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Behind the Chair: "Doing Hair" and "Flipping the Script" in Interviews on the Sensitive Topics of Religion and Sexual Experiences

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Key words: hairdressing; Goffman; Hochschild; sensitive topics; Northern Ireland; qualitative interviews; sexual experiences; religion; emotional labor; flipping the script; creative methods

Abstract: Religion and sexual experience are deemed sensitive topics to research. I aim to elucidate how I used hairdressing as an activity during qualitative interviews to aid in researching the relationship between religious-cultural upbringing and women's sexual experiences in Northern Ireland. There has been little recognition of the subjective sexual experiences of adult women in Northern Ireland; this is partly due to the dominance of Roman Catholicism and Evangelical Fundamentalism's religious practices in the country and their promotion of morally conservative ideas around women's bodies and sexual activity. This, in turn, has allowed a moral, religious perspective on sexual activity to have a high level of significance for the individual in Northern Ireland and society, making it challenging to research. I will explore how "doing hair" during qualitative interviews can help to combat issues associated with researching sensitive topics using GOFFMAN's (1956) dramaturgical analysis and HOCHSCHILD's (1983) emotional labor concept. I argue that utilizing the routine performances between the hairdresser and client and "flipping the script" on the researcher/participant vs. hairdresser/client power relations can aid in the disclosure of the socially and culturally sensitive topics of religion and sexual experiences.

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1. Introduction

Northern Ireland has been described as having a morally conservative view on sex due in part to the dominance of institutional Evangelical Fundamentalist Protestantism (MacKENZIE, 2022), Roman Catholicism, and the continuing high levels of religious belief and participation in these religions. Religion is also intrinsically connected to the broader political sphere and policy development (HAYWARD & McMANUS, 2019; MacKENZIE, 2022). In this article, I describe the process and rationale for "doing hair" during qualitative interviews for researching the sensitive topics of sexual experiences and religion. I use the colloquial term "doing hair" because it is how hairdressers talk about their work in the hair industry. In 2020, I conducted eighteen semi-structured interviews with cisgender women from Northern Ireland aged 26-68 to explore the relationship between religious-cultural upbringing and sexual experiences. [1]

I explore doing hair as an activity through two theories, GOFFMAN's (1956) dramaturgical analysis and presentation of the self, and HOCHSCHILD's (1983) concept of emotional labor. GOFFMAN and HOCHSCHILD are both situated within the theoretical tradition of symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionists postulate that objects, events, and behaviors are all imbued with symbolic and subjectively interpreted meaning and that individuals react to these meanings in a socially appropriate manner. Simulating the routine performance of going to the hairdresser combined with a hair salon as the location of the interview is, I propose, beneficial for interviewing on the sensitive topics of religion and sexual experience. An element of the hairdressers' routine performance is not only to provide an aesthetic service to their clients, but also to engage in emotional labor with their clients. Part of the performance of emotional labor during a hair appointment is to practice empathic listening, emotional regulation, and giving physical reaffirming touches, which are similar to a non-binding counselor; these performances allow trust and rapport to build within the hairdresser-client relationship. Clients, in response, often disclose information on personal issues (COWEN et al., 1979). I further argue that doing hair in sensitive research interviews can help create an equal role through a process that I have called "flipping the script." Flipping the script disrupts the implicit hierarchical relationship that can exist between researchers and their participants and hairdressers and their clients. [2]

I structure this article by first presenting a contextualization of the specificities of Northern Ireland and why research on sexual experiences and religion is seen to be sensitive. This is followed by a review of the literature exploring qualitative interview methods and hairdresser/client interactions (Section 2). In Section 3, I develop the theoretical framework that is based on GOFFMANN (1956) and HOCHSCHILD (1983). I explore how doing hair during qualitative interviews can help flip the script on researcher/participant power relations (Sections 3 and 4). I will then turn to my research design and methods (Sections 5 and 6), which I follow by presenting the findings from my research (Section 7), and, finally the discussion and conclusion (Section 8). [3]

2. Context, Background, and Literature

Northern Ireland is a distinct society due to its religio-political history and culture (HAYWARD & McMANUS, 2019). Since the creation of the Northern Irish state in 1921, two separate and often violent politically informed religious communities have lived side by side (ALTGLAS, 2022). The two communities are split between Nationalist/Catholics and Unionist/Protestants, and this division still informs many individuals' sense of self and identity (BENSON & TREW, 1995). A group of researchers from Queens University Belfast and Ulster University found that 71% of Northern Irish people identify as either Catholic or Protestant (ACTIVE RESEARCH KNOWLEDGE [ARK], 2021). However, HAYWARD and McMANUS (2019) discovered that regular church attendance has been declining, which would indicate that religion is more of an ethnic identifier than a belief system. MITCHELL (2005) emphasized that even for many people who do not actively participate in the institutional church, "religious structures and religious ideas remain socially significant beyond the confines of the most devout" (p.18). Similarly, even though many young people have stated that they have no religion (ARK, 2021), they nevertheless participate in cultural activities linked to traditional religious customs (DURRER, KELLY, McKNIGHT & SCHUBOTZ, 2020). Religion is still part of cultural socialization and is deeply entwined with people's sense of belonging to one community or another (HAYWARD, DOWDS & SHAW, 2014). Religious ideology is part of the Northern Irish understanding of social life; it is the lens through which they see the world (MITCHELL, 2006). [4]

The significance of religion is visible in policy and legislation development and is particularly noticeable in the education system. Religious education is compulsory in most schools, and there is often overtly religious doctrine discussed in school assemblies (HAYWARD & McMANUS, 2019). The Christian belief system still informs formal school-based sexual health education and teaches female sexuality in accordance with traditional heteronormative and gender-essentialist roles (WILKINSON, 2021). There is no mention of what FINE (1988, p.30) called a "discourse of desire," meaning that there is no discussion of sexual consent, sex for pleasure, or how to communicate about sexual interaction (ROLSTON, SCHUBOTZ & SIMPSON, 2004, 2005). Sexual health education in Northern Ireland still, in many schools, explicitly promotes abstaining from sex until marriage (MacKENZIE, HEDGE & ENSLIN 2017; ROLSTON et al., 2005; WILKENSON, 2021). [5]

However, sexual abstinence education does not stop young women from engaging in sexual interaction before marriage (SCHUBOTZ, 2012); it just means that young women are not sexually literate when they first engage in sexual activity. Consequently, young women may not know how to have safe sexual interactions and may not know how to communicate effectively about their own sexual needs (FLANAGAN, in press). Religion, patriarchal institutions, and the lack of sexual health education are part of the reason why Northern Ireland has a systemic problem with rape myths and victim-blaming (POWELL, 2022). MacKENZIE (2022) pointed out how this can silence those who seek to report sexual assault, and explicitly referred to a public rape trial in 2018 that "revealed

the inadequacy of the criminal justice system to deal with such allegations and exposed how sexual violence, misogyny and sexism are framed and processed in law, education, the church and wider society" (p.3). [6]

Researchers are still hesitant to explore religion and sex in Northern Ireland. As noted above, Northern Ireland's view of sex comes from a religious, moral perspective, which has resulted in a "reluctance to raise the issue of sex even in the ... sober context of social research" (ROLSTON et al., 2005, p.218). SCHUBOTZ, ROLSTON and SIMPSON (2003) investigated the sexual attitudes and lifestyles of youth in Northern Ireland and used a mixed methods design which consisted of focus groups, discussions and narratives, one-to-one interviews, and a large-scale quantitative survey. SCHUBOTZ et al. elucidated that the study of sex in Northern Ireland can be complex because of the general political situation. The researchers reported that topics related to dating and marriage can frequently be connected to mixed religion relations and may be dangerous because paramilitary organizations are themselves tied to this socio-religious segregation. As DOYLE and McWILLIAMS (2019) have argued, the consequence of speaking out against or reporting sexual assault or violence can be dangerous, especially if the violence has been committed by paramilitary organization members, who still have a visible presence in some communities. MacKENZIE (2022) indicated that rape myths and fear of paramilitaries could have negative prejudicial consequences for rape and sexual assault complainants, which can further discourage women from speaking out about sexual issues. POWELL (2022) found that sexual violence and violence against women in Northern Ireland was prevalent and severe through the 1065 responses from an online survey. However, they also argued that women who participated in their research found it difficult to talk about violence and sexual violence because of the dominance of religion and patriarchal attitudes, including their own traditional gender role socialization, in addition to the fear of stigma. Therefore, it can be argued that it may be challenging to collect data on sensitive topics in Northern Ireland. [7]

While it is not impossible to collect high-quality data on subjects such as sexual assault and violence in socially conservative and divided societies like Northern Ireland, SCHUBOTZ et al. (2003, p.8) indicated that "researchers who are prepared to be innovative, sensitive and committed can succeed in accessing invaluable data." Sensitive research can be defined as "research which potentially poses a substantial threat to those who are or have been involved in it" (LEE & RENZETTI, 2003 p.5). Exploring sensitive topics and potentially delicate issues can be painful or emotional for everyone involved. The topics of religion and sexual experience can also be considered as an "intrusive threat" to the "private, stressful or sacred" (ibid.). This type of inquiry can also raise concerns over possible suffering or distress which may occur when exploring personal experiences related to emotionally complex problems (DICKSON-SWIFT, JAMES, KIPPEN & LIAMPUTTONG, 2007). NOLAND (2012) stated that many academics have reported difficulty obtaining ethical approval for projects that sought to explore sex or sexuality from institutional review boards (IRB). NOLAND further observed that many IRBs recommend using anonymous

surveys instead of face-to-face interviews or focus groups to protect the participants. This may be why many researchers who have explored the relationship between religion and sexual experience have addressed the issue using quantitative methods, mostly large-scale questionnaires. Scholars have analyzed the intersection of sex and religion using quantitative surveys on topics such as sexual guilt, sexual satisfaction, and sexual self-esteem (ABBOTT, HARRIS & MOLLEN, 2016; CRANNEY, 2019; LEONHARDT, BUSBY & WILLOUGHBY, 2019), and discovered a correlation between religiosity and conservative sexual values. What quantitative methods miss, however, are the valuable perspectives of lived experience that can be obtained only through personal narratives. [8]

CLANEY, HALL, ANDERSON and CANADA (2020) explored sexual experiences and religion by using qualitative semi-structured interviews. They discovered that single, emerging adult women who practiced evangelical Christianity contextualized and managed their sexuality in combination with their religious identities and regarded the rules around sex as reassuring. They indicated that future research needs to measure the multiple different aspects of religiosity when assessing the impact of religiosity on sexuality. ALLSOP et al. (2021) also used semi-structured interviews and found that religious women tended to set sexual boundaries in relationships, which gave them a sense of empowerment. The empowerment came through feeling supported by their religion to set these sexual boundaries. [9]

OLTMANN (2016) argued that while face-to-face interviews are a staple in qualitative research, we must not "simply assume[] that they will be done in this mode" (§2). Telephone interviews can help to reduce what GAZSO and BISCHOPING (2018, §2) called "awkward moments," these moments can happen when there are emotional pressures or issues that can create clashes during field work. Telephone interviews were used by CHANAKIRA, O'CATHAIN, GOYDER and FREEMAN (2014) to understand and explore the personal stories of university students and their risky sexual behavior. The researchers chose telephone interviews as they felt that the relative anonymity that telephone interviews afford the participant in comparison to face-to-face interviews would help reduce the embarrassment often aroused when talking about risky sex. [10]

There can be issues with technology in telephone interviews, for example calls can be dropped. It is also impossible to read body language and it can be difficult to assess emotional responses (OLTMANN, 2016), which can be useful in interpreting and analyzing data. NOTERMANS and KOMMERS (2013) conducted traditional interviews on religion and found that for their participants discussing religious experiences produced intense emotional responses that sometimes resulted in tears, which was not conducive to the continuation of the interview. The researchers realized that they needed to use an alternative method to collect their data. They incorporated religious iconography to encourage elicitation, discovering that the emotional response to the iconographic object elicited stories that revealed deep religious meanings. Using physical artifacts and iconography

allowed the participants to focus on the imagery to tell their stories, and were a source of distraction from their distressful emotional responses. [11]

Space and place in relation to the location of the interview are also important for reflexivity. The interview site can help participants feel comfortable and can also help the interviewee understand their position in relation to the participant (GAGNON, JACOB & McCABE, 2014). Additionally, the interview location can help to construct or deconstruct the power structure and positionality between participants and the interviewer (ELWOOD & MARTIN, 2000). However, the location does not have to be a fixed place; mobile methods such as walking have gained traction as an interviewing method to explore self and place. This method can also encourage spontaneous conversation; talking becomes easier when distracted by the walk, and pauses are part of the natural flow of walking (CARPIANO, 2009; EVANS & JONES, 2011; KING & WOODROFFE, 2019). [12]

No researchers to my knowledge have used the process of doing hair as an activity during qualitative interviews on the sensitive topics of sex and religion. However, scholars have sought to understand hairdressers' interactions with clients and have determined that hairdressers often undertake the role of informal helpers. Hairdressers frequently spend a substantial amount of time talking with clients about moderate to serious personal problems such as issues with children, physical health, marriage, depression, and anxiety (COWEN et al., 1979). Academics have also reported that hairdressers deal with problems such as physical health, sex, sexual assault, and domestic violence with their clients (POOL, 2005; SATTLER & DEANE, 2016). Hairdressers have also disclosed to researchers that they have learned to recognize the signs of depression, dementia, and self-neglect in older people (ANDERSON, CIMBAL & MAILE, 2010). It is so well acknowledged that clients disclose information on sexual health, reproductive issues, and other deeply personal issues (PAGE, CHUR-HANSEN & DELFABBRO, 2021), which scholars and policy makers have proposed that hair salons and hairdressers could be used as sites for identifying, reporting, and helping women who are suffering from intimate partner violence (DiVIETRO et al., 2016), and to give information on contraception and HIV services (BASSETT et al., 2019). [13]

The reasons that clients disclose personal issues to hairdressers are less well known. COWEN et al. (1979) identified that it may be because clients develop a trusting relationship with their hairdresser over time. Contact is often regular and for extended periods of time. Conversation and physical touch between the hairdresser and client are the main mode of interaction, which can build trust. HARNESS, JAMIE and McMURRAY (2020) used a combination of interviews with, and observations, of hair stylists and their clients to establish that the time spent and regular contact between clients and their stylists allowed the relationship to become a type of commercial friendship, which enabled a deep level of trust to build up over time. HARNESS et al. (p.1085) demonstrated that these interactions create

> "a well-established trusting relationship [that] imbues the encounter with therapeutic symbolism, positioning it as akin to a doctor-patient consultation due to perceived confidentiality. This quasi-medical confidentiality created an additional dimension to the hairdresser-client relationship beyond that of friendship, whereby clients can comfortably disclose personal information knowing it will not be shared." [14]

HARNESS et al. proposed that this quasi-medical confidentiality was created through this perceived doctor-patient role play, combined with the emotional labor that hairdressers perform during these encounters with clients. Similarly, SHARMA and BLACK (2001) discussed how retaining long-term clients is the objective of a successful business in the beauty industry. Hairdressers and beauticians must perform emotional labor to ensure that their clients' emotional needs are met, as otherwise they may not make another appointment. They argued that clients not only wanted to look good, but they also wanted to feel good. This sense of wellbeing is primarily achieved through intimate touch between the client and hairdresser, and the service providers' emotional self-discipline in dealing with clients' feelings and demands. HANSON (2019) outlined the degree to which empathetic listening is part of the emotional labor that hairdressers must perform for client retention. HANSON argued that emotional pampering is a requirement of the job function, and that many stylists agree that "their position is not necessarily as a conversational participant, but rather one of a non-binding counselor" (p.149-150). [15]

3. Theoretical Framework Dramaturgy and Emotional Labor

The theoretical framework I used to guide my methodological design was based on both the work of GOFFMAN (1956) and his dramaturgical analysis of the presentation of the self, and HOCHSCHILD's (1983) theoretical contributions on emotions, specifically the concept of emotional labor. Both of these perspectives have their roots in, or are connected to, symbolic interactionism (DELANEY, 2016). Symbolic interactionists postulate that individuals impose subjective meaning on objects, events, and behavior. Individuals act or interact based on these symbolically interpreted subjective meanings rather than on possible objective truths. Within symbolic interactionist theory, therefore, social situations, environments, or instances are thought to be socially constructed through human interpretation (CARTER & FULLER, 2016; DELANEY, 2016). [16]

GOFFMAN (1956) theorized that individuals perform actions in everyday life as if they were performers on a stage. Individuals perform impression management to present a certain representation of the self and to protect themselves against unexpected actions that may disrupt the performance of the presented self. GOFFMAN suggested that groups of individuals practice similar and in tandem roles within society. He referred to these groups as teams. Teams of individuals (such as hairdressers or researchers) that perform similar roles (hairdressing or researching), and their audiences (the clients/participants) should understand the correct role performance and scenario. The audience knows what to expect from hairdressers or other team performers in the specific environment related to that role. There can also be routine performances between the actor and the audience

in everyday life. A hairdresser (actor) and client (audience) know the routine performance within the salon interaction. The front stage allows individuals to present whichever role they seek to portray to the audience. This front is displayed through creating, maintaining, and manipulating the perceived setting, space, or place where the interaction or performance will happen. For example, I propose that the mirror, scissors, combs, and gowns are symbolic objects that help to create the situated space for the symbolic event (the hair appointment). The objects allow the audience to interpret the correct or appropriate behavior that is related to the specific environment (the hairdressing experience) and helps to aid impression management. [17]

In addition to the setting, there is also management of the manner in which, and the physical appearance of how, the actors present themselves, including for example, the language they use. These are specific to the actor's role, and *vice versa* for the audience if participating in a routine performance or interaction. Then there is the backstage—which the audience does not get to see. The backstage exists so that the actors have a space (physically and emotionally) to get ready to give the correct performance to their intended audience. [18]

HOCHSCHILD (1983) ascertained that in the service industry to which hairdressing belongs, workers must perform emotional labor. This can be defined as labor that

> "requires one to induce or suppresses feelings in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others … this kind of labor calls for a coordination of mind and feelings, and it sometimes draws on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our personality" (p.7). [19]

Emotional labor helps to regulate or manage emotional expressions with others as part of one's professional role. It is performed through face-to-face or voice-to-voice interaction and can often be expressed through behavior—this is the labor involved in dealing with other people's feelings. It has been documented that hairdressers perform emotional labor with their clients daily (COHEN, 2010; HANSON, 2019; HARNESS et al. 2020; HILL & BRADLEY, 2010). If hairdressers do not perform emotional labor, they may lose clients or income. Whether a hairdresser is self-employed or employed, the exchange of money and keeping one's job are the incentives. To support their own business or keep their own job, the hairdressers must always keep the client happy. Clients know and expect hairdressers to serve them in a caring manner, even if they are rude or disrespectful to the hairdresser. Clients know that hairdressers will be caring because they are paying for it (EAYRS, 1993; HANSON, 2019; HARNESS et al., 2020). When the "customer is king, unequal exchanges are normal, and from the beginning customer and client assume different rights to feeling and display" (HOCHSCHILD, 1983, p.86). [20]

Emotional labor can be conceptualized as similar to GOFFMAN's (1956) backstage, but the labor is internal instead of a space or setting. While GOFFMAN was concerned with surface acting, emotional labor can be

considered deep acting. Impression management of one's emotions so that the audience sees only the emotions the actor wants to display is essential, even if this is internally harmful. [21]

4. Flipping the Script

"Flipping the script" refers to how doing hair in sensitive interviews can help to equalize the implicit power imbalance between the fieldworker and participant by flipping the symbolically interpreted hierarchical roles in both the interviewer/respondent relationship and the hairdresser/client relationship. "In traditional research, the roles of researcher and subject are mutually exclusive: the researcher alone contributes to the thinking that goes into the project, and the subjects contribute the action or contents to be studied" (REASON, 1994, p.42). This perspective originates from a more positivist and quantitative framework that has claimed that the investigator can be a neutral and objective observer (KARNIELI-MILLER, STRIER & PESSACH, 2009). Scholars using different forms of qualitative inquiry have sought to depart from this traditional stance with the aim to create a more co-produced version of knowledge production (ibid.). However, the relationship between researcher and participant can be complex. KARNIELI-MILLER et al. argued that even the language used to label the roles between researcher and participant can symbolize an "expert-subject relationship" (p.281). AAMANN (2017) suggested that participants can see researchers as moral judges. Here, it is argued that class is embedded in everyday interactions and that participants often position themselves as being judged, being the judge, or refusing to be judged by the researcher. The feeling of being morally judged combined with the researcher being perceived as an expert may risk the participants distorting the data by producing participant bias, whereby the participants may change their behavior to match up with what they think the researcher wants to discover (DICKSON-SWIFT et al., 2007; LEE & RENZETTI, 1990). [22]

There is also a power imbalance between hairdressers and their clients, with the client holding more power than the hairdresser. The social and historical context of hairdressing as an occupation is important in this relationship, as hairdressing is traditionally seen as a working-class woman's occupation (HUPPATZ, 2012; LINDSAY, 2004). A person does not need formal high school grades or schooling to become a hairdresser (GIMLIN, 1996). Hairdressing is perceived as challenging work, with poor conditions and low pay due in part to being historically associated with female domestic servitude (HUPPATZ, 2012; LINDSAY, 2004). Historically, only middle to upper-class women could afford to maintain a coiffed hairstyle as they did not have to engage in domestic work (BLACK, 2004). However, HUPPATZ (2012, p.47) suggested that still today, "hair treatments, cuts and blow dry's are leisure time practices of the affluent, as visits to the hairdresser are not only about regular grooming or self-maintenance but also pampering, self-indulgence and relaxation." Similarly, LAWSON (1999, p.239) pointed out that hair management is after all related to economic status, and that "people with little money generally arrange their own hair." Hairdressing is still seen as an appropriate occupation for a working-class woman (SHARMA &

BLACK, 2001). Even if some clients are working-class, and some hairdressers work in high end salons, hairdressers are "still imagined as working class" (HUPPATZ, 2012, p.46) and of low status. [23]

Hairdressers are expected to consistently defer to the customer under the mantra "the customer is always right" (HANSON, 2019, p.151). This common phrase implies that due to the customers paying for a service, the service workers must do everything in their power to make them satisfied with the service. Therefore, the client inherently holds more power than the hairdresser, precisely due to the commercialization of emotions, as "hairdressers are financially and emotionally required to defer to their client's judgments" (GIMLIN, 1996, p.518). If the hairdressers do not engage in emotional labor, such as empathetic listening, deep and surface acting (i.e., smiling or being generally agreeable), even if the customer is wrong, there can be consequences, such as getting in trouble with managers and losing their job or losing out on payment for the service provided (COHEN, 2010). [24]

I understand that doing hair during the interview process to utilize the routine performance of emotional labor in the hairdressing/client interaction to allow for deep disclosure could be perceived as a form of rapport-building manipulation. This could have caused an ethical dilemma (KARNIELI-MILLER et al., 2009) had I not negated the issue by fully informing my participants about the content of my research and my study aims. Before the interviews, I gave the participants explicit information about the content of the interviews and the process of doing hair. In addition, the participants could remove consent up until the point at which their interviews were transcribed and anonymized. [25]

There was no economic exchange in my interviews; however, cultural, historical, and economic context is crucial in setting the stage for what GOFFMANN (1956) called impression management. Flipping the script on these symbolically interpreted roles of researcher/participant vs hairdresser/client within the interview helped to create a more equal role interpretation which I will discuss in detail in Sections 8 and 9. [26]

5. Rationale and Researcher Position

I am a trained hairdresser who has been practicing for over 18 years. During my time as a hairdresser, I gained the physical skills of working with hair and the emotional or soft skills of working with people, such as active listening and emotional management. I have spent more than half of my life interacting in the role of the hairdresser. During my time behind the chair, my clients would talk to me about various topics. Clients often told me about their personal lives, problems at home, stressful work relationships, and other personal details. I had many intimate conversations with people I had just met that day about romantic affairs and sexual relations. It was often a complaint between my colleagues and me that we, as hairdressers, were our clients' "emotional bin bags." [27]

Emotion work comes with the hairdresser's job role; from my experience, clients often expect it. However, it is not spoken about, we are not paid for it, and we are not professionally trained on how to deal with it. How to perform emotional labor is something that many hairdressers learn on the job, with years of experience interacting with many different clients. When I started this research, I realized that this hairdresser-client relationship, which is both casual and intimate, could be beneficial for extracting rich and deep qualitative data in interviews on sexual experience and religion. I also realized that my capacity to undertake informal emotion work, which I have obtained from more than 18 years of hairdressing, could help me in conducting high-quality qualitative research interviews. [28]

I interviewed 18 cisgender women between the ages of 26-68. All the participants had been raised in Northern Ireland in a religious home and had attended a religious school. Twelve of the 18 participants were university educated. I have also grown up in Northern Ireland. I was in an insider position with my participants, raised in a religious family, and went to a religious school. I had a shared lived experience with the people who I interviewed. The importance of understanding this relationship has been reflected upon by DEW, McENTYRE and VAUGHAN (2019), who argued that research should be designed culturally and ethically to reflect the groups with which the work is taking place. As an insider to the culture I studied, I too can feel uncomfortable talking about sex. [29]

The interaction between the hairdresser and client is through a mirror rather than directly face to face, and she stands above and behind the sitting client. This creates a level of distance but also intimacy which I thought might deflect feelings of discomfort when talking about sensitive topics. Traditionally, if someone is standing over and behind a person, the person sitting may feel vulnerable. However, as the client/participant can always see the hairdresser/researcher, this may deflect these feelings. I also felt that the hairdresser/client relationship could help create feelings of trust and rapport because the hairdressing experience is intimate and caring. It encourages situated and temporal trust. There is also an implicit contract between client and provider—trust, discretion, and professionalism. [30]

I wanted, therefore, to conduct my interviews in the hair salon not only to help my participants feel comfortable, but also, because I feel uncomfortable having to sit face-to-face with strangers and ask them about their sexual lives. I too wanted to relax and feel comfortable asking intimate and private questions. I knew from experience that a way to minimize these awkward encounters was by talking through a mirror and doing hair. I feel very comfortable touching clients, doing their hair, and listening and responding to their beauty needs, while listening and responding to their personal stories. I do not have to look at the client as I am looking at their hair; and I do not have to respond as one would face to face, all of which minimizes the awkwardness of talking about sexual experiences. [31]

6. Methods

6.1 Sampling and recruitment

The basic criterion to participate in my study was to be a woman over the age of 25 who had grown up and gone to school in Northern Ireland. I sought women who had been socialized in Northern Ireland to contrast their experiences to the research on the sexual attitudes and behaviors of Northern Irish youth (BECKETT & SCHUBOTZ, 2014; ROLSTON et al., 2004). I received ethical approval from the ethics committee of Queen's University of Belfast on the 26th of August 2020. I started my recruitment during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first national lockdown in the UK started at the end of March 2020 and ended in June of that year. I built a website for my PhD study recruitment because I wanted to give the potential participants as much information as possible about the research so that they were fully informed before consenting. I also wanted to be able to send a link to the webpage by e-mail, text, and all the social networking sites. I made sure that the webpage was mobile phone compatible. The webpage contained information about me and my study, including a personal letter to my participants, which included my research position and some self-disclosure. I added some participant information, including COVID-19 safety measures that I had put in place, blog-updates on my research, and a contact form. A disadvantage of using digital recruitment methods was that I may not have reached members of the population who did not or could not use the internet. [32]

During the first week the website went live, I was overwhelmed with responses. I had over 50 e-mails from possible participants. After the first e-mail round, I organized a phone call to confirm details and get more information. During the initial phone calls, I asked the possible participants to confirm that they met the basic criteria. The participants were fully informed that the interaction would take place through an interview on religion and sexual experiences. I told the potential participants about the location of the interview, the hairdressing activity I would be using, and gave them some background into why I wanted to "do hair" in the interviews. I also told them about my history in the hair industry, informing them that I had over 18 years of experience as a hairdresser. I gave them the link to my business and self-employed Instagram page so they could browse my hairdressing work and trust my hairdressing skills. I asked them if they were comfortable with this process, and they replied that there were. [33]

6.2 Interview schedule

I developed an interview schedule that consisted of about 15 questions for a semi-structured interview. I chose to use semi structured interviews rather than unstructured narrative interviews (MANN, 2016) as I wanted the conversation to start with a reflection on religion and religious cultural upbringing and I wanted to find out specifically about the participants' sexual health education. I was concerned that the participants may have not spoken directly about their sexual experiences in narrative interviews. The first question I asked my participants was: "Tell me about how religion played a role in your upbringing." The first part

of the interview focused on their religious, cultural upbringing and current religious practices. I wanted the participants to relax during the interview and to try to recall parts of their personal histories. Other questions in the first half of the interview included, for example: "Do you remember what the basic tenets of the religion you grew up with were?" The second part of the interview, after we had discussed religion and religious-cultural upbringing, was focused on their sexual experiences. I asked the participants to: "Tell me about your sexual experiences when you first started becoming sexual?" Later in the interview, I asked: "When did you first learn about sex for pleasure?" The conversation flowed back and forth between religion, upbringing, sex education, and sexual experiences. Many participants spoke much earlier in the interview about sex and relationships, while some needed probing questions about their sexual experiences such as "tell me a little more about that experience, or how did that experience make you feel." [34]

6.3 Logistics of hair salon interview methodology

A public hairdressing salon on an average busy day is noisy. There are often many people, noisy hair dryers, a lot of chatting and music. This would not be a suitable environment to retain anonymity and confidentiality. I decided, therefore, to use my private home hair salon. Because I had to voice record interviews, I realized that I could only offer a few services to avoid noise pollution on the device. I decided to offer the participants a dry trim, meaning I that would just cut their hair dry and then style it with a heated tool such as curling tongs or hair straighteners, or just style their hair. There was also some noise from the trolley on which I kept my comb, scissors, clippers, clips, and styling products, but the conversation sound was still very clear. [35]

When the client/participant first came into the salon, I introduced myself and thanked them for coming. I immediately sat them in the hairdressing chair facing the mirror. The first topic of discussion was their hair; I needed to complete a consultation with the participant/client to find out what they wanted me to do with their hair and if the style they requested was possible. We talked about when their hair had last been cut, how often they got it cut, hair texture, face shape, and lifestyle. I gave them my professional view on what I thought would suit them and whether they could manage the style at home. The stage was set primarily as a hair salon, and secondarily as an interview location. The hair consultation worked as a rapport and trust-building exercise. I shared my professional expertise on their hair, eased them into the conversation, and allowed them to relax and feel comfortable. After we decided what to do with their hair, I put a gown on them, asked them to read and sign the consent form, and told them that I when I turned on the recorder their interview would start. [36]

6.4 COVID-19

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the participant and I were obliged to wear personal protective equipment (PPE). My participants wore face masks, gowns, and plastic gowns. I wore a facemask, a face shield, and a plastic apron. Initially, I thought that wearing PPE would hinder the interview process. However, we were used to wearing PPE by this stage in the COVID-19 pandemic, and it did not cause an issue. Some participants mentioned that wearing PPE throughout the interview helped them feel more anonymous since we (interviewer/respondent) would not even recognize each other outside of the salon, as we were not able to see each other's faces. [37]

6.5 Field work

6.5.1 Pilot interview 1

I completed my 1st pilot interview, which latest about three hours. The logistical hairdressing set up was suitable. I used a TASCAM DR-05 Portable Digital Recorder to record the interviews. I chose to use this recording device as it was good at drowning out background noise, such as general hairdressing noises. I dry-cut the participant's hair and then used a heat tool (straighteners for curls) and styled it. Using the face masks, in combination with the participant sitting in front of the mirror and me at the back, was perfect. It worked just how I had imagined it would. The only issue was that the hair only took about one-hour maximum, but the interview lasted longer. However, we continued to talk through the mirror. [38]

6.5.2 Pilot interview 2

My next participant informed me on the phone before the interview that she had just had her hair cut. We decided to interview face-to-face rather than through the mirror. We both sat in salon chairs and spoke to each other face-to-face. The participant answered all the questions; however, there were quite a few awkward silences after she had answered some of the questions. I tried to pause in the silence and let her talk more, but I found that quite difficult. There was no emotional tension; however, some of her answers were very short. In hindsight, I should have sat with the silence, but due to my discomfort with the silence, I used probing questions too early or moved on to the next question. The interview only lasted about an hour. I felt that this was because we both felt uncomfortable talking about sex. [39]

6.5.3 Interview interactions

I believe that when I conducted the hairdressing interview method that the participants and I were distracted by doing hair. I could stay quiet and keep on doing their hair, which softened any uncomfortable silences. I was not directly looking at the participant, and the participant was not looking at me. I felt that this allowed the participants not to feel pressured into giving me an answer immediately, but allowed them time to think about their answer, to reflect and possibly add to it. This lack of eye contact also helped to reduce feelings of shame and embarrassment. [40]

6.6 Data analysis

I used BRAUN and CLARKE's (2013) thematic analysis to identify themes and patterns of meaning across the data set. I felt confident using thematic analysis as BRAUN and CLARKE have both independently researched sexual issues (FARVID & BRAUN, 2006; HAYFIELD & CLARKE, 2012; McPHILLIPS, BRAUN & GAVEY, 2001; OPPERMAN, BRAUN, CLARKE & ROGERS, 2014; TERRY & BRAUN, 2009). Thematic analysis consists of six phases based on immersion, coding, and theme building. However, I deviated slightly from thematic analysis while developing the themes for the hair doing. Initially, I coded any instance related to hair as "hair interactions." After all the coding of hair interactions, I broke the interactions down further into themes, such as conversation flow, distraction, no eye contact, and looking and feeling good. [41]

7. Findings

The data in this section were taken from when I asked the participants for their reflections on getting their hair done. Several participants said they enjoyed the interview method and spoke about how it helped them relax and feel comfortable discussing the sensitive topics of sex and religion. The participants experienced three themes in common: distraction, no eye contact, and looking and feeling good. [42]

I noticed during the interviews that the conversation flowed seamlessly between talking about hair and the interview topic. This flow is standard in hair salons, when the hairdressers must check in with the client mid-conversation to check that they are happy with their hair; usually, it is a quick disruption to the conversation, and then we both move on. This is shown below in my interaction with Deirdre[1] who was 25 years old. Deirdre's hair was very short, so I gave her a short buzz cut on the top and sides. I asked her if she liked what she was seeing so far, and we quickly agreed that it was looking good. We continued to talk about Deirdre's thoughts on losing her virginity.

1 The participants have been given pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.

> Researcher: "How's the hair looking? You can't really see anything but you're not hating it (*both overtalking, inaudible*). OK, so what did losing your virginity mean to you?"
>
> Deirdre: "Losing your virginity was a huge thing like that, was it? It was, you know 'life steps' of a person. You go to school, you lose your virginity, you go to university, you find a man, you have babies. Losing your virginity was like a life marker. I remember feeling really conflicted because I kinda lost my virginity one night. Like me and a guy tried but it was way too sore, so he had to stop. So technically he had been inside me, but it wasn't what I would call sex. And I remember being just really conflicted, was this like semi-status that wasn't real? And I remember being really frustrated about that." [43]

Mary was a 30-year-old practicing Catholic and spoke about the deep internal shame she felt with anything related to sex. Earlier in the interview, she told me that she thought the guilt initially came from the fear of what her mother would think of her if she found out that she had had sex with her (future husband) before marriage. She said she still felt guilty about committing the sin of sex before marriage and the second sin of lying to her mother. She associated sex with guilt and shame and described how she found it challenging to talk about sex with her husband. She worried that it was not good for their marriage and that this was one of the reasons she wanted to participate in my research. This dialogue shows how the conversation flowed from complex topics to hair. Mary explicitly states that she would have felt uncomfortable sitting face to face. She also mentioned the extra benefit of wearing a mask in the interview.

> Mary: "I think that's the problem. I feel shame all the time with it."
>
> Researcher: "Anything to do with sex you feel shame about basically?"
>
> Mary: "Yeah."
>
> Researcher: "Yeah, That's quite hard, that's heavy, that's heavy."
>
> Mary: "Really annoying. That's gorgeous."
>
> Researcher: "Do you like that yeah?"
>
> Mary: "Thank you so much. It's absolutely beautiful."
>
> Researcher: "We didn't take much off, just like a centimeter, so it's kind of not too much. How did you find getting your hair done and getting interviewed at the same time?"
>
> Mary: "Great, thank you yeah, really good. I think it would have been uncomfortable looking and having to, the eye contact, I think I would have found, I think I would have got uncomfortable, you know, and with the topic and all as well."
>
> Researcher: "Yeah. Yeah. I think so too. I think even for me it would be kind of uncomfortable too."
>
> Mary: "Yeah. And it's also weird with the face masks as well, isn't it like, 'cos I can't actually, I, I could pass you in the street...and I don't know who you are. Which is kind of good as well 'cos it gives you a wee bit of anonymity." [44]

Evelyn who was 40 years old and described herself as almost an atheist mentioned that many women go to the hairdressers and feel comfortable talking through the mirror. We used the mirror as a conduit for uncomfortable conversations, and in our conversation, we were able to talk to each other without having to look into each other's eyes.

> Evelyn: "It was good. This is a really good way to do it. I mean 'cos you've been going ... you know, you used to go to the hairdressers for years ... and talk in this way through a mirror, and I think if you're sitting face-to-face, it wouldn't be the same." [45]

Helena was 52 years old and grew up in a Catholic home and still identified as a Catholic. She disclosed information about the lack of a sexual relationship with her husband. Helena said that she did not enjoy sex at all and described it as a "chore;" however, she still engaged in sex to satisfy her husband noting that "I have to do this, keep him in a good mood for the week." Helena felt ashamed about not enjoying sex with her husband; she worried that I would ask her if she was still married. Helena briefly acknowledges that clients often confide in their hairdressers and that people tell their hairdressers things they may not tell others.

> Helena: "I was more nervous last night, cos I had been saying to my daughter, 'Oh gosh! I've this thing tomorrow' and I go like, 'Oh my God! I'm gonna be really open and honest with a total stranger'. I'm gonna say things out loud that are gonna really sound bad. Like, there'll probably be a question, 'are you still married?' You know? Things like that, ya'know what I'm saying? But I found that I was watching you. I think because I was distracted with the hair ... I think I didn't have time to think about, 'oh God, no I can't say that!' Cos if I hadn't been watching you, I *know* I would have second-guessed what I was gonna say. But do you not find that anyway, that people do tell you more things whenever they're in the hairdressing chair?" [46]

Helena said she relaxed during the interview and felt comfortable telling me her personal stories, as she was able to concentrate on me doing her hair rather than thinking about what she was going to say and whether she was going to be judged for saying it. [47]

Kathleen who was a 35-year-old atheist became quite tearful at points in the interview, such as when she mentioned that she used to describe herself as a "worn-out hole," or when she used to describe herself as "five-pinter," which meant that she used to slut shame herself about how many sexual partners she had. However, Kathleen agreed that getting her hair done helped distract her while she recalled difficult topics, and helped her to carry on with the interview.

> Kathleen: "Yeah. It was great. I think because it is, like that aspect of it, just the whole thing there's an intimacy there and it's like constant flow. I think 'cos you're just disarmed 'cos you're not really focusing, you're focusing on what the hairdresser's doing—'oh, that looks really nice—oh yes, he did once try it on without asking' ... (*laughs*) ... It, it's not that it's disarming, it's almost a distraction thing, sort of thing. It's hard whenever you're sort of dealing with something so intimate, you don't know how people are going to react to it or like." [48]

Another participant Niamh, a 34-year-old practicing protestant, also mentioned the distraction of uncomfortable or awkward moments. Even though Niamh did not go into a deep discussion of how she felt the hairdressing interview process went, she did say that she looked and felt great with her hair.

> Researcher: "So how did you find it, the interview, I mean, how did you find getting your hair done?"
>
> Niamh: "Great, yeah, really great yeah, yeah, yeah, very visually distracting for me. I look amazing and I feel great." [49]

Lucy who was a 50-year-old atheist, was also a previous client; our relationship and interaction were slightly different from the other participants as we had built a relationship over several years. Lucy, throughout her interview, referred to herself as being embarrassed and ashamed when talking about sex. She said, "I don't know, it's a very intimate thing, you know? You know, revealing that part of yourself, it's not something I feel comfortable talking about." She did not often discuss sex with her friends, which she felt came from her Catholic upbringing. Her family had never talked about sex, and Lucy felt that she had not been socialized or given the sexual scripts to allow her to feel comfortable talking about sex. However, she said that she felt comfortable talking to me about sex.

> Lucy: "Well I mean it's interesting I'm having these conversations with you, I mean, I don't really know you that well, (*laughs*) you're my hairdresser. I feel very comfortable talking to you about it, you know? Erm ... I don't think I would feel very comfortable talking with any other hairdresser (*laughs loudly*)." [50]

During the interviews, there was a range of emotional responses; there were several tearful moments, laughter, and anger (mainly at their experiences and the lack of institutional support). [51]

8. Discussion and Conclusion

As part of my research, I explored doing hair as an intimate interview activity in researching the sensitive topics of sex and religion. The participants found that getting their hair done while being interviewed helped them feel comfortable disclosing information about their intimate lives. In a country where the topic of sex is embroiled in religious morality and fear of social stigma, and where women are socialized under patriarchal religious standards that promote traditional gender roles, talking openly with a stranger about sexual experiences could have brought up negative feelings that would have impacted the data collection. However, as my findings show, this did not happen. [52]

Talking about sex can be perceived to be shameful or embarrassing within Northern Irish culture. CHANAKIRA et al. (2014) in their research on risky sex used telephone interviews to combat embarrassment and help participants feel safe through visual anonymity. However, I felt that telephone interviews would have been too impersonal to uncover in-depth details about my participants'

intimate lives. I needed to show my participants that I was empathically listening. I wanted to comfort them with physical touch when they were relaying difficult or distressful experiences. [53]

Engaging physically with my participants was important, which is one of the reasons why walking interviews, as discussed EVANS and JONES (2011), would not have been suitable for my research. Walking and talking about explicit sexual experiences could also mean that other people in public may overhear the conversation, resulting in embarrassment or fear of stigma since reporting sexual offenses or being open about sexual experiences in Northern Ireland is still seen as taboo. In addition, the city in Northern Ireland where my research took place is relatively small. We could have met someone we knew personally, resulting in the participant feeling unsafe and uncomfortable, in addition to compromising anonymity and negatively impacting the level of disclosure. [54]

It was noted above that to conduct research on the sensitive topics of sex and religion in Northern Ireland, researchers must be prepared to be innovative (SCHUBOTZ et al., 2003). GAGNON et al. (2014) observed that the space and place of the interview could have a vital role in the whole process due to meanings with which we imbue the site. I realized I needed to situate the interview in a location conducive to talking freely about sexual experiences. This is why the hair salon was a good location for the interviews as the hair salon space is already perceived to be a place for treatments and pampering (HANSON, 2019). Additionally, the cultural norms within the hairdresser/client interaction already have a level of trust because of what HARNESS et al. (2020) explained as quasi-medical confidentiality and because the hairdresser acts as an informal caretaker of the client (EAYRS, 1993). [55]

For the participants, watching me do their hair was a physical visual distraction, which stopped them from overthinking their responses and allowed the conversation to flow naturally. This response reflected what NOTERMANS and KOMMERS (2013) discovered in their work on religious experience in highly emotional research, a physical distraction from intense feelings helps the interviewee to disassociate those emotions from the story. [56]

One of the positive outcomes of COVID-19 on my research was that I and my participants all wore face masks during the interview which helped add another level of anonymity, as we were not able to see the bottom half of each others' faces. There were many different levels of how this impacted my interaction with my participants. Firstly, we would not recognize each other outside the interview, giving more physical anonymity. Secondly, we could not fully see each other's physical facial reactions, both positive and negative. It was a positive as we could disguise negative emotions, but it was also a limitation for me as the researcher as I was inhibited from enacting emotional labor through visual facial empathic emotional responses. However, this may have also been a positive for the participants; if they were embarrassed, they did not have to look at my face to gauge if I was judging them. Not having to look directly at each other helped with not feeling embarrassed or ashamed when talking about sexual experiences. [57]

Many women have already experienced going to the hairdresser and talking through the mirror; this relates to GOFFMAN's (1956) theory on routine performances. GOFFMAN argued that the actor and the audience in everyday interactions understand and know how to interact during routinized performances associated with different societal roles due to interpreting the front stage behavior of the actor, the social setting, and symbolic objects. I had hoped that my participants would feel comfortable with the routine performance of going to the hairdresser and would enact the social norms associated with the routine performances between hairdressers and clients. The routine performance of the hairdresser/client relationship is that clients can physically and emotionally pamper themselves in exchange for money. Even though there was no economic exchange in the interview/hair appointments, I wanted to build upon preexisting norms within the hairdresser/client routine performance. Additionally, some of the participants at the end of the interviews said they felt guilty that they did not economically compensate me for their new hairstyles, which is a part of the routine performance of the hairdresser/client experience. The guilt may allude to how the participants felt they had gained something for free, rather than an exchange of service for information. Importantly, the participants did not feel the interview was a chore but an enjoyable and relaxing experience. [58]

The interpretations of cultural norms play profound roles in "shaping not only the relationship between teller and listener but also the power relation between the two" (HYDÉN, 2013, p.231). Therefore, I argue that flipping the script on the hierarchical relationship between researcher/participant and hairdresser/client created a more symmetrical role interpretation. I wanted the participants to experience the interview as a casual hairdressing appointment rather than a formal one. The interviews were relaxed, enjoyable, and had an easy conversational flow. It is difficult to tell if I successfully flipped the script on these power relations. However, as shown in the findings section, there was a lot of laughter during the interviews, and the participants disclosed information that they admitted they would not have shared with anyone else, disclosures that may have been deemed sinful in their eyes. [59]

Harnessing the preexisting routine performances of the hairdresser-client relations was beneficial in allowing my participants to feel comfortable disclosing information about their intimate lives. The participants' feedback showed that they enjoyed the process and felt relaxed. One of the most beneficial parts of doing hair as an interview activity was that we (client and participant-researcher and stylist) could sit in uncomfortable silence and allow the hair process to take over. Those pauses allowed time for deeper reflection and allowed memories to become more specific or solid, which led to richer data. [60]

Not many researchers will be able to employ doing hair for sensitive interviews. However, researchers can devise many different and creative methods that deploy the same principles I build upon in this paper, such as using preexisting social norms within everyday routine performances, and on which a foundation of trust has already been built. For researchers investigating sensitive topics, thinking about where they are situated in relation to their participants is essential,

as well as reflexively adjusting their research design or location to actively mitigate the power structure in researcher and participant relations. [61]

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