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Not stranger or friend: The role of self-disclosure in personal-service provider  
relationships

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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School,  
Marquette University,

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Master of Arts in Communication

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

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ABSTRACT  
NOT STRANGER OR FRIEND: THE ROLE OF SELF-DISCLOSURE IN PERSONAL  
SERVICE PROVIDER RELATIONSHIPS

Sarah E. Devereux, B.A., M.A.

Marquette University, 2020

The process of self-disclosure was examined through a type of relationship that has not been studied significantly in previous research, the personal-service provider and client relationship. Most research regarding self-disclosure has looked at either close, intimate relationships or that of strangers. Self-disclosure between people who are not members of the groups mentioned above requires further research to fully understand how often it occurs, why it happens, what type of information is shared and more. Eight semi-structured qualitative interviews with hairstylists who have been working for two years or more and have built relationships with clients were conducted to answer the questions surrounding the self-disclosure occurring in this type of relationship. The rules that govern this specific interaction don't follow the same norms that govern most self-disclosure interactions. In addition, personal-service providers reported additional pressures involved with receiving these disclosures from clients.

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## Not stranger or friend: The role of self-disclosure in personal-service provider relationships

### **Introduction**

Self-disclosure occurs often throughout our lives, but many people do not think twice about it. It is often seen as an expected phenomenon that brings us closer to our friends and loved ones. However, we don't only share personal, private and deep information with those in our close, intimate relationships. We share personal information with a variety of the people involved in our lives and for different reasons, and these are the relationships and experiences that beg for more research. Self-disclosure has been defined as "the process of telling another about one's intimate feelings, attitudes, and experiences," (Specher & Hendrick, 2004, p. 858). When deciding to disclose personal information about oneself, people weigh a variety of factors, often first looking at the relationship they have with the person to whom they are sharing. This relationship is significant in the decision-making process when disclosing personal and private information. Self-disclosure plays an important role in distinguishing the type and level of relationship we have with another person.

The literature surrounding self-disclosure has concentrated principally on relationships that are deep and intimate, such as family, friends, and significant others. However, some research has been done on the phenomenon of disclosing to strangers. This thesis focuses on an aspect of self-disclosure that has not been given much attention in previous studies: how self-disclosure is used in the relationship between personal service-providers and their clients. The consequence of the limited prior research is that

we do not fully understand much about this third type of relationship; where the relational partners are not quite friends but also not strangers. Therefore, the purpose of this research study is to probe a new relationship in terms of self-disclosure, which hasn't been discussed previously. As many people know or have experienced, when they go to a personal-service provider throughout the time of the appointment, they may have disclosed a lot of personal information. This is a common phenomenon in today's society; however, without further research, we cannot fully understand how often it occurs, what the norms that govern the self-disclosures are, or the relationship that develops. It is my assumption that deep self-disclosures frequently occur between personal-service providers and clients, but without further research, we cannot conclude one way or the other.

This study aims first to understand how often personal-service providers report receiving self-disclosure in their encounters with clients. Second, this study will attempt to understand the norms that govern the self-disclosures that occur in this type of relationship. I also research how the responsibility of gaining self-disclosures from clients affects the service-provider outside of the work setting. And finally, I look into how the personal-service provider classifies the relationship with the client. Therefore, the data collected in this study will be used to understand the entire relationship between personal-service providers and their client to understand if the relationship follows the universal principles of self-disclosure.

To answer these questions and understand more about this relationship, it was necessary to do in-depth interviews with hairstylists to understand their point of view. I collected personal narratives from hairstylists who have been working at their craft for

two or more year. The narratives focused on an in-depth examination of the stylists' relationship with their clients. Each interview was first recorded and then transcribed for ease of analysis. This process is described in depth in the Methodology chapter of this thesis.

In this thesis, I begin by explaining self-disclosure and factors that contribute to self-disclosure in relationships. Then I discuss the related theory of social penetration and how it explains self-disclosure in relationships. I conclude the literature review by presenting other related concepts to show the gap in research surrounding the personal-service provider and client relationship and explaining the four research questions that this study seeks to answer. In the methodology section, I provide each participants background and the procedure for the interviews. The analysis of the data is based on four norms of self-disclosure (Chaikin, et al., 1974): the rarity of how often self-disclosures occur, self-disclosures are incremental, reciprocal, and usually happen in intimate relationships. Based on these norms, I evaluate the data to see if the self-disclosures that occur in this third type of relationship follow the common principles of self-disclosure. This study offers an in-depth look at the relationship between service providers and clients to understand further the occurrence of self-disclosure in the quasi-friendship that develops between clients and service-providers.

## **Literature Review**

### **Understanding Self-disclosure**

**Definition.** Before we can discuss the literature surrounding self-disclosure, we must first understand the concept of self-disclosure itself. Sidney Jourard (1971) first

introduced the idea of self-disclosure through the concept of *willful disclosure* which is, "to let another person know with no shadow of a doubt what you have done, what you feel, etc." (pp. 16-17). Therefore, we understand self-disclosure to be what happens between two or more individuals when they decide to reveal information about themselves that the other person(s) would have no way of knowing otherwise. We are continuously making self-disclosures about things—whether verbal or nonverbal. While we reveal information about ourselves nonverbally through our clothes, facial expressions, hairstyles, piercings or lack thereof, we most often think of self-disclosure as verbal behavior.

Specifically, self-disclosure has often been studied through verbal statements that reflect our thoughts and feelings as we converse with another person. This can be anywhere from "I think Susie is very entitled," or "I feel angry when Bobby misspells my name in emails," to something more surface level such as, "I really like deep-dish pizza,". These statements reflect information that we keep to ourselves until we decide to share with another person. Rosenfeld (2000) stated that we engage in disclosure when we grant someone access to private information and secrets. So, while we are constantly making self-disclosures about ourselves day-to-day, it is the deeper, and more personal thoughts, attitudes and feelings that we deem high-risk when we are deciding to share with others, which is what most research into self-disclosure focuses on.

The superficial information that we decide to reveal to another person, such as the deep-dish pizza example above, plays a vital role in crafting, creating, and maintaining our relationships. This type of information helps to maintain our relationships as we converse day-to-day, but doesn't do much to advance our relationships deeper. This

personal information that we share with another person can include, "descriptive, evaluative and affective disclosures," or "facts about themselves, opinions and attitudes they possess, or information about their moods and emotions" (Omarzu, 2000, p. 175). And it helps maintain our relationships because sharing information about ourselves with another person allows us to connect and relate to another human. But when we take the next step and decide to reveal more sensitive and personal information to another person, this is where it's possible to face more consequences. The communication process of self-disclosure allows people to reveal their "true self" to another person (Jourard, 1971). This process leaves us vulnerable by being open to another person.

There are four norms that previous research of self-disclosure has noted and studied (Chaikin, et al., 1974). They include the following: Self-disclosure is often incremental, meaning it takes place over a long period. Literature has shown that self-disclosure is a process over time and often increases as relationships develop (Altman & Taylor, 1973). The second principle states that self-disclosure is reciprocal. When one person discloses personal information, it often pushes the other person to disclose as well (Altman, 1973). Which leads to the third principle, that self-disclosure often happens in close, intimate relationships (Hensley, 1996). The last principle of self-disclosure is that majority of our overall communication is not deep self-disclosure, but rather small talk (West & Turner, 2020). A lot of the communication we participate in on a day-to-day basis is very surface level, basic, phatic, or instrumental communication. This means the deeper self-disclosures are often quite rare, but because disclosing personal information can cause stress and anxiety, it tends to garner more attention.

For this thesis, I draw from Cozby's (1973) definition and define self-disclosure as sharing deep and personal information that one would not otherwise know about us. While there is some information that someone wouldn't know initially, such as liking deep-dish pizza people can probably find that out easily through interacting with us, it is the more intimate information that we don't often share immediately with a person that makes up most traditional definitions of self-disclosure. This information tends to include private topics surrounding our relationships with other people or our deep personal thoughts, feelings and attitudes toward another person

**Factors affecting S-D.** There are a number of factors that might affect the way that people self-disclose. In this literature review we specifically focus on how communication apprehension and technology can affect how people disclose and their decision to disclose.

***Communication Apprehension.*** Communication Apprehension is common in most people's day-to-day lives and it has a direct tie to self-disclosure. It may not look the same for each person, but there are times when we all get nervous or anxious about communicating with others. According to James McCroskey (2001), communication apprehension is the feeling of fear that is directly associated to the communication with or expected communication with another person.

Communication apprehension is most often studied in conjunction with self-esteem and is tied to disclosing information to others. Communication is at the heart of most interpersonal experiences and to be successful, individuals need to verbally communicate with one another. While you can self-disclose nonverbally, most instances occur verbally between individuals. If a person fears communicating with another person,

they are less likely to self-disclose in general (McCroskey, Daly, Richmond & Falcione, 1977). As previous literature states, the act of self-disclosure is used to deepen relationships, so the fear of communication and disclosure may prevent ones relationship from progressing.

Communication apprehension has been studied in various environments and has been classified into four types: interpersonal, meeting, group and public. The type that is most closely linked to the research in this thesis is interpersonal, however self-disclosure can occur in any of these situations. Interpersonal Communication Apprehension is characterized as feeling anxiety when thinking about interacting or throughout a physical interaction with one other person (Beatty, McCroskey, & Heisel, 1998). The fear of communicating with someone can also be closely linked to one's decision not to self-disclose in this type of environment. If someone does not feel comfortable, they might be less likely to share personal information and decide that the cost outweighs the benefits.

A persons' comfort level may encourage self-disclosure and deter communication apprehension. Comfort can be described as comfort with the person or comfort in the environment where the disclosure would take place. In close, intimate relationships the level of comfort with a person grows which often evolves into trust (Steel, 1991). In encounters with strangers, a trait an individual has may put someone at ease where they feel comfortable to disclose (Derlega et al., 2007). Due to the lack of relationship with hairstylists or the lack of privacy in a salon, you can reasonably presume that a client might be apprehensive about disclosing.

***Technology Use.*** Technology has also had a significant impact in the realm of disclosing personal information to both friends and strangers. With the influx of different

social media platforms and technologies, people often find themselves creating more relationships with people online. The act of revealing private information is "a fundamental precondition of the act of self-presentation online, which is the process of trying to influence the impression that is formed by the observer," (Kramer & Haferkamp, 2011, p. 129). In order to begin and maintain any relationship with someone, it involves sharing more personal information with them, even if not face-to-face. And due to the illusion of privacy involved with technology, people might be more willing to disclose a lot of personal information. In a study conducted by Schouten et al. (2007), the sole fact that the subjects had more control over their computer-mediated technology showed a more positive correlation of self-disclosure in instant messaging among teens. Due to the distance created by technology, people are more likely to disclose more intimate information than they might face-to-face, (Trepte & Reinecke, 2011). The comfort that being behind a computer screen provides allows people to engage in more spontaneous, in-depth disclosures because of the anonymity provided.

However, research has been done that has refuted the claim that people are more comfortable disclosing behind a screen. In a study done by Nguyen, Bin and Campbell (2012), they found that while people may disclose more online, that when disclosing face-to-face, individuals feel like they are participating in a deeper interaction. Technology is another means to self-disclose but not all relationships rely on the use of technology to self-disclose. Some people may prefer to disclose in person and face-to-face.

**Relationships found in.** Self-disclosure, by definition, most often occurs in our affiliation with another person. While we can self-disclose to ourselves, most research

defines self-disclosure as reliant on one person sharing information with another.

Therefore, self-disclosure is an integral part of some of the interpersonal relationships we have throughout our lives. Sprecher and Hendrick (2004) note, "one reason that self-disclosure may be associated with the quality and stability of the relationship is because it can serve as an act of relational maintenance," (p. 860). By sharing personal information with another person, you are showing that you trust them, therefore showing your intent to continue the relationship. Another reason that self-disclosure often happens in interpersonal relationships is due to trust. Rotter (1980) defined trust as, "generalized expectancy held by an individual that the word of promise, oral or written statement of another can be relied upon" (p. 651). And Steel (1991) stated, "in most relationships trust must exist before the disclosure of critical information can occur," (p.1319). We often rely on trust when deciding whom we maintain a relationship with. And then when we decide to take relationships deeper, we often rely on sharing the personal, intimate details of our life with them and expect the same from them. This is most often the moment when we decide to self-disclose, as we reinforce our relationships by sharing personal information and show that we trust them.

***Intimate relationships.*** Most often, self-disclosure is studied through the lens of close relationships and is thought to happen more as the relationship progresses. It is understood that, "as we progress from the stages of stranger to casual acquaintances to friend to intimate, the degree of social penetration or self-disclosure is necessarily a part of that progress," (Hensley, 1996, p. 299). So, self-disclosure is used most often when studying romantic, intimate, or marital relationships. This is because self-disclosing personal information is often related to the "building blocks" of personal relationships

because we often feel closer to someone when they disclose personal information. The nature of intimate or romantic relationships assumes that the partners choose to be close to one another and have shared information and experiences. In line with this thought process, "people would reveal more about their inner thoughts and feelings as their relationships and affection for one another developed over time," (Greene, Derlega, & Mathews, p. 413). This perspective argues that self-disclosure and relationship intimacy are positively correlated and increase over time.

Jourard (1971) states that self-disclosure is gratifying and generates feelings of affection toward the subject of the disclosure. But Sprecher (1987) also suggested that receiving self-disclosure affects feelings of affection for the discloser of information. People experience a feeling of pleasure when they share their inner thoughts and feelings, as it can be a type of release. On the other side, people often tend to feel joy when receiving a disclosure as it shows the discloser trusts and appreciates the relationship. This shows that self-disclosure is a transactional process, where partners may switch between "discloser" and "subject of disclosure" often throughout the relationship (Greene, Derlega, Matthews, 2006, p. 412). Because self-disclosure often is reciprocal between parties, it means that both partners are at one point involved in revealing personal information about themselves. Self-disclosure breeds more self-disclosure, with people revealing more and more as they deepen their relationship with another person.

Self-disclosure has been studied in many intimate relationships regarding the breadth of topics: partner communication, sexual satisfaction, friendship communication, family communication, and so on. MacNeil and Byers (2005) study of sexual self-disclosure found that among women who participated in greater nonsexual and sexual

self-disclosure led to feelings of greater emotional intimacy. Another study of attachment theory in adult friendships conducted by Welch and Houser (2010), found that secure individuals in friendships had higher levels of self-disclosure and relationship satisfaction, whereas fearful individuals were more closely linked to lower self-disclosure and relationship satisfaction. These results show that the deeper, more private self-disclosures are very prevalent in intimate relationships, instead of acquaintances.

*Strangers.* Another relationship that has been found to contain self-disclosures is the relationship between strangers. Altman's (1973) theory of social penetration theory also studied how people disclose amongst strangers. While we have focused a lot on disclosures in intimate relationships, the next most likely group to disclose is strangers, even before acquaintances. (Altman, 1973). Self-disclosure likely occurs in a non-relationship more than a semi-relationship (that of an acquaintance) due to being deemed low-risk because of the nonexistent relationship. A stranger is someone who knows little information about us and has little impact on our overall life. The stranger is an attractive person to share personal information with because of their "outsider" status, little background knowledge, and distance from our day-to-day lives. Qian & Scott (2007) stated that people are more likely to disclose to a stranger because there is less opportunity for the information shared to get back to close friends and acquaintances that may be impacted by the information shared. The "stranger on the plane" (or bus or train) phenomenon describes the experience of disclosing personal information to a complete stranger because there is a low likelihood that you will see this person again (Guerrero, Andersen & Afifi, 2013). Because of this probability, we are put at ease and can freely share our inner thoughts without any perceived consequence.

There are a variety of reasons why a person may decide to disclose private information to a stranger: cultural norms and expectations, knowledge of social network, and characteristics of the person, (Derlega, Winstead and Greene, 2007). We may meet a stranger and immediately feel comfortable around them due to the way they look or act. We potentially may decide to share information with someone because the situation we are in. When you are seated next to someone on a plane for hours, the silence may become unbearable for some, and they decide to strike up conversation and eventually self-disclose. Sharing with strangers is often thought of as a cathartic experience, and allows the discloser to share information without fear of judgment or consequence in relationships. Rosenfeld and Kendrick's study (1984) claimed in the situations with strangers, "catharsis was the best predictor of how much the discloser was willing to disclose" (p. 338). People also may choose to disclose to a stranger because that stranger disclosed information to them. Moon (2000) said, "there is substantial evidence that people will engage in intimate self-disclosure—even with relative strangers—if they first become the recipients of such disclosures from their conversational partners, (p. 324). When people are on the receiving end of self-disclosure, they often feel a sense of comfort with that person which may lead to them disclosing as well. While the disclosures may not always be in-depth, it is essential to note that research is still being done on the self-disclosures between strangers.

**Norms of self-disclosure.** As with any interpersonal concept, there are rules that govern self-disclosure in relationships. Often self-disclosure is reciprocal, varies in depth and breadth, and happens through the duration of intimate relationships. People are also constantly questioning the environment that someone discloses in such as, "does the

disclosure process support or deviate from existing norms about what, how, and when people should disclose to one another?" (Greene, et al., 2006, p. 412). For instance, it has been suggested that revealing too much information too early in a relationship can actually lead to deterioration of that relationship (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Therefore, we are always considering the rules and the norms if we are contemplating engaging in self-disclosure.

One of the norms of self-disclosure is reciprocity, which focuses on who is engaging in self-disclosure and at what point in the relationship, (Sprecher & Treger, 2015). Often people expect both parties to engage in revealing private information, due to the risk involved in disclosing private information. The danger in sharing personal information is usually high, which often means people want to share with others who are sharing with them. Because of this, "relationship partners who disclose a lot are also likely to be the recipients of high levels of disclosure," (Greene et al, 2006, p. 413). So, we may be less likely to share personal information with someone who hasn't disclosed information to us in the past.

Depth is one of the norms of self-disclosure that's expected to arise during communication. It's believed that as the relationship between two people progresses so does the level of self-disclosure. Omarzu (2000) defines depth as, "the intimacy level of the disclosure," and she reflects that intimacy often includes emotionally intense or potentially damaging or embarrassing information, (p. 175). As our relationship with another person deepens, the more serious information is shared and emotions and feelings heighten. Similarly, incremental exchange theory, (2006), states that disclosure progresses in the sensitivity of the material that is disclosed from person to person over

time, (Greene et al., 2006). We are likely not going to initially bring up serious and sensitive topics at the start of a relationship, but as we become closer we're more likely to engage in more sensitive conversations with someone.

Similarly, previous literature states that the breadth of topics expands as the relationship move further along, meaning that more and more topics come up in the conversation as people learn more about one another (Omarzu, 2000). This includes more highly sensitive information that one would not know about another person without being told. As you deepen your relationship with another person, you are likely to cover more topics than you might with someone you've recently met. You may become more of an "expert" on someone's life the longer you know them because you are discussing more topics, rather than deepening and focusing on one topic. But with the progression of relationships, the reasons to disclose still stand. As mentioned earlier, participants are always weighing the costs and benefits of disclosing and some studies have shown that revealing too high of a level of disclosure can hinder the relationship between partners and can leave the subject of the discloser uncomfortable, embarrassed and unsure how to respond, (Collins & Miller, 1994, p. 459).

Finally, self-disclosure is incremental and happens throughout the relationship. It has been researched that, "disclosure gradually or rapidly accelerates with relationship development, in frequency, depth, and range of topics," (Greene et al., 2006, p. 413). Self-disclosure is often incremental, meaning it takes place over a period of time. Previous literature has shown that self-disclosure is a process over time and often increases as relationships develop.

Before we can understand the relationship between service-providers and clients, we need to understand how service-providers use communication in their roles. Service-providers interact with people, or “clients”, daily in their roles. The service industry is defined by providing work to a consumer. While this can mean tangible goods, it does not always have to be. In the case of this thesis, the service-providers deal in the beauty industry and are directly involved face-to-face with the clients.

**Reasons to self-disclose.** By choosing to self-disclose, people are deciding to be open with another person. The decision to open themselves up to another person can be based on a variety of reasons. In deciding to disclose, people often take into account the benefits and costs involved with disclosing to another person, (Greene et al., 2006, p. 413). Some of the benefits to disclosing are to deepen and intensify the relationship with another person and to relieve mental stress, but risks could include the uncertainty involved with the other persons' reaction and being concerned with the private information being shared (Derlega et al, 2007). Once a person decides to disclose, they open that information up to be shared beyond the sole disclosure recipient.

Some of the reasons to disclose are: to experience catharsis, improve physical health, capitalize on good news, achieve self-awareness, or to initiate, escalate, and maintain relationships.

One of the reasons is catharsis, which is defined as, “the process of releasing, and thereby providing relief from, strong or repressed emotions,” (“catharsis”, n.d.). This phenomenon comes up often when deciding to self-disclose because the private information is weighing heavily on the owner of the relationship. Catharsis has been linked as a “significant contributing variable” when deciding to disclose to non-intimate

friends or strangers, (Rosenfield, & Kendrick, 1984, p.336). Catharsis often deals with revealing information that is negative or may be perceived as negative by the recipient. This could be a leading factor as to why individuals may choose to cathartically reveal information to a stranger or non-intimate friends.

Also, the act of disclosing can be therapeutic and linked to emotional and physical health. Jourard (1971) claimed that someone could not be healthy without self-disclosing to another human being. The sheer process of self-disclosure allows someone to become himself or herself openly, rather than "in the effort to avoid becoming known, a person provides for himself a cancerous kind of stress which is subtle and unrecognized," (Jourard, 1971, p. 33). Engaging in self-disclosure allows someone to relieve themselves of private information that weighs negatively on their mind and emotions.

More recently however, there has been research that studied whether keeping things private could be a good thing. Petronio's (2002) theory of communication privacy management notes that people have control over their information and have the sole power of deciding to disclose. Communication privacy management theory also recognizes that there are risks involved with disclosure, which can open the discloser up to vulnerability (Petronio, 2002). So, as a means to safeguard their emotions and mental health, in certain cases it may be better not to disclose. Negative emotions may not occur frequently, but when they do, they often have a larger impact, (Gable & Reis, 2010). And this notion was further demonstrated by Baumeister et al. (2001) when they found bad news has more power compared to good events across different situations.

However, not all self-disclosures are negative, and some instead focus on the sharing of good news. This concept is referred to as capitalization and is defined as, "the

social sharing of positive events," (Gable & Reis, 2010, p. 198). We often react to positive events with an overwhelming urge to share the news with others. While negative self-disclosures may have a significant impact initially, the more common positive events that occur can have a lasting effect over time.

Self-disclosure is also used as a means to intensify a relationship. It can be used to tease out our feelings for another person, "people use self-disclosure as well as reactions by the disclosure recipient and the initial discloser to collect information about a prospective partner and to make forecasts about the possibility of a future relationship," (Derlega et al, 2007, p. 153). However, it is not only used in intimate relationships but acquaintance relationships as well. We use self-disclosure to decide how much we like, trust, and want to get to know another person and if we want to maintain a relationship of any level.

**Reasons not to disclose.** There are also plenty of reasons that someone may not want to disclose information. As mentioned earlier, when someone is deciding to disclose, they weight the benefits and the costs. The cost of disclosure can at times outweigh the benefits. People may fear judgment, consequence, embarrassment, loss of relationship, among other issues. For instance, if Sally cheated on her husband Bobby, she may not want to disclose to her friend Meghan because Meghan might judge her. There is also the potential for Meghan to tell her husband or other people. Sally also may decide not to disclose to Bobby, because she may fear losing her relationship. While there are a number of reasons why a person may decide not to disclose, they are mostly linked to the cost of the disclosure outweighing the benefit.

**Explaining social penetration theory.** Social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) is also crucial to understanding the concept self-disclosure. This theory provides a framework that describes how relationships develop over time. By following social penetration theory, we can see how self-disclosure often plays a role in the development of relationships overall. Social penetration theory is often linked to research studies about self-disclosure to understand the nature of relationships. Altman and Taylor (1973) asserted that as relationships progress over time, it is likely that a heightened amount of self-disclosure happens in the relationship. Social penetration theory also states that the purposeful revealing of information deepens relationships in a variety of contexts, including: romantic relationships, friendships, social groups and work relationships (Carpenter & Greene, 2015). Chen & Nakazawa (2012) describe this experience as when "the communication changes from relatively shallow to greater depth of, as well as from relatively narrow topics to greater breadth of personal information" (p. 133). In plain terms, the closer we get to someone, the more likely we are to share more personal information of a variety of topics, but also a deeper focus into specific topics.

Social penetration theory also states that people consider the benefits and consequences they receive from different interpersonal interactions with others (Tang & Wang, 2012). Often, these benefits and consequences affect how often we disclose and also how our relationships with people progress. Rewards can be a deepened relationship, gaining useful information, or even gaining popularity among groups. However, the consequences involved with the interpersonal interactions could include leaving one party vulnerable or harming them in other ways dependent on the information.

Similarly to self-disclosure, social penetration theory agrees that personal information is revealed over time. When people begin to reveal more and more information to others through a gradual timeline they are experiencing both self-disclosure and social penetration (Tang & Wang, 2012). Social penetration theory discusses depth and breadth when explaining self-disclosure. Depth encompasses how intimate the topics we share with a person become, as we get closer to them. Breadth consists of the variety of topics we cover with someone as our relationship deepens. Similarly to the concept of self-disclosure, reciprocity is often expected in these interactions (Chen & Nakazawa, 2012). As we are disclosing with someone and moving through topics of conversation, we often expect the same deal of disclosure, otherwise the cycle may stop.

Social penetration theory has often been described through the onion model (Carpenter & Greene, 2015). The onion model states that as relationships develop and deepen people start to “peel back” their layers to reveal more intimate information about themselves. This is thought to be done gradually and progresses through different stages: orientation, exploratory affective, affective and stable exchanges. The beginning of the process is characterized by very superficial information and then as the relationship progresses the individuals experience the breadth and depth across conversation topics (Taylor & Altman, 1987). As the relationship grows, each participant learns more about one another as they continue to share personal information across a variety of topics. When we become closer to someone we tend to discuss a number of topics—from our day-to-day instrumental communication to our intimate thoughts and feelings, we share information frequently. We may cover insignificant topics such as what we decided to

wear or eat but as we become more intimate we could debate our inner values, political ideologies, feelings on war, etc.

**Understudied relationship where self-disclosure occurs.**

**Personal service-client communication.** Careers in the service-providing industry are most often client facing and reliant on customer satisfaction. Client-facing means the service-provider deals with customers personally, individually, and on a daily basis. This means that those involved in these types of professions are very focused on the overall client interaction. To have a positive interaction, service providers often rely on a conversation with their clients. Winsted's (2000) study of behaviors that led to customer satisfaction found that "engaged in small talk" was one of the more prevalent indicators of satisfaction. This shows that not only do the clients want this kind of interaction with service providers, but they also expect it in the encounter. Since this is something that is expected, it often puts more stress on the provider to engage in stimulating conversation throughout the appointment.

The study conducted by Garzanti, Pearce, and Stanton (2011) claimed, "conversation is an important function in building friendships, similar to an extended, affective and intimate (EAI) service encounter," (p. 2). This conversation plays a vital role in the interactions between client and provider, and over time, develops the relationship between them. The personal-service providers take on a specific role when servicing a client, and "roles are inescapable. They must be played or else the social system will not work," (Jourard, 1971, p. 30), meaning they may not be as successful at their job if the personal-service provider does not abide by the role.

Personal-service providers such as hairstylists, nail technicians, nurses, sales associates, flight attendants, bartenders, and more have a unique relationship with their clients. Previous literature has studied some of the careers mentioned above and their communication practices with clients. Steuber and Pollard (2018) assert that nurses use self-disclosure to establish a connection with their patients and to show understanding, humanize the relationship, distract the patient and to prompt disclosure from the patient. They claim, "self-disclosure is a form of treatment [...] and decisions about self-disclosure are based on attempts to enhance therapeutic relationships" (2018, p. 655). In this study, the nurses decide to share information about themselves with their patients in order to gain trust and get something in return.

Limited research has focused on the hairstylist-client interaction, but studies that have been conducted focus only on the small talk involved in the encounter. As an example, hairstylists engage in a "people-processing" encounter in which conversation is crucial and plays an important role in the overall satisfaction of the client, (Garzaniti, Pearce & Stanton, 2011). In order to successfully perform their job, hairstylists must engage in small talk with the client. Without small talk, the stylist wouldn't know how to proceed with the hair appointment, and need to engage in conversation to complete the job.

In a research study conducted on the relationship between nurses and the families they care for it was found that while nurses engage in relationships that resemble friendships, it is not quite the same as friendship, (Bignold, Cribb & Ball, 1995). Similarly, Muphy (2000) explains, "flight attendants...work in a service industry, and the main tool of their trade is maintaining a happy face" (p. 34). The concern with customer

interaction and satisfaction is prevalent in a variety of service-providing careers and is an additional responsibility aside from the job itself. This is an element of emotion labor, which is discussed in the following section.

### **Emotion Labor**

Hochschild introduced the concept of emotional labor and focuses on emotion management in the personal-service industry. Emotional labor is the process of managing emotions in the workplace according to expectations from the organization (Hochschild, 1983). Emotional labor is thought of as a skill, something you have to work at to improve just like any physical labor required at a job. In contrast to Hochschild's definition, Bolton and Boyd (2003), state, "actors are able to draw on different sets of feeling rules according to context and their individual motivations to do so," (p. 291). This claim opens the emotion work up to the employee to decide how to engage in emotional exchanges with clients. Bolton and Boyd's (2003) study about airline workers found, "[the cabin crews] may genuinely empathize with a passenger rather than present the cynical face of a service provider," (p. 304). Meaning, rather than prescribe to one set of feeling rules set by the organization, they can juggle a variety of emotions at one time to satisfy the client interaction.

This emotional labor puts additional pressure on those in the service industry that is not in the normal day-to-day functions of the job itself. Previous literature has stated, befriending clients minimizes the formal and professional relationship however it increases the emotional demands on the hairstylists themselves, possibly affecting the hairstylist outside of work, (Bignold, Cribb & Ball, 1995). The demand of emotional labor was proven to cause stress, anxiety, conflict and anxiety in the home life of the

employees who were engaging in acting during day-to-day job functions. The additional emotional work that is expected of the employees was positively related to feelings of exhaustion outside of work (Wagner et al, 2014). The emotional work that is expected of the workers often falls outside of the scope of the job but is still expected by the client.

One of the features of service encounters is that a lot of what is expected is pre-determined by standards in society. Solomon et al. (1985) state, "service encounters as a class of human interaction is the purposive, task-oriented nature of the interaction" (p.101). Due to society's standards, then, each participant in the conversation has a pre-determined role to play and even a script that we usually follow. Service-providers themselves may adopt a different attitude or personality when showing up for work because "they must adopt a relatively standardized set of behaviors," (Solomon et al, 1985, p. 102). Often in personal-service provider relationships, much of what their script contains is the correct verbiage of how to sell products and services to their clients.

Service-providers are engaging in a performance in their daily lives, in addition to managing their own emotions and deciding what to show and when. Employees are expected to conform to a certain "mood or emotion," which in turn is either "deep acting or surface acting," (Wagner et al, 2014). Deep acting involves trying to change true feelings occurring to maintain the required display of emotion, whereas surface acting tries to change the visible emotion without changing the true feelings. Naturally, throughout the course of employment, an employee will experience a variety of feelings, and those feelings won't always fall in line with expected displays, so they must commit to one of the types of acting.

### **Research Questions**

The previous research doesn't examine self-disclosure in the relationship of personal-service providers and their clients. I believe the relationship that exists between these people relies heavily on self-disclosure to create connections. It is my belief that self-disclosure comes up frequently throughout these interactions, but it follows different rules than self-disclosures in personal, intimate relationships. In order to learn more about the relationship and the nature of the communication that characterizes it, I asked the below research questions:

RQ1: How often do personal-service providers report being on the receiving end of self-disclosure?

RQ2: What are the self-disclosure norms that govern the relationship between the personal-service provider and client?

RQ3: (How) does the responsibility of gaining these self-disclosures from clients affect the personal-service provider outside of work?

RQ4: How does the personal-service provider classify the relationship between themselves and clients?

### **Methodology**

To further understand the relationship between hairstylists and their clients and the communication that shapes it, qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted. Conducting qualitative interviews allowed me to understand the personal-service providers' perspective of the relationship and their accounts of the conversations that occur. Initial contacts were made, and then the study relied on snowball and convenience sampling to recruit participants for the study. Participants were recruited either through recommendation or from cold-calling local salons and asking for participants that were



Experience in years (rounded to the half year)	12	5	15	7	12	13	28	4.5
Work Location	City	Suburb	City	City	City	Suburb	Suburb	City
Salon Style	Boutique							
Salon Position	Owner	Stylist	Manager	Manager	Stylist	Stylist	Owner	Stylist

## Procedure

The interviews were conducted at the salon where the participant worked or at a public location, most often a nearby coffee shop at the request of the participant. The interviews lasted a minimum of 30 minutes and a maximum of an hour. Each interview was recorded and I took notes while conducting the interviews. The interview questions followed a semi-structured interview guide, which allowed for each stylist to include personal anecdotes and experiences (see Appendix A). Marquette University IRB approved the research focus and granted permission to conduct the interviews with human-subjects. I obtained verbal validation to record each interview from the participant.

I transcribed each interview as soon as possible after recording. The transcriptions were printed for easier analysis and resulted in 231 pages. The interviews were analyzed through a constant comparison method, to ensure no themes were missed. The names of the stylists were changed for anonymity and any identifying information was removed

from the transcript and this thesis. The information and quotations used in the following results section were taken directly from the interviews.

## **Findings & Interpretation**

The transcriptions were analyzed and information was separated into common themes that occurred throughout the interviews. All findings relied on self-disclosure in the relationship, but highlights specific themes in relation to the disclosure. The themes that follow are: more than just a haircut, depth and breadth of conversation, relationship with clients, hairstylists' response to self-disclosure, and emotional labor.

### **More than Just a Haircut**

A common theme that surfaced throughout the interviews was the responsibility of the personal-service provider. The participants often related their experience to that of a bartender, as someone who is also an “unlicensed therapist”. The term “unlicensed therapist” came up often throughout the course of the interviews as participants reflected on their training and experiences in the role. In this theme, we will discuss how self-disclosure builds a relationship between client and stylist and becomes an expected part of the experience.

One personal service provider reflected on her experience in beauty school and being told that their job includes “a free therapy session with haircut,” (Ursula, 2019). Another said clients will often say, “this is just like therapy,” and reflected that “maybe we’re not giving the right advice, but at least it’s something. It’s part of our job

description, literally it's listening we really are an ear for them," (Kelly, 2019). Or another person equated their experiences to that of a lawyer, "People just load all of this information on us and it's intense because like physically I can't give you legal advice, I mean I can't, but I can give you my opinion," (Vic, 2019).

One topic came up often throughout discussion was the personal-service provider doing "more than just a haircut". They reflected that their job requires more than just technical knowledge, but also "emotional, physical and mental work throughout each appointment," (Quinn, 2019). When discussing clients coming in in a bad mood, one stylist said, "As a stylist, I'm like you know what can I do to make them more cheerful. Even though I'm like just giving them a hair service, I'm still connecting with them on a physical, emotional and mental way," (Bobby, 2019). Another personal service provider recounted a story about a stylist they know charging \$1,000 a haircut and said, "It's definitely more than just a haircut. I mean, you look at his haircuts and everybody knows how to do what he's doing, he's not doing anything different than anybody else. But it's how he connects with his clients, and that's why people go," (Billy, 2019). Or another talked about people complimenting them, "'you know you're great and you're so good at creating your craft!' but it's so much more than that, it's not just doing a good color job," (Vic, 2019).

Another stylist even said, "They're not just coming in to get a haircut. They know it's going to be a good time, they know if they need to vent they can come in," and recounted another client who told her he specifically came to get a haircut every time he was having girl troubles, "he set up an appointment with me because he just needed to talk," (Kelly, 2019). And another thought some of their clients didn't even care about

their haircut, reflecting “they’re actually not there for the appointment, they’re just there to talk about their feelings...like they don’t even care what I do, I could shave their head,” (Vic, 2019).

The personal-service providers also discussed the term “client experience” frequently throughout the interviews. Everything came back to the client experience, and often focusing on positive themes of: relaxation, therapeutic, maintaining a “safe space”, and more. One stylist described the client experience by saying, “I feel really grateful that she feels like this is a safe space, yeah like there’s no judgment, she can talk freely,” (Jordan, 2019). The idea of creating a safe space came up often when discussing the environment in which the service-providers conducted their appointments. Another said, “It’s kinda like this safe space being around someone new that you feel like you can kinda unload or like get things off your chest with zero judgment,” (Ursula, 2019). They reflected on being open, welcoming, non-judgmental, which helped them do their job. Some of the stylists didn’t think they were given enough credit for what they do. One reflected, “But I feel like hairdressers don’t get enough credit, you know as far as being counselors and helping people out,” (Vic, 2019).

Finally, all of the personal-service providers reflected on their ability to hold a conversation directly affecting their success. Many believed that clients come to them for more than just a cut and instead enjoyed the personality of the hairstylist. However, upon reflection all of the service-providers noted that during school and/or training there was hardly any emphasis on conversational skills or psychology to better understand clients. Most of the participants reflected that they believed sentiments such as, “being able to hold a conversation is just in my nature,” and “I’m naturally a very chatty person, which

allows me to be successful at my job”. One interviewee reflected, “I feel like I have the gift of getting people to talk about themselves, even if they come off as introverted,” (Vic, 2019).

### **Depth and Breadth of Conversation**

When conversing with clients, stylists report a variety of topics being discussed, even when they may not want to talk about something. While clients may do majority of the talking, stylists often are the ones in control of the conversation. The stylist may guide someone down a path or make the decision to change topics entirely. In this theme, we discuss the depth and breadth of disclosures in the relationship.

Often the personal-service providers discussed how little they try to talk about themselves during interactions with their clients. The stylists often referred to themselves as outgoing, extroverted, an “open book”, but they still always directed the conversation away from themselves. One interviewee said, “I try really hard to keep it about them all the time,” and “I will never guide the conversation to be about me” (Billy, 2019). Quinn commented that he does not tell clients anything personal about himself and tries to keep the conversation strictly professional, (2019). And another reflected, “Very rarely, never talk about myself with a client. Even if they ask me a question, I’ll answer it and then I’ll bring it back to them,” (Vic, 2019). One stylist reported, “the rule of thumb is the 80/20 rule, where you’re listening 80 percent of the time and only speaking 20 percent of the time, and I very much follow that rule behind my own chair” (Jordan, 2019). And Bobby reflected that while he will share information about himself occasionally, “I try to get my clients talking 90% of the time,” (2019).

Another common theme surrounding conversation with clients was the taboo topics. Most interviewees brought up “politics and religion” as things that you are not supposed to talk about with clients. These topics were described as “really big no-no’s that I don’t like to talk about” (Billy, 2019). Some stylists reflected that the client wasn’t afraid to bring up any topics, including the stylists’ choices in life. Cathy reflected on a time when someone insulted the way she began a family, saying “sometimes the audacity of what they will say to you is really quite shocking,” (2019). Stylists also noted that often certain conversation was avoided because the stylists were afraid of offending others in the vicinity, not because of their own resistance to discussing a certain topic. One participant agreed when talking about topics like politics, “I like having conversations with people I don’t agree with...in that specific scenario there is an etiquette and appropriateness to the people around you,” (Jordan, 2019). The environment seemed to affect the conversation at times, but other times they reflected that some clients didn’t care who heard all of their business.

On the other hand, almost everything else is free game when it comes to conversations with their clients. Topics range from weekend plans, to vacation, to culture, to work problems, to relationships, miscarriages, infidelity, etc. One client went so far as to tell the stylist about her infidelity in her marriage, even though her stylist also did her husband’s hair and could easily tell him, (Cathy, 2019). Another stylist reflected that when people are in their chair many negative topics such as “I’m getting a divorce, I lost a child, there was a death in the family, I lost my job, etc.” would come up in conversation. The stylists noted that the frequency of negative topics arising was much higher than positive topics.

Sometimes the conversation that came up in the chair would go beyond the chair and the stylist would feel as though they wanted to follow up with the client. One stylist reflected offhandedly asking a client to let them know how a job interview went, and the client actually called later to let them know. Vic reflected, “she called just to let me know, and like she wasn’t even a friend,” or another client who called to follow up about their conversation regarding her daughter winning homecoming queen, “it’s a good feeling, they know I care and they want to call to tell me,” (2019).

### **Relationship with Clients**

Another common theme that came up throughout the course of the interviews was the relationship that the hairstylist had with their clients. As stated above, all hairstylists agreed that having a relationship with their clients directly correlated to their success. However, how they classified the relationship with their client varied from stylist to stylist. This theme discusses how self-disclosure helps to build the relationship with the client.

A few times the interviewee reflected that the conversation between themselves and their clients was similar to that of a first date. One person reflected, “I don’t want to call it a pickup line, but it kinda is like dating,” (Billy, 2019). And another person said, “So it’s like exciting because it’s like a first date, you never know what you’re going to get,” (Vic, 2019). First dates often include small talk and “getting to know you,” type questions which is common of service interactions. However, first-dates typically don’t delve into deeper, more private topics, which is where this experiences changes.

While the personal-service providers had varying ways to describe the intimacy of their relationship with their clients, they all agreed that it was unlike any other

relationship in their lives. When asked to classify their relationship with their clients' responses varied from "they're my clients," (Quinn, 2019) to "Friends. Really, I'm not joking," (Kelly, 2019). Quinn even discussed that he thought his lack of intimate relationship with clients may be some of his appeal to new clients, (2019). Other stylists tried to find another term to describe the relationship. One person said, "I'd say like they're my pals, not my friends, not my clients. I feel like client is way too structured," (Billy, 2019). One interviewee said, they considered maybe 4/150 clients friends, but they thought that about half of those clients probably considered them a friend, (Jordan, 2019). Bobby reflected that over time, it becomes more of a friendship rather than a client relationship, even going so far as to be invited to their wedding, (2019). Another stylist said, "You know I do think they consider you a friend, someone they can tell their feelings to and share their excitement with," (Ursula, 2019). Overall, the stylists had mixed views, but majority leaned towards keeping the relationship more professional.

Throughout time, the relationship has changed based on the stylists' perspective and experience as well. One interviewee reflected, "At the beginning I was like I don't want, I want my clients to be my clients and my friends to be my friends," but over time they have realized that's not going to happen, (Vic, 2019). In contrast, Quinn started his career by developing personal relationships with clients and engaging in deeper conversations, but has since stopped. After realizing that he wanted to engage more in product- or industry-related conversation, he stopped all friendships with his clients. And then another stylist reflected that she was going to one of her clients' lake house for a recent vacation, but that it took some time to get to that place of comfort with this specific client.

### **Stylists' Response to Self-Disclosure**

When discussing self-disclosure, one of the stylists brought up a saying, “your stylist knows everything about you and your life,” Vic said, “it’s really true, we do,” (2019). A lot of the stylists felt as though people were constantly disclosing personal information to them. And most of the time, they do enjoy hearing things. However, that wasn’t always the case. In this section we will talk about frequency of self-disclosure and how the stylists’ responded and felt about the receiving the disclosures.

When asked how often they felt people were disclosing to them, they usually laughed. The question itself was humorous because collectively, they all felt like they heard a lot of personal information about their clients. Each stylist was different in his or her reaction to the receiving of information, but they could all easily recount examples of some of the information they received. One stylist said, “out of every five clients I see, I would say 4-5 are telling me very personal, very, very private things,” (Billy, 2019). Another stylist reflected that about 80% of her clients reveal private information to her daily.

One interviewee even mentioned personal stories from people who weren’t even their own client, but they were another stylists’ client. Without having any connection to the person, they still know a lot about their life. They reflected, “there are other stylists so sometimes you hear other people’s conversations but they just get so comfortable in that chair that they just don’t care,” (Vic, 2019). Due to the layout of the salon at times it’s easy to hear what others are saying. As discussed above, sometimes the environment would change the conversation, but other times it had little effect. Quinn reflected that he didn’t think the environment made clients any less likely to disclose, in fact he said “the

fact that we're not eye-to-eye might make them more likely to disclose," (2019). A lot of the stylists reflected that sometimes multiple clients engage with each other during their appointments, which creates more of a community atmosphere. This community can lead to a larger group of self-disclosure, which some people didn't shy away from.

One interviewee reflected, "this one time this lady, like first-time client, was just like telling me all these things that I was like 'I don't know if I would tell someone I knew for 20 years this information,'" (Cathy, 2019). And she went on to say, "It's really cool, but also somewhat alarming what people are willing to share with a stranger," (Ursula, 2019). While most of the stylists reflected that they often received self-disclosures from clients, it didn't stop them from conveying their surprise. Often they reflected their disbelief with what people would share, whether it was a new client or a client they saw for many years, they still didn't believe their relationship warranted that type of disclosure.

A lot of the personal-service providers reflected on how often they are talking throughout the day. When discussing clients who are not as chatty some explained that it was a good thing, because it meant there was a break in the day. Billy said, "I just go to town and it's silent and it's nice because it's kind of like cleansing for my mind at that point as well," (2019). Another interviewee said, "When I go home I don't want to sit and talk and talk and talk, I need to decompose because I was just taking in everything from everybody's life. I don't wanna talk, I want to like, relax," (Kelly, 2019). Another agreed, "I think that's really I mean that's part of the job that is so exhausting. You know all day I give and give and give. And by the end of the day I'm exhausted to like go home and I feel bad sometimes. Like I'm telling my boyfriend to stop talking because I can't listen

anymore,” (Jordan, 2019). And another said, “You’re just talking a lot in a day, so when I get home I don’t even want to say anything to anybody,” (Ursula, 2019).

A few also reflected on how they carry things their clients’ say to them at all times, and how it can weigh on them. Kelly said, “I carry a lot of what my clients are going through. I will sit and think about it at home...I actually worry about clients,” (2019). Or another person reflected, “There are definitely things that are heavier and weightier that I think about and makes me think about clients, and both positive and negative [things],” (Jordan, 2019). One stylist said, “you know I try to keep my work life and my personal life separate,” because they don’t want to bring their work home with them and be thinking about it later on (Bobby, 2019). Another stylist said, “If someone breaks down in your chair or something crappy is happening in their life you know you think about it like, ‘oh I wonder how Jan is doing today,” (Ursula, 2019). When reflecting on how often clients disclose very personal, private, information, one stylist said, “I’ve heard things before where I’ve stopped for a second and stepped away to go hug them,” (Ursula, 2019).

Another stylist reflected on client expectations and there only being one of her, but many of them. She reflected, “You’ve got 100 hundred people that adore you, we just don’t have the time in our personal lives to adore 100 people,” (Ursula, 2019). The stylists see multiple clients each day and personally get involved with almost all of their personal lives. It requires a large emotional bandwidth to be able to deal with most of the disclosures that they receive. Bobby reflected how clients will come in either “looking for my sweet-sympathetic side or they need me to lighten the situation,” (2019). Just the labor involved with being at work all day can make anyone exhausted, but considering all

of the personal, sometimes very negative, conversations that stylists are involved in everyday can lead to a heavy mind.

### **Emotion labor**

Emotion labor requires workers to put on a happy face to perform their job, when their actual feelings don't reflect that. In this section, we discuss how emotion labor plays a role in their relationship with their clients.

When discussing their job, the stylists often talked about the "mood" or the "vibe" of a salon or an interaction with a client. They often reflected the sentiment of not letting anything affect how you perform in the salon. One stylist said,

"I tell all my employees this is our stage. You're an actress; you cannot let that affect your work. You have to shut it off and leave your problems at the door," and "I have a crazy outside life and no one would know it. I can come in and get the worst news and I can come to work. This is my job, I'm here to make other people feel good," (Kelly, 2019).

And Kelly wasn't the only person to mention being on a stage. Another stylist talked about being on stage and being there to entertain clients, saying, "you are behind the chair and working like you're on stage and it's like a song and dance," (Jordan, 2019).

Another stylist reflected on the day her grandpa passed away and not being able to reschedule her clients for that day. She said, "You just have to put your big girl panties on and go to work," (Ursula, 2019). Emotion labor requires workers to manage their own emotions for work (Hochschild, 1983), which is exactly what the stylists' do each day. Other stylists alluded to negative moments in their life, but now allowing that to affect their work. One reflected, "I will never let a bad day affect a client's experience. That's

not fair to them, they don't come to see me in a bad mood," (Vic, 2019). Regardless of what is going on in the stylists' life, they always feel like they have to be on in order to serve the interest of the client that is sitting in their chair that day. When reflecting on some of the difficult things that have happened recently in their own life, one of the participants said, "You know, the service is about them. They're here to care for themselves and like it's not appropriate for me to be [like] negative and talking about really hard serious stuff," (Jordan, 2019).

## Discussion

The themes examined above all shed light on the research questions that this study sought to answer. In this section I discuss each research question in-depth and provide insight based on quotes and anecdotes from the stylists as well as previous literature reviewed in this thesis.

RQ 1: *Receiving Self-Disclosure*. The first research question asked how often hairstylists report receiving self-disclosures from clients. The interviews showed that hairstylists report receiving self-disclosure from clients in most interactions. In fact, some of the hairstylists claim that most of their interactions with clients are self-disclosure, as they talk about "we talk about a great deal of things. You know, divorces and relationships and friendships and children and the good and the bad," (Jordan, 2019). As reflected in the topics section of the results, most conversational topics were open and people felt comfortable sharing deep information with their stylists. One of the stylists reflected that 4/5 of the clients she sees will share a deep, personal part of their life that otherwise she would not know. Many reflected often feeling like, "I can't believe they are telling me this right now," when clients opened their mouths to share private information.

These types of conversations were very prevalent throughout the salon, and while the stylists made some guesses as to why, none of them were really sure why this was the case. This information supports social penetration theory (Taylor & Altman, 1987) in regard to depth and breadth because each hairstylist reported covering a variety of topics and diving deeper into each topic. However, unlike the theory of social penetration theory, the stylists noted receiving these disclosures sometimes at the very beginning of their interactions with a client. So in this case, the disclosure wasn't necessarily used as a means to deepen the relationship and can instead be considered a cathartic release of information.

The majority of the stylists reported receiving deep disclosures from clients often, however, one stylist reflected that some topics still take more of a relationship for people to open up about. While certain topics such as divorce and family drama are private and personal, people often disclose information around those topics almost immediately to their stylist. However, one stylist, Ursula, noticed that the topic of fertility battles had special circumstances, "That's one that is really crazy to me, I've had a few clients who have been going through that for years and I've been doing their hair the whole time, but it still took them three years to tell me," (2019). So while a connection forms and clients share deep information regularly, some topics still require more of a relationship.

RQ 2: *Norms*. The second question asked what the norms are that govern the self-disclosure between clients and hairstylists. In previous literature the norms that govern self-disclosure were defined as: being incremental, being reciprocal, happening in a close relationship, and the rarity in which we self-disclose compared to regular conversation (Chaikin, et al., 1974). Self-disclosure is often incremental, meaning it takes place over a

long period of time. Literature has shown that self-disclosure is a process over time and often increases as relationships develop. The second principle states that self-disclosure is reciprocal. When one person discloses personal information, it often pushes the other person to disclose as well. Which leads to the third principle, that self-disclosure often happens in close, intimate relationships. The last principle of self-disclosure is that majority of our overall communication is not deep self-disclosure, but rather small talk. A lot of the communication we engage in on a day-to-day basis is very surface level, basic, phatic or instrumental communication. This means the deeper self-disclosures are often quite rare. But because disclosing personal information weighs heavy on emotions, it tends to garner more attention.

Overall, the conversations between hairstylists and clients seem to follow some of the above “norms” that have previously been studied, while deviating from others. First we discuss how incremental the disclosures are as the relationship progresses. While Social Penetration theory (1973) posits that self-disclosure is incremental and occurs over time as the relationship deepens, that was not necessarily the case with this study. Some of the stylists recounted stories where people disclosed a wealth of very personal information with the first meeting. Most of the stylists were surprised by the disclosures due to the limited time they knew each other and lack of relationship.

Next, we will discuss how the norm of reciprocity is visualized in this relationship. Only some of the hairstylists engaged in reciprocal conversations, one hairstylist stated, “I don't share in depth the way that they share with me. And so I also don't respond in depth the way that a real friend would. Just because it's not a healthy space,” which shows that the conversations aren't completely reciprocal like most self-

disclosure in relationships are (Jordan, 2019). However, others reflected that if someone asks, they would share to a certain extent. However, self-disclosure and close, intimate relationships are characterized by reciprocal self-disclosure because that is what is said to deepen relationships between people. However, as shown in the results above, the stylists always try to navigate the conversation away from themselves, most often said they prefer not to share about themselves. One reflected, that sharing information could blur the lines of the relationship, because it is still a professional relationship, even if they do get close (Bobby, 2019).

Next, we discuss the last norm of self-disclosure, which is that self-disclosure usually occurs in close, intimate relationships. However, the relationship between the hairstylist and client is not classified as a “close relationship” at least from the hairstylists’ perspective. One hairstylist said that out of her 150 clients she “maybe considers four of them friends” compared to the 75/100 that she believes consider her a friend of theirs, (Jordan, 2019). But, the hairstylists also don’t consider their clients to be strangers. Instead, the hairstylist-client relationship is more of a quasi-friendship, somewhere between a close, intimate relationship and complete strangers never to be seen or talked to again. All of the hairstylists recognized that this relationship is unique because it is characterized by providing a service however is not only focused on that service.

Finally the last norm is that majority of our conversations are small talk instead of self-disclosure. At first, the hairstylists and their clients engage in small talk to get to know one another more. Small talk is crucial for all interpersonal relationships and it is crucial for the hairstylists to perform their job. However, often very quickly they

transition from general small talk to deeper, more personal topics. Sometimes, the hairstylists even reflected that people automatically dove into deeper topics, which is in direct contrast to Social penetration theory as well.

However, there are a few norms that are unique to this relationship in general. In majority of the cases, the relationship only occurs in the environment of the salon and the context of providing services. The third principle of self-disclosure tells us that self-disclosure occurs in close, intimate relationships. As shown through the interviews, this isn't usually the case. The hairstylists reacted differently to their exact classification of the relationship, ranging from clients that only talk about hair to close friends who vacation together. However, when they reflected upon the relationship, the topic of meeting up with clients outside of the salon always came up. Most of the time, regardless of the interactions in the chair, the stylists did not meet up, or in some cases, even interact with their clients outside of the salon. In fact, some stylists went so far as to specifically not add people on social media or not give out their phone number in order to avoid outside interactions. Technology has become such an integral part of our day, and can be one of the main ways we interact with our relationships, especially if we are not seeing each other often. The stylists may have had a number of reasons why they did not give out their information, but there is potential that it could be due to limiting disclosures through use of technology, outside of the salon interactions. In contrast, close intimate friendships often interact frequently, or at the very least don't avoid interaction with one another. Friendships that begin in the workplace can often lead to interactions outside of the workplace, however most of the stylists agreed that they don't see clients outside of

work. If they saw a client outside of work it was often a small percentage of their clients, usually only 5% of the clients they treated were considered friends.

Another unique norm of the self-disclosure in this instance is the expedited release of information due to prolonged exposure, but lack of follow-up. Taylor and Altman (1987) say self-disclosure happens gradually as the relationship progresses. However, the client-hairstylist relation can be a one-time affair and the relationship does not progress very far. Instead, the client-hairstylist relationship quickly intensifies due to the prolonged exposure to one another, but as soon as the appointment ends, the relationship is paused. The relationship does not progress through stages as typical interpersonal relationships. The experience focuses on the client and relies heavily on their desire to communicate.

**RQ 3: *Effect on Hairstylist.*** The third question touched on the responsibility that the hairstylist feels upon receiving the self-disclosure from the client. Most of the hairstylists recognized the amount of emotional work it took to do their job. Hochschild (1983) touched on a very similar subject: emotion labor. Emotion labor is when someone works to manage their own emotions in regard to their profession. In this case, the hairstylists often had to put on a happy face regardless of their situation. This was shown through the stylists reflecting on when they had bad days, but they used phrases like, “leave it at the door,” and “put your big girl panties on,” to describe how they dealt with work those days. While this may not be that different from other professions, those in the service-providing industry took things a step further, going so far as to describe “putting on a show” for their clients. Contrary to other service-provider professions, hairstylists are with clients for an extended period of time and are in close-contact which means they

often aren't able to take a moment for themselves. When they are with a client they may have to sustain a certain composure or reaction that may not always align with how they are feeling.

This theme reminds us of the concept of 'face' and how one may need to control their overall reactions in accordance with another person. Ting-Toomey (1988) described the concept of face as a projected image of one's self in a relational situation that is co-created by participants in the situation. Other research has expanded into the concept of 'facework' where people manage their reactions in a sense of being polite (Arundale, 2006). Some of the hairstylists may not agree with things that the clients are saying, so they have to be careful to manage their reactions.

As shown through the results the theme of giving a performance, wearing a mask or putting on a show came up throughout the conversations. Because the stylists are in a client-facing position, they don't feel as though they can have a bad day. They often mentioned having to "be on", "be in a good mood", "entertain the guest", etc. This all related back to the stylist ensuring the client had a relaxing experience and providing extra services in order to be successful at their job. From the start of the client interaction, the stylist is always concerned with providing the best service possible, and making it all about the client. However, as they are providing the service, they are also making a connection with the client. While the connection isn't the same as a close, intimate relationship, the stylist still becomes emotionally involved with the client's life. This connection often extends further into the stylist's life than just in the constraints of the salon.

In addition to hiding their own emotions and putting on a performance, the stylists often felt drained after their workday. Once again, this may not that different from other service industry professions such as bartenders, nail technicians, retail workers, waitresses, etc. However the stylists are often drained for reasons mainly outside of the expected job requirements and they spend an excess of time with their clients. The emotional aspect of the job can be very draining on the service providers. The service-providers often reported being on the receiving end of self-disclosures, which were usually very emotional topics. These topics themselves could be very draining on the stylist but also required more mental work after receiving the information. When reflecting on following up with clients, one participant stated, “generally I don’t follow up, which I think for me is just like a boundary of health that needs to be in place,” because following up with people and being personally involved in their life puts extra pressure on the stylists themselves. She continued, “when you are vulnerable and raw with someone like that, you can only be vulnerable and raw and real with so many people,” (Jordan, 2019).

In addition, the service-providers feel required to provide more emotional support for their clients. It becomes an expected part of their job. The stylists noted that they don’t hate that part; in fact most reported loving the connections they make with clients. However, that didn’t stop them from recognizing how exhausting that part of their job can be. One of the stylists had recently stepped away from the chair to work in the industry and upon reflection she said, “It is just so exhausting and overwhelming and emotionally draining everyday,” and “because you’re literally giving, giving, giving all day,” (Ursula, 2019). As shown above, throughout the interviews the stylists often

mentioned the phrase, “giving, giving, giving,” in a way to describe their role in the relationship and as a hairstylist. This idea of constantly giving can be emotionally draining, often leading to the stylists going home and not having much else to give other people.

RQ4: *Relationship Classification*. Some of the hairstylists defined their relationship with clients as friendships, but most did not equate it to a “real friendship”. The relationship that develops between the hairstylist and a client mimics that of a real friendship, however it is created due to the circumstances of the service. The sole fact that the two individuals met through a place of business changes the dynamic of the relationship than if the two were to meet through another friend or bump into each other out in public. The two people meet because one is expecting a service from the other, which involves an exchange of currency as well.

While the relationship mimics a friendship, it doesn't have the same qualities of a friendship. One participant reflected, “I think the guest you know does think we're friends, and I want them to feel comfortable and I want them to feel safe, but it's still a professional relationship. And so I don't want to muddy the lines of them expecting more from me than I'm able to give,” (Jordan, 2019). And another reflected, “My clients do mean a lot to me, but I feel like they friend us more than we friend them. I think we mean more to them, like it's not a fair relationship,” (Ursula, 2019). The relationship is unbalanced as the client may consider the stylist a “friend” and may invest more in the relationship, but the stylist is still there to perform a service first.

Also, friendships are often reciprocal or at least more equal in terms of sharing information and talking about oneself. However, the participants all reflected on not

being able to talk about themselves or their own issues. The stylists often put these constraints on themselves, or believed the service-provider role itself required them to maintain professionalism. When they talked about the rough times they were going through they always said that they couldn't bring that into the salon because it wasn't about them, it was all about the clients' experience. Standard friendships or more intimate relationships are also characterized by having equal interactions, sharing of information and often levels of support.

### **Limitations**

The results discussed in this thesis are not specific to the duration of the personal-service provider and client relationship. Each hairstylist recounted numerous stories and interactions with clients, but the length of the relationship with the client was not tracked per story.

In addition, some of the results from this study could be due to environmental or cultural reasons. Most of the participants in the study came from high-end, boutique salons in Milwaukee, WI. It is possible that some of the findings are due to the small boutique mentality and expectations. Also, the salons are located in the Midwest, which may have an impact on the stylists' behaviors.

Another limitation of the study was that the gender influences were not studied. First, this study did not keep track of results based on the gender of the client. The gender of the stylist was noted, but not always the client whom they were referencing. Additionally, this study did not compare results of same gendered stylists-clients versus different gendered relationships. Both of these factors could have an effect on the self-disclosure that occurred in the relationship.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

The data collected in this study were valuable to introduce a third type of relationship that hasn't been studied previously regarding self-disclosure. The service-provider and client relationship has proven to be heavily reliant on self-disclosure, and further research should be conducted to further understand the relationship. While this study only focused on the hairstylist profession, future research could be conducted on more service-providing professions to include: bartenders, nail technicians, aestheticians, nurses or flight attendants to compare the norms that govern self-disclosure in those relationships. While all of these professions fall under the service-provider category, each role has unique characteristics and norms that govern the individuals' relationship with clients.

Future research should also consider the clients' perspective in this relationship. While this study furthers our understanding of the amount of client self-disclosure in the relationship, we still don't know much about why the self-disclosure occurs in the first place. Future studies should be conducted to understand why clients feel comfortable revealing personal information about themselves to people in service-providing capacities since the norms that govern the relationship don't follow the norms of an intimate relationship, which is established in previous literature.

Future research could be paired with a quantitative study to expand on the data that was collected from the personal narratives from each participant. If a survey was conducted, there could have received more quantitative results to understand the data further. Quantitative data would help to round out the results in order to further

understand exactly how often certain experiences occur and the duration of each relationship cited.

### **Conclusion**

Self-disclosure is an important part of interpersonal relationships. Through an analysis of qualitative interviews with eight hairstylists in Milwaukee, WI, I was able to understand more about the self-disclosure that occurs in the service-provider and client relationship. Previous literature surrounding self-disclosure focuses heavily on intimate relationships and a relationship between strangers, but the data found in this study show that self-disclosure often occurs in the quasi-friendship relationship between service-providers and their clients. The norms that govern the self-disclosure in this relationship are similar to that of other relationships, but deviate slightly. The major differences include: the self-disclosure isn't reciprocal and it often occurs in a majority of the interactions between the two people. Unique norms uncovered by this study was the lack of relationship and communication outside of the service experience and the expedited process of disclosure. Another finding from this study was that of the emotional labor that service-providers endure due to the amount of self-disclosure they report receiving during their client interactions. Emotion labor is understood to be how a worker manages their emotions in regard to the constraints of the job. The hairstylists enjoyed the connections they make with their clients, but did recognize the emotional toll they can take on them. Finally, previous literature on Social Penetration Theory and how it occurs in interpersonal relationships does not adequately describe the relationship between hairstylist and client. While a main focus of SPT is on disclosing information, the way it occurs in the hairstylist-client relationship does not always happen gradually and isn't

necessarily used as means to deepen a relationship. Further research should expand on this study as well as include data from the clients to understand both perspectives of this unique relationship.

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## Appendix

### Interview Guide

#### Schooling/Training

1. What type of classes did you take?
2. Did your current job require any additional training?
3. How many salons have you worked at?
4. What drew you to becoming a hairstylist?

#### Job Responsibilities

1. How long have you been a hairstylist?
2. What are your job responsibilities?
3. What does a typical day look like?

#### Client Conversations

1. Who usually starts the conversation?
2. Do you have any repetitive clients? Can you speak about the relationship?
3. How does the conversation usually begin?
4. How do you engage clients in conversation?
5. Is the conversation reciprocal? Do you share any/as much as the client?
6. What is the nature of the conversation?
7. What kind of topics come up throughout the conversation?
8. Does the nature of the conversations change over time?
9. How long did you know people before disclosures start to come up?

#### Client Relationships

1. How many clients do you consider friends?
2. How long were clients that you consider friends coming to you?
3. Does having a relationship with your clients improve your job?
4. Do you engage in equal conversation with every client?
5. Could you talk about your relationship with one specific client?

#### Aftermath — Personal Reflection

1. Have you thought about things clients have said to you outside of work?
2. How does carrying on conversations while you work feel?
3. How do you deal with things clients tell you?
4. Have you ever wanted to follow up with something that a client told you?