Don't Cut Your Own Hair;  
A Portrayal of New Barbershop Culture  

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BUZZ...BUZZ...BUZZ... next please! Who’s next in the chair? Anybody waiting? There it is. The awkwardness is that of looking around the barbershop and trying to figure out who’s up next. Was it that tall dude? Or is he just here hanging out? Or is he here waiting for his little brother? How about the guy to the right of me that just went to get a slice of pizza? He was here before me, should I wait? That’s it for you, that real “awkward moment” when you and the seven guys waiting have no idea who’s up next. But hey, don’t sweat it; you’re at the barbershop. Grab a cold one, sit down and relax. What is tedious, boring, and a sense of normality to some, is truly a way of life to others. Through observation and research, one most definitely observes the select stereotypes regarding the barbershop environment; however, in doing so one also realizes the “depth” of the people that work in the shop as well as those who patron it through the common themes of culture/community, varying demographics, sociability and tradition. The barbershop reminds individuals, that you can’t take without giving back.

People watching is one of those “things,” that we as people just have a habit of doing. While waiting on the imaginary “line,” sitting in the waiting room chair, I can’t help but browse my surroundings. The stereotypes certainly are there and exist in showing the epitome of all that is manly and loaded with testosterone. The walls are coated with team flags of all different colors, the television is showing the
local baseball game, there is an “old school” radio playing some oldies, an old man outside smoking a cigarette, and finally a fish tank that has clearly been overfed by six year olds, and desperately needs to be cleaned. It is so apparent that the stereotypes exist. You don’t even have to listen. It’s all around you. Although times have changed, and so have the stereotypes, it is undeniable that the barbershop certainly does actively demonstrate select stereotypes regarding athletics and “bathroom talk.”

Surely, most people won’t deny the stereotypes the barbershop presents, but most people also won’t describe the stereotypes that the shop has come to have broken, and embrace. The film, “The Barbershop,” demonstrates African-American culture inside the barbershop. The stereotypes are shown, filled with black men of all ages talking about the girls they hooked up with this past week and how their favorite sport teams performed recently. To the average viewer, this may be all that’s shown, however, there is much more behind it. There is a clear direct relationship between the shop, its employees and its patrons. It is a direct representation of its peoples. In this specific example, we look at black culture, which has relatively recently gone into a culture of “bling, ghetto fabulousness and aesthetic types of flashy displays”. (Mukherjee) In further analysis, she comes to the conclusion that this community comes and patrons the shop, requesting haircuts that fit this theme of flashy displays. It presents the notions to question why people ask for what they do. It has sparked further debate about the contemporary black consumerism. The haircut goes beyond the need for a trim. The barbershop provides the ability to analyze whether people are getting their selected hairstyle
pathologically, subversively, or defiantly. Even more in depth, the film analysis shows how conversations play into this theme, representing its respective people through demonstration over class and consumerism.

The people that patron their local barbershops are those of many backgrounds, but still those generally of a select demographic. The film analysis brings about the notion that those that attend the select shop, however, all film analysis actually represents individualism and the freedom to select their own hairstyle to fit a certain aesthetic look and disposition. For this example, the African-American culture is able to bring about a tight knit community, stuffed with black popular culture, commodity consumption and post-soul politics that bind individuals together to bring many different backgrounds into a barbershop demonstrated, common demographic. Barbershops, while simply being labeled as a business, truthfully are a representation of the demographics and values of the community it serves.

While barbershops are able to exemplify community and togetherness, they are also a representation of the adaption to the changing times. Todays’ era demonstrates one of acceptance, tolerance and designation of equality. In my interviews, I questioned one barbershop in particular, which is New City Barbershop. In doing so, I interviewed a staff, which I found surprisingly diverse, not necessarily fitting the quota for stereotypes of masculinity. I interviewed Mike, a middle-aged, male, Israeli barber, with a heavy accent and a strong commitment to his Judaism. I also interviewed Andy, an older, male, Italian barber, who reminds me of the older grandpa that has “been around the block once or twice,” and is full of
wisdom. Additionally, I interviewed Brian, a younger male, who presents himself in a more “hoodlum” demeanor, who is finally back after serving a brief stint in county jail, and multiple court mandated state exonerations. Finally, I interviewed Olga, a female, Russian barber who is also young, very stylish, speaks with a heavy accent and is still evidently adopting a relatively fresh culture change after moving countries.

After conducting these interviews it was very apparent that all these individuals had gotten into the business for different reasons and by different methods. Olga had gone to school for it, Brian’s grandpa taught his uncle who had taught him, Andy had been doing it all of his life, and Mike was the shop owner, who over time learned to cut hair and got his license as well. In their personal time, they all do very different things as some have families and some go out and enjoy the single life. Some have interests in cars, some have interests in fashion and others have interests in politics. Outside of the barbershop, they are all very different people, and in talking to them so are their customers. All of them had mentioned in one way or another, that their clients ranged from little toddlers, to delirious, old people. Some people like their head shaved, and some only want a small trim on top. Some people are fat, some are skinny, some are tall, and some are short. The barbershop has many different demographics, evident in their employees. All the employees came from such vastly different backgrounds, however, they all relate on commonality on respect for the daily, hard work both they and their clients do.

Although the diversity of the barbershop certainly exists, there is something about barbers and clients that is all the same. That “something” is the willingness to
create the barbershop atmosphere. This is that “smoke and joke” atmosphere, which demonstrates an environment where is there is no stressing, no “bullshit,” and no judging of other people. It’s the individualistic mecca for stress relief with the focus of masculinity and humor. If an individual wants to go outside and smoke a cigarette, or go into the back of the shop and crack open a cold one, there should be no one there to tell him otherwise. There is no censorship. You are there for you. I remember in having a conversation with my barber at home he asked me about my girlfriend and love life, and after I told him my girlfriend had broken up with me, he proceeded to announce to the shop that he was giving me his famous “fade to get laid!” (Moore). Some of the younger patrons and employees laughed while others reminded me I’m still young and that there were “plenty fish in the sea.” My problem had seemed to turn into the shop’s problems and became the main topic of discussion. It seemed as if I had an entire family there for me, ranging from cliché characters of the “crazy cousin” who would want me to get as many girls as I could, to another character of an “overprotective sister” who I compared to Olga, telling me she would “hurt that stupid chick if she sees her in here again” (Czechotz). Everyone in the shop had joined in on the conversation and was bonding. It is this sociability and non-restricted communal environment that is created in the shop, that is able to blend all different types of backgrounds and all different types of people into one demographic and unite them under a common cause, despite their differences. My experience is simply one example. Over the years, I have observed much and am well aware of a similar feeling of good conversation. Friendship and family do come
about in other conversations regarding politics, sports, and news, to anything to sex, drugs and rock and roll.

Barbers are individuals who on average make a very modest salary, with a median national average at about $28,000, despite having medieval traces to surgeons and dentists, who in today’s era, make upwards of six-figure incomes (Bristol). While history demonstrates a class distinction of original barbers separating laboring, ambitious blacks and upper elite whites, today’s changing times represent a new era of barber life, distinct of color and of class. A barber is one who works hard on both their finished product haircut and with the communicability to their customer. It is this that is the true separation from a haircut to a trip to the barbershop.

Evidently a trip to the barbershop is not simply a haircut, but all the little things it comes with. This is the commonality that doesn’t stereotype, doesn’t act judgmental, and doesn’t even have a true hierarchy or representation of class. It is a new demographic, represented in the barbershop. It is not one that represents barbershop enthusiasts or those that are super picky about their hair or style. It is just one of simple humanity. This demographic is more an ideology about people. It is what I have learned to be the true representation of community and the barbershop. It is a reminder that this business is a safe haven. It is one filled with pride, tradition and hard working individuals who do what they do because they love to serve people, interact and build personal relationships. It is a simple reminder that we are all people, no matter how much money we have, how big our house may be, how expensive a car we drive or how prestigious a career we may
aspire to. It is a reminder that at one point or another, we were all kids, who just enjoyed the free lollipops and fish feeding at the barbershop when our parent or guardian took us to get our haircut every so many weeks. Often times, we as people get caught up in the seriousness of life. One week we can't afford to go out to eat, the next month we can’t afford our rent payment, and the week after that the car you just paid to have fixed breaks again. Years go by and all we have to show for it is a little bit of money saved up in the bank, not enough to do anything real exciting with.

It reminds us that in order to gain, we must give back. Remember while money may be your motivation, nothing can quite touch somebody’s heart like good conversation and friendship. I believe barbers should really be given a big “thank you,” for adding some humility into both my life and the lives of many. People worldwide have varying demographics, socioeconomic backgrounds, skin colors and all the above, however, the barbershop reminds us that at the end of the day, we are all simply people, under one planet who simply need their haircut. This is both a literal haircut and a metaphorical haircut that represent friendship, lasting relationship, and humility. Whether black, brown, white, rich, poor, tall or short we all need to remember that before any of that extra nonsense, we are all human beings first. I believe a little bit of the barbershop atmosphere in all of us would be a great reminder to the world to appreciate those important people in your life, and forget about the materials you don’t have. Remind yourself, that just like the barbershop, there is a business and a haircut that have to be accounted for, but don’t
ever forget that more important than the haircut and the business itself, is the people that “cut your hair,” both inside and outside of the barbershop.

Works Cited


Goldstein, Mike. Personal Interview. 26 March. 2013.

