? Much like feminine humor was likened to hair salon humor, the participants in this study also perceived masculine humor as the dominant (gendered) humor style in a barbershop, such that barbershop humor *is* masculine in both style and content. The above two quotes illustrate participants' perceptions of the masculine/barbershop humor juxtaposition. First, when Brad, the owner of Striker's Barbershop in Sacramento, CA, described the barbershop as a place for men where taboo discourse takes place (away from women). Gordo, a barber in Phoenix, reiterated Brad's sentiment, “It's like Vegas [in the barbershop]...What happens, stays there, those are the rules.” The perceived connection between masculine and barbershop humor/discourse was evidenced in Marco's use of the terms “guys” and “barbers” interchangeably. Participants also discussed, though less frequently, masculine humor patterns as separate and unique from feminine humor patterns in the context of hair salons. Taken together, the participant narratives showcase industry perceptions of gendered humor in the hair industry.

Traditionally speaking, the barbershop has always been a place for men to escape and enjoy the company of other men (Alexander, 2003; Barber, 2008; Lawson, 1999). Modern day barbershops have maintained this custom and pride themselves on their ability to provide clients with the comforts of a “homey man cave” (Bobby, barber in Phoenix), free from women and children, and therefore a space where it is safe to “cuss, tell dirty jokes, drink beer” (Marco), and talk about “what they want... like sex or rock and roll, whatever!” (Hector, a barber in Sacramento). Stereotypical gender norms might suggest that these hyper-masculine conditions leave little to be desired by women (and anyone else who does not comply with stereotypical standards of hegemonic masculinity), who are discouraged from frequenting this men’s-only workspace in both subtle and not-so-subtle ways (Stanley, 2001). Gender segregation in barbershops is often achieved through the enactment and maintenance of old school, hyper-masculine, *boys only* discourse (often in the form of humor) and traditions that function to exclude women, and as the data suggest homosexual men. For example, Marco told me that, “there are very few women barbers... and a gay man cutting in a man’s barbershop where they talk about manly things? I’m sure he’d fake it everyday,” suggesting that a “gay man” would attempt to *pass* as heterosexual if he were to work in a barbershop (Shugart, 2003).

Gender exclusionary discourses and traditions often include the use of hyper-masculine, sexist artifacts to designate the barbershop as a space where hegemonic masculinity is the organizational norm, as well as sexual humor, teasing and pranks (i.e., other-directed humor styles). The following participant narratives reveal a gendered humor process, thus responding to my first research question, and illustrate the powerful

role that humor plays in the sedimentation of existing gender stereotypes through micro-interactions in various barbershops.

**Visual humor: “We got Playboy!”** Throughout my observations, I routinely took fieldnotes on the décor of the hair salons and barbershops I visited. I encountered several diverse spaces, each with its own unique vibe, theme, or aesthetic ambiance that gave the salons and barbershops distinct character. I felt comfortable in hair salons, and generally able to predict what I might encounter inside; perhaps because I am a woman and accustomed to the sights of fashion magazines and make-up, as well as the sounds of hair dryers and tranquil mini-waterfalls in the hair salons I have visited. But the sights and sounds of a barbershop were all new to me. I had never been inside a barbershop, at least not alone. The following excerpt is from my fieldnotes and details my experience entering the Retro Phoenix Barbershop for the first time:

I walked through an iron-barred front door that chimed as I entered the barbershop. Standing in front of me was Bobby, a thirty-something Latino man with a clean-fade hairline, tattoos up his arms, and a charismatic grin. He motioned for me to take a seat with the nod of his head toward a long wooden park bench that rested along the back wall of the shop. Above the bench, I noticed the following items on the wall: a giant framed poster featuring various men’s/boy’s military-style hair styles (a barbershop staple), a poster of a bright red Lamborghini, which reminded me of something my little brother might have had in his room as a boy, and a large picture of a sexy Asian woman with a sensual smirk and a sword in her hand. Cluttering the wall were several black and white photos of Ronald Regan, George Bush and other former presidents (both Republican and Democrat), as well as newspaper clippings from past presidential elections and basketball game victories. There were framed Casablanca and Sweeney Todd movie posters, a life size Chucky doll complete with blood stains and knife wounds, a signed electric guitar (though whose signature, I couldn’t tell), and a velvet picture of a neon painted Rastafarian lion smoking a joint in sunglasses.

On the opposite side of the shop were the barber chairs – black leather with vintage gold trim; there were three in all. Situated on the far side of the chairs were two video arcade games – Mrs. Pac-man and a car racing game I didn’t recognize. They were running on demo mode. High on the wall over the

arcade games was a flat screen television playing muted Nascar interviews with closed captions. Just below the TV stood an elaborate and multi-layered wooden bookcase filled with dozens of magazines – the only ones I could read were Sports Illustrated and one titled “Mafia.”

I suddenly remembered what other barbers – Gordo, Warren, Hector, Dan, and many more – said about the magazines featured in their barbershops. For example, in an interview with Hector, a barber in Sacramento at H&H Barbershop, he boasted, “We got Playboys!” then picked one up and pretended to toss it at me during our interview. In response, I pretended almost like it was a lizard, or maybe a disgusting insect, and squirmed in my seat while shaking my hands free from an imagined filth. Hector laughed and placed it back on the table next to the mini-fridge, in plain view. Then later, at Gordo’s barbershop in Phoenix, Arizona, I had asked Gordo to walk me through the shop and remember him saying (rather nonchalantly), “Oh yeah, we have some playboys up there,” pointing to a stack of magazines resting on an old television.

The Retro Phoenix Barbershop also had a mini-refrigerator that stood in the center of a short hallway on the way to the bathroom, in the back of the barbershop. Again, remembering my visits with Gordo, Hector and Dan, I was reminded of the contents in their fridge, Budweiser. At work! I have always wanted to sneak a bottle of wine, or the occasional “mini” into my office desk, but was always too fearful. I am not sure what was in Bobby’s fridge – sandwiches, beer, maybe nothing at all?

Notwithstanding my initial remarks about barbershops being uninviting toward women, I was not immediately turned off to this space. If anything, the décor made me curious. I could see how each and every item could generate good talking points – playoff games or upcoming elections, movie releases or musical concerts. I decided to ask Bobby more about the barbershop and how the space and décor influenced the types of interactions that took place, if at all. First, Bobby explained that there are only two guys that work there, himself and Dante (the owner), and that 95% of their clientele were men, so they designed the shop with men in mind. Bobby then said their barbershop is supposed to be somewhat of a tribute, “like a throw back barbershop... a homey little man cave, for like, a man,” he chuckled. In essence, this space had been strategically designed and filled with *stuff* for men with the expectation that it would make the patrons and barbers feel at

home. Then, in reference to my question, Bobby continued, “We have a lot of jokers that come in... you’ll hear a joke about one of the players [on Sports Center], anything we see on TV... guys come here just to get away, they just relax and B.S. with us, you know?”

Upon visiting other barbershops, I observed similar patterns. For example, Brad described his barbershop in the following way:

It’s a man's club. It's like sitting in the garage with a bunch of guys drinking beer. You know, we're connected to a bar so there's always beer flowing in there and we have cup holders for the chairs...most women would be more comfortable in more of an environment that's a little nicer, decorated, or neater, more girly, you know? The barbershop's manly, it's a place for men.

In Brad’s short description, he uses seven gendered terms to paint a complete picture of his barbershop; the terms are gender exclusive in that they invite men to the space, while excluding women and non-manly others. The garage-like atmosphere, coupled with the flowing beer and cup holders, render this space “uncomfortable” for women, according to Brad. Even Marco discussed his plans to open a new barbershop in 2016 that is also “going into a bar. It’s going to be more of a man’s, a gentleman’s club, shooting the bull, talking sports, leave the wife and kids” [at home?]. These barbers were verbally explicit about the plans to exclude women (and children), and what would take place as a result of creating a man’s-only space. Several other barbers also relied on strategic design choices that (stereotypically speaking) should keep “others” out.

For example, at the H&H Barbershop in Sacramento, Playboy magazines and beer were available in plain sight. Dan, a barber at H&H explained, “Barbershops have always been like that, you know? Sports. Playboy. A rite of passage for kids,” he chuckled. I personally found these magazines offensive and hated the thought that men were teaching their children to objectify women as a rite of passage into manhood. This practice sends

a strong message about what it means to be “a man,” and therefore supports hegemonic masculinity ideals.

I also noticed comic strips and signs hanging on the walls of the H&H shop with comical messages of “no wives allowed.” Warren, a barber in Phoenix, also joked about a former employer that had sexist signage hanging in the front windows of his barbershop, though he did not say what they read. These warnings reminded me of the “no trespassing” signs owners frequently place around their private properties, and that is what these workspaces had become – men’s private property. Hector, also a barber at H&H explained, “men feel comfortable here. They sit down, and bitch about their wives,” then mimicking a feminine voice, he joked, “Honey do this, and this and this!” Dan and his coworkers laughed. The men-only scheme across all the barbershops I visited seemed to be working; not once did I observe a female barber working in any of the shops, nor did I see more than one “wife” inside a barbershop (I assumed the woman to be a wife because she came in with a man of about the same age, wore a wedding ring, and waited for him to get done – however, my assumption also represents heteronormative thinking and interpretations of the gendered relationships that occur in this space).

Looking back at my observations and in speaking with the barbers, it was quite clear that creating a man’s only workspace began with the barbershop décor – sports memorabilia, naughty magazines, and the occasional comical warning sign for women to enter at their own risk. Together, these gendered artifacts represent a traditional and strategic attempt to create a masculine space exclusive of wives and children, and stereotyped by men’s love of all things sports, beer and sex. Couple these conditions with

gendered humor (often targeting women), and it was easy to see how these practices foster hegemonic ideals via gender stereotypical norms of interaction.

**Sexist and sexual humor: “We’re losing another soldier” and “Violet and the Vaseline.”** Beyond creating a physical space exclusive to men, the participants also shared stories that revealed a pattern and tradition of sexist humor in the industry. This included the occasional “bitching” or “B.S.-ing” about one’s wives, ridiculing marriage, retelling the classic blonde joke, or other puns and innuendos that were sexual in nature, all in good fun. It is important to note that when I asked the participants to tell me funny stories, they frequently shared a story that featured a funny joke sequence and/or punch line. This tradition follows patterns of masculine humor, such that there is often a single joke teller with an intended target and/or audience, rather than multiple humorists co-creating humor sequences in communal ways, as demonstrated in the feminine/hair salon humor patterns (McGhee, 1979; Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2001). If and when there are multiple humorists engaged in the same joke sequence (as seen below with Hector, Dan and Russ), the style of humor among the men (stereotypically) turned into a one-upping contest, showcasing hyper-masculine values such as competition, power and authority (Lawson, 1999). The ability for humor to assert power/authority is one of the many reasons that masculine humor patterns have been studied alongside the superiority theory of humor (Berger, 2001; Crawford, 2003; Meyer, 2000; Rappoport, 2005).

Hector, a barber at H&H Barbershop in Sacramento, told the first joke sequence. I first asked Hector and his coworkers (Dan and Russ) how long they had been barbering together to get an idea of their overall rapport. Hector answered, “we worked in the same

shop in San Jose, all three of us over there, and now we are here. What was it, 1960? 1967?” he asked, turning to his coworkers for help. Dan quickly responded, “and four wives later! And four wives later!” as he burst into a rolling laughter. Hector shook his head and smiled. I decided to join in, “four wives later?” I asked, then turning to all three barbers I added, “four wives collectively, right?” Dan said, “no, four or five for me!” and Hector jumped in, “and two died on him” pointing to Hector, “and one died on me.” Despite the somber news, the men continued laughing. “Oh, I am so sorry” I replied. But Hector quickly consoled us all, “eh, they had to go!” All the men chuckled and Hector continued, “they had their day, you know?” he pointed one final time at Dan, who laughed even harder.

This humor sequence stood out for many reasons. First, it showcased a one-upping/teasing pattern among the men, stereotypical of masculine humor patterns (Collinson, 1988; Roy, 1960). For example, Dan immediately turned my question about their years of experience in the hair industry into a joke about Hector’s numerous wives. Embedded in this joke is that it is better to count how many wives Hector had had, than the years they had been working together. This joke generated laughter from all three men, prompting a response from Hector. Hector responded to Dan’s criticism by turning the joke back on Dan and his dead wives, while also admitting that all their wives ultimately “had to go,” because they had “seen their time.”

The humor in mocking marriage surfaced again in a later interview with Gordo, who explained that the barbers will regularly “tease another guy who comes in here if he’s getting married. You know, another one bites the dust, we are losing another warrior, look at that big ring around his nose now!” These punch lines mirror the early research by

Roy (1960), in which men in barbershops were chastised for their close relationships with their wives. Yet, the target of the joke in these humor sequences is shifted from wives, to emasculated men who fall captive to their wives once engaged. While one might argue that these gendered punch lines showcase women with some degree of (domestic) authority, they do so by depicting stereotypical and negative perceptions of women as robbers of masculinity and/or domestic herders leading their bulls by the nose. This genre of heteronormative and marital humor also depicts men as victims, who are bound to be ridiculed by more masculine men if they choose to marry. This theme was again witnessed in the following joke from Warren, “My wife came home the other night, said she hit the lottery, pack my bags! I said, ‘Do I pack them for the mountains or for the beach?’ She said, ‘It doesn't matter, pack your bags and get out.’” Warren mentioned that he frequently tells this joke, because it is one of his favorites. However, his favorite joke also perpetuates stereotypes that women marry for money.

A tradition of barbershop humor targeting women is clear in the above narratives. Because women are typically muted and absent from this space, there is little possibility for their resistance, whether in the form of humor or gendered discourse. Stereotypical gendered humor not only perpetuates damaging stereotypes for both men and women, but also privileges heteronormative organizational discourse. For example, the joke teller ultimately trusts and relies upon the audience to understand and generally accept stereotypes about married women and men. If they do not, the humor would fall flat, and authority would not be granted. Heteronormative humor also excludes and prohibits “others,” (non-married, non-heterosexual organizational members) from joining in on the joke.

Stereotypical gendered humor also surfaced in the participants' perceptions about men's sexist/sexual humor patterns. For example, one participant described masculine and barbershop humor as "perverted. Definitely more sexist [and] dirtier humor than girls...you [women] don't have to turn it [the topic of conversation/joke] into a dirty joke every time" (Gloria). This perception implies that men are first and foremost always focused on issues of sex and/or sexuality, even in a work setting such as a barbershop. It also implies that the barbershop is one work setting where this perverted and sexist humor frequently occur, evidenced in Gloria's use of the phrase, "every time."

Bobby also shared his perception of masculine humor during our interviews. Bobby explained, "It's like, men talk [joke] about women, you know? Like, 'oh she was hot' ...and it just escalates from there!" Bobby then said he was not comfortable sharing any more about the "escalates" process in front of me because I am a woman; perhaps he was exaggerating or this was just a joke, or perhaps my female ears were too sensitive, and Bobby wanted to avoid looking like a jerk. "It's just a boundary that you don't really get into with women," Bobby explained vaguely, "you just want to be polite [with women]. With a guy, you're cussing, you know?... and you let some out, but when there's kids and women, you don't wanna really do that." I could tell that Bobby was truly uncomfortable sharing any more about boundaries, and types of jokes that occur behind closed barbershop doors.

Finally, Jay, a hair stylist in Phoenix, echoed this stereotypical perception of masculine humor by admitting the following:

Masculine humor, for me, is how to take something that would be a common thread, and twist it into sexuality. By definition...I find, I have found for years the

only way I can turn something into humor is to find the sexual relevance to it. This quote is intriguing insofar it echoes Gloria's interpretation of masculine humor as twisted and sexual. Here, Jay suggests that there is no other option for men to be funny, if not by referencing sexuality when he says, "the only way I can turn something into humor..." In this way, one might argue that men are restricted by social stigmas and gender expectations regarding the type of humor they can engage in, in order to be considered funny.

Demonstrated above, and more often than not throughout the barbershop data, is that sexist humor and sexual jokes were talked *about*, rather than told directly to me. I imagine this was the case because I am a woman researcher, and a participant (usually a man) would have to be willing to let me in on one of their "Vegas" secrets and gentleman's club banter, which was forbidden. However, I also found that some of my participants were initially suspicious of my research, and wanted to be sure that their uses of inappropriate humor were taken in context – as lighthearted and playful humor exchanged among trusting and accepting coworkers. Therefore, I was only able to gather two clear examples of the sexual humor that both male barbers *and* hair stylists provided as exemplars of the masculine humor patterns they described.

The first example is from Jay. Jay's position as a heterosexual male salon hair stylist made his contributions both interesting and valuable to this study, as he often spoke on behalf of men, yet in the context of a feminine workspace. Although Jay is a hair stylist (and not a barber), he demonstrated his version of masculine humor in the following narrative that he retold from his humor journal:

Probably the most frivolous [*sic*] sexual story is my first one, which is what I call 'Violet and the Vaseline.' So Violet is a nail tech over here. And this is me looking for any opportunity to make something sexual out of something, without getting in trouble for it... So, nail tech. You know, really large breasted woman, she is over here and she is brushing her chest off with a towel and she is getting all wet. And she looks frustrated, and I'm like, 'oh, I've got something for you.' And she's like, 'what?' I said, 'I have a cure for you.' And I come over here, and I'm looking through my cabinet... And she comes over and she is like, 'what is it?' And I turn around and I hand her a jar of Vaseline. And she looks at me like, 'what am I supposed to do with that?' I'm like, 'just think about it!'... And then she all of a sudden got it, and she's like, 'screw you!' And then she walks off. Or whatever. But that's my day-to-day, except there are so many of those, I don't really remember all of them.

Here, Jay demonstrates the process of taking something mundane (a woman wiping off her blouse), and making a sexual reference out of it (getting "wet" at work, caressing one's breasts, in need of a lubricant to cure sexual frustrations) for the sake of humor. Yet, despite the friendly and humorous rapport between Jay and Violet, the humor sequence perpetuates stereotypes about hegemonic masculine humor as fixated on issues of woman's bodies (i.e., Violet's breasts), perversion, and sexual fantasies. It also objectifies women as Violet's simple attempt to get something off of her shirt turns into a sexual plot by Jay. Finally, it perpetuates patriarchal ideals insofar as Jay's narrative tells the story of a (working) woman with an ailment in need of his "cure;" in other words, Violet is all "wet" and frustrated from rubbing a damp towel over her shirt (or from caressing her breasts, from Jay's perspective). Jay offers Violet a cure for her (sexualized) frustrated attempts. Violet refuses Jay's remedy however, once she realizes that Vaseline is in fact a humorous sexual innuendo and reference to a lubricant, intended for sexual pleasure and/or masturbation. This joke sequence also privileges heteronormativity by portraying both women and men flirty and hyper-sexual at work.

The second example of a sexist humor theme emerged in the form of the classic dumb blonde joke. Dumb-blond jokes have circulated in American humor for decades and were popularized in dozens of Hollywood films featuring dimwitted and promiscuous blonde bombshells (Shifman & Lemish, 2010; Oring, 2003; Prichard, 2006). According to humor theorists, “dumb-blond jokes are really [jokes] about women in general... the blonde is merely a placeholder for joking about a particular set of values for which the blonde is regarded as symbolically appropriate – though not a sociologically accurate representation” (Oring, 2003, p. 62). Upon Googling “Dumb Blonde Jokes” for the purpose of this project, hundreds of websites and books exclusively dedicated to dumb blonde jokes populated my screen. One such text, *The Ultimate Dumb Blonde Joke Book* (Kellett & Gloury, 2013) featured the following two dumb blonde jokes on the cover as teasers for the readers: “Why did the blonde jump off a cliff? Because she thought her maxi pad had wings!” and, “What do you call a blonde with a brain? A golden Labrador!” Another example of the way that women have been stereotyped as both stupid and promiscuous through dumb blonde humor cycles is illustrated in the following joke: “How does a blonde turn on the lights after sex? She opens the car door” (Shifman & Lemish, 2010, p. 20). In each of the above examples, blonde women are ridiculed for their idiocy, as well as objectified (as dogs and sexual beings).

Despite my perception that blonde jokes are distasteful and outdated, I was confronted with more than one during my observations and interviews, if only the mention of how frequently they get exchanged in barbershop settings. For example, Christine said the following about her previous job at a barbershop, “a lot of the women

[barbers] came and went because they just couldn't handle a lot [of the humor]." She then told the story of a female coworker who would often complain about the (number and content of) blonde jokes in the shop. Christine explained, "She said, 'I don't need to put up with it. I don't want to hear any more blonde jokes.' Well gosh! Guess what?" she said, and in a sarcastic tone, continued:

All six men [barbers and clients], started with blonde jokes. She ran out of the shop, and I ran after her and told her, 'Why are you working here? You need to go somewhere else, because it ain't gonna stop. It's only going to get worse now!

Christine's coworker eventually quit. Her story paints a grim picture for female barbers; one whereby professional women are subject to relentless sexist teasing that worsens if resisted or confronted. Christine's claim that "it ain't gonna stop" also demonstrates the generally accepted understanding of barbershop humor as sexist by tradition. Her story also portrays a bleak future for change; according to Christine, it is better to leave the business if female barbers are not able to endure a future of sexist humor. Here, sexual harassment *is* the bar; women must work under man's rule and standards. By setting this condition, Christine actively participates in the sexist humor cycles that discourage women from working as barbers.

Arthur, owner of Dad's Barbershop in Phoenix, also told me a sexist/blonde joke. Arthur first admitted that the joke was not his own, but one he had heard over the years at his shop. Arthur is originally from Europe and spoke in a strong accent and somewhat broken English. The following is from my fieldnotes and interview with Arthur:

"So you're gonna hear more like I said about woman's jokes. We're [barbers] gonna joke about the blondes for example. We're not correct at all. One of the jokes, if you want I can tell you?" I gathered from his intonation that he was asking me for permission.

I said, “yeah, that’s fine.” So Arthur continued, “Why the blonde when she's going to church, she doesn't get on knees in front of the God, why?" As a good audience member is supposed to do, I repeated, “Why?” Arthur finished the joke, “Because automatic the mouth opens,” Arthur motions an opening mouth movement with his hands and bursts into a hearty laughter. “You know these type of jokes we do here, you're not going to do it in a beauty salon, you know what I'm saying?”

According to research by Oring (2003), the “blondes” in the blonde jokes are not merely stupid, but “sexually active. They invite sex.” (p. 60). In Arthur’s joke, the blonde is portrayed as both stupid (by confusing prayer behaviors with oral sex positions) and sexually inviting through her “automatic” sexual response once on her knees. Sexist humor is perhaps the most detrimental to women, as it objectifies women as passive sexual (and organizational) participants, especially in settings where women are muted or absent. Moreover, women “are more frequently targeted [and]...likely to be affected to a greater degree by denigration through sexist humor” (Kochersberger, Ford, Woodzicka, Romero-Sanchez, & Carretero-Dios, 2014, p. 442). In a work setting, the telling and retelling of sexist jokes have demoralizing consequences for victims; their marginalized status and stereotypical gendered portrayals are made normative organizational discourse that we are inevitably “gonna hear” (Clair, 1993).

The above exemplars depict a hyper-sexual, innuendo-laden version of masculine humor in the hair industry. Collectively, the narratives portray the men as sexist entertainers, at least to the degree that they can pervert an otherwise mundane punch line or story plot. Evident here, as it was in the above hair salon data, is the active participation among organizational members (both barbers and hair stylists) who perpetuate and sustain stereotypical gender norms and expectations embedded in organizational discourse. These findings contribute to Ashcraft and Pacanowsky’s (1996)

conclusion that organizational members, even those who are part of the marginalized group, actively contribute to hegemonic discourses and the construction of their own gendered work communities.

**Teasing and ridicule: “Counting the bulbs.”** A third theme that emerged in the barbershop data was humor directed at other men, typically in the form of teasing, ridicule, or pranks (i.e., practical jokes). Together, these humor styles represent a more aggressive or hostile form of other-directed humor, thus supporting the superiority theory of humor (Allen et al., 2004; Keith-Speigel, 1984). Aggressive humor styles have often been studied in relation to blue-collar, all-male work groups (such as the barbershop) whereby ridicule, teasing, and horseplay, for example, represent organizational norms via displays of hegemonic masculinity (Collinson, 1988, 2002; Gibson & Papa, 2015; Hay, 2000). According to my participants’ narratives, anyone who is present is subject to being the target of teasing – whether it be a fellow barber, a client, innocent bystander, or even a child. The following collection of stories from my fieldnotes and interviews with the barbers showcase the ways they engaged in aggressive humor styles at work.

The first story was taken from my observations and interviews with Dan, Hector and Russ at H&H Barbershop in Sacramento. I asked the men to share stories, funny stories that had happened at work. Dan volunteered to go first, though he insisted that I would not find any humor in his jokes. I encouraged him anyway, and Dan shared the following:

“We have a bunch of bums that come in here,” he paused, as if to build suspense for a punch line, but as he paused, Hector quickly interrupted (as he frequently did).

Hector said, “And we look at them and say,” then stopping to point at Dan, “Oh man, it's your brother again!” The three men burst into laughter. Dan

picked up the story where Hector left off, “And I tell them, ‘hey, you want the damn want ads from the paper again? Take 'em!’”

Here, Hector and Dan engage in a quick and playful teasing sequence whereby Hector interrupts Dan’s story to take a funny jab at Dan, insisting that his homeless “bum” brother is back again. However, Dan is not the only target in this joke, the “bunch of bums” is also ridiculed for not having jobs. Dan’s final punch line is humorous insofar as it explicitly states the obvious (which humor often does) – since the “bums” cannot possibly afford a haircut or shave, they must be visiting the barbershop for their want ads, a feature of print newspapers where jobs are typically posted.

The second story is from Bobby at the Retro Phoenix Barbershop. When I asked Bobby to describe the type(s) of humor he has witnessed and remembers from his barbershop, he first mentioned that the shop frequently has a lot of “jokers” come in the shop, and that he and Mauricio (the owner) like to “mess around with the clients” as well. Bobby then told a story about a young man who walked into his shop with “weird hair:”

“We just start laughing!” Bobby said, “and it’s just, ‘WOW! What happened to you?’” Again, Bobby laughed, and then reenacted a humorous dialogue with clients with similar bad hair situations, “Or we’ll ask them ‘hey who cut your hair?’ Most of them will say, ‘oh my cousin,’” Bobby stopped to laugh and sarcastically said, “Yeah, we already know!’ We’ll know that because a lot of people end up trying to do it [cut their hair] themselves and you can tell right away...when we see them, we’re like ‘we can’t believe it! I wouldn’t go out with my hair like that if that was me!’” Again he laughed, “I have done it to myself, but nothing that bad, you know?”

In this fieldnote exemplar, Bobby and his coworker Mauricio tease (and laugh at) clients for their bad haircuts, although the barbershop is precisely the place their clients should go when they need hair help. When the customers try to defend and/or explain themselves, they are met with sarcasm and more teasing about their self-made (or cousin

barber) haircuts. This style of harmless ridicule is a common, if not staple, characteristic of barbershop banter, and some have argued it is what makes the experience worthwhile (Alexander, 2003; Thompson, 2009). However, it is this style of humor, outright ridicule of another person, that is often perceived as masculine due to the ways it conflicts with stereotypical gender norms regarding feminine communication patterns (Nilsen, 1993; Tannen, 1993, 1994). For example, several hair stylists and barbers suggested that men can and do “get away with more” in their humor, than women. Tawnee explained, “one guy I know was talking to a client, and she was complaining about her boyfriend. And he’s like, ‘that’s because he’s cheating on you, let’s move on!’...If I had said that, she would probably get up and leave or start crying.” She then went on to share that she was “envious, like, how do I get to that point?” in her humor with her customers. This data supports research about women who engage in masculine styles of humor at work as often judged and/or perceived as less feminine (Martin, 2004).

The next story is from my interview with Marco. I had just asked Marco to share a funny story and to describe the type(s) of humor that go on in his barbershop in Sacramento. He immediately began reminiscing about a time when he was a kid, working in his dad’s barbershop:

“It was a small town,” Marco explained, “back then, if you were the star quarterback, and you had a bad game, the barbers would give it to you!” He laughed, remembering his past, “Back then, they would tease people, ride them on things that they did wrong. Like, the paper took a picture of my nephew getting pinned [while wrestling] and when my nephew came in the shop, one of the barbers asked him, ‘were you counting the bulbs [on the gym ceiling]?’”

Marco remembered one more story he wanted to tell, this time, where he did the teasing. “And just the other day, a young guy came in, and showed me a picture of Brad Pitt. He said he wanted his hair like that. So I said, ‘the only way to do that is if we staple that picture on your forehead, because you are never going to look like that!’ and all the guys laughed.

Taken together, these narratives reveal a culture (and general acceptance) of other-directed humor (i.e., teasing, sarcasm, ridicule) in the barbershop. As mentioned by Brad, “the teasing never ends!” Similar to research by Lynch (2010), this data showed that “seemingly cruel and teasing humor [among] the workers” is an organizational norm. Research has also shown that this type of humor, in single-sex (and especially all-male) groups, functions to increase in-group bonding and therefore, establish organizational norms of interaction for in-group members (Hay, 2000; Lynch, 2010). In-group humor has multiple paradoxical functions; for example, it both strengthens the bond for those who are *in* on the joke, yet simultaneously distances others, whether it is the target of the joke or outsiders. Moreover, in-group humor ultimately “encourages/forces in-group members to conform to the group’s preferred meanings,” and in this case, gendered organizational humor (Lynch, p. 154). In any case, when the dominant group’s preferred meanings are being imposed upon work group members, hegemonic ideologies are reinforced.

In this case, the dominant “group’s preferred meanings” are reflected in other’s directed humor, or in other words, masculine humor patterns (Collinson, 1988). For example, teasing demonstrates the power and authority of the teaser over the teased, seeks to purposefully demean an “other,” and forces the target of the joke to publicly withstand ridicule among their peers, thus conforming to competitive masculine speech/humor patterns (Collinson; Hay, 2000). The following quote by Christine, a former barber and now hair stylist, further demonstrates this competitive quality embedded in the masculine/barbershop humor she has experienced. Christine explained that in the barbershop, “you can give it just as much as you take it. The men didn’t curl up

and cry. You weren't in that atmosphere...I mean, come on? If it's offensive, you just get in their face, and that's what I did. And I would find something better to come back with!" Here, in order to keep up with the men, Christine learned to embrace the dominant humor style, withhold emotions (much like the men did), and compete even harder. In essence, she adopted the dominant ideology, and thus sustained hegemonic organizational discourse norms regarding gendered humor patterns.

**Physical pranks: "It's a fart machine."** The teasing that took place was not always verbal, but also included various practical jokes and/or physical pranks played on one another as well. The final theme that emerged in the barbershop humor data was truly an extension of the previous one, yet represents a more physical and strategic style of aggressive humor. The following narratives from my fieldnotes and interviews represent a short collection of stories told by the barbers about their favorite pranks that occurred in their shops.

Hector and Dan, barbers at H&H Barbershop in Sacramento, told the first story. I had already asked the men to tell me about a funny story or joke at work, and their stories kept flowing. After telling me the story about the "bums," Dan said, "Oh, Hector! Tell her about that time you had that fart machine!" Hector chuckled, and shared the following:

"Oh, yeah the fart machine! I had a fart machine that day. It's great! I came in early and put it in a box and I put it over there some place." He pointed to an area off to the side of the shop. Hector continued, "I wanted it by Dan, or close to him, because it was remote control, and the people come in, you know? There was this young couple. And, she was sitting there" Hector points to the waiting area, "and he [Dan] starts cutting his hair. And I go like this, and I'm pushing it." Hector slyly pushes a fake button off to the side, and makes a sound effect "Brrrr!" He laughs. "Dan, get a grip of yourself." Both the men start to laugh.

Hector continues, “And the girl goes, she's all embarrassed you know? She looks up, and I see her face. But the guy didn't say anything. Because they sound just like a fart. And, brrrrrr” Hector makes another sound. “And then Dan goes, ‘I don't know if that's me. I don't feel it?’” Dan shakes his head, but keeps laughing. Hector went on, “And it was funny! He didn't know what was going on! And I walked outside, you know? Because it's remote control. So I am out there going,” Hector again mimicked pushing the fart machine button over and over, while his laughter continued to grow, Dan’s too! “Before they [the couple] left, I said, ‘hey, hey! It's a fart machine!’ I told them. You know, I wanted them to come back!”

Hector’s prank plays off of two things: Dan’s vulnerability and his ignorance (i.e., inability to tell if he was actually farting and/or to recognize that a prank was being played on him). Much like prior studies of masculine humor patterns, the prank victim (Dan) is susceptible to further teasing and ridicule the longer he demonstrates his vulnerability (Collinson, 1988). Gender scholars have often argued that this style of humor aims to feminize and marginalize its target by publicly challenging one’s masculinity in organizational settings (Berger, 2001; Collinson; Gilbert, 2004). In doing so, the humor reinforces a dominant and hegemonic masculinity by making it preferred, triumphant and ultimately, more clever.

The next story is from Brad, whose shop is situated next to a bar. As Brad described, many of the jokes, pranks, and bets that go on in his shop originate in the adjacent bar, as they have a longstanding partnership and rapport between the businesses.

Brad explained:

“They sell real big beers out of the bar, and so one of the bets is whether or not someone can drink a whole beer with in 20 seconds and then read the [services offered] board [in the barbershop]. But what a lot of people don't realize is the tabs at the bar have a special system so they come out ice cold. So...their throat is so cold that they can't speak [and therefore cannot read the sign]...And everybody, everything stops and everybody’s watching it and filming it.”

I then asked Brad if this was a common occurrence at his barbershop, playing pranks on each other? Brad said, “oh yeah, all day!”

In this story, Brad makes a bet with another man that Brad is certain will lose due to his prior knowledge of the beer temperature; this is the essence of the prank. The betting victim is tricked from the start into a chugging contest that “everybody” is watching and filming. In this way, there is a certain amount peer pressure to successfully complete the beer drinking challenge in front of a lively crowd, yet to no avail. Ultimately, Brad wins the bet each time while the target remains literally speechless. Brad’s prank supports top-down organizational humor literature whereby higher status organizational members employ superiority-based humor techniques to persuade and manipulate lower status members (Lynch, 2010; Mullany, 2004; Tracy et al., 2006). This pattern not only functions to sustain organizational hierarchies, but also to assert hegemonic masculinity norms of humorous interactions.

The final story is from Pole, the owner of a hair salon in Phoenix. Although Pole is not a barber, he was the only (male) stylist who shared a prank at work. In fact, only one other stylist, Denise (a former barber) shared a story about a practical joke she played on her coworkers; no other hair stylists discussed this style of humor in the hair salon. Pole however, said that he used to do practical jokes “all the time.” He then shared the following example:

“I would get fake cockroaches, and put them in the candy machine. What’s great is when you pour it out [the candy with the cockroach in it], and they throw it! So much fun!” Pole let out a guilty laugh, which clearly indicated his love of practical jokes.

“But I do that to my husband all the time. I booby-trapped cockroaches in his medicine cabinet one day, and good thing I was there! He was like ‘the only reason I didn’t scream like a girl is because you were in the bathroom!’

In this example, Pole juxtaposes his personal and professional humor by enacting the same prank on his customers as he does at home with his husband. Pole introduces

gender stereotypes into the story at the point where he says, “and good thing I was there,” and again when he reported his husband saying, “the only reason I didn’t scream like a girl is because you were in the bathroom.” Their dialogue suggests that it is inappropriate to scream and act afraid in front of other men and that screaming itself is a feminine reaction. Although this humorous exchange occurred in the privacy of Pole’s home, it reveals gender expectations and stereotypes about how masculinity is best performed in the context of humor.

Pranks and practical jokes represent a unique form of organizational humor, one that illuminates the paradoxical role of gendered humor in the workplace. For example, pranks are often memorable, and therefore provide “fodder” for future pranks; in essence, they set a precedent that others-directed humor is acceptable at work, especially as they are repeated (even by owners) as a normative function of organizational culture (Lynch, 2010, p. 143). Pranks also represent a more physical and hostile style of humor, and as seen above often require strategic planning on behalf of the humorist. In other words, practical jokers fully intend to trick their targets and triumph over victims in front of an audience. Gender humor scholars have often reported that men both appreciate and engage in more strategic, physical (e.g., slapstick, pranks) and antagonistic (e.g., teasing, ridicule) styles of humor (Hay, 2000), even at work as attempts to assert authority and perform masculinity in front of others (Collinson, 1988). This was shown to be the case on several occasions as the male barbers, six in all, shared stories of laughable practical jokes that took place in their shops.

However, pranks and practical jokes also detract from work productivity, and therefore act as resistance to hegemonic organizational norms and demands for *work*

(Lynch, 2010). In other words, as organizational members engage in humorous acts, their effects become prioritized, if only momentarily, over their workplace productivity. This claim was supported in Brad's narrative when he said, "everything stopped and everybody watched." Because hair salons and barbershops are free from traditional corporate restraints, the setting and organizational structure of the barbershop lend themselves toward more flexible interpretations of organizational norms and expectations. In the above narratives, for example, the barbers took time out of their work schedules to plan and execute elaborate pranks that either victimized one of their coworkers, or exposed the vulnerabilities of their clients. Therefore, while pranks and practical jokes resist organizational norms of productivity, they simultaneously set up conditions for unequal power distribution (i.e., organizational hierarchies, patriarchal discourse) in support of hegemony through masculine styles of humor.

### **Summary**

Collectively, the above narratives detail the participants' perceptions of and experiences with gendered humor patterns in various barbershop settings. The collection of sexist, blonde, and others-directed humor showcases the dominant themes that emerged during the data collection process. Several conclusions can be drawn from this data including the way that barbershop humor privileges heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity via gender exclusionary and hyper-masculine organizational discourse patterns (e.g., décor and humor). These conclusions will be elaborated upon in the following chapter. It is important to also note that these were not the only humor styles evidenced in the data, but rather the most frequently experienced or shared stories and perceptions, perhaps because they were the most memorable. Also, the participants'

stories were often described as occurring all in the spirit of good fun, or as part of an ongoing attempt to maintain traditional barbershop norms of gendered interaction. For example, Hector said, “most of the people that come here, come here because they like the *old* barbershop,” Hector emphasized the word “old.” “And we want to have a good time, and the people know us, so they know that,” Hector said. Also, Jay explained, “when men do it [use humor], we do it for the humor.”

Yet, the styles of humor most commonly narrated by the participants (e.g., sexual humor, teasing, pranks) also contributed to the general perception that one must develop a “thick skin” in order to work in a barbershop, due to the ways that jokes are relentlessly played *on* one another. Several barbers reiterated this essential organizational quality. For example, Christine reflected on her past experience as a woman working in a barbershop, and shared, “To work in a barbershop, if you can’t, how do you say it? If you can’t, let’s say take it! You have to have thick skin and if you can’t take a joke, turn around and walk out!” Implied in Denise’s description of barbershop humor is that jokes are bound to be *done unto you*, in other words, “you” are going to be target or butt of a joke at some point, and if this is bothersome, perhaps it is better to work elsewhere. Bobby reiterated this organizational norm, “you have to have thick skin [in a barbershop] and look the other way and learn to be, you know? Regardless of the fact, if a guy says something, it’s just words. It’s not going to kill me.” Together, these testimonials communicate a message of organizational endurance; a need to endure offensive, aggressive, and even sexist humor cycles in organizational settings, because that is simply the way it is and “it’s not going to kill” anyone (Bobby). What is more, the participants actively contribute to (i.e., constitute) these workplace conditions by engaging in stereotypical gendered

humor patterns that support organizational hegemony. These conclusions are also elaborated upon in the final chapter.

### **Gay Male Humor in the Industry**

*“They [gay men] have the best of both worlds. They are like female and male, and they’re funny, you know?”*

-Christine, hair stylist (and former barber)

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In this final data section, titled “gay male humor in the industry,” I explore gay male humor from the salon industry participants perspectives. It is important to note that I encountered little to no “lesbian” humor, and therefore did not address (and/or combine) LGBTQ community members as one homogenous group in this space. None of the individuals in this study disclosed lesbian, bisexual, transgendered or queer identities, yet two of the three male hair stylists I interviewed did disclose they were gay. Finally, it is important to consider the distinction between gender and sexual identity, as they are not (nor were they treated as) one in the same. Rather, gender identity, in the context of this study refers to one’s performance of feminine and/or masculine qualities, whereas sexual identity typically refers to one’s sexual orientation.

As mentioned above, gay male humor emerged as a third and liminal space, somewhere between feminine and masculine humor, yet still sharing qualities with both. Though the data in this section represents a smaller set of interview excerpts and observations than the previous two, the data renders much needed attention. An analysis of gay male humor in this context is relevant for many reasons, first due to the population of gay males who make up a majority of the positions held by men in hair salons (Barber,

2008; Gimlin, 1996; Lawson, 1999; Nordberg, 2002), second due to the lack of research on queer/gay humor overall, and third, so as not to further bifurcate/generate gender differences in terms of sex and gender binaries in organizational studies (i.e., male/female, masculine/feminine), thus marginalizing, if not ignoring completely, alternative populations and gender diversity (Jacobs, 1996).

According to the literature, gay male speech and humor patterns have often been explained in binary gendered terms – as extensions of feminine speech and humor patterns, yet sharing (hegemonic) masculine qualities and/or motives (Gotman et al., 2003; Reed, 2011). If one were to imagine a gender spectrum, gay male humor patterns, according to scholars, would lie at the borders of feminine and masculine humor, and therefore constitute a third and liminal space. Perhaps their liminal position is due to perceptions of “gay” men (by heterosexuals) as being (and/or having qualities of) both female/feminine and male/masculine, similar to what Christine stated above. (The term “gay” will be used in place of “homosexual male” throughout the remainder of this chapter in efforts to reflect the participants’ vernacular). To further illustrate, Vlaude, a barber in Phoenix Arizona said, “for me maybe it’s funny because they [gay males] joke about woman, and you know, and act like woman,” he paused for a moment, then in his rich European accent asked confusedly, “and look at them like men? That doesn’t match!” Furthermore, Jill, a stylist in Phoenix shared, “Most of the salon people are women, or they are gay men. So we are all on our period at the same time! ... So we will all be in a bad mood for about a week, but we all just laugh.” In both of these excerpts, gay stylists laugh at, and alongside women, sharing women’s sense of humor and even their menstrual cycles, yet still occupy a man’s body. In this way, their heterosexual peers

socially situate gay men at the intersections of feminine and masculine gender identities, speech patterns and humor.

Within this third space, society has generated a plethora of stereotypical perceptions about gay humor; for example, that it playfully insults women, mocks (hegemonic) masculinity, is often sex-focused, and above all else, is ostentatious in its performance (e.g., utilizes a broader vocal range, dramatic paralanguage) (Jacobs, 1996; Mauldin, 2000; Reed, 2011). As evidenced in the opening quote, gay humor in the hair industry was described in similar ways; several participants compared “gay” humor to feminine humor patterns, contrasted it to “straight” humor, and used gender stereotypes to label and make sense of distinctly “gay” humor patterns. All 30 of my participants, however, reported that gay men (in the hair industry and writ large) are much funnier than their “straight” counterparts.

**Sexual humor: “Ok, slow down!”**

The following excerpt is from my interview with Camme, the owner of Timeless Hair Salon in Phoenix, and demonstrates the way that gay humor was compared and contrasted to both feminine and masculine humor in terms of sexual humor and vulgarity, the first emergent theme concerning gay humor styles and content.

The gay guys are definitely more funny [*sic*] than the straight guys. But the straight guys, I think the gay guys are more vulgar, but then the straight guys can get vulgar too, but then the girls can be raunchy too.

This excerpt is interesting in several ways. First, it shows how gay hair stylists are perceived as funnier than their “straight” peers in the salon. In this way, “gay” is funnier than “straight,” one might argue both as a gendered identity/performance and in the context of gendered organizational humor. Second, Camme labels both “gay guy” and

“straight guy” humor as “vulgar” (later compared to “girls” humor as also “raunchy”) as she attempts to explain why gay hair stylists are funnier than “straight” hair stylists.

Despite naming gay men as funnier, which one might argue is a virtuous attribute, this particular portrayal of gay humor as vulgar functions to fuel negative gender stereotypes about the nature of gay (as well as masculine) humor as sex-laden/dirty (Mauldin, 2000).

The following quote by Bonanza further perpetuates the stereotypical perception that gay humor is focused on sex. I asked Bonanza to describe her perception of gender differences in hair salon humor (i.e., differences in the ways that women and men use humor in the hair salon, and whether or not gender identity plays a role in these differences), and she explained:

I think my gay [men]... are usually the first to break out the sexual humor. Or if I even hint at a joke, they will take it all the way. They will take it to the point where it's like, 'ok, slow down!' I would say the gay males and the straight females do that.

In both of the above excerpts, Camme and Bonanza point to the ways that gay humor pushes organizational boundaries in terms of vulgarity, but also professionalism.

Bonanza's warning to gay males that they need to “slow down” implicates both gay men and straight women as ready and willing to push the status quo by engaging in taboo (i.e., sexual) humor at work, yet the warning also gives the impression that this style of humor is considered unprofessional. Therefore, although the perception of vulgar and/or sexual humor challenges the norms of organizational discourse, it teeters on the edge of what is acceptable, even in an organizational environment that is free from traditional corporate rules and regulations.

### **Critical humor: “You need to lose 5 pounds.”**

Indeed, gay stylists were consistently described as funnier than both female and male hair stylists in part because, as the participants described, gay men are equipped with a unique power to “get away” with humor that heterosexual women and men cannot. This field note excerpt from my interview with Chloe showcases this shared perception:

“Well, there was this really hot gay guy. He was pretty funny! He could get away, you know, if you are gay and hot you can get away with pretty much anything... he could say anything. He could be like, ‘girl,’” Chloe mimicked a high-pitch, sassy and feminine tone, while waving her hand in the air. “‘You need lose 5 pounds!’ And she'd be like, ‘ok!’” Chloe fakes a giggle.

I then asked Chloe why she thought that gay men could “get away” with more (in the context of humor). She replied, “Because he's hot, and he'll make out with you, but it doesn't mean anything. Any girl will listen to a hot guy!”

Embedded in Chloe's narrative are several claims about the influence of gender on humor. For example, Chloe gives power (i.e., the ability to get away with “pretty much anything”) to all attractive men in her claim that “any girl will listen to a hot guy.” This power is then transferred to a fellow gay hair stylist who was allowed to get away with publicly critiquing a female client's weight. Chloe's reenactment of the stereotypical and humorously high-pitched, “girl!” exclamation, coupled with an overtly feminine mannerism – the over the head hand wave that Chloe used to mimic stereotypical gay paralinguistics, helps achieve stereotypical gendered portrayals of all her story characters (Mauldin, 2000). Chloe then imitates a nameless female client, who says “ok!” and giggles, thus accepting the critique from the man simply because he is gay and good looking. Finally, the gay stylist in the story mocks heterosexual masculinity by “making out” with other women, yet both parties (the gay male and the heterosexual female) understand and accept that their physical intimacy in no way implicates a romantic

relationship. Taken together, and according to this narrative, gay humor playfully critiques women, sexually engages women (and escapes the female's expectation for an intimate relationship that a heterosexual man might encounter), and gets away with this lighthearted humor all because gay men are good looking. Chloe's package portrayal of gay humor perpetuates many of the homosexual gender stereotypes found in the research, namely, that gay humor insults women, mocks masculinity, and is often focused on issues of sexuality (Jacobs, 1996; Reed, 2011).

Jay further elaborated on the ability for gay men to "get away" with humorous behavior that heterosexual men cannot:

"Like Chip downstairs, what's interesting about him as a gay male who is very outwardly [gay], the things he can do and get away with like man-to-man are completely different than me! Like, you know, he can walk into a room and fart and go, 'was that you? Or was that me?'" Jay laughed, "I can't do that! He can talk about sexuality, he can talk about like disturbing biological sexuality, and everybody will laugh at it. But if I were to conjure the same sentence, it'd be like, 'you're disgusting!' ... [and] I don't know if it's because of the charm and charisma thing, or because of the gay tone. Or is it [homosexuality] just more accepted? Is it my being monotone?"

Then slurring his voice he mimics a gay man, "'like, you are not going to believe what I found in my poop today!'" then adopting a monotone and deeper pitch states, "versus, 'you are not going to believe what I found in my poop today' ... And I can't add that level, with that tonality, without being taken as, 'is Jay gay?'"

I first found it interesting that Jay "outed" his coworker (without permission), though over the course of my interviews, I began to get the impression that this was an industry in which homosexuals are frequently "out," and/or outted by their coworkers. Certainly, as the research suggests, gay humor has been stereotyped as outing and/or othering itself from the heterosexual population – perhaps the heterosexual community has also adopted this practice when and if talking about or imitating gay humor (Mauldin, 2000; Quimby,

2005). The next thing I found interesting was the way that Jay described his coworker getting away with things “man-to-man” in the context of humor. For example, Jay mentioned that his coworker could fart in public, talk openly about sexuality (and “disturbing biological sexuality,” though I was not quite certain what that meant), and is allowed to slur and play with vocal tones – behaviors that Jay considers funny but as a heterosexual man, cannot get away with. As Jay explains, Chip’s bathroom humor is laughed at, even appreciated by his coworkers on the basis that Chip is gay, and therefore allowed to joke about bodily functions. Throughout Jay’s narrative, Chip’s humor parodies hegemonic masculine humor by engaging in the same patterns (vulgarity, bodily humor) (Collinson, 1988) yet curtails the expected consequences that heterosexual males might endure if they were to engage in this humor in front of women or mixed sex work groups (e.g., people misperceiving them as “disgusting” or judging them as “gay”).

The idea that gay men are “getting away” with something at work that others (i.e., heterosexuals) cannot, suggests that gay stylists are behaving in nontraditional ways that might otherwise be reprimanded in a more traditional (i.e., heteronormative) organizational setting. In this way, one might argue that gay humor functions to resist the organizational status quo in that it rarely participates in heteronormative and hegemonic organizational humor discourses and instead, pushes boundaries via alternative humor styles and content that disrupt organizational and gender norms. This resistance pattern is interesting insofar as it invites new possibilities and interpretations of gendered humor from within the organization that cannot be explained in binary gendered terms. What my data revealed however was that this type of resistance was often humorously communicated at the expense of perpetuating and/or maintaining existing gender

stereotypes about gay humor. This was evidenced in the ways the participants narrated and acted out their stories, even playing the part of their gay coworkers in stereotypical ways (e.g., using a higher tone or lisp, feminine mannerisms, and stereotypical vernacular).

**Feminine humor qualities: “Gossiping gabbin’ BFFs.”**

The participants also described gay humor as gossipy, as well as centered on beauty and (often other’s) physical appearance. Jill showed this comparison between gay and feminine humor in the following narrative:

“So the two straight men (stylists) are serious, they are serious! And they don't really joke around...they are not gossiping, and they're not gabbin' and joking around and being carefree!” There was almost a sense of disappointment that I could detect in Jill’s voice.

She continued, “Whereas the straight man is very serious, and,” then mimicking a hyper masculine, almost robotic vocal tone, says “‘let me do my job,’ and ‘there you go,’ and then go home and go to the wife.” Jill’s face softens again. “Whereas, when I see Chip” (who I know is a gay male stylist) “and Laura, they are laughing all day long...you will hear them start to sing and dance as they are grabbing their clients...And Chip, walks in everyday with some sort of new funny joke or what he did last night, or you know, he'll walk in knowing that he looks damn good! And his day is going to be awesome!”

Here, Jill implies that gay men gossip, gab, joke in carefree ways, and look “damn good” doing it, while the straight men are hard at work, more serious about the task at hand, and ultimately focused on getting home to “the wife.” This portrayal of gay men does a few important things regarding humor and gender within the organization. First, it stereotypes gay men in similar ways to women via feminine humor styles and content – in other words, gay stylists are gossipy, gabby coworkers, much like women. Second, it assumes gay men are not focused on getting home to their spouse/partner, but instead laughing, singing, dancing, and sharing stories with their female coworkers. Jill communicates this

perception by using heteronormative language that situates men as breadwinners and women as already at home waiting; also by labeling gay stylists as “carefree” then immediately comparing their organizational demeanor to a “straight” man’s task-oriented work ethic. Jill also used her voice in strategic ways (i.e., adopting a masculine and robotic tone) to mock men’s means of conducting business. Her sarcasm ultimately challenges patriarchal workplace values, yet also portrays gay and female stylists as more interested in having a good time than getting their work done so they may return to an empty home. Finally, the narrative dramatizes Chip’s confidence by using egoist language (such as, “knowing he looks damn good!”) to describe Chip’s attractiveness. In this way, it emphasizes Chip’s confidence about his physical appearance over his talent/skill set, and how his appearance guarantees him a good day.

The next quote below from my interview with Katya further elaborates on the unique humor qualities shared between gay men and women. As Katya and I were discussing the differences between feminine and masculine humor, our interview took an interesting, unscripted turn. Katya started to discuss who are more successful in the hair industry, men or women. Katya first explained, “it kills me to say it, but men are more successful, they are proven to be more successful, only because females love being told they are beautiful by a male, regardless if they are straight or gay.” I must have looked surprised, because Katya laughed and continued to explain:

“Yeah, even if they [stylists] are gay, then the girls [clients] are like, ‘oh! He is my BFF!’” Katya mimics a giddy schoolgirl tone, laughs, and continues, “And he is looking out for me! And he can make me look so pretty! And he *knows!*” she then begins to nod her head and adopts a more sarcastic tone, “he *knows* what's pretty!” Katya laughs.

In this excerpt, Katya places a heavy burden on gay male stylists to not only befriend their female clients, but to look out for them by using their expert (gay) beauty knowledge and (assumed) “female” intuition. Female clients are the most sought after customers in the hair industry, given the money women are expected to spend on hair services and products (Lawson, 1999). As such, men are given the upper hand if what Katya says about women (loving to be told they are beautiful by a man), is true. Data from my interview with Erin reiterated this assertion:

I think women...want a man's opinion. They want a man to tell them, ‘oh you look pretty’ or ‘oh, your hair is beautiful!’ Even if it’s gay or straight...and I think a lot of times, they [male stylists] get busier because of it.

Gay men therefore, have an even greater advantage than heterosexual men (and especially over women), according to Katya’s rationality, because in addition to making a woman feel beautiful and complimented by a man, gay stylists also offer their female clients the added bonus qualities of a “BFF,” on top of their industry knowledge. While the above narratives do not showcase explicit examples of organizational humor in the form of joke telling or humorous stories, they do shed light on the ways that gay hair stylists are stereotyped in similar ways to women, as well as contrasted to heterosexual men in terms of humor style, content, and even industry expertise.

**Masculine humor qualities: “Not a magician.”**

In addition to sharing stereotypical feminine humor qualities, gay humor was also explained as being other’s focused and hypercritical, or qualities often associated with (heterosexual/hegemonic) masculine humor. In the first example, Andrew, an openly gay stylist and manager a hair salon in Phoenix, shared the following personal story when I asked him to recall something funny that had happened at work:

A specific example would be that a lady was walking by with her stylist, and he was like, 'what can I do for you today?' And she said, 'Can you um, make me look like I lost 60 lbs.?' And *I* said, 'Uh, he's a beautician, not a magician!'" Andrew uttered his last sentence in a sassy, sarcastic tone while raising his eyebrows. "And she never came back to the salon again, soooo, there's that!

After sharing his story, Andrew immediately explained that this was a big mistake and how he ultimately misread his client. He then reiterated the importance of knowing one's audience and who is around before engaging in sarcastic or inappropriate work humor. However, his comical misjudgment (assuming that this client would find humor in his snide remark) also functions to support the superiority theory of humor whereby humorists exalt their own status by marginalizing and/or ostracizing others (Allen et al., 2004; Berger, 2001; Duncan, 1985; Meyer, 2000). In this joke, Andrew targets the woman's weight and appearance, then marginalizes her status as he explains that even a magician could not help her look skinnier. Superiority based humor styles (e.g., critical sarcasm, other-directed hostile humor), are often tied to masculine humor patterns that function to assert authority and power over others (namely, marginalized individuals) (Gilbert, 2004; Rappoport, 2005). If and when these patterns surface at work, they carry devastating consequences for (already) marginalized populations who are ridiculed by those interested in maintaining the status quo, gender stereotypes, and/or social norms of organizational discourse. What's more, Andrew actively participated in a joke sequence that perpetuates existing negative gender stereotypes about gay men – their tendency to playfully insult women and focus on beauty and (another's) physical image.

Katya shared another example of gay humor that playfully insulted women, whilst being hypercritical in the following narrative. I asked Katya to describe the differences, if any, between gay and "straight" male stylists' humor in the hair industry, and she replied:

“Well, gay males will tear down a female in heartbeat in an instant! They love to joke about tearing down girls, they are like,” then mimicking a hyper-feminine and harsh tone, ““Oh girl! Your eyelashes!’ Like they will tear you down! And you have to be more on your toes with them [gay men] because they notice more things than a straight man would. A straight man would be like, ‘oh, you have blue eyes,’ and you are like, ‘no, I have brown, but it's cool.’ Where a gay man, it's like ‘uh-oh that shadow does *not* go with your eyes, and that jewelry does *not* go with your skin!’” Here, Katya emphasized the word *not* with her voice by raising her volume. She then stated, “I think that's just the personality of the salon environment in general.”

It was difficult for me to tell whether the “personality of the salon environment in general” was being described as hypercritical of women, or as generally more feminine (than perhaps, a barbershop?) Either way, Katya depicts gay male humor as disparaging in nature; the gay men in her story love to joke about tearing down “girls,” and more specifically, tearing down a women’s body by pointing out her fashion faux pas’ and cosmetic errors (both of which gay men are assumed expert). This style of humor provides an example of superiority humor, most often evidenced in hegemonic/masculine humor patterns (Warner, 2011). Yet, as seen in several of the above excerpts, gay stylists were differentiated from “straight” stylists due to the way they pay extra attention to details regarding women’s beauty and appearance. However, instead of being applauded for their attention to detail, Katya cautions that it is best to be “on your toes” around gay hair stylists, which makes paints a picture of gay stylists as offensive in regard to their humor, and perhaps professional demeanor. I also believe it is important to note that this example also portrays a negative image of heterosexual male hair stylists as ignorant and/or unobservant.

### **Flamboyant humor: “Over the top.”**

One final theme that emerged in this data set was the way gay humor was differentiated from feminine and masculine humor in terms of its overt flamboyancy, as gender stereotypes might suggest. For example, Cynthia said, “I would think gay men are more flamboyant if they are in the industry.” Her statement suggests that gay men are already flamboyant, a common gender stereotype. Then, as Katya described, “you have the really flamboyant gays [hair stylists], who are always like the fun party...some of them are pretty out there.” Taken together, these excerpts set an expectation for gay stylists as eccentric and entertaining coworkers, perhaps the reason they are perceived as funnier than heterosexual men and/or women in the hair industry. The following excerpt is from my interview with Pole and further elaborates on the perception of gay stylists as overly flamboyant. Pole openly disclosed his gender identity as a gay male prior to the interview, and when asked to describe the gender differences in humor at his salon, he shared the following:

Gay men in the hair industry, which it sucks because it is a stereotype, but they are way more flamboyant! Way more expressive! Way more dramatic! So they tend to have conversations like over the top, like something you would see in the Barbershop [movie], you would see that kind of conversation going on. Where a straight guy doing hair is probably not going to be as crazy.

Pole first acknowledges that his perception of gay stylists mirrors gender stereotypes about gay men as more flamboyant, expressive and dramatic (than heterosexual men, and perhaps women?) Pole even references a popular comedic film, *The Barbershop*, as context for his claims. *The Barbershop* was a film made popular in 2002 and features an all-African American cast working as barbers in the south side of Chicago. Pole’s comment about gay male humor being “over the top” in reference to the film, could be

interpreted as a comparison between gay humor and African-American humor stereotypes (e.g., loud, uninhibited, animated). Finally, Pole calls gay men “crazy” by comparing them to their less-crazy heterosexual male coworkers. What I found peculiar about my time spent with Pole was that he did not demonstrate any of stereotypical “gay” behaviors. Rather, I perceived Pole as a quiet, laid-back salon owner, who was hyper-masculine, at least in his appearance (Pole is covered in tattoos, has facial piercings and a shaved head, wore a black shirt, work boots and jeans, and maintained a relatively strong build at approximately 6 feet, 4 inches tall). Yet, he described other gay men as the exact opposite. This pattern was similar to the way that women described *other* women in equally critical and stereotypical ways (e.g., overly emotional, defensive, judgmental). As mentioned by Christine, “women are hard on their own sex!” A similar pattern emerged here as well, whereby a (traditionally) marginalized group was critiquing and stereotyping a member of their own community. For example, here was an opportunity for Pole to talk about his own unique sense or style of humor, or perhaps (re)tell a funny story from work, yet instead, Pole reiterated a gender stereotype; the dramatic, expressive, flamboyant gay stylist.

Chloe shared the following story, which illustrates similar language used to describe gay male humor in the hair industry. I had just asked Chloe to talk about the different types of humor she has witnessed in the hair salon – slapstick, teasing, pranks, etc., and she said:

“There was a really flaming gay guy that worked at Oasis and he was so loud and obnoxious, and it was way over the top!” I prepared myself for a good story. She continued, “He was like 60 or something, and from Miami... one time, I was cutting hair, or it was my first week and I was blow-drying, and he came in with his scissors, his OPEN scissors and pretended he was going to like,” Chloe

sounded shocked and used her hands to mimic a pair of scissors in a hair cutting motion chopping off a majority of her own hair, “and she [the client] was faced away from the mirror, and he [the gay stylist] pretended he was going to cut her hair!” Chloe sounded angry at this point.

“And I was like, ‘that’s not funny! I don’t know who you think you are!’” Chloe shook her head in disappointment. “And then, the same [gay] guy, I remember he told my friend who was pregnant, ‘Damn, you got a fat ass!’ ... Sometimes he was funny, just being loud and gay. Sometimes it was offensive.”

Here, the word *flaming* functions to stereotype and depict a particular level of “gayness,” or in this case, flamboyancy, as Chloe “outs” the main character of her story and provides context for the joke sequence. Chloe also mentions that the gay stylist was loud, obnoxious and like Pole mentioned, “over the top” in the context of humor. She then gives two examples of his humor, the first an offensive prank on a customer, and the second distasteful and colorful insult about a woman’s body. Finally, Chloe stated that sometimes he was funny “just being loud and gay,” hence perpetuating the stereotype that “gay” is indeed just naturally funnier than “straight.”

Several stylists described gay humor in similar ways. For example, Denise said, “I have worked with several [gay men], and they are just more outrageous I think,” though she did not elaborate or give an example of this type of humor when prompted. Humor is often difficult to talk about, and in the moment or on the spot, challenging to recall. Yet given the lack of real-life examples to support the above perceptions about gay humor, I was made to assume that several of the hair stylists’ insights and perceptions of gay humor originated from existing gender stereotypes, perhaps observed in the industry over time, or as Pole mentioned, depicted in the media. This was hard to tell and is therefore a limitation of this data set.

## Summary

In response to my first research question, the above narratives demonstrate the ways that gay humor is gendered in the hair industry. First, gay men were depicted as funnier than their heterosexual coworkers, simply because they were gay. Therefore, one might argue that gay is funnier than straight. Gay men were also likened to females in their speech and humor patterns. For example, they were depicted as dramatic, expressive, and gossipy coworkers. They were also compared to women in terms of their overall organizational behavior; their attention to details, beauty knowledge/expertise, and even (humorously) depicted as sharing a woman's menstrual cycle. In these ways, the hair stylists feminized gay humor. However, gay humor was also described as offensive and examples were given that demonstrated stereotypical masculine speech and humor patterns; humor that is sexual/explicit, other's directed and/or critical, thus marginalizing the joke victim. In these ways, gay humor was recounted as stereotypically masculine in some instances.

Finally, gay humor was uniquely portrayed as flamboyant, "over the top," and with the ability to "get away with" more in terms of humor styles and content traditionally deemed inappropriate for the workplace. It is here that gay humor resists hegemony and invites nontraditional/alternative-gendered interpretations of workplace humor. Noel explained, "they're [gay stylists] very open, no holds barred... nothing is off limits [regarding humor], because it's almost like they have given themselves permission to be like, 'look, you take me as I am!'" Here, a traditionally marginalized group of organizational members are offered empowerment (by their heterosexual peers) through humor to perform alternative gendered identities, and in doing so invite others to do the

same. Yet, this act of resistance occurred at the expense of actively perpetuating (by heterosexual stylists who depicted stereotypical portrayals of their gay peers) and maintaining (by gay stylists who painted gender stereotypical portraits of gay humor/humorists) existing gender stereotypes about gay men, thus supporting hegemony.

In the following chapter, I elaborate upon these conclusions through a discussion of humor, gender, and hegemony in the hair industry. I first provide a summary of my dissertation project, and then respond to my research questions by drawing conclusions about the juxtaposition of humor and hegemony to gender organizational communication. Throughout this section, I discuss the major contributions of my dissertation, and the implications for humor, gender and organizational communication scholarship. I conclude with a discussion of practical and methodological contributions, as well as directions for future research and study limitations.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, FUTURE DIRECTIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

“We are an equal opportunity [employer], but it takes a special kind of guy to work here...he has to be, probably a very even temperament, and to not let things get to him. Women are very passionate and hormonal, and we have our drama, so some guys can fit right in and be a part of all that, and others [are] like ‘oh, it’s too much!’” she laughed.

-Cricket, salon owner

“There have been two females that have worked in the [barber]shop and there have been a lot that have wanted to. But you gotta have a certain type,” Bradley smiled, then in a sarcastic tone added, “and no matter how cool they say they [women] are, no matter how much like one of the guys they are, at some point they all cry, you know?”

-Bradley, barbershop owner

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This dissertation explored the discursive processes and patterns by which humor was gendered in a nontraditional (i.e., non-corporate) organizational setting – the hair industry, through an in-depth and critical feminist analysis of organizational humor. The goals were to extend existing feminist gender and organizational scholarship (Acker, 2006; Ashcraft & Pacanowsky, 1996; Clair, 1993) by offering the unique juxtaposition of humor and hegemony to gender and organization communication literature, from a diverse and understudied population twenty years after Ashcraft and Pacanowsky’s (1996) case study. As such, efforts were made to expose gendered humor patterns (i.e., styles and content) in support of or resistance to hegemonic organizational ideologies and humor discourse (e.g., heteronormativity, patriarchy, sexism, and hegemonic masculinity, among others).

Using qualitative data methods such as fieldnotes, member journals, and participant interviews, I began by collecting humorous narratives from hair industry professionals, and then moved toward a critical feminist analysis of hair salon and

barbershop humor. Here, I demonstrated how humor is gendered in the hair industry through a collection of humorous stories, dialogues, and industry professional perceptions that exhibited gendered patterns. I then analyzed the narratives through a critical feminist lens (Ashcraft, 2004) in order to draw connections about the role of humor in organizational hegemony.

My findings throughout Chapter Four depicted how humor was gendered in the hair industry, as well as how hair industry humor functioned to support hegemonic ideologies. I organized my findings via gendered humor typologies (feminine, masculine, and gay male humor) in order to highlight the dominant themes that emerged from the data. The participants articulated clear differences between feminine, masculine, and gay male humor patterns in their respective workplaces. These distinctions surfaced as participants 1) engaged in gendered humor that *excluded* one another, and/or 2) when the hair stylists and barbers engaged in humor styles/content that mirrored existing gender stereotypes, thus sustaining hegemonic organizational discourses.

For example, as evidenced in the above quotes, both Cricket and Bradley joked about the “special kind” of man or “certain type” of woman it *takes* to work in a female- or male-dominated space (i.e., hair salon or barbershop). I say “joked about” because both participants shared their opinions and stories in a lighthearted fashion, amidst conversations about humor, and even laughed at the gendered distinctions they drew upon themselves. Still, stereotypical gender speech patterns were embedded in each of their narratives. Using “we” centered communication, Cricket (a female salon owner) explained that working in a hair salon would require a man who could work alongside passionate and hormonal women and be a part of the women’s drama; Bradley’s quote

supported Cricket's claims through his use of others-directed, "you" language to highlight women's inevitable emotionality and (despite women's attempt to establish a man's work credibility) inability to keep up with a (hyper)masculine coolness/work demeanor. Bradley finished by saying, "you know?" and although *you know* is a common colloquialism, it also demonstrates a cultural expectation of shared knowledge concerning gender stereotypes (McGraw, 2010; Mintz, 1985), such as women being overly emotional and incompetent of working like a man. Embedded in their assertions were stereotypical gendered speech patterns (women using more relational and communal language and humor and men using more aggressive and others-directed language and humor), as well as content (women *are* dramatic, men *are* even tempered) that function to perpetuate sexist gender stereotypes about women's work and men's work (Acker, 2006; Ashcraft, 2005; Allen et al., 2004; Nilsen, 1994; Rappoport, 2005; Schnurr, 2008; Tannen, 1993, 1994).

Research has shown that gender norms and stereotypes are often maintained via organizational discourse in ways that privilege heteronormative values (i.e., heterosexuality) and patriarchal structures (Acker, 2006; Clair, 1993; Clair et al., 1996; Holmer-Nadesan, 1996; Murphy, 1998). The hegemonic perpetuation of these ideologies is problematic if and when organizational minorities are disadvantaged and/or marginalized by these practices. For example, traditionally speaking, hair salons are considered hyper-feminine spaces, yet males still dominate the industry in terms of stakeholders and profit making abilities (Nordberg, 2002). Indeed, women, as well as men, were shown to participate in hegemonic processes such as self-subordination

(Mumby, 1997; Tracy, 2000; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005), women's marginalization and sexism (Acker, 2006; Clair, 2003).

As demonstrated throughout Chapter Four, humor in the hair industry was gendered through expressions of stereotypical and exclusionary humor patterns. These humorous expressions functioned to privilege particular ideologies as well as gender identities (e.g., heteronormativity/heterosexuality, hegemonic masculinity, sexism, among others) and reify existing organizational gender norms and stereotypes. My data also revealed that the individuals who supported/participated in hegemony via workplace humor, also belonged to the communities they ultimately marginalized (Ashcraft & Pacanowsky, 1996). In other words, women played an active role in their own self-subordination via organizational humor. Self-subordination is a process whereby organizational members lower (i.e., make inferior) their own status to meet the demands of hegemonic and patriarchal organizational standards (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). In other words, self-subordination gives hegemony the upper hand in shaping organizational norms (Mumby, 1997). Below, I further elaborate upon these conclusions as well as present disciplinary and theoretical implications, practical and methodological suggestions, directions for future research, and study limitations.

### **Conclusions: Humor and Gender**

In response to my first research question – how is humor gendered in the hair industry – I found that the participants divided the humor of their peers into three gendered categories: feminine/hair salon humor, masculine/barbershop humor, and gay male humor. Furthermore, they engaged in humor that actively sustained gender norms and stereotypes via gender stereotypical and gender exclusionary humor patterns. It

should be noted however, that the three gendered categories the participants articulated throughout the study (e.g., feminine, masculine, and gay male humor) ultimately reflect their perceptions about the performances of one's *gender* identity and humor, rather than one's *sexual* identity/orientation and humor. Therefore, as reflected in the data analysis, feminine and masculine humor patterns often imitated, and therefore privileged, heterosexual gender stereotypes, identities, and performances. Moreover, the participants treated "gay male" humor as a gendered (identity) construction, rather than sexual identity or orientation that was reflected in the humor. In other words, gay male humor was perceived as an extension of one's feminine and/or masculine gender performance, instead of a humor discourse or performance marked by one's sexual orientation. This distinction between one's gender identity and sexual identity/orientation is important to make so that they are not confused or conflated as one in the same.

**Gendered distinctions.** Three gender categories emerged from the participants' perceptions and experiences of humor and gender at work: feminine/hair salon humor, masculine/barbershop humor, and gay male humor (only present in the hair salon). Embedded in each of these themes were hyper-stereotypical gendered speech and humor patterns that excluded "other" members from the group. For example, hair salon humor often targeted heterosexual men, perpetuated sexual themes, and was differentiated from masculine and gay male humor by its stereotypical hyper-feminine qualities, including communal storytelling and self-deprecating humor patterns (Duncan, 1985; Holmes, 2006; Mullany, 2004). Likewise, masculine humor often targeted heterosexual women via sexist punch lines, sexual innuendos, and men-only jokelore and décor. Masculine humor was described as (hetero)sexual, physical, aggressive and proved to be derisive in

nature (e.g., critical humor, ridicule, and teasing). Gay male humor, on the other hand, was compared and contrasted to both feminine and masculine humor, though experienced exclusively in hair salons. In other words, gay humor has both feminine and masculine humor and speech qualities, yet was only witnessed as a constitutive feature of organizational humor in feminine spaces. Gay humor was also described as sexual and hypercritical in nature, yet also dramatic and expressive.

The gender distinctions and their subsequent performances make a contribution to gender and organizational research by showing that industry professionals experience (and perceive) hair salon and barbershop humor in three discursive (and confining) ways – feminine, masculine and gay male humor. According to research by Tracy and Trethewey (2005), individuals’ “subject positions are determined by structures of discourse” embedded in our organizations (p. 169). These structures of discourse function to sediment and institutionalize confining gendered frameworks (e.g., gender stereotypes, sexism) from which organizational members make sense of their gender identities and performances (Acker, 2006; Crenshaw, 1991; Mumby, 1997). In this case, the hair industry humor reflects participant interpretations of three gendered structures that position organizational members as either feminine, masculine, or gay. Missing from the three typological constructions however, were alternative interpretations of gender and gender identity embedded in the workplace humor (e.g., lesbian, bi, and/or trans identities); in other words, individuals who do not conform to the three hyper-gender stereotypical patterns in the context of the hair salons and barbershops, were made absent. To illustrate, Jill explained, “Most of the women [stylists] I know are straight...there isn’t [*sic*] a lot of lesbian women in the industry. I don’t know why?”

Later, in a conversation with both Jill and Tessa, Jill asked her coworker, “Why is it that we find a lot of gay men, but not a lot of gay women [stylists] in the industry?” Tessa replied, “Oh, I think it’s because we are feminine, you know what I mean? I think it just differs for them.” Embedded in Tessa’s response are claims about the type of femininity (and gender performances) that is privileged in traditional hair salons – heterosexual and hyper-femininity, as well as (mis)understandings and assumptions about lesbian women and their distaste for, and differing performances of, the type of femininity present in hair salons. Jill and Tessa were not alone in their recollections; several other stylists, as well as barbers, mentioned they had never worked with lesbian hair professionals. This informal and anecdotal data should not be interpreted as a true representation about the number lesbian women working as professional hair stylists and/or barbers; rather, their reflections demonstrate the participants’ experiences of lesbian women as an absent or minority population in the hair industry. Together, the above findings show the constitutive power of humor and gender stereotypes *today*, in shaping gender constructions and (humor) discourses in both female- and male-dominated workspaces.

Gender organizational scholars might expect, for example, to find employers and employees adhering to masculine organizational norms in traditional corporate environments (e.g., confining gender roles, patriarchy, hierarchies) (Acker, 2006). Throughout male-dominated workspaces women (and minorities) are routinely reminded of their subordinate positions to men and challenged to conform to hegemonic organizational ideals (Bell & Forbes, 1994; Clair, 1993; Rappoport, 2005; Schnurr, 2008). Yet would we, as gender organizational scholars, also expect the same practices from female-dominated (even queer) spaces, or workspaces where traditionally tabooed

and unrestricted humor might function as resistance to hegemony? This study demonstrates that hair salons, much like traditional masculine organizations, are *not* less likely spaces to witness discourse in support of gender stereotypes and hegemony (Flyvbjerg, 2011).

**Stereotypical humor.** According to the participant narratives, hair salons were discursively constructed as feminine spaces – home to (heterosexual) female and gay male stylists, where women could tell humorous stories about their boyfriends or marriage, parenting experiences and children, and where women *and* gay stylists could gossip about sex, be catty with one another, and humorously critique one another’s body image and appearance. Feminine humor and hair salon humor were often described as one in the same, showcasing the participants’ perceptions (as well as confining notions) about who occupies these spaces, and how one ought to behave – in a feminine manner. The hair stylists’ narratives also revealed stereotypical feminine humor and speech patterns such as shared storytelling, rapport talk, and self-deprecatory and subordinating humor styles (Crawford, 2003; Mullany, 2004; Mumby, 1997; Nilsen, 1994; Tracy, 2000; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). In other words, jokes and stories were told *with* or *alongside* other organizational members and often disparaged the self (i.e., subordinated or marginalized the self in the context of the organization). Here, the hair stylists performed hyper-stereotypical gendered humor and speech patterns that function to sustain dominant ideologies such as heteronormativity and gender stereotypes in a female-dominated space.

Barbershops, on the other hand, emerged as male-only/hegemonic masculine spaces via visual and verbal humor that often functioned to marginalize and “other”

women from the dominant group. The barbershops were organizational settings where men could escape their wives, browse through Playboy magazines, swap sexist jokes, tease and prank one another in their playful displays of hegemonic masculinity (Collinson, 1988, 2002; Roy, 1960; Stanley, 2000). The men's humor demonstrated hyper-masculine patterns such as one-upping and others-directed humor, sexist and sexual jokes made from mundane topics, and physical pranks (Collinson, 1988, 2002; Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2001; Stanley, 2001). In other words, jokes were often played *on* individuals. Over time, gender stereotypical humor contributes to the normalization of hyper-masculine organizational discourses such as sexism, evidenced in claims such as, "barbershops have always been like that" (Dan). Indeed, the lack of corporate structures and language regulations (frequently boasted about by the participants) that might otherwise prohibit sexist discourse, further enabled the barbers to set their own industry standards regarding workplace humor, which in turn, created ripe conditions for unrestricted and unchallenged sexist and gender-excluding banter. This study therefore also points to the complexity of the sedimentation of gender stereotypes and sexism that still permeates modern day organizations, and how hard it is to get away from hegemonic discourses that have been embedded in our organizations for decades (Brunner & Costello, 2002; Clair, 1993; Rappoport, 2005; Stanley, 2001). Even in non-corporate spaces (both female- and male-dominated) where the *individuals* (rather than the corporate hierarchies) carry the power to shape their own organizational discourse norms, sexism is alive and well, and often unchallenged.

Gay male humor, as a third and final category, was discursively situated as a liminal category between feminine and masculine humor; sharing qualities of both yet

also unique insofar as gay humor behaved stereotypically flamboyant (Hewitt, 1995). Again, it should be noted that gay male humor was treated as a gendered speech/humor category, rather than a reflection of one's sexual identity or orientation. Flamboyant humor perpetuates existing gender stereotypes about gay men – for example, the participants described gay males/stylists as “over the top,” “flaming,” and “dramatic” in their humorous expressions. Gay male humor was also expressed as (also) overtly sexual, hypercritical of women, and at times, mocking hegemonic (heterosexual) masculinity; conforming yet again to gay male speech/humor stereotypes cited in the literature (Jacobs, 1996; Mauldin, 2000; Reed, 2011). This conclusion contributes to humor scholarship by demonstrating that humor functions far more frequently as a discursive reflection of gender stereotypes, rather than a means to disrupt or resist them. True, humor is highly contextual and individualistic insofar as each person has a unique sense of humor; still, as evidenced in this study, humor does not navigate far from societal expectations regarding gender norms, and identities.

Taken together, the gendered constructions of feminine, masculine, and gay male humor set up “us/them” dialectical (gendered) tensions and conditions that carry potential to shape workplace patterns; it is here that oppositional, or *gender exclusionary* humor, thrived.

**Gender exclusionary humor.** As mentioned above, this study demonstrated that hair industry humor was gendered by the participants' perception of gender (feminine/masculine/gay), but also through *gender exclusionary* humor patterns. I define *gender exclusionary* humor as humor aimed at othering, excluding, and/or critiquing the “opposite” (or another) sex/gender. The exclusionary conditions, either explicit through

humor or humorously implied, discourage particular organizational members from participating as equal members in the work community. Consequentially, marginalized groups are muted and made absent from gender exclusive workspaces, creating suitable conditions for the perpetuation of hegemonic organizational ideologies (elaborated upon in the following section).

Gender exclusionary humor was demonstrated throughout the data when: 1) individuals targeted another/“opposite” sex in their humor, 2) individuals engaged in gender stereotypical humor, and 3) engaged in sexist humor or sexism. I use the word *opposite* when describing gender exclusionary humor because stereotypically speaking (and evidenced in the data), jokes of this nature frequently reflect heteronormative values and heterosexual identities (Mauldin, 2000), such as women humorously “bashing” their spouses, or men ridiculing women/their wives.

***Targeting the other.*** Several times throughout Chapter Four, hair stylists and barbers engaged in gender exclusionary humor by targeting (an)other sex/gender. For example, Camme shared that much of the humor in her hair salon involved “bashing” a “bad boyfriend or husband,” and Tawnee shared tricks she likes to play on her husband. Gender exclusionary humor was especially evident in barbershops. Gordo, a barber in Phoenix, joked about “losing another soldier” when his male client shared his upcoming wedding plans, while Dan and Hector laughed at the passing of their ex-wives. The barbers’ pre-existing rapport and quick ability to one-up one another in their (competitive) joke sequences showcases the in-group function of humor – or how the men had bonded over their sexist jokes (Holmes, 2006; Lynch, 2002; Mesmer-Magnus et

al., 2012). In this way, the dominant population, and in this case men, was the gendered in-group while women/wives are excluded from their workplace humor.

By targeting an “other,” the humorist successfully ostracizes the joke victim, prevents them from participating in the humor, and therefore marginalizes their (organizational) status as a community outsider (Allen et al., 2004; Warner, 2011). For example, the barbershop humor set up conditions whereby women were not encouraged to enter the masculine space. Comical signage such as “no wives allowed,” coupled with ridicule about marriage, and the possibility of being a prank victim at any time, were hyper-masculine behaviors that arguably exclude women from barbershops. As such, women’s voices are muted from this space, thus designating the work setting as masculine. The male-only atmosphere carries potential to sustain longstanding sexist, hyper-masculine traditions that are normalized through organizational humor. Similarly, women in hair salons who engaged in self-deprecating humor, cattiness or gossip, or jokes about their husbands, may also simultaneously discourage men from participating in female-dominated workspaces, and/or feminine humor cycles. This claim carries implications for other female- or male-dominated industries by demonstrating how dominant work populations ultimately maintain the discursive power to normalize exclusionary and oppositional humor and discourse.

Heteronormative joke sequences showcasing men opposite to women, and vice versa, were far less evident in the gay male humor I witnessed, perhaps because there was no perceived opposite to the gay male stylist, if not his heterosexual peers. In fact, the primary way gay male humor was made “other” was by situating gay male humor patterns alongside feminine and masculine humor traits, then attributing minor

distinctions to it. For example, Camme mentioned that gay men are “more vulgar... but straight guys can get vulgar... then the girls can [be] too.” Moreover, Bonanza said that her gay male stylists are the first to break out in sexual humor, which implied that heterosexual women and men also engage in sexual humor, yet not “first” or as readily. However, all thirty participants mentioned that gay males were funnier than their heterosexual peers, and often able to get away with more due to their gender identity and organizational status. In other words, gay men were perceived as having both feminine and masculine qualities, and therefore more knowledgeable about beauty as well as attuned to the needs of (heterosexual) women. In this way, gay male stylists possess powerful and privileged organizational positions in the hair industry, both as “one of the girls” yet still positioned in ways that allow them to exercise their masculine privilege. Future studies would benefit from further investigation into the type(s) of privilege gay masculine identities maintain in the beauty industry and how these privileges are ultimately exercised in ways that contribute to hegemony, and/or women’s subordination, if at all.

*Stereotypical humor and gendered in/out groups.* Gender exclusionary humor was also evidenced when participants engaged in gender stereotypical humor patterns that set parameters toward gendered organizational in and out groups. For example, the pranks and ridicule demonstrated in the barbers’ humor reflected stereotypical masculine speech and humor characteristics (Allen et al., 2004; Collinson, 1988; Stanley, 2001). Similarly, the gossip and self-deprecating humor exchanged between the hair stylists reflected gender stereotypes (i.e., gendered speech patterns and social expectations) relating to women’s humor patterns and hair salon culture (Alexander, 2003; Barber,

2008; Gimlin, 1996). It is well researched that one of the many functions of humor is to (simultaneously) create in-groups and out-groups; in other words, those who are (allowed/accepted) *in* on the joke and those who are (not allowed/accepted) *out* (Bell & Forbes, 1994; Holmes, 2006; Holmes & Marra, 2002; Kangasharju & Nikko, 2009; Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012; Porcu, 2005). My research elaborates on this function of humor and showcases the substantial role that humor plays toward the perpetuation of gender exclusive work communities. For example, throughout my data collection, I did not witness one woman working in a barbershop, and was only able to find and interview two heterosexual men working in hair salons, out of thirty total participants. Future research could elaborate on these findings and seek connections between exclusionary humor and actual work populations.

The above claims further contribute to organizational scholarship by demonstrating the powerful role of humor in normalizing gender stereotypes within organizational discourse, how stereotypes help distinguish gendered in and out groups, and ultimately, how gendered humor creates confining roles for both women and men (Ashcraft & Pacanowsky, 1996). According to Ashcraft and Pacanowsky, “confining roles, practices and meanings [help] preserve asymmetrical power relations” between men and women, due to the ways these patterns construct and limit individuals within the organization (p. 219). Gender organizational research has indicated, for example, that women who adopt masculine (i.e., hegemonic) styles of humor at work risk being perceived as less feminine and/or “faking it”; because they do not conform to gender stereotypes, they are *othered* and or marginalized from/by the dominant group (Nilsen, 1994; Schnurr, 2008). Heterosexual males face similar stigmas in female-dominated

industries and have been shown to engage in hyper-masculine gender displays in order to combat stereotypes and stigmas that challenge their masculinity (Nordberg, 2002).

Humor is therefore a double edge sword. If an individual participates in (gender) stereotypical humor, they actively perpetuate the status quo; however, if they resist gender stereotypes through humor, there are personal risks such as stigmatization. Therefore, a major contribution of this work is to show how humor traps individuals into (performing) confining and hegemonic gender roles. As this study has shown, humor does not often behave critically (at least, not in the hair industry); rather, gendered humor is much like the discourse and rituals of courtship, chivalry, or chauvinism; it represents longstanding traditions, norms, and expectations concerning gender roles, as well as cultural lessons about the nature of gendered relationships and privilege in our society, such as who should behave in what way and where.

**Sexist humor/sexism.** Finally, gender exclusive humor was witnessed through various expressions of sexist humor, often at the expense of women. As mentioned in Christine's recollection of the sexist blonde humor at her previous barbershop, her female colleague was asked to endure the sexist humor or find another place of employment. When organizational discourse norms are established in ways that target, discourage, and even (implicitly) permit certain members from professions in a particular industry, gender equality cannot be realized. Rather, inequality regimes are perpetuated, which problematize women's upward mobility in the hair industry (Acker, 2006). Inequality regimes, according to Acker, are interrelated practices, processes, actions and meanings that result in continuing inequalities, often at the expense of women. Sexist and self-subordinating humor, I argue, function as inequality regimes within the hair industry.

Inequality regimes are especially problematic due to the ways that institutionalized hegemonic practices have traditionally marginalized and/or subordinated women (Kochersberger et al., 2014). In the context of this study, for example, men make up a minority population of hair industry leaders and elites, yet *still* find greater financial success than their female peers, suggesting that female hair stylists (and especially female barbers – there were none) have hit a glass ceiling and/or plateaued in their upward mobility (Bloomberg, 2015; Nordberg, 2002).

As evidenced throughout this study, sexism and sexist humor run rampant throughout the hair industry in both female- and male-dominated spaces via gender exclusive and stereotypical humor. Sexist humor can be defined as any humor that “demeans, insults, stereotypes, victimizes, and/or objectifies a person on the basis of his or her gender” (p. 441-442). Traditionally speaking, women are most often the targets of sexist humor, and “given the relative power disparities between men and women” in society, are also more likely to experience its detrimental effects (Kochersberger et al., 2014, p. 442). A study by Kochersberger et al., however, found that women reported enjoying sexist humor just as much as men did, especially when the women held preexisting sexist views of themselves. In other words, the women appreciated humor that resonated with their preexisting attitudes and worldviews about (their own) gender roles and norms. The larger implication of this finding is that sexism is hard to get away from (even in non-corporate and female-dominated workspaces), due to the complex ways it is perpetuated (from both females and males) and normalized as everyday organizational discourse. As co-participants and appreciators of sexist humor cycles,

women (alongside their male coworkers) therefore play an active role in their own marginalization.

Taken together, the humor narratives and subsequent analyses reveal the discursive process and patterns by which humor is gendered in the hair industry. However, the participants' uses of humor also actively sustained existing gender stereotypes in support of hegemony. The humor literature has much to say about the role of humor in organizational resistance (McLane & Singer, 1991; Lynch, 2002; Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). However, there is another set of feminist literature, including the work of Ashcraft and Pacanowsky (1996) that argues that female organizational members are often drawn into hegemonic discourses in the workplace that continue to reify their marginalized positions, and subordinate them. My findings contribute to this conversation by juxtaposing humor alongside gender organizational research and presenting a modern, in-depth qualitative analysis of hair industry narratives that revealed similar patterns.

### **Conclusions: Humor and Hegemony**

In response to my second research question (which emerged later in the data collection process), this study demonstrated that hair industry humor did little to resist hegemony, and therefore supported hegemonic organizational ideologies. This was realized when organizational members engaged in humor patterns that privileged dominant social/gender identities (i.e., masculinity, heterosexuality) and/or exposed hegemonic values that functioned to subordinate women's roles (e.g., heteronormativity, sexism, the objectification of women). These findings strengthen conclusions by Ashcraft and Pacanowsky (1996) – that organizational members, including women, actively

participate in hegemonic processes. This claim provides implications for feminist organizational scholars by showing how traditionally marginalized work populations (women) together alongside dominant/majority populations (men), are *still* participating in hegemonic processes even in female-dominated spaces, twenty years after this case study (Ashcraft & Pacanowsky; Clair, 1993).

As gender organizational scholars, we might not expect marginalization patterns to occur from members who belong to the communities they ultimately subordinate, especially in female-dominated work settings. However, as mentioned above, women were not less likely organizational members to contribute to these processes; rather, they too engaged in stereotypical and gender exclusive humor (Flyvbjerg, 2011). This claim problematizes women's organizational roles in the hair industry as co-contributors to their own subordination, a position that is already evidenced by men's elite industry positions and higher income. My research responds to this critical social issue – women's participation in their own marginalization via hegemonic processes – by helping feminist researchers understand the complex role of humor in the hair industry to sediment existing gender stereotypes and to normalize marginalization patterns that may in turn, exacerbate women's subordination.

Several of the participants' narratives supported hegemonic themes such as heteronormativity, sexism, and women's objectification through (often stereotypical) gendered humorous expressions. These patterns were most often evidenced in humor sequences that pitted women and men against one another (leaving out gay stylists all together), or when humor took a sexual turn, often targeting, objectifying and/or sexualizing women's organizational roles within a hegemonic masculine gaze. This study

shows therefore, that heteronormative and sexist humor patterns are frequently circulated, rather than resisted, in both female-dominated (hair salons) and male-dominated (barbershops) organizational spaces. In other words, both women and men perpetrated heteronormative and sexist humor themes. These humor cycles functioned to normalize heterosexual discourse (e.g., marriage, lust, flirting) and sexualize and objectify women's organizational positions.

**Heteronormative humor.** In Chapter Four, Tawnee shared a story about her frustrations with her husband's organizational skills and how she likes to play tricks on her husband by adding unnecessary items to his shopping list. Her narrative demonstrated stereotypical marriage themes such as the dissatisfied wife and gullible husband. Here, and in similar heterosexual and marriage-related humor cycles, the wife and husband humorously stand in opposition to one another, as one attempts to outsmart the other – which Tawnee ultimately did through her co-created murder mystery scheme with a male client. Women complaining about or mocking their husbands are common themes to women's stand-up comedy, as previously stated, yet also contributes to a general perception that women readily (and publicly) belittle their husbands if given the opportunity, especially in female-dominated groups. Gender organizational scholars noted a similar pattern whereby women attain female solidarity when men are made the target of their collective humor (Bell & Forbes, 1994; Holmes & Marra, 2002; Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2001). However, evidenced in my study and throughout the literature is a pattern of gender solidarity that is achieved through masculine humor, such as ridicule and sexist discourse that pokes fun at the other's stereotypical gendered shortcomings (Holmes & Marra; Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2001; Schnurr, 2008). Again, humor

behaves as a double-edge sword, trapping individuals into stereotypical and gendered humor cycles in support of hegemonic ideologies.

For example, female hair stylists frequently described the hair salon as a place to humorously vent and complain about their boyfriends (Bonanza), as well as boast about “how *many* guys they went home with” (Camme). Chloe even described the back room of her hair salon as a space where the women openly joked about their wifely obligations to fulfill their husbands’ sexual fantasies by engaging in unwanted anal sex on their husbands’ birthdays. Evidenced in these narratives were heterosexual and sexist themes such as women’s hyper-sexuality and subservience to men’s sexual desires. Sexist gendered humor cycles showcase women in marginalized positions to men (Ford et al., 2008; Rappoport, 2005); in other words, although the women were dissatisfied by their (sexual) relationships with men, they were also obligated to them as girlfriends or spouses. Furthermore, Jill shared a story in which she humorously depicted heterosexual male stylists as the household breadwinners, eagerly anticipating a return home to their expecting wives, while the female and gay stylists she described carelessly went about their work days humorously singing and dancing, free from the pressures of hegemonic masculinity to be the provider. The above stories reveal heteronormative themes about men’s work (as a provider) and women’s work (as not taken seriously), and also teach lessons about heterosexual love, lust and obligation. Through the repetition of heteronormative humor cycles, alternative interpretations of intimate relationships are muted or made absent, thus excluding organizational members from dominant discourses.

Several of the male barbers in my study used humor to ridicule (heterosexual) relationships, namely the marriage between a man and woman, through comical signage

(“no women allowed”) and sexist humor. For example, Gordo joked with his recently engaged male client that, “we are losing another warrior,” and “another one bites the dust.” Warren also shared a similar joke featuring his wife winning the lottery. When Warren asked where he and his wife would be vacationing together, his wife told him to “pack your bags and get out!” Finally, Hector and Dan joked about the horrible “honey-do” lists the men share in their barbershop as they “bitch about their wives” in the barbershop. While the barbers’ jokes portrayed women in dominant *domestic* positions (rather than in professional leadership/managerial roles), they did so via masculine humor patterns that derided women for their attempts at control. In this way, women’s authority was ridiculed, and better tolerated (by men) behind closed doors where men too can escape the public ridicule their wives impose upon them. Moreover, the sexist jokes above assumed heterosexuality (and marriage) was the relational norm and therefore, a safe and common ground for organizational humor. In doing so, it further excludes non-marital relationships and/or non-heterosexual organizational members from participating in the humor sequences, and supported stereotypical social constructions of hegemonic masculinity in the workplace.

**Sexual humor.** Heteronormative themes embedded in sexual humor were also evidenced in all three categories of the data – feminine/hair salon, masculine/barbershop, and gay male humor, further supporting the claim that sexual (and sexist) humor is not only alive and well in the hair industry, but is a normative pattern of organizational discourse. For example, Christine shared a practical joke she likes to play on her teenage male clients; if or when Christine found the boys looking at the female stylists, Christine told the boys that the women used to work for Centerfolds (a strip club) and got fired for

inappropriately touching their patrons. According to Christine, her tale usually sparked the boys' curiosity and they continued gazing (or even gawking at) the women in the salon. As described in Chapter Four, Christine actively encouraged and invited the boys to fantasize about her coworkers' bodies and sexuality, thus objectifying the women as objects of the boys' desires. In other words, Christine's humorous narrative contributed to the objectification and marginalization of her own work community. Additionally, Jay shared an intimate (heterosexual) experience he had at a shampoo bowl with one of his female clients where he "just wanted to see" how far he could take their physical relationship by employing various sexual innuendos in suggestive and playful tones. In Jay's story, the female client eventually gave in to his playful seduction and awarded him permission to do "whatever you want to do." Much like Christine's story, Jay's narrative portrayed heterosexual lust and flirting as a normative part of hair industry culture, yet again at the expense of objectifying women. In both of these stories, heterosexual and masculine gender identities were privileged and awarded power over women.

From the men in my study, most often at the barbershop, there was no shortage of sexual humor. For example, Bobby described how the men (barbers) would stop what they were doing (i.e., their work) to check out a "girl" each time a woman walked by the window, then explained that the guys' humor often escalated to a sexual place from there, unbeknownst to the female passerby. I was also audience to a sexist "dumb blonde" joke that featured a young woman in church, praying on her knees, yet also ready to engage in oral sex out of habit. According to Arthur, this was not the first time the joke had circulated in the barbershop; he explained, "you're gonna hear more... we're not correct at all." Women's marginalization occurs when sexual harassment and/or hegemonic

masculinity disguised as humor, sets the bar (i.e., organizational standard that women must either endure or perish) – either for female patrons or employees (Clair, 1993). As mentioned by Christine in Chapter Four, “we’d lose our jobs,” based on the sexist humor in her former barbershop. She concluded by saying, “you could probably sue every barber for sexual harassment if you wanted to!” This finding bolsters research by Clair (1993) about the prevalence (and often trivialization) of women’s sexual harassment, including the experiences of sexual harassment victims, who may find the validity of their experiences passed off as “harmless entertainment” (p. 120). Further highlighting sexist humor patterns, Jay told the story about Violet and the Vaseline, whereby Jay offered his female coworker a cure for her insatiable sexual needs. The fact that all these stories were (re)told as humorously memorable moments, demonstrates the way that sexism (and sexual harassment) has been disguised as entertainment.

Sexist humor cycles ultimately strip women of their power and authority, and render women incompetent in mixed-sex groups (Nilsen, 1994). Through repetitive reiterations of women’s positions (both interpersonally and organizationally) as inferior, women’s status continues to be marginalized. The structural sedimentation of sexism via humorous discourse is problematic insofar as it contributes to attitudes about women’s subordination in both domestic and organizational settings. However, sexist humor cycles and patterns are not easily overcome, as they are often unchallenged in overt ways (Clair, 1993). As mentioned, research has indicated that both women and men enjoy sexist humor (on some level) (Kochersberger et al., 2014). Moreover, from my observations and interactions in the various hair salons and barbershops, the participants willingly (i.e., openly, honestly) shared sexual humor and attributed it a having a good time at work. To

illustrate, Cricket explained, “They tell you [in cosmetology school], you are never supposed to talk about sex, religion or politics. But I am sorry,” she paused to laugh, “that is always talked about!” Pearl also noted that “it builds a little more of a relationship with a client if we can have our inside jokes... or crazy conversations that we probably shouldn’t be having.” Noel also reiterated that hair salon humor “always seems to go to the sexual genre” at some point in her workday, but no one seems to mind or “call corporate.” As noted by Drimonis (2014), any sexist jokes aimed at women – “blondes, women barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen, women as sexual toys...normalize sexism and hostility towards women in a way that most people don't even realize because these types of ‘jokes’ are so omnipresent” in our society (para. 3). However, according to my research experience, institutionalized sexism was realized via industry trends that reflect gender inequality. For example, female hair stylists often complained about men’s higher salaries, men’s ability to flirt/generate more female clientele, and also to “get away” with more in regard to humor.

Together, the stories presented in Chapter Four and the subsequent analyses demonstrated humor in support of hegemony via heteronormative and sexist humor patterns. The data showcased how women, alongside men (heterosexual and homosexual), actively participated in hegemonic processes (i.e., heteronormativity, marginalization, objectification) at the risk of *further* disadvantaging their own communities. The analyses further demonstrated the complex role of humor in the sedimentation of hegemonic ideologies, and how pervasive (yet also difficult to combat) sexism is in organizational humor.

## **Theoretical Contributions**

This research contributes to existing gender organizational scholarship by exploring a unique and understudied context (and population), humor in the hair industry, and by juxtaposing humor and hegemony in this space. Throughout this study, gendered humor functioned as a constitutive feature of hair salons and barbershops, actively involved in making and normalizing organizational patterns in support of hegemony (Ashcraft, 2005; Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Clair, 1993). This dissertation makes a contribution to Ashcraft and Pacanowsky's (1996) case study research by drawing similar conclusions about women's participation in hegemonic discourses, yet reflected in a modern day organization, as described above. The study showed, for example, that hair industry professionals (i.e., women, men and gay males) actively contributed to organizational hegemony through stereotypical and gender exclusive humor patterns. Ultimately, these patterns function to sediment existing gender stereotypes, as well as reinforce sexist gender norms that appear to exclude or marginalize members (i.e., women).

This dissertation makes key theoretical contributions to existing humor theories. First, to the superiority theory of humor, this study demonstrated how gendered humor styles consistent with superiority theory (i.e., ridicule/teasing, sexist and self-subordinating humor patterns) functioned to sustain hegemonic ideologies in the hair industry, a space where traditionally marginalized organizational members (i.e., women, gay men) make up the majority population. According to humor literature, superiority-based humor styles include a target (or butt) of the joke and a victor, who triumphs over their joke target, thus asserting power while simultaneously marginalizing the "other"

(Allen et al., 2004; Collinson, 1988; Duncan, 1985; Keith-Speigel, 1984; Oring, 2003; Tracy et al., 2006). Throughout the data, women were frequently shown in subordinate positions to men, as well as objectified via sexist humor patterns (e.g., blonde jokes, playful body critiques). Superiority humor is often displayed in organizational settings via top-down humor from management (Lynch, 2010; Mullany, 2004; Tracy et al., 2006); however, in this study, women openly engaged in their own (self)subordination practices through their expressions of self-deprecating and/or sexist humor. For example, Bonanza jokingly questioned her parenting abilities in front of her peers, and later, her professionalism as she openly discussed sexual matters and personal experiences at work. Noel too engaged in self-deprecating humor as she made herself the butt of her own joke about her linguistic confusion over “pubic lice.” Gendered humor themes, such as gender stereotypical humor and sexist/sexual humor, were repeated in various hair salons and barbershops, which demonstrate the role of organizational humor in normalizing women’s marginalization. In this way, superiority-based humor styles and joke content function to sustain hegemonic masculinity, meanwhile normalizing dominant masculine ideologies among organizational members.

This study also carries implications for the incongruity theory of humor. According to theorists, incongruity-based humor relies on the audience’s awareness/cognition of what is considered *normal* or expected in a given scenario (Allen et al., 2004; Graham, 1995; Lynch, 2002; Meyer, 2000; Rappoport, 2005). Humor occurs when there has been a violation of the cultural norm or expectation among audience members (McGraw, 2010); it is our way of making sense of two contradicting ideas. However, according to theorists, the audience only finds humor in a joke sequence if and

when the violation of the norm does not pose any *real* threat to an individual or their worldview (McGraw, 2010). Using the “blonde in church” joke from Chapter Four, that fact that *someone* is praying on their knees in a church illustrates a shared (cultural) expectation of what is likely to occur in this setting; yet the strange juxtaposition of oral sex to this scenario introduces a violation of this norm. However, due to the commonplace nature of “dumb blonde” jokes in our society, it can be argued that the joke does not pose any *real* threat to its listeners’ worldview (i.e., blonde jokes do not actively resist or challenge the status quo, nor do they present an unknown joke referent for most domestic audiences.) Therefore, the blonde joke is funny because the themes embedded in the humor (i.e., sexism, women’s objectification and marginalization) are consistent and familiar (i.e., hegemonic, sexist) well-known humor patterns in American culture. Still, the strange pairing of a hypersexual blonde and a church setting surprises the audience, rendering the punch line humorous (Keith-Speigel, 1984; Lynch, 2002).

Another example of incongruity-based humor emerged when Christine told a sexist joke about her female coworkers’ work at Centerfolds, and how they got fired for violating a patron. The *threat* (i.e., a challenge to the status quo and/or listeners’ worldview) is lessened because it was a woman who invited the audience to participate in sexism, rather than reject this practice. The joke content is also incongruous insofar as it does not seem likely (to most audiences, but especially teenage boys) that a man would “complain” about a woman sexually “touching” him in a strip club he paid to enter. In these examples, and throughout the data, incongruity-based humor styles and patterns (e.g., women telling sexist jokes) functioned to sediment traditional (and damaging)

gender norms and stereotypes by reinforcing the status quo (i.e., hegemony) and normalizing potentials threats, or challenges to the dominant ideology.

Finally, this study problematizes the cognitive relief theory of humor in the hair industry, by showing how subordination and marginalization patterns are normalized and supported in hair industry humor cycles. The cognitive relief theory argues that humor functions as a means to rid the built up cognitive tensions that are otherwise suppressed (Freud, 1960; Lynch, 2002; Meyer, 2000; Perks, 2012; Wilson, 1979); this is an important strategy for maintaining harmony (i.e., not disrupting the status quo) and gaining friends within the organization, yet also a means to perpetuate the status quo. For example, relief-based humor is useful for disguising controversial issues or taboo organizational discourse as “just a joke” (Ford et al., 2008; Mumby, 1997; Murphy, 1998). Jay’s story about Violet and the Vaseline, the various anal sex narratives, as well as Christine’s practical joke about Centerfolds, illustrate the ways that women’s objectification has been used as humorous entertainment. While research has indicated the ways that humor may provide a safe vehicle to openly resist or critique dominant organizational hegemony (Bell & Forbes, 1994; Holmes & Marra, 2002), humor itself does little to prompt organizational change, reform, or transformation in actualized ways (Lynch, 2010; Murphy, 1998). Instead, relief-based humor styles and content mask *real* organizational tensions, such as institutionalized sexism, women’s subordination and objectification, that might otherwise gain attention not treated in humor and good fun. For example, studies have found that both women and men generally “interpret sexist humor in a light-hearted, non-critical ‘humor mindset,’” rather than an oppressive discourse that carries *real* offenses (Kochersberger et al., 2014, p. 244).

These conclusions beg the question as to whether there is any humor that might be able to disrupt or resist hegemonic discourses. Indeed, as this study demonstrated, normative hegemonic discourses (i.e., sexism, hegemonic masculinity) are deeply embedded in our organizations and difficult to escape; yet perhaps, there is a liminal space (neither feminine, nor masculine) from where individuals can play with gender in subversive ways and still avoid stereotypical gender portrayals. For example, over time, as members of the dominant group (i.e., men) engage in counter-stereotypical gendered humor, alternative interpretations about gender stereotypes may be drawn. In other words, if men were to predominately engage in feminine styles of humor (and/or non-gendered styles of humor such as absurdity, exaggeration, or wordplay) and in ways that did not mock women or gay men, alternative humor discourses would emerge. Examples may include a barber who tells self-deprecating jokes, or a group of male stylists who perform an elaborate story sequence about their children, friends, or coworkers. These examples are not hard to imagine, and probably already occur. However, these were not the stories the participants remembered and therefore were not included in my data set. According to Tracy and Trethewey (2005), “resistance lies in rebelling against the ways in which we have already been defined as individuals in discourse” (p. 171). A practical application of this assertion is to encourage dominant (and therefore power-holding) populations in a variety of organizational contexts risk gender stigmatization in efforts to promote greater equality among organizational members, as well as to help reduce organizational pressures (for both men and women) to conform to hegemonic standards and discourse.

As a critical feminist scholar, my ultimate goal is to advocate for gender equality, and therefore to make thoughtful, practical suggestions about the application of my research, such as meaningful ways to teach/train and engage in organizational humor that disrupts the status quo. Following, I suggest industry-specific practical implications and applications of this research with the knowledge that disrupting the hegemonic status quo (e.g., escaping sexism) is not an easy process, yet hopeful that small changes reflected in our organizational discourses truly can make a difference over time.

### **Practical Applications**

Hair industry professionals play substantial roles as socialization agents in our everyday lives and communities (Alexander, 2003; Lawson, 1999; Thompson, 2009; Thornton, 1979), and as such, carry potential to act as organizational change makers – to resist and/or challenge workplace discourses that privilege hegemonic ideologies (e.g., sexism, gender stereotypes). Yet how and why would an individual be motivated to adopt the role of a change maker? Traditionally speaking, hair stylists and barbers have embraced community and professional roles that far exceeded their responsibilities as beauticians, but also reflected their positions as social and moral authorities, teachers, and even trusted counselors (Barrie, 2015; Davis, 2011, 2013; Van Devender, 1967). Barrie (2015), an editor of a popular press online beauty magazine, *Elite*, described that “we [clients] trust them [hairdressers] with our lives...it takes much longer to build trust with a strange, static therapist...it’s part of hairdressers’ job to deeply listen” (para. 18). Katie, the owner of a hair salon in Sacramento, reiterated this sentiment:

We are like bartenders, it’s safe to tell us things that they [clients] don’t even tell their own family members, husbands, wives, or friends... and sometimes, I can

plant seeds or say something inspirational that can really help them out. People say all the time, ‘I am so glad I came today, I feel better already.’

As clients, we invest copious amounts of time, money, and relational energy into the hair industry each year, with the hopes of having our beauty ideals and relational goals met. Moreover, independently owned and operated hair salons and barbershops are organizations free from corporate rules and regulations, such as standardized labor policies, corporate trainings, and strict codes of conduct, thus allowing for a more organic, free-flowing, and unrestricted dialogue amongst their members. However, according to my findings, the hair industry is fraught with a unique set of *alternative* (i.e., non-corporate) rules and standards implied and enforced via gendered organizational humor, and in support of hegemonic ideologies.

Practical recommendations of this research therefore include industry-wide training in the form of mindful organizational and interpersonal communication skills, as well as gender diversity and gender equality education. The goal of these trainings to encourage hair stylists and barbers to develop a communication tool kit, so to speak; a vocabulary (and humor) that resists hegemonic ideologies and discourages sexist, marginalizing, and stereotypical discourses. Embedded within the current cosmetology school curriculum for both hair stylists and barbers are mandatory lessons on professional ethics and customer service (Beauty Schools, 2015; Paul Mitchell, 2015; Robert’s School of Cosmetology, 2015; The Barber Academy, 2015). Browsing through my husband’s cosmetology school textbooks, I found at least one chapter in each book dedicated to topics such as professional ethics, customer service, professionalism, and charm and client relationships. In speaking with Shaun about his educational experience, he also

mentioned that cosmetology schools frequently invite guest speakers to teach and train new hair stylists on various styling and color techniques; in other words, experts are invited to come and teach a section of the curriculum. As such, he suggested that the standard lesson on ethics would provide an appropriate space and valuable opportunity for communication scholars to partner with cosmetology school directors in efforts to raise awareness about gender diversity (of both staff and clients), sexism, stereotypes, and humor. Shaun also reminded me that several hair industry professionals have never taken a communication college course (and in many cases, do not hold a college degree), so a short seminar or workshop in mindful communication or gender diversity would truly “shake the industry.”

Through the curriculum, female (and male) stylists could be informed to the risks of gender stereotypical and/or self-deprecating humor, and the ways that these styles of gendered humor function as self-subordination. The risks of engaging in self-deprecating humor are two-fold. First, self-deprecating humor comes across as self-centered and/or narcissistic, especially if done too often (Nilsen, 1994). Self-deprecating humor about a woman’s body and/or sexuality is especially self-centered as audiences are made to collectively analyze and respond to (via shared laughter) women’s bodies in a public space. I remember when a trusted teaching mentor once told me that my use of self-deprecating body humor inappropriately demanded that my students evaluate my body in the classroom, placing an unfair burden upon them. She next explained that the students may never have evaluated me in this way, had I not provided them a humorous and playful platform to do so. I trusted her insight because I knew that she had my best interest in mind and truly wanted me to succeed as a teacher, yet she also understood my

appreciation for classroom humor. Her lesson resonated with me and changed the way I subsequently engaged in humor in the classroom, even in subtle ways.

Second, a humorist that uses self-deprecating humor also runs the risk of being perceived as incompetent due to the content of their self-defeating humor. In other words, if women and minority groups are habitually drawing attention to their flaws or foolishness as a means of social entertainment, over time they risk being perceived as flawed and foolish among their peers and superiors (Nilsen, 1994). This effect is further exacerbated by men's participation in sexist or derogatory humor that also portrays women in disparaging, marginalized, or sexualized roles. By raising awareness about self-deprecating humor, and other gender stereotypical humor patterns, women (and men) can make more mindful decisions about their expressions of organizational humor and its lasting effects.

The communication skills and gender diversity/equality trainings could also be taught in existing hair salons and barbershops to more seasoned professionals. However, implementing this education would require the careful partnering of communication experts alongside trusted salon owners and/or mentors who act as positive role models and spokespersons for these issues. The hair salon and barbershop owners I interviewed had much to say about their transitions from "behind the chair" to "behind the desk," and as such, could provide valuable lessons of their challenges and triumphs from personal experience. Much as my teaching mentor effectively influenced my pedagogy by helping raise awareness about my humor patterns, so too can hair salon owners and/or industry mentors work to influence the communication patterns of staffs through positive encouragement and motivation.

More women should also be encouraged by industry leaders to enter the barbering profession, and therefore be shown their potential to earn a barbers' salary, invent/design barbershop products, own a barbershop, etc. Females might be more eager to enter a barbering profession if they 1) saw themselves (successfully) represented and welcomed into the field, and 2) knew their barbershop coworkers were trained to act as women's allies (rather than humorous perpetrators) regarding experiences of sexual harassment, sexism, and general "othering" humor. Women should feel supported at work and also skilled at speaking up during instances of sexual harassment, rather than made to endure disparaging messages or find their way out the door, which may in turn create systems of women's immobility and oppression, and the muting of their voices in male-dominated organizations. Therefore, ally and sexual harassment education should be added to the current cosmetology curriculum and embedded within the ethics training. The trainings should feature female barbers (and/or male and female shop owners) as guest speakers who spread awareness about these issues by sharing their industry successes and challenges with new stylists or barbers. A more idealistic and lofty goal would be for communication scholars to partner with hair industry celebrities such as Tabatha Coffey from *Tabatha's Salon Takeover* or one of the many female stylists or judges from Bravo's reality television show *Shear Genius*, and encourage these celebrities to act as spokespersons on behalf of gender equality in the hair industry. These industry icons, alongside communication specialists, could lead workshops or retreats that demonstrate the importance of such issues. The overall tone of the training would be one of prevention, rather than discipline, so as to avoid possible tensions and unfavorable accusations about the current culture of the hair industry. Applying this knowledge to the

hair industry will not only position novice hair professionals as progressive change agents among their communities and patrons, but also reflect an effort by current industry leaders to take a stand on issues of gender equality.

During my data analysis, I found two organizations that currently conduct leadership trainings and seminars for hair salons (not barbershops) across the United States – Summit Salon Business Center, LLC (SSBC, 2015) and Salon Consultants International (SCII, 2015). Both organizations are owned and operated by the same individual (a white male), whose credentials include twenty years of hair industry experience, multiple salon ownership, and product endorsements by L’Oreal and Redken, LLC. SSBC and SCII offer consulting services on salon leadership skills and how to increase profits; their primary foci are on business growth and developing an “academy” of professional stylists focused on selling (SSBC, 2015). Summit was also the organization that taught the “Red Tornado” course at Chloe’s salon (described in Chapter Four). According to Chloe, the training resulted in some ridicule from the stylists who later used the training terminology as name-calling in the break room. However, Chloe also mentioned that ultimately, she was impressed by the training and shared the following:

Summit is a huge business. It’s trying to make salons more like a business, rather than old school where it was more drama...the industry is totally changing right now. It is more professional. It is frowned upon if people are talking shit next to you, where before people would feed into that... his program, the Summit, it’s really, really good...I don’t necessarily agree with some of it, but that’s because I came from the old culture.

Chloe did not elaborate on which parts of the training she disagreed with, but from the tone of our conversation I believe that Chloe still valued the longstanding (gendered)

traditions of the hair salon that make it unique from other industries, such as the informality of both personal and professional relationships. My educational goal through mindful communication training and gender diversity/equality awareness is not profit-focused, nor is it to corporatize or standardize an industry that prides itself as separate and unique from corporate America. Rather, my goal is present the hair industry with research-backed and advocacy education that moves the industry one step further toward gender equality; as a progressive organizational and community leader that is both sensitive to and advocates for gender equality in all its positions. For example, hair stylists and barbers could learn how to foster a safe and healthy organizational culture that may also render higher employee satisfaction, greater mobility in the industry, and greater success, through communication scholarship. These are not promises that my study can fulfill, but a place where future research can intervene and partner with hair industry professionals.

Finally, through my personal experience, I have found that people are excited by and curious about humor, in all its contexts. For example, in the fall of 2014, I proposed a Humor and Communication seminar at Arizona State University. Within the first day of its availability, thirty students registered for the course. I have also been asked to present to the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute as well as guest lecture for various organizations about humor as communication. Moreover, my study participants (both hair stylists and barbers, women and men) were often eager to talk about humor with me, and after our interviews, stuck around to talk about comedians or other funny stories that were tangential to my research. From these experiences, I believe people are not only interested in humor, but also intrigued by its many applications in various settings.

Moreover, hair industry professionals are also deeply concerned with issues of customer retention and client satisfaction, as repeat customers represent the promise of continued income. Curricula focused on humor are significant to hair stylists and barbers insofar as it demonstrates connections to the professionals' primary concerns (i.e., customer retention and customer service) and topics of interest. Therefore, future studies should focus on the connection between humor and customer retention/satisfaction in the hair industry, thus making substantial additions to the proposed curricula. Additional future directions are elaborated upon below.

Throughout this section, I made several industry-specific recommendations regarding the application of my research including a revised cosmetology and barbering curriculum section, as well as additional trainings, workshops, and education focused on mindful communication and humor, sexual harassment, and gender diversity and equality. However, it is important to note that organizational gender equality is not an issue that can be overcome by a revised hair industry curriculum or weekend retreat alone. Rather, readers should treat this dissertation as a case study or microcosm of a much bigger societal issue; the structural sedimentation of sexism (among other hegemonic discourses detailed above) embedded throughout our organizational discourses. While humor remains a fun, pervasive part of our social lives, it also plays a powerful role in the normalization of hegemonic discourses throughout our organizations. Therefore, a final practical application of this dissertation research is to encourage its readers to reflect upon their own everyday uses of humor in the workplace, and how these expressions transmit important messages about the nature of gendered relationships in our workplaces.

## **Methodological Contributions**

This study makes a methodological contribution to humor, gender and organizational scholars (and readers) by offering a complex, detailed, and behind the scenes look at the (humorous) everyday micro-interactions that occur within the hair industry – a space where readers and researchers might not otherwise have access. Using various qualitative methodologies, I gave rich, thick descriptions of hair salon and barbershop settings, the participants and their experiences of humor, as well as my own gendered interactions. I used the participants’ voices via informal and narrative interviews to showcase their perceptions, experiences, and stories of humor in the workplace (Riessman, 2003; Tracy, 2013). I believe that good qualitative research has the ability to capture both the unique and mundane qualities that constitute our organizations, thus providing organizational scholars with greater insight about the inner-workings of our modern-day organizations.

Gender and organizational communication scholars and readers alike need more in-depth, critical, and *in-vivo* accounts to better understand how modern-day organizations function (Kotthoff, 2005; Saldaña, 2009; Tracy, 2013). This is especially true for feminist organizational scholars committed to developing feminist epistemologies and providing opportunities for marginalized or muted groups to share their personal stories as ways of knowing. Qualitative research by Gurney (1985), Clair (1993, 1996), Ashcraft and Pacanowsky (1996), Horn (1997), Murphy (1998), Lutgen-Sandvik (2006), and Hill and Bradley (2012), among many others, has proven invaluable in demonstrating the power of various qualitative research methods to illuminate in-depth and behind-the-scenes organizational discourse patterns. Moreover, “the role of personal

experience in the production of knowledge has been, and remains, an important concern for feminist scholars...considering [women's] experiences foster[s] new ontological and epistemological understandings of women's realities" (Clair, 1993, p. 245). In other words, it is through rich descriptive accounts, participant voices and narratives, and self-reflexivity *as* method, that organizational scholars may come to know the subtle and nuanced realities, as well as discursive patterns of our community organizations that generate new (and critical/feminist) ways of knowing.

Another way this dissertation makes a methodological contribution is by advocating for more methods training as well as institutional support for women who research all-male or male-dominated environments, and who may experience the unwanted and/or unpleasant conditions of a sexist or paternalistic male-female relationship in the field.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, a (re)training of this caliber is not an easy task. Ideally, community leaders and study participants would willingly participate in a critical education about how to ethically engage with female researchers, however, such an endeavor is not likely gain public support. This is especially true because study participants already "frequently do more than is necessary to ease the way for researchers, receiving little to no benefit from the research...and [so] the risk to the

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<sup>1</sup> Specific recommendations concerning ethics and methods training for women in male-dominated spaces are elaborated upon at length in Chapter Six. Suggestions include, for example, an "ethical codes of conduct participant agreement" created by the University that details the nature of the researcher-participant relationship, for the participant prior to the study. Although an agreement like this would be challenging (if not impossible) to enforce, the University might also consider keeping a detailed record of community partners/participants who effectively uphold their commitments for future research. I also suggest a mentorship program whereby novice researchers are paired with experts based on their general research interests and preferred methods (much like an advisor-advisee relationship, yet with a clearer pedagogical focus on gender and research).

research of confronting their behavior seems too great” (p. Horn, 1997, p. 303). In other words, researchers might forfeit their gratitude and rapport in exchange for a “militant feminist” approach at teaching the community valuable lessons about gender and ethics (Gurney, 1985, p. 55). A more realistic training expectation is for female researchers to be trained how to handle the problems they will most likely experience in male-dominated research environments, including “the relationships she will be able to negotiate... the expectations and assumptions made about her by the researched [men] and the power differential between her and the researched” (Horn, 1997, p. 306).

Relational ethics literature also suggests that researchers should be encouraged to write through these experiences, be self-reflexive about their researcher positions, talk to others in the field, and learn to anticipate the consequences of their intended study populations (Ellis, 2007). Despite these recommendations, (which I found both vague and problematic due to the ways they situate women within the male gaze) my review of feminist scholarship in search of more specific and viable solutions rendered few, if any alternatives (Gurney, 1985; Horn, 1997).

My findings further support conclusions that gender stereotypes and stigmas, as well as sexist and paternalistic ideologies “hamper women’s work in the field,” and often under unwanted relational conditions (Gurney, 1985, p. 42). Gurney noted that at times, “female researchers may be forced to tolerate, or at least not openly object to, sexist remarks and behavior in order to maintain rapport” with male research participants. Furthermore, if and when a female researcher is caught up in complicated male-female relational dynamic, research has indicated that she [the researcher] has “only two options. She can totally reject the advances... and risk his feelings that he has been rejected, or

she can welcome his advances and allow the female-male relationship to develop. However, either have detrimental effects on the research,” such as limiting one’s access and experience with participants, or situating the women in an ethical dilemma at the hope of getting *good* data (Easterday, Papademas, Schorr, & Valentine, 1977, p. 341). My accounts in Chapter Six detail my personal experiences in this exact scenario, yet further problematize female researchers’ options by adding a third, and ineffective method; treating sexism with humor, which as my research and others (Clair, 1993) argue, trivializes the victim’s unwanted experience and perpetuates future and similar encounters. Humor, in my case, functioned temporarily as a conversational pivot, or subtle and playful means to divert the conversation away from matters of male-female sexuality and sexism, but did little to challenge these ideologies in practice. Despite these encounters, my study responds to Gurney’s (1985) request for more accounts from experienced female qualitative researchers and contributes to a limited collection of research studies conducted by women on male-dominated communities (Easterday et al., 1977; Horn, 1997; Laws, 1990; Tracy & Rivera, 2010). Much like Gurney (1985), I too believe more attention is much needed in this area; a topic that is often overlooked and certainly outdated in regard to existing research. Future research would benefit from additional case studies from female researchers in all male settings, and/or applied research (toward the development of future strategies) in support of these issues. More directions for future research, as well as research limitations are discussed below.

### **Future Research and Study Limitations**

Future directions for this study are abundant. First, as mentioned, gender communication scholars may continue meeting the demands of qualitative feminist

scholars for more qualitative research that addresses the challenges faced by female researchers in all-male or male-dominated research environments (Easterday et al., 1977; Gurney, 1985; Horn, 1997; Laws, 1990; Tracy & Rivera, 2010). Autoethnographic or qualitative narrative feminist scholarship would make a valuable contribution to a limited body of research. It has been far too long since these issues have been (re)visited and/or deeply explored by current qualitative feminist scholars; yet the challenges facing female researchers in male-dominated spaces (e.g., gender stereotypes and stigmas, sexism, patriarchal ideologies about the nature of male-female relationships) still exist today. My conclusions about women's research in male-dominated spaces emerged after the fact, and consequently, were limited by my post-research self-reflection. Therefore, future research should focus on women's advocacy, qualitative research ethics, and seek to offer viable strategies and solutions for female researchers who are challenged by their positions as women in all-male or male-dominated groups.

Future research would also benefit from investigating the role of women's organizational humor to their overall success and/or mobility in the hair industry. For example, I was often made curious by women's self-deprecatory humorous exchanges, and the extent to which gender stereotypical speech and humor might affect industry leaders' (and peers') perceptions of women's (in)competence (Nilsen, 1994). However, I was limited in the extent to which I could hypothesize about women's success in the industry given my primary research objectives. As evidenced by the literature, men still hold higher leadership and stakeholder positions in the hair industry, in addition to generating higher overall salaries, even when working in the same positions as women (Nordberg, 2002). I am curious to know, given women's active participation in their own

subordination via hegemonic processes and discourse, what role humor might have in limiting women's upward mobility. Additional time in the industry, as well as a more narrowed focus on women's-only humor patterns and industry experiences may provide future researchers with a better understanding of this connection. Relatedly, future scholars might also study the relationships (if any) and/or the connection between men's (both heterosexual and homosexual) sexist and/or hypercritical humor directed at women, and women's subordinated positions (including their profit-making abilities and challenges). These were questions I did not ask, yet often considered during my data collection process.

Future research might also explore the effects of organizational communication skills and gender diversity trainings (suggested above) on issues of gender equality. For example, organizational scholars might investigate whether or not mindful communication and gender diversity training reduces sexist humor, results in more gender equality, and/or contributes to women's leadership roles and advancement in the hair industry. Also mentioned, I did not encounter any openly gay lesbian women working in the hair industry (in either setting), gay male barbers, nor women barbers. My study was further limited by the one heterosexual male working in a hair salon that I interviewed (in addition to Shaun). Therefore, greater participant diversity via gender and sexual identity demographics would significantly enhance future renditions of this work. Similarly, the scope of this project was limited by the sites that were selected (and/or agreed to participate) and the demographics represented in these spaces. Future work might aim for more participant diversity in relation to racial, ethnic, sexual, or class identities.

Moving forward, research might also seek to expose the material effects of gender exclusionary humor on hair salon and barbershop demographics (and/or other female- or male-dominated industries), if any. This study pointed to the ways that humor was gendered and how it often contained gender exclusionary messages that targeted the “other,” but did not take into account the extent to which gender exclusionary humor was a true culprit for unequal gender distribution in places where it occurred. Future studies might seek to expound upon these conclusions and analyze narratives from participants who (initially) sought careers as hair stylists/barbers, but who were discouraged, left, or quit the profession, as was the case with Christine’s coworker who quit the barbershop after years of enduring sexist humor from her colleagues.

### **Concluding Remarks and Reflections**

This dissertation generated critical insights and understandings about the discursive patterns and processes by which humor is gendered in the hair industry, and how these commonplace expressions ultimately support hegemony. Moreover, by illuminating the stereotypical and gender exclusionary patterns (styles and content) of hair industry humor, I drew conclusions that extended prior feminist organizational research claims concerning women’s participation and discursive contributions “to the maintenance of dominant systems of meaning” (Ashcraft & Pacanowsky, 1996, p. 220). My hope is that this research not only generates knowledge about the constitutive communication practices of a familiar, yet understudied organizational population, but that it also inspires heuristic curiosity from future critical feminist researchers by offering critical implications and applications for the study of humor, gender, and modern day organizations. Finally, I hope this work communicates a spirit of much needed advocacy

toward gender equality in both female- and male-dominated industries, as well as mixed-sex organizations by showing how our own everyday organizational humor creates confiding roles and limiting/marginalizing conditions.

## CHAPTER 6

### UNEXPECTED FINDINGS: A COLLECTION OF PERSONAL STORIES

#### AND LESSONS LEARNED

This final chapter represents a collection of personal experiences and unexpected findings I encountered while collecting data for my dissertation. The accounts are taken directly from my field notes and therefore, adopt an autoethnographic tone. They only tell the reader my side of the story. Together, these fieldnote reflections reveal how my study of humor was not always fun and games, but at times, a rather serious endeavor whereby ethical considerations and methodological precautions should have been taken, especially as a female researcher entering male dominated spaces (e.g., barbershops). The subsequent findings were tangential to my primary research objectives and claims, and are therefore intended as an addendum to the completed dissertation project. My hope is to provoke interest among my readers, as well as make heuristic methodological contributions for future feminist organizational research in the area of qualitative methods ethics, skills, and training.

As I transcribed my fieldnotes, I remember asking myself the following questions: How are *researchers* protected throughout the research process? What are researchers to do if and when they encounter unforeseeable and possibly intimidating circumstances, such as sexual harassment or inappropriate joking? What is the role of the institutional review board, if any, in these cases? How might researchers, and women in particular, become better trained and equipped with the proper tools (i.e., dialogue, securities, protocols) needed to conduct ethical research within “other” populations? These are the questions that prompted this final chapter – unexpected findings, in order to ignite future

dialogue among qualitative organizational researchers (and especially women) about potentially unforeseen methodological precautions and ethical considerations.

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Tuesday, July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2014

Dad's Barbershop in Mesa, AZ

"I can last longer"

The door chimed as I walked into Dad's Barbershop in Mesa, Arizona yesterday. The small shop was filled with an overwhelming musky aroma of shaving cream and aftershave, and the sounds of an international soccer game echoed from four flat screen televisions posted in each corner of the shop. Red, white and blue striped barbershop memorabilia decorated the windows and tiny workstations of the men, four barbers in all.

A short, middle-aged man with salt and pepper gray hair stood behind his hair, working on what looked to be an ex-military patron. The barber gave me a quick but confused glance (which I immediately assumed was because I was woman), then with a sneer smile and chuckle in his voice he asked, "So, are you here for a haircut?"

"A flat top actually, with a little shave on the sides," I replied, hoping to match his sarcasm and break the ice. I knew exactly whom I was talking to. I recognized the man's voice from our phone conversation earlier that day; his name was Warren and he was the manager of Dad's Barbershop.

Warren laughed at my flat top joke and quickly replied, "So I assume you want it razored?"

I smiled, hoping he remembered who I was – the researcher here for interviews. Just then, Josh, a second barber with a bright red beard chimed in, “he gives good back massages too!” Great, what door had I opened?

This was not my first exchange of humorous banter with Warren; he had already teased me on the phone when I first explained my dissertation project and asked if he and his crew would be willing to do interviews with me about barbershop humor. For example, when I first asked him his name on the phone, he said “Vladimir!” and burst into laughter. “No, no, that’s not my name. Of course I am kidding. W-A-R-R-E-N. Warren is my name. And I’m an old timer you see, I’ve done time!” he explained over the phone, “and I have lots of good ones [jokes], even clean ones for the ladies. I’d be happy to share my jokes with you when you come in!”

I didn’t hesitate to set up a meeting time, though I was afraid he misunderstood the focus of my project. “I would make a great addition to your study,” he insisted, “the guys are always telling me I need to shut up!” He then said he would ask the other barbers if they would participate too. Warren immediately seemed like the kind of guy who prides himself on his reputation as the resident jokester.

So, yesterday, I interviewed Warren. The interview lasted forty-seven minutes, and was choke full of one-liners and punch lines about his wife (and exes), marital affairs (which I doubted actually occurred due to the delivery style of his jokes – sarcastic and exaggerated), sex, blondes, kids, and sports. Warren was my first interview, so I cannot say I was fully prepared for he had to offer.

I then interviewed Arthur, the owner of the shop. Arthur was a handsome middle-aged man with a thick Armenian accent (nearly impossible to comprehend) almost as

thick as his dark salt-and pepper hair. Throughout the interview, Arthur recounted the differences between European humor and distasteful American humor, which disgusted him. “We’re not correct at all here. One of the jokes, if you want I can tell you,” Arthur said. Hesitant, I laughed a bit and replied, “Yeah, that’s fine.” Arthur then gave an example of Warren’s “favorite” joke:

Why the blonde, when she’s going to church, she doesn’t get on her knees in front of the God to pray, why? Because automatic the mouth opens when she is on her knees! You know, these type of jokes we do here... You know what I am saying?

I did know what he was saying. I had heard my fair share of blonde jokes, being a blonde myself, but I wasn’t quite sure how to transition from here.

Today, I went back to Dad’s Barbershop to interview a third barber, Vlaude, who took interest in my project yesterday and volunteered to do an interview the following morning. The shop was quiet – there was no soccer game on today, just a CNN news broadcast set at a low volume as the barbers cleaned and organized their stations. Today, five barbers were working and three had vacant chairs. Vlaude stepped away from his empty station and ushered me over to sit alongside him in the waiting area – a long line of blue upholstered chairs that faced the barbers.

“How long do the interviews take?” Vlaude asked me before we got started.

“Well, one interview I did was under 20 minutes, but another lasted about 45, so it’s really up to you!” I tried to explain, hoping that my response was sufficient and that Vlaude would not think this was a waste of his time.

“Wait a minute, I don’t understand that!” Warren rebutted, “20 *or* 40 minutes with a beautiful woman? Put me in a back room with a gorgeous blonde and I’ll bet I can

last longer than that!” The other barbers began to laugh, and I could sense the mood quickly shifting.

“I doubt it. Warren never lasts that long, you can ask his wife!” Josh, the red bearded barber teased.

More hearty laughter and banter ensued among the men. Meanwhile, there I stood, in the middle of the barbershop in my long scarlet red summer skirt, recorder in hand, surrounded by five male barbers and two of their male clients. All laughing, poking fun at one another’s sexual ineptitude. But it was as if I was not in the shop at all, an invisible bystander witnessing a group of men taking jabs at one other for their sexual (in)competence, and taking bets on how long they could “*last*” . . . with *ME*! I felt the need to do or say something, but wasn’t sure what.

Should I tell them I was pregnant? I suddenly found this a viable strategy, one that might make me less desirable, spoiled goods perhaps. Should I make a joke, and fight fire with fire with my own feisty, sarcastic side to show them that two can play at this game? That might make me appear more masculine and shift their attention from me as fuel for their masculine banter, to more of a joke competitor. Should I laugh alongside them and avoid the potential awkwardness that any other sort of confrontation might create? That didn’t feel right, but safest.

It was then I noticed something interesting, something that had not sat well with me since yesterday’s interviews.

If and when a joke was told that I considered sexist or offensive, I felt compelled to laugh, both as a researcher in need of a *good* interview for my dissertation, but also as a woman, perhaps as a social nicety, or exercise in gender etiquette, I wasn’t sure which.

I did know that I was afraid that if I didn't laugh, my silence would influence the interview process, such that he (Warren, Arthur, any man really) would stop telling *good* jokes and I would miss out on rich and valuable data. But was I willing to laugh at a sexist joke for the sake of getting a *good* interview?

I cannot say I was frightened at any point of their banter, or even threatened by their sexual betting. There was something about the men's tone that assured me, "this is *only* a joke," all in the name of good fun. But this safe space is where humor hides its power, under the guise of "it's only a joke." The experience was certainly unexpected, and so I felt vastly unprepared to respond in an ethical, confident manner that still helped me maintain the integrity of my project.

So, I went with the pregnant *AND* sarcastic response, "You know, I am 3 months pregnant, so my husband might have something to say about all this!" I laughed and even fought to hold back a wink at Warren.

A WINK? Why, so that I too could be part of the, "just joking" club? Still, I felt proud, like I hit two birds with one stone! I had managed, at least in my mind, to make myself less sexually desirable as a pregnant person and unavailable as a married woman. This seemed appropriate for now. The mood in the room shifted again.

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Tuesday, July 29<sup>th</sup>, 2014

Old School Barbers in Orangevale, CA

"Are those mirrors on your shoes?"

The tiny shop certainly had an Old School Barber feel. There was the classic red and white striped barber poll mesmerizingly spinning in the window, 1990s dusty

playboy magazines scattered on the tables, and sports memorabilia hanging from every corner of the shop, including a team flag and letterman jacket from the local high school. The walls were painted sky blue to match the letters on the storefront sign, though it must have been some time ago, as evidenced by the yellowing of the newspaper clippings and comic strips that decorated the walls. An old vintage barbershop poster hung on the sidewall next to a California license plate. The poster showed portraits of traditional men's hair cuts and styles that Dan, Hector and Russ specialize in. The portraits all looked very "military" to me.

Across the front of the store was a giant mirror bordered by a small blue shelf where the men's barbering tools rested – barbicides, straight razors and shaving creams that smelt of old men. And just underneath the mirror and small counter was a black mini-fridge filled with Budweiser beer cans and snacks (I learned this as soon as the shop closed and the men immediately popped open a can).

Dan, Hector and Russ were all in their early 70s, and had been working together as barbers for more than 40 years. "We see generations of men come through these doors," Hector explained, "and we always tell them, you must be accompanied by a grandparent, dead or alive!" he joked. His heckling reminded me of Jim Henson's Muppet characters, Statler and Waldorf, who relentlessly badger each other and their audience in a series of playful puns and putdowns.

Hector was the owner of the shop and Russ was his brother. Together, they first opened up shop in San Jose, CA in the late 1960s, and later moved to Orangevale, CA where they had been running Old School Barbers since the 1990s. Dan was their long-time friend and coworker, a man who began barbering with them in San Jose, CA in the

60s, but after 15 years and three divorces, followed the brothers to Orangevale, CA.

“Nobody else wants us, you will always see us together” Dan joked.

The three men had a near perfect synchronicity to their humor and long-lasting jovial rapport embedded in their conversation style that was impenetrable as a guest in their shop, the kind of communication where one finishes the other’s sentences and they always seem to be on the same page. They were always one step ahead, jokesters.

Due to the size of the shop, a mere 300-400 square feet at most, simply walking through the front door nearly put me in Dan’s chair. I scooted my way into the shop through the narrow entryway and stepped to the side of the barber chairs and into a small open space next to a wooden table with playboy magazines and newspapers piled high.

I smiled, “Hello! My name is Tara and I spoke with Russ earlier this morning about doing some interviews.”

Without hesitation or so much as a handshake, Dan, the man directly in front of me looked me up and down (the kind of thing every woman dreads) and said, “Are those mirrors on your shoes?” in an all-too-serious tone.

Confused, I too looked down toward my toes. Strapped on my feet was a pair of shiny black flip-flops with a metallic gold embroidery stripe that lined my toes. “I wouldn’t quite call them mirrors,” I said, unknowingly (and naively) providing Dan with the perfect set-up for his punch line.

“Oh I would! Because they’re doing their job,” Dan snickered as he gave a second, long hard glance down toward my feet. It took me a moment, but I soon got the joke. I had a long dress on, the kind that falls just an inch or so above your ankles and allows your shoes to peak out beneath the hem.

Oh come on! Really?

Feeling extremely self-conscious and with nowhere really to go, I took a little step back and tucked my feet beneath my dress. I knew the gold strip was not *actually* a mirror, but I didn't want to give Dan's imagination the satisfaction of thinking it functioned as one.

"I used to wear mirrors on my shoes too when I was younger!" Dan continued as he laughed. At this point, his joke had gained the attention of his friends, Russ and Hector.

"I hope for different reasons than I might expect," I replied, my tone a bit more snarky than I'd like to admit for a first meeting.

"Oh no, I could see everything just fine!" Dan added. And with a hearty chuckle and proud gaze around the room, the joke was over. Hector's eye roll functioned as a good transition to Dan's next one-liner.

"What's your name again, Tara you said? Terrible Tara. Is that what they call you?" Dan teased, perhaps because of the alliteration?

"Not the best way to make a good first impression so far," I snapped back, feeling feistier than I had felt in Phoenix with Warren in Dad's Barbershop. Dan smiled at me, almost as if to agree that his first impression was not particularly flattering. I wondered what nicknames Dan had accumulated over the years. Dirty Dan, perhaps?

If nothing else, Dan was a riot, the "funnyman" in the shop, to use male generic language. From that moment on, I witnessed Dan transition seamlessly from joke to joke, sharing over 40 years worth of funny stories which included tales of Viagra trials, mishaps in the barbershop, and even being victim to a fart machine prank, among many

more. “That’s what Dan does, always juices it up, makes the story better. It’s something you have to do in here!” Hector explained.

Hearing Hector’s words helped me understand that Dan’s joking demeanor was part of their barbershop ritual, a performed comedic reputation that he had achieved and maintained alongside his peers and clients over the years. He meant no *real* harm, I assumed, but told his jokes for the pure sake of entertainment. Yet today, his reputation was maintained at the expense of my discomfort, in a moment of what corporate America refers to as sexual harassment.

I reflected on my initial conversation with Dan once in my car and took ample notes. Similar to my experience in Dad’s Barbershop, I realized I never felt blatantly threatened. I was increasingly less surprised that I would be sexually harassed at an all-male barbershop. After all, Dan’s early commentary certainly fit the “dirty old man” stereotype that one might expect to find at an old school barbershop. And I had no female (or male) allies to back me up here. “Men come in here to bitch about their wives, to get away for a while, older men... that’s the way it has always been and how these guys have always been,” I remembered Dan saying.

But I did notice a growing pattern in my response to the men’s sexist humor – a defense mechanism I had developed in the form sarcasm paired with a touch of deliberate naivety. I knew how to snap back (at some point), a witty defensive skill I had developed long ago to deal with the teasing I experienced in middle school, but never too aggressive or serious as if to say, “I am uncomfortable and going to leave.” This partnership seemed to work well as a researcher – I felt I had managed to play along with my participants

without jeopardizing the relationship or nature of the interview. But was this the best way to carry out my research?

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Thursday, September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2014

Timeless Salon in Phoenix, AZ

### Part One: “Way Over the Top”

Jay was a heterosexual, male hair salon stylist in his early 40s. He told me that he legally changed his name a few years ago and thought his new name had a catchier ring to it than his birth name – which he never disclosed. I have to admit, “Jay” did have a hint of a hipster vibe that seemed to fit the chic personality of Timeless Hair Salon.

It was a large and bustling salon; different from any of the mom-and-pop salons I had visited. Timeless Salon was two massive stories high with the constant sounds of hair driers, mechanical nail files, loud chatter and laughter from all floors. Beauty products and fashion accessories lined the entryway and fresh coffee was served in the lounge as clients waited for their appointments.

Sitting across from Jay in a comfortable oversized salon chair, I couldn’t help but notice his long, wavy dark hair that he kept brushed back from his vibrant blue eyes. He wore a snug, charcoal gray t-shirt that he tucked into fitted skinny jeans. By most standards, I believed women would find him physically attractive.

We sat together in his workstation on the second floor of Timeless Salon, where Jay had worked for the past nine years. He was quite the conversationalist. For example, despite my multiple attempts at using an interview guide to direct our conversation toward the topic of humor and gender in hair salons, much of our time together (over one

hour!) was spent discussing his band, personal theories of psychology related to the female psyche, and past relationships (both with clients and staff).

So I have slept with a receptionist from here, a receptionist from the other salon I came from. There's a girl that works next to me, she and I dated in 2001 for about nine months or so, and we are still really good friends... So the receptionist here that I slept with... she started bragging... and eventually everybody found out and whatever. And the community of it all becomes very dangerous, you know? It's just safer not to do it.

I wasn't quite sure where the conversation was going at that point. I remember asking Jay something about humor and boundaries; perhaps he only heard the word boundaries?

About fifty-four minutes into our interview and after hearing several stories of this nature, I decided to ask Jay if he could share a funny story, something from his notebook (member journal) that really stood out. "I will share story #5 that I call, my wife Emilia," he replied. I found it peculiar that he numbered his stories. He began:

"I met my wife in the here in the salon by way of a girl who used to work downstairs... So Emilia came in one day and asked, 'what do you charge?' and I was like, 'you can't afford me!'" Jay mimicked a flirty tone, "to this day she's like, 'then imitating a woman's voice, 'you were the biggest dick! What an asshole.' I was like, 'you're a college student!' So I have her in the chair, and I do this whole –" then, twirling his hands in a circular motion, Jay begins to mimic the way that hair stylists typically tousle their clients' hair from behind the chair during the initial hair consultation.

This is a practice that I am very familiar with, given my experience in the salon and the fact that my husband is a stylist. Jay continued, "- and I was *way* over the top!"

I could tell by the exaggerated and sensual tone in Jay's voice that this story was headed down a sexual road. So, in efforts to prevent the retelling of another unrelated story, I reached for my laptop and began scrolling to the next set of questions – questions that did not ask about boundaries or funny stories! It was at that moment, when I looked away

from Jay and down at my computer screen, that he jumped out of his chair and approached me from behind. He began to vigorously tousle my hair!

“So like this, like ‘what do you want to do? What’s um, what do you like and what don’t you like?’” he reenacted.

As he uttered these words, his fingers began to massage my scalp, coarsely running up and down the back of my neck, across to the lobes of my ears that he sporadically pinched and pulled. Every so often, Jay smirked and paused to grab small portions of my hair between his fingers that he gently tugged by their roots. I was becoming physically uncomfortable, but what’s worse is that he never broke eye contact in the mirror we both faced. He was all in!

“I get it!” I said, in a quickened high-pitch tone that I hoped would communicate, “STOP” and began to lean forward in my chair. I was truly shocked by what was happening, but Jay’ hands followed my forward lean and he continued:

“And usually I am just like,” then barely touching my hair, Jay gives it a few swishes back and forth and continued, “so whatever. But I don’t know. I just wanted to see, and kept giving it to her more and more, and like, her eyes completely roll back in her head.”

Jay continued again to caress my hair, massaging my scalp harder and harder. Taken aback, I moved forward again in my chair, beyond his reach. He backed away a few steps to finish his story.

“And she’s like, and the way her humor is, she’s like,” and again, mimicking a feminine voice and sexual tone, while closing his eyes, he said, ““What? Oh yeah, yeah. Whatever you want to do.”

This story was getting out of control by all normative standards of research. Was I reliving one of Jay' sexual fantasy moments? How did we get here?

I don't quite remember how I transitioned out of that one. To the best of my recollection, a coworker walked up the stairs and interrupted the end of his story.

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#### Part Two: "And These!"

A few moments after my very strange encounter with Jay at his salon chair, I politely wrapped up my interview, thanked Jay for his time, and explained that I had another interview to attend so it was best I get going. Jay smiled and offered to walk me out. As we walked down the staircase behind Jay's station and toward the front door, another female stylist was on her way up the stairs and stopped to greet us mid-staircase.

"Cheri!" Jay exclaimed, and held out his hands for a big hug. "Isn't she gorgeous? She is always looking so fabulous and making me jealous!" Jay said in a sassy tone. It was clear they had a flirty work rapport. And Jay wasn't far off, she was stunning! Cheri had gorgeous long blonde hair (clearly colored), flawless tan skin, perfect makeup, and a neon pink dress that can only be described as an outfit Barbie might wear. Something about her eyes however gave the impression that she was a bit older, and something about her face gave her secrets away – she'd had some work done.

"Oh stop it Jay! You always know how to make me blush. Are you a new client?" Cheri turned to me and asked.

"Oh no, I am here doing research. I am not sure if you got the memo from the owner, but I am the one doing interviews about humor in hair salons," I explained, realizing that I was giving Cheri this information in hopes that she would not think I was

spending time with Jay for any other reason. I was clearly feeling violated from my recent experience and wanted nothing more than to leave, process and write!

“Oh! I have been gone for a while, so I didn’t see the memo,” she smiled. “And you’re pregnant!” she shouted on the staircase, with a giant smile on her face.

“Yes, I am! Five months along,” I shared, happy to be showing at this point in my pregnancy.

But then, Cheri did something even more unexpected than Jay had done from behind his chair. As a pregnant woman, it was a far too common experience that people, especially other women, reached out and touched (or rubbed) my stomach at the moment they realize I am pregnant. So far, I had not taken much offense to this behavior, and often chalked it up to other people’s curiosity about pregnant bellies, or desire to physically touch (as close as possible anyway) my daughter. In some instances, I even found it endearing that someone would want to reach out and try to touch her. But this is not what Cheri did.

“And THESE!” Cheri shrieked, which startled me a bit. She then reached both her hands out toward my breasts, cupped one in each of her hands and proceeded to juggle them up and down! She giggled as they bounced, almost as if they were toys.

I stood in the staircase, motionless, except for my jiggling breasts of course.

“See, now that’s not fair. I could never do that to a woman when I first meet her,” Jay complained. I had a feeling he was enjoying our interaction.

“That is because you’re not a woman or gay. Women can do that to each other and it’s no big deal. If you weren’t standing here,” Cheri looked at Jay, “I would flash her

mine!” She turned to me again and explained, “I had my boobs done and I love showing them off. I’ll bet gay guys do that to you all the time, don’t they?” Cheri asked.

“None that I can remember,” I replied, still frozen on the staircase.

“Well, it was nice to meet you, congratulations!” Cheri said and dashed up the stairs. I dared not make eye contact with Jay as we walked down the remaining stairs toward the front door. Rather, I thanked him again for his time and left without shaking his hand. I had had enough physical contact for one day.

### **Protocols and Rationale**

According to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) website at Arizona State University (2015), the role of the IRB “is to review all proposed research involving human subjects to ensure the subjects are treated ethically and that their rights and welfare are adequately protected” throughout the research process (para. 2). In order to ensure that researchers are taking the proper precautions to protect their subjects, the IRB maintains rigorous and standardized sets of protocol that call for the protection, security, confidentiality, and overall well being of human research subjects. Furthermore, the Nuremberg Code (1949), a code of conduct brought on by a series of inhumane experimental practices during WWII (Tracy, 2013) and adopted by the IRB, reflects a series of ethical research practices which include gaining voluntary consent from participants, avoiding unnecessary “physical and mental suffering,” and limiting the degree of risks for research participants (p. 181). Prior to conducting research on human subjects, university researchers must therefore submit an application to the IRB to be reviewed and approved in order to ensure all these protocols have been met and addressed. While the aforementioned codes and practices serve a valuable purpose in

upholding ethical research protocols, what I find curious is that they are all aimed at protecting the “subject” of human research, not researchers themselves. I was challenged to consider the following questions: what protocols are in place that protect me, the researcher, from unethical behavior, sexual harassment, or from being physically violated (by both a man and a woman) during the research process? Where might I turn to find resources aimed at protecting the researcher’s overall safety, security, and well being?

I decided to investigate this issue further and conducted an online search via Google Scholar, Google, and the ASU library using terms such as “protections for researchers” and “IRB protocol for protecting researchers,” among other synonyms for the same topic. I had almost no luck, aside from a few science-based websites that suggested ways to prevent biohazard accidents in laboratory settings, and one animal-based research site that recommended hiring additional security officers and/or law enforcement should researchers become under attack (Society for Neuroscience, 2015). What I found instead were numerous websites (often redirecting me to the IRB) and articles originating from various universities and organizations throughout the country, dedicated to the protection of research *subjects*, not researchers. I then reviewed the last edition of the Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research (Putnam & Mumby, 2014) searching for researcher protections, and again, came up short on practical guidance about how to best protect myself as a (female) researcher. I finally turned to an online inquiry of “female researchers in all-male environments,” hoping that the intended subject matter might simply be disguised in other types of research reports. While I did find fascinating research studies conducted by women in male-dominated industries (Easterday et al., 1977; Gurney, 1985; Horn, 1997; Tracy & Rivera, 2010), I was not able

to locate specific protocol or practical methodological guidelines that work to ensure the protection and safety of female researchers.

Why don't researcher protection protocols exist? Why, each time I teach the advanced qualitative research methods course, am I challenged to direct my students to scholarly research that addresses their concerns about personal safety in the field? According to Cannella and Lincoln (2011), this is because "the regulation of research ethics... has... most often been influenced by traditional, postpositivist orientations" that value objectivity and researcher neutrality above all else, such that the study of human *subjects* (aptly referred to as human *participants* in qualitative research designs) outside of experimental methodologies has been largely ignored in the social scientific research community (p. 81). For example, empirical and science-based methodologies typically position researchers as a disinterested, distant observer, or as an all-knowing decision maker (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Conducting research under these conditions limits the possibilities for unscripted participant interactions, unexpected/unplanned conditions, and the complexities that arise from researcher participation/immersion. Current IRB regulations reflect a line of empirical inquiry whereby the researcher is removed from the community of research subjects (Cannella & Lincoln, 2011). As such, it may be the case that IRB and alternative protection protocols have yet to be developed in constructive and practical ways that address and reflect the practices of naturalistic inquiry.

Furthermore, "instructional literature on qualitative research... assumes that the fieldworker is 'anyman' and that *his* personal characteristics, such as gender, have no bearing upon the... setting" (Gurney, 1985, p. 42). Gurney then goes on to describe how

her position as a young, female, graduate student gave her participants (all men in an economic crime unit) the impression that she was both nonthreatening and naïve, as a researcher. Together, these conditions allowed her participants “to place me in roles with which *they* were comfortable, but which made research more difficult for me” (p. 47). Reading Gurney’s account was certainly helpful in processing my own experiences, however the author did not provide pragmatic strategies aimed at protecting female researchers (and to be fair, this was not her intention). Gurney stated for example, that “[sometimes] the presence of a token woman leads to an exaggerated display of dominant male culture, including instances of sexual innuendo and sexual teasing,” and that ultimately, fieldworkers should not and “cannot expect to control setting members’ behavior” (pp. 48, 59). I certainly found this to be the case as I struggled through each uncomfortable encounter noted above, but was left unsatisfied with the idea that researchers are ultimately at the mercy of their participants’ hegemonic and gendered displays. The problem, Laws (1990) argued, is that women’s experiences and meaning making processes are often tainted and influenced by men’s perceptions of women, which frequently reflect attitudes of superiority and heteronormativity/hyper-masculinity. In her book titled, *Issues of blood: The politics of menstruation*, Laws explained:

I have... found my research a painful process, for I have had to make myself pay attention to men’s sexist views of myself in a way which I would ‘naturally’ avoid in any other situation. Another problem was the lack of literature to refer to in evaluating my own experience. (p. 216)

This was not the only message of its kind that I received. Research by Horn (1997) for example, painted a detailed portrait of the challenges faced by a female researcher in a male-dominated police center, yet gave little, if any, practical advice on how future

female researchers might better prepare for and/or educate themselves on these issues before entering the field.

### **Personal Reflections**

During my data collection process, I quickly realized that my participants' dialogue was beyond my control, and that I was not prepared with the right words, methodological strategies, or even institutional support that would ensure my safety and well being. Rather, I relied on my own communicative (and often humorous) skill set to manage the situation at hand. This typically involved making a sarcastic and/or witty remark and physical gesture to step back (or lean forward) as a signal of my overall discomfort to my participants. I have always found that humor is quite valuable in this way – as a means to diffuse tension-filled scenarios or as I often tease, get me out of a jam. Indeed, an act of humor can effectively send an implied message, such as “stop harassing me,” without the need to overtly state the words that may otherwise create an uncomfortable confrontation. However, I do not believe that joking my way out of sexual harassment or a sexist joke cycle is the best or most effective way to conduct ethical research, nor a skill set that most researchers have learned or developed.

In fact, I often felt uncomfortable knowing that my own laughter and teasing them back was not only being recorded in some cases (evidence that I too had participated in a sexist joke cycle!) but a breach of my critical investments, values, and ethical practices in feminist research. As a critical feminist scholar, and as a WOMAN, the idea of laughing at a time when I was made the target of sexual harassment or a sexist joke cycle was extremely troublesome. It produced a lasting guilt that surely influenced my research (Gurney, 1985). I would leave the scene asking myself, was this sort of complacent,

participatory behavior (e.g. laughter) the type of thing that allows men to think sexist jokes are acceptable in society, in the workplace? Was a snarky remark really enough to rebuke an objectifying remark in a room full of men? I wanted so badly to practice what I preach (e.g., feminist values, practicing agency, combating patriarchal and hegemonic humor cycles), but how?

### **Practical and Methodological Implications**

I believe raising these questions and bringing female-fieldworker challenges to the forefront make small, but significant contributions to existing scholarship on qualitative research ethics – if simply a request for continuing dialogue and improved practices regarding issues of researcher protections. Experienced qualitative scholars could dedicate special issues of academic journals to addressing the concerns and implications of female researchers who perform qualitative research in all-male industries/settings (and vice-versus). Furthermore, expert fieldworkers (and not just those from the feminist and women’s studies division) could raise awareness by conducting short-courses, workshops, and/or trainings at national or regional conferences that address these types of issues for women, men, and minorities. It is not enough, as past literature suggests, to surrender control to research participants, despite researchers’ ability to exercise control in most research settings. Surrendering control places researchers, and especially female researchers in all-male environments, at the risk of gendered marginalization. Nor do I believe that humor (e.g., laughing my way through discomfort as the targets of sexist joke cycles and sexual harassment) is a safe or viable option for many. Rather, institutionally supported standards of protocol need to be

developed that ensure researcher protection, safety and well being, as thoroughly as they currently do for our participants.

I therefore suggest developing new qualitative research method curriculum (e.g., chapters in a textbook, conference workshops) that work to raise awareness about these issues and increase researchers' protection in the field. For example, a new clause could be included in participant information and/or recruitment letters that asks research participants to pledge and/or make a commitment to participate as ethical members of the research project. This clause could include a short summary of behaviors that are considered inappropriate or unethical, according to University research standards. Despite an inability for Universities to penalize participants for breaches of these commitments, Universities and/or IRB offices might consider instead keeping detailed records of organizations and/or individuals that upheld the commitments, and those who did not. Over time, these records would make a valuable contribution toward a growing collection of "safe" (or safer) and committed community partners.

Universities might also consider how they could develop or enhance qualitative research trainings, whether for women entering all-male research sites, or otherwise. Often, these issues are treated as informal discussions or "confessions from the field" in our graduate level seminars, but are not backed by University standards of ethics, protocols, or training programs. Experts in the field who have ample research experience with a variety of participant communities could lead interdisciplinary trainings, share their stories, and together, make practical and legal suggestions (e.g. developing a vocabulary for threatening situations, protocol for reporting inappropriate behaviors/harassment to University officials and/or the IRB, and general safe practices –

such as conducting research in partners/groups) to novice researchers. Finally, Universities might consider how they could implement a mentorship program between experienced and novice researchers. Similar to the advisor-advisee mentorship, qualitative researchers of all levels of expertise and from various disciplines could be paired together based on general similarities via the types of projects they conduct and research communities they investigate. Together, through increased discourse and enhanced training, I believe the challenges I faced during the qualitative research process could be met by practical measures to increase researcher protections.

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APPENDIX A:  
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION LETTER

July 2014

Dear Participant,

My name is Tara Franks and I am a graduate student under the direction of Dr. Sarah Tracy in the Hugh Downs School of Communication at Arizona State University. I am here to share with you about a research study I am conducting on hair salons and barbershops in order to understand how humor is used and gendered (in both style and content) in creative, diverse workspaces.

I am inviting your voluntary participation in this study. There are no foreseeable benefits, risks or discomforts to your participation. You must be 18 years or older to participate. Participation in this study will involve verbal consent on your behalf to participate in the following:

1. My own workplace observations- here, I will visit your workplace and make observations about the nature of humor as I visit the salon. I will not interact or ask anything of you or anyone in the salon for my observations. I am merely observing the salon for my records. I will obtain permission from salon management before I observe your workplace, and I will spend no more than 3 hours total at your workplace throughout the project.
2. Participation in member diaries- or what I will call humor journals! Should you choose to participate in member diaries (they are voluntary!), you will be provided a letter of instructions along with a notepad. I am requesting that participants take notes for TWO consecutive weeks about funny “moments” that occur at work. This activity can be done with paper and pencil, or electronically (e.g., Facebook, text message, via email message).
3. A 30-minute informal interview to take place at a public site of your choice (outside work hours). The questions will be focused on humor, gender, and your personal experiences of humor.

You have the right to decline participation in any of the above-mentioned areas, and may opt out/stop participation at any time.

I would like to record our interview. The interview will **not** be recorded without your permission. Please let me know if you do not want the interview to be recorded. If you are comfortable being recorded, I will need you to provide verbal consent at the time of the interview. You can also change your mind after the interview starts, just let me know.

In order to maintain the utmost confidentiality of participant identity and date records during the research process, I will use the audio recordings to create typed interview transcripts immediately following the interview sessions. The names of participants will be omitted and pseudonyms will be assigned to individuals and their workplaces. The results of this research study may be used in reports, presentations, and publications, however the researchers will not identify the participants by name, nor any identifying demographics.

By participating in the above-proposed activity, you are consenting to be a part of this study.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact the research team: Dr. Sarah Tracy, (480) 965-7709, Sarah.Tracy@asu.edu, or Tara Franks at tara.franks@asu.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788.

Respectfully,  
Tara Franks  
Tara.franks@asu.edu  
Dr. Sarah J. Tracy  
Sarah.tracy@asu.edu

APPENDIX B:  
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Thank you for taking your time and meeting with me today for this brief interview. It should not take more than 30-45 minutes of your time. Today I would like to talk to you about your experience and perceptions of humor at work. My specific interest in this study is to understand how humor is gendered in hair salons and barbershops.

As mentioned in the informed consent letter, I will be audio recording your responses for accuracy. All responses will be kept confidential and no identifying information will be used in the written portion of this study.

Before we begin, do you have a preferred pseudonym? \_\_\_\_\_

## DEMOGRAPHICS

1. How long have you been a stylist/barber?
2. Can you tell me a little about the demographics at work?
  - a. How many males work at the salon/barbershop? Females?
  - b. Who owns/manages the salon/barbershop?
  - c. What about the clientele? Male, female? Majority race, class?
  - d. Explain a little about the culture/mission of your salon/barbershop?
3. Why did you get into this profession?

## HUMOR QUESTIONS

1. First, think about something funny that happened recently at work - maybe a funny joke, prank, or a funny story was told - can you tell me about what happened and who was involved? Feel free to omit their names.
2. I see that you wrote down \_\_\_\_\_ in your humor journal. Would you mind revisiting that funny moment? Tell me more about it.

PROBES:

  - a. Or, tell me about the funniest story you can recall from work.
  - b. Who did it involve and what was the nature (topic) of humor?
3. Tell me about a funny, or the funniest person at work. Who are they?

PROBES:

  - a. Are they male or female? Hetero/homosexual?
  - b. What about them makes them funny?
  - c. How would you explain their sense of humor?
  - d. How do your coworkers respond to their humor? What about clients?
4. How important is it to have a sense of humor, or to use humor in your profession? Why?
5. What are the benefits of using humor at work?
6. What are the disadvantages, if any, of using humor at work?
7. In general, what types of jokes/topics do you find are most common at your salon or barbershop?

PROBE: How might this differ from other workplaces, if at all?

8. There are several types of humor - some are light-hearted, and others are more offensive. Have you ever had an experience at work where you were engaged in or witness to offensive types of humor?
- PROBES:
- Can you give me an example of humor that might be offensive in your workplace?
  - How did you/how might you, respond if someone took humor too far?
  - What eventually happened? (Examples may include: someone was fired, put on probation, new formal or informal policies were enacted at work to protect individuals, or nothing occurred at all).
9. What differences have you noticed about the ways that men use humor at work from women, and vice versus?
- PROBES:
- How would you categorize/explain (in general) male's/masculine humor at work? Women's/feminine humor at work?
  - Which examples, specifically, come to mind?
  - How do you think gender, or sexuality, effect these differences?
  - How is male/female humor influenced by who is present, if at all?
10. There are several types of humor- for example, slapstick, practical jokes, pranks, sarcasm, witty humor, irony, joke telling, storytelling, to name a few.
- Which do you believe women engage in more, less?
  - Which do you believe men engage in more, less?
  - Please share any examples to illustrate this.
11. In your opinion, who is funnier - women or men?
- PROBES:
- Why do you think that is?
  - Now consider your workplace. Who is typically funnier/funniest and why?
12. How often, if at all, do you use humor in the workplace?
- PROBES:
- For example, do you often joke with your co-workers, managers, or clients?
    - What topics do you often joke about?
    - Imagine you had to describe your own sense or style of humor, how would you do so?
    - Would you describe your humor as more strategic or natural/free flowing?
    - Do you find yourself initiating humor often? Why or why not? (If not, how would you describe your role (engagement/overall appreciation) in workplace humor?
  - Are you more comfortable joking with/around women, men, or both?
  - What about women/men makes it easy/difficult to joke with them?
13. What types of humor do you think are most appropriate for work? What types of humor do you believe are inappropriate for work? Can you think of a time that illustrates either of these opinions?

14. Is there anything you want people to know about humor in hair salons that we have not discussed? OR – Is there anything you would like to add?
15. Do you have any further questions for me?

Thank you for your participation in this study! Results will be made available to you at your request at the completion of the study.

APPENDIX C:  
PARTICIPANT PSEUDONYMS AND DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Pseudonym	Gender	Position	Location
Katya	F	Stylist	Phoenix, AZ
Bonanza	F	Stylist	Phoenix, AZ
Pearl	F	Stylist	Phoenix, AZ
Selena	F	Stylist	Phoenix, AZ
Pole	M	Salon Owner/Stylist	Phoenix, AZ
Tawnee	F	Stylist	Arcadia, AZ
Bobby	M	Barbershop Owner/Barber	Phoenix, AZ
Camme	F	Salon Owner/Stylist	Arcadia, AZ
Andrew	M	Salon Manager/Stylist	Arcadia, AZ
Jay	M	Stylist	Arcadia, AZ
Tessa	F	Receptionist/Stylist	Arcadia, AZ
Jill	F	Stylist	Arcadia, AZ
Noel	F	Stylist	Arcadia, AZ
Arthur	M	Barbershop Owner/Barber	Glendale, AZ
Vlaude	M	Barber	Glendale, AZ
Gordo	M	Barber	Paradise Valley
Warren	M	Barber	Glendale, AZ
Cricket	F	Salon Owner/Stylist	Carmichael, CA
Melanie	F	Salon Owner/Stylist	Folsom, CA
Christine	F	Stylist	Orangevale, CA
Denise	F	Salon Owner/Stylist	Orangevale, CA

Cynthia	F	Stylist	Rocklin, CA
Gloria	F	Stylist	Roseville, CA
Brad	M	Barbershop Owner/Barber	Folsom, CA
Russ	M	Barber	Orangevale, CA
Hector	M	Barber	Orangevale, CA
Dan	M	Barber	Orangevale, CA
Marco	M	Barbershop Owner/Barber	Woodlands, CA
Katie	F	Salon Owner/Stylist	Carmichael, CA
Chloe	F	Stylist	Folsom, CA