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'Very unsure of what's to come': Salon worker experiences of COVID-19 in Australia during 2020

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journals.sagepub.com/home/csi**Hannah McCann** 

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Abstract

During Australia's first nationwide lockdown due to COVID-19 in 2020, hairdressers and barbers were allowed to remain operating while beauty salons and similar businesses were ordered to shut. This article offers some preliminary insights into the impact of the pandemic on salon workers during the period, in particular the additional emotional labour required. Drawing on a survey of salon workers based in Australia ($n=92$), this article considers the emotional labour involved in salon work in tandem with the impact of COVID-19 disruptions on this workforce. Results of the survey reveal the variety of emotional disclosures that salon workers generally encounter from clients and how these disclosures continued during the period, as well as the emotions experienced by workers themselves. Survey results suggest that many salon workers, who were themselves experiencing heightened levels of physical, emotional and financial vulnerability, were expected to continue their emotional roles for clients during a period of high anxiety and stress. This work suggests that future decision making ought to consider the impact on, and how best to support, all workforces who remain in operation during lockdowns, particularly emotional labourers, and not just those typically imagined as 'essential'.

Keywords

Beauty, COVID-19, emotional labour, hairdressing, salons

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Introduction

During Australia's first nationwide COVID-19 lockdown between March and May 2020, when most businesses were closed, hairdressers and barbers were allowed to remain operating (Prime Minister of Australia, 2020a). The decision to allow hairdressing salons and barbershops to remain open sat in contrast to most other lockdowns across the world, where these services were forced to close. This decision raised serious workplace health and safety concerns for hair workers around the impossibility of physical distancing, with the peak industry body Australian Hairdressing Association (AHA) calling for the Federal Government to order an industry shutdown and provide attendant financial assistance (Elmas, 2020a). No reasoning was provided by the Australian Government as to why hair and barbering services could remain open, while 'beauty and personal care services' (including beauty therapy, tanning, waxing, nail salons, tattoo parlours, spas and massage parlours) were ordered to shut (Prime Minister of Australia, 2020b). This article examines the results of a survey ($n=92$) conducted with hairdressers, barbers and beauty salon workers in Australia, and their experiences of periods of working or not being allowed to work during 2020. Consideration is given throughout this article to both hair workers (who were allowed to continue operating) and beauty workers (who were not), in order to help illuminate issues experienced across the industry, especially given that many salons offer a mix of services, of which only some were allowed to continue in lockdown. Although this article draws from a relatively small sample, these results provide some preliminary insights into the impact of the Government decisions during the beginning of the pandemic on the hair and beauty industry.

To date, analyses of work during COVID-19 have tended to focus on essential services such as health care workers (Ardebili et al., 2021; Greenberg et al., 2021; Said and El-Shafei, 2021), the shift to working from home (Molino et al., 2020; Waizenegger et al., 2020; Xiao et al., 2021), or the gendered dynamics of work and household labour during the period (Collins et al., 2021; Craig and Churchill, 2021; Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir, 2021; Zamarro and Prados, 2021). Although there has been reflection on food delivery and gig economy work (Apouey et al., 2020; Cherry and Rutschman, 2020) in general, less attention has been given to workers who might not be typically imagined as 'essential' but who have nonetheless been expected to work out of home through some lockdown periods, such as hairdressers and barbers in the first Australian lockdown.

This article addresses the gap in considering the experiences of salon workers during the period in question and highlights the complexities of being an emotional labourer in a time of crisis. This article begins with a literature review on the nature of salon work, which details current understandings of the role that salon workers can play in the lives of their clients. This is provided to help elucidate an understanding of both hair and beauty salon work that goes beyond the simple aesthetic curation of bodies, to consider the importance of emotional labour in the industry. Second, the survey methods are described. Third, this is followed by a summary of the results. As part of the results section, the article also goes into a detailed description of the themes that emerged from the single open-answer question provided to workers. Fourth, the discussion section offers an analysis of the emotional labour of salon work as it intersected with the difficulties

reported by workers in terms of clients, navigating health and safety, mental health, employment relations and economic concerns during 2020. The concluding section details the key lessons to be gleaned from the survey that may be taken into consideration in future determinations about salon workers during a pandemic.

The nature of salon work

According to the Australian Government Department of Jobs and Small Business (DJSB) Australian Jobs 2019 report, in 2018 there were 60,500 hairdressers and 33,600 beauty therapists operating in Australia, with both occupations in the ‘below average’ median earnings category (DJSB, 2019). The fact that salons were allowed to remain operating, and indeed that some customers still sought out these services, begs questions as to why and indeed whether salons ought to have remained in operation during a public health crisis. As Chief Executive of major hairdressing chain Just Cuts Denis McFadden said at the time,

Without hairdressing being on the shutdown list, it is incredibly difficult for our franchise owners to take the heartbreaking but necessary steps to stand down workers so they can access available support or call for breathing space on leases. (Quoted in Worthington, 2020)

In other words, though financial Government support was available, leaving it up to individuals to decide to close shop – rather than forcing them to – created uncertainties about what decisions would be best for their businesses.

One view expressed in response to the Government decision was that this was simply about valuing aesthetic appearances over health. As Chief Executive of the Australian Hairdressing Council (AHC) Sandy Chong commented, ‘Is vanity more important than safety? The fact is no one will die if their hair doesn’t get cut for a few weeks or months’ (quoted in Boddy, 2020). Subsequent research conducted in Australia on the impact of salon closures on clients has found that higher levels of distress about not being able to access beauty salons was positively associated with higher rating of dysmorphic concern (Pikoos et al., 2020). This would suggest that visiting salons is about keeping up appearances. However, beyond aesthetic questions there are several reasons why salons might also impact clients, and play important social role in some communities.

Prior to COVID-19, research revealed the intimate nature of the salon encounter, both physically and emotionally (Hill and Bradley, 2010; Sheane, 2011), and that as such salon workers are often trusted with sensitive client disclosures (Anderson et al., 2010; DiVietro et al., 2016). Salon workers can be a source of transformative care for vulnerable clients (Ward et al., 2016), and barbershops can be spaces of bonding where identity is negotiated and shaped in otherwise marginalised communities (Roper and Barry, 2016; Shabazz, 2016). Because the nature of the job means coming into frequent and intimate contact with diverse members of the community, hairdressers are noted as an occupation of interest for rethinking who might do public health outreach outside of the official health workforce (Royal Society for Public Health, 2015). Research shows that salon workers can act as informal helpers around medical and social issues (Cowen, 1982; Sattler and Deane, 2016; Wiesenfeld and Weis, 1979). This includes the ability to

play an active role in health promotion especially for otherwise hard-to-reach communities (Howze et al., 1992; Linnan and Ferguson, 2007; Makabe, 2020; Randolph et al., 2021; Rasmusson et al., 2018; Sadler et al., 2011; Solomon et al., 2004) and to assist in intervening around issues like family violence (McLaren et al., 2010). This research suggests a significant positive role that salon workers can often play in communities in terms of providing social support, care and health promotion.

Emotional labour in the salon

However, it is crucial to note that the role salon workers can sometimes play is underpinned by the fact that these workers perform emotional labour with their clients. Salon work involves labour that is infrequently socially valued or recognised, nor financially remunerated (Sharma and Black, 2001). As defined by Arlie Hochschild (2012: 7), emotional labour requires workers to 'induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others'. Research has consistently shown that salon work involves the management of client feelings, becoming second nature to workers who experience the effort as 'spontaneous' (Parkinson, 1991: 419). The nurturing role that workers play in managing client feelings has been noted as a key feature of both hair and beauty salons (Gimlin, 2002; Hamilton et al., 2020; Toerien and Kitzinger, 2007a, 2007b). Being able to generate positive emotions in clients through this role has been found to be a source of job satisfaction (Hill and Bradley, 2010; Sharma and Black, 2001; Sheane, 2011). However, whether emotional labour in fact constitutes deep worker alienation around their labour conditions is a matter for debate (Cohen, 2010; Hochschild, 2012). The emotional demands of salon work can lead to burnout (Page et al., 2022; Yoo et al., 2014) and are skills that are generally not trained for, with workers having to learn on the job (Garzaniti et al., 2011; McCann and Myers, 2021). In addition, the management of client emotions is simultaneous to the physicality of the salon encounter and managing bodies (Eayrs, 1993; Gimlin, 2007; Kang, 2003, 2010; Khan, 2020; Straughan, 2012). Gimlin (2007), for example, uses the term 'body work' to account for the enfoldment between the physical, social and emotional aspects of salon work.

While salon services are sometimes seen as 'trivial', recognising the emotional labour and physicality involved in salon work reveals there is more going on in the space than mere tinkering with aesthetic surfaces (Sharma and Black, 2001: 929). Furthermore, whether the emotional aspects of salon work are interpreted as part of job satisfaction or as alienated labour, we ought to consider the impact of managing client emotions on workers during the particularly stressful time of the pandemic. The positive role that salon workers may play in the lives of some clients does not negate the concerns about health and safety raised within the industry during COVID-19. The physicality of salon encounters often includes body parts such as hair, skin and nails, and a certain close physical proximity is required to conduct most services. One study, out of the Netherlands, has found that hairdressers occupy a 'close contact professional' role and that workers in this category have been more likely to test positive to COVID-19 (de Gier et al., 2020). Prior to COVID-19, research already indicated the occupational health and safety risks

of salons, including issues with hygiene practices and monitoring (Hepworth and Murtagh, 2005; Khalaf et al., 2020). Understandably, the pandemic heightens the importance of hygiene and raises issues around physical proximity for transmissibility of the virus between clients and workers.

It is also unclear whether any of the health and well-being or emotional factors about salons outlined above played into Government decision making, especially given the original directive that appointments could only go for a maximum of 30 minutes (Prime Minister of Australia, 2020b). This decision was criticised within the industry for being out of touch with the reality of appointments, and for expressing a gendered bias to barber services which often take less time (Elmas, 2020b), and was quickly reversed before any salons had to implement it. This suggests the Government was possibly driven by other concerns, perhaps not wanting to be seen to shut another industry in its entirety, or simply thought it was important for people to maintain aesthetic appearances during lockdown. Despite the opacity of the Government reasoning, the question that remains is the impact that the overall decision to keep hairdressers and barbers on the open list of businesses had on workers during the period. The survey analysed in this article digs into both the issues around the positive emotional role salons may play, the impact of emotional management of clients during a crisis, as well as the health and safety concerns felt by workers around staying open or closing their doors.

Methods

The aim of the survey was to gather reflections from both clients and workers about experiences of visiting and working in salons (or not being able to) and the nature of salon work during the COVID-19 outbreak in Australia during 2020. The survey was in three parts, the first covering demographic information, the second for clients of salons, and the third for salon workers. This article only looks specifically at demographic responses from salon workers and the section of the survey designed for workers.

The survey was designed in Qualtrics and approved via ethics committee. It was open between 27 July to 21 September, for a total period of 8 weeks. It was advertised through social media on Twitter and Facebook, including specific networks on Facebook such as local community groups and hair and beauty groups. It was also advertised through academic networks via newsletters, promoted on the project website, shared by industry groups including Hair and Beauty Australia and the Hair Stylists Australia union, and circulated via various Australian salon contacts. No remuneration was offered for participation.

Data

Survey participation was only open to people over 18 years of age and residing in Australia at the time of the survey. The intention was not to obtain a representative sample of salon clients or workers in Australia, but rather to provide some indication of client and worker experiences of visiting or not visiting/working or not working in salons during COVID-19 in 2020 through gathering client and worker responses.

Questions

The survey consisted of a set of demographic questions, a set of seven closed and two open questions for clients and a set of eight closed and one open question for salon workers. Salon workers were able to answer the client questions, but clients were not able to access the salon worker questions unless they specified experience as a salon worker. The closed questions asked of salon workers and results are detailed below. The final question in the survey was the open question for salon workers which asked, 'If you wish, please provide any other reflections that you have on being a salon worker and COVID-19'.

Analysis

Data from the closed questions from the worker portion of the survey were collated as descriptive statistics. A process of inductive coding was used for the responses to the single open question for workers. This involved reading through the responses, followed by a repeat reading and individually coding each post using NVivo. This ensured that themes emerging from the posts were not pre-imposed and were informed by the data (Kirby et al., 2021). These themes were also used to inform analysis of the responses of the salon worker respondents to the single closed question. Given indications in the open question answers that owners versus non-owners may have had different experiences during the period, a chi-square analysis was conducted for the closed question relating to worker feelings during COVID-19, to determine any significant differences between the reports from these two groups.

Results

There were 383 total responses to the survey, 92 of which were from people with some experience of working in salons. This article focuses only on the responses from salon workers. Demographic information about the salon worker respondents can be found at Table 1. In the workers section of the survey, which is the focus of this article, results of the first closed question revealed that 91% of the salon worker respondents were working in salons up until COVID-19 disruptions (stated in the survey as 22 March 2020 in Australia), and 9% stopped working in a salon before this time. Thirty-nine percent worked in salons that offered hairdressing/barbering only; 38% worked in salons that offered hairdressing/barbering and a mix of beauty services such as waxing, spray tanning, skin care and eyebrow maintenance; 17% worked in salons that offered beauty services such as waxing, spray tanning, skin care and eyebrow maintenance only; and 5% did not disclose. The respondents were also constituted by 42% owners, 35% senior stylists who were not owners, 12% apprentices/junior stylists, 5% front desk/administration staff and 5% who did not disclose.

For those who were working up until the pandemic and whose experiences of salon life changed directly as a result, the predominant feeling reported was anxiety (Table 2). Negative emotions all ranked more highly than the positive emotions, and zero workers reported feeling 'relaxed'. There were no significant differences found in the responses

Table 1. Demographics of the salon worker respondents.

All salon worker respondents	Count	%
Age		
Range	18–65	–
Average	37	–
Gender		
Cisgender woman	84	91.30
Cisgender man	7	7.61
Non-binary	0	–
Transgender	0	–
Did not disclose	1	1.09
Sexuality		
Straight	78	84.78
Other (total)	14	15.22
Queer	3	3.26
Bi/pansexual	7	7.61
Lesbian	1	1.09
Gay	2	2.17
Asexual	1	1.09
Location		
NSW	20	21.74
VIC	47	51.09
ACT	3	3.26
TAS	2	2.17
QLD	11	11.96
NT	1	1.09
WA	3	3.26
SA	4	4.35
Did not disclose	1	1.09
Location type		
Urban	57	61.96
Rural	6	6.52
Regional	28	30.43
Did not disclose	1	1.09
Place of birth		
Australia	77	83.70
Other	13	14.13
Did not disclose	2	2.07
Ethnicity		
Anglo European	82	89.13
Other	9	9.78
Did not disclose	1	1.09

between owners and non-owners, with the exception of owners being more likely to report feeling safe and in control and non-owners less likely to report feeling in control.

Table 2. Responses to 'If your experience of working in salons changed because of COVID-19, how did this make you feel? (Please select all that apply)'.

Salon worker respondents who did not stop working before COVID-19			
Feeling	<i>n</i> =84 Total % reporting	<i>n</i> =45 % of non-owners	<i>n</i> =39 % of owners
Anxious	77.38	77.78	76.92
Out of control	58.33	60.00	56.41
Frustrated	54.76	53.33	56.41
Sad	36.90	31.11	43.59
Unsafe	36.90	44.44	28.21
Disconnected	36.90	33.33	41.03
Moody	32.14	26.67	38.46
Lonely	29.76	26.67	33.33
Angry	25.00	24.44	25.64
Low self-esteem	19.05	15.56	23.08
Safe	11.90	2.22	23.08*
In control	11.90	0.00*	25.64*
Connected	8.33	6.67	10.26
Happy	7.14	2.22	12.82
Social	7.14	4.44	10.26
Relieved	7.14	0.00	15.38
High self-esteem	4.76	0.00	10.26
Other	3.57	2.22	5.13
Calm	2.38	2.22	2.56
Stable mood	1.19	0.00	2.56
Neutral/no feelings	1.19	2.22	0.00
Relaxed	0.00	0.00	0.00

*Statistically significant values for chi-square analyses based on $p=0.05$ at one degree of freedom.

Workers reported on the kinds of client disclosures encountered as a salon worker, which included general stress, marriage or relationship breakdown, mental health issues (such as anxiety, depression), traumatic experiences, feelings of loneliness or isolation, terminal illness, family or gender-based violence, struggles with social oppression (such as experiences of racism, homophobia), suicidal ideation and struggles with gender transition. Where respondents selected 'Other' prior to COVID-19, this was specified as child neglect, sexual harassment, bushfires, bereavement, job loss and home loss. Where respondents selected 'Other' after COVID-19, this was specified as 'job loss' – presumably referring to the experiences of clients losing their jobs because of the pandemic.

In the workers section of the survey, there were also 38 responses to the open question 'If you wish, please provide any other reflections that you have on being a salon worker and COVID-19'. While a small sample, this also provides insights into an array of worker experiences during the period, that is, 38 salon workers voices. The results of the thematic analysis of these responses are detailed below. Four overarching themes emerged:

the difficulty of managing clients in a pandemic; the impossibility of social distancing in a salon; economic issues and the importance of government support; and the personal toll felt as a worker.

From conspiracies to OCD: the difficulty of managing clients in a pandemic

Many of the salon worker respondents noted that managing clients while operating during the first lockdown period was more difficult than pre-pandemic times. As this respondent outlined,

Whilst choosing to stay open and work through the first COVID period, it was an incredibly anxious time trying to man[a]ge client fears around the virus, their frustrations with family members forbidding them to go out, their manic decision making – making appointments, cancelling appointments, coming in for their service only to freak out whilst in the process, along with manic moods ranging from conspiracy notions to OCD behaviours. (Owner of a hair salon)

Workers also emphasised the difficulty of having to play a particular care role for clients during the period, but not feeling particularly supported or prepared for this as workers:

Coping with highly anxious clients trying to find answers from me, their hairdresser.

So much emphasis was put on me to ‘keep them safe’, what about my safety from them! I felt as if I couldn’t refuse them in my salon but they happily cancelled/ postponed their appointments. (Owner of a hair salon)

I know we have a responsibility, not only to help our clients externally but to hold space for them when they need to vent. (Owner of a hair salon)

Workers in beauty salons who were forced to close during the first lockdown also reflected on similar experiences with clients once restrictions eased:

Clients I’ve come across are emotional due to a stressful year. Some have cried in treatment. Some disclose information on their difficult year- usually illness, family and relationship problems. I notice clients are rude. They just want their treatment, their time . . . their booking they’ve been waiting for. They don’t have time for small talk or have the energy to smile. I don’t blame them but it’s hard. I give and they take. That’s the role and it’s that simple. But some days, I struggle with emotional burnouts. (Senior spa therapist)

These comments suggest that the pandemic intensified the emotional labour required as part of salon work.

Hygiene fears: the impossibility of social distancing in a salon

Fears around the hygiene and the difficulty of social distancing in salon spaces were also noted by many of the workers. Salon work requires physical contact, and the emotional

aspects of the job mean that talking and sharing air in close proximity is the norm. The impossibility of social distancing was a significant source of stress for many who continued to work through the first lockdown. As this comment exemplifies,

I am so stressed that I am seriously thinking of closing business and changing careers as I cannot social distance in my vocation as a hairdresser. (Senior stylist in a hair salon)

Some also suggested the industry needs broader scale reform around hygiene and health and safety. As one respondent suggested,

I would like to see everyone in a personal services vocation have the opportunity to attain an 'infection control' ticket, like the RSA, White card or Blue card. (Owner of a hair salon)

Some workers also reflected on their relief at closing during the lockdown period even though they were technically allowed to remain operating, due to fears around safety:

It's too easy for people to lie about where they've been or if they've been unwell. We work so closely with clients, I wouldn't be surprised if a single hairdresser could spread it to a whole town by close contact with multiple people. I'm glad our salon closed for a brief [*sic*] period and our boss asked how we felt the whole way, keeping us in the loop. Others I know didn't and we're forced to work under extreme stress and anxiety. (Senior stylist at a hair and beauty salon)

This last comment also highlights the lack of autonomy that workers who were not owners had in deciding whether their salons stayed open or decided to shut down.

Bad bosses but safety nets: economic issues and the importance of government support

The economic pressures of working in the hair and beauty industry during the pandemic and the intersection of this with structural issues (such as whether one was an owner or not) were a key focus in many of the comments. Significantly in the Australian context, the Federal Government announced financial support would be provided for businesses impacted by the pandemic, in the form of a supplement for employees called 'JobKeeper' (Prime Minister of Australia, 2020c). To qualify for the scheme, businesses had to prove a revenue downturn of 30% due to COVID-19. This enabled businesses to keep paying their staff even if they were shut or running at a reduced capacity. JobKeeper meant that some beauty workers whose businesses were forced to close (as, unlike hair salons they were deemed inessential) could 'rest':

Its very unfortunate but I totally understand the reasons for closing during covid. In fact it was a blessing in disguise. I was extremely over worked and exhausted so made me stop for a while and rest. Financially job keeper was a godsend. (Owner of a beauty salon)

The JobKeeper payment was provided through employers to employees, at a flat rate of 1500 AUD a fortnight, a higher wage than many non-owner staff in hair and beauty

salons. This applied to staff at all levels, including casuals and apprentices who had worked at businesses for at least a year. Business owners were able to access payments if self-employed and several State and Federal cash support packages were also made available for small businesses (Simon, 2020).

However, while the majority of hair salon workers could access JobKeeper through their employers, the fact that hairdressers and barbers were not on the government 'closure' list meant that many non-owner staff continued to work during the period at the directive of owners. Many respondents who were not owners noted the pressure from their bosses to keep working. For example, as these two respondents outlined,

I know bosses are still pushing to get clients in the door. All thye [*sic*] care about is money making and I know quite a few hair salons that pressure their workers to come into work even if they are feeling sick. It's not a supportive industry. (Front desk worker at a hair and beauty salon)

Pressure from owners to come and work even though I didn't feel safe and I was provided with Job Keeper. (Junior stylist at a hair salon)

As these comments reflect and as media also reported at the time, there were tensions between some owners and non-owners, with some staff wanting to stay home due to fears about the virus but being ordered to continue working (Karp and Butler, 2020). As AHC Chief Executive Chong noted at the time, the Government left it up to hair salons to decide whether to shut or not, which meant that 'some salon owners [were] scared to voluntarily close because they would need to stand down or sack staff' (Ryan and Wylie, 2020). Such comments reflect that leaving businesses to decide whether to shut led to uncertainty in the sector, and confusion over how and whether the financial supports provided could help if businesses decided to close of their own volition. It seems that even though financial supports were in place, some owners perhaps still felt that closing their businesses while not technically ordered to would be financially risky and have longer term negative consequences. This created a conflict between some hair salon owners and workers.

Extreme pressure: the emotional toll felt as a worker

Finally, many of the respondents noted the personal emotional toll that the pandemic was taking on them, in terms of mental health and enjoyment of work. These comments reflect a mix of stresses experienced, from having to manage clients, working during the pandemic given the risks, to the stress of the financial pressures of shutting shop by choice or government decree. For some, this stress was extremely severe and related to having to work during the period, as one respondent noted:

I feel anxious and often have panic attacks it has made me go into a horrible mental health state working in this pandemic and I have contemplated ending my life because of the stress. (Junior stylist at a hair salon)

Experiences were also highly mixed depending on individual circumstances, yet the common experience was feeling the personal toll as a worker. One respondent simply

commented, 'Very unsure of what's to come'. Other respondents noted the negative impact of no longer feeling enjoyment at work, and the impact of being in isolation from other workers. These comments reflect competing stresses at play – the financial stress of what it may mean to close business, not have the routine of a job, and the stress of loss of human contact, versus the stress of working during a risky time:

Work isn't as joyful as it was before. Everyone is under a lot of stress and frustrated with the world. (Senior stylist at a hair and beauty salon)

Torn between wanting the salon to stay open to have a job and routine And [*sic*] purpose during the pandemic, but knowing that staying open was the wrong thing to do for the community. And felt very judged for doing so. (Senior stylist at a hair and beauty salon)

I was comfortable not working/needng to close the salon due to the pandemic to help stop the spread, however the isolation has been extremely hard to deal with as this work is very social. I feel that no amount of emails or social media connections will live up to the experiences of seeing friendly faces and helping and meeting new people every day in the salon. (Owner of a beauty salon)

The second comment highlights the emotional load of having to decide whether to stay open. Furthermore, as the final comment reflects, although beauty services were not allowed to remain operating to see clients face to face, many owners in the industry continued to work without seeing clients, by managing communications, administration and other elements of their businesses. Overall, these comments suggest that the period was one that was highly anxiety-inducing and uneasy for many workers due to a range of intersecting factors.

Discussion

The survey responses give us some indication that being a salon worker during COVID-19 in 2020 in Australia was largely a time of high anxiety. Of the 92 salon worker respondents, 16 noted that their salons offered a *mix* of hair and beauty services. This suggests the Government decision to shut down one part of the industry (beauty) and not the other (hair) reflects a misunderstanding of the mixed composition of many salons in the industry. The labour of managing client emotions, already a key aspect of salon work, became intensified during the period for those businesses still open, and safety, economic concerns and personal mental health problems were issues workers had to negotiate.

Similarly to findings on 'essential' workers, such as those in health care, which found intensified negative feelings as a result of working during the pandemic (Ardebili et al., 2021), the open question on worker feelings overwhelming suggests that the experience of the pandemic in 2020 for most salon workers was anxiety and other negative emotions. Although some workers expressed getting time to slow down while their businesses shut, no one identified as feeling 'relaxed' in the period. In general, the results suggest there was not a significant difference in emotional experiences between non-owners and owners. However, that owners were more likely to report feeling safe and in control compared with non-owners, and that non-owners were less likely to report

feeling in control, suggests that there was some intersection here between employment relations/power in one's place of work and one's experience of the pandemic during the period in question. According to these results, owners felt relatively safer and more in control than non-owners during this period, with non-owners still at the behest of their employers.

The kinds of disclosures encountered by salon workers prior to COVID-19 provide startling insight into the array of difficult social issues discussed by clients, and how common it is to hear from clients about sensitive topics. These findings support previous research that suggests workers are likely to encounter disclosures such as around mental health (Anderson et al., 2010) and family violence (DiVietro et al., 2016) and extends upon this to show the wider array of issues workers are confronted with (see also Page et al., 2022). These findings suggest that workers play a role as a sounding board for some clients around very sensitive and difficult life issues. These findings align with previous work which has highlighted the nurturing role that salon workers must play (Toerien and Kitzinger, 2007a): as one respondent put it, to 'hold space' for clients. Looking at this in combination with the feelings felt by workers themselves during the period (Table 2) and responses to the open-answer question suggests that not only did workers continue to have to perform emotional labour in the period, they had to continue to do so during an incredibly taxing time. Unlike previous literature that has found emotional labour is tied up with job satisfaction (Hill and Bradley, 2010; Sharma and Black, 2001; Sheane, 2011), this was not evident in the survey responses, with an emphasis instead on 'burnout'. These reflections suggest an intensification of emotional labour in the context, to a point of unpleasantness, that 'Work isn't as joyful as it was before'.

These findings also show that this emotional labour was required within a pandemic context where fears around the physical proximity necessitated by the job – and consequent viral contagion risks – were heightened. As the theme around the impossibility of social distancing in a salon reveals, workers in the hair and beauty industry have felt particularly vulnerable during COVID-19 given the physicality of their work. Along these lines, we might return here to salon work as 'body work' (Gimlin, 2007) to help make sense of fears reported by workers. As Twigg et al. (2011) note, there is a certain vulnerability to body work, which is necessarily entangled with emotional labour, given the emotional demands of working with bodies in a caring capacity. Thinking about the kinds of emotional disclosures encountered by the salon workers as noted, in combination with their own feelings during the period (Table 2) and the fears expressed by workers about hygiene and proximity to bodies in the open-answer question, we can see this vulnerability of body work at play.

As the theme around the economic issues also highlighted, providing material supports during the pandemic has been key to people's sense of security and well-being. Although a majority of the workers surveyed held nominally secure full-time positions in salons prior to COVID-19, the conditions of the industry are such that salon workers might be considered a precarious workforce. Given the low wages and low wage ceiling for non-owners, weak occupational health and safety regulation, and very low union density, the hair and beauty salon workforce in Australia meets much of the criteria for labour-related insecurity described by Guy Standing (2011) on the precariat. As the results also suggest, employment relations feed into the precarity experienced by many

workers who are non-owners and do not have as much choice and power, particularly in a circumstance like a pandemic.

Conclusion

This study has provided some preliminary insights into the experiences of hair and beauty workers during the COVID-19 crisis in 2020 in Australia. Overall, the findings suggest that for this sample of workers, many had high anxiety, were filled with economic concerns, had fears about the virus and had to deal with personal mental health impacts, all the while negotiating their duties as emotional labourers.

Limitations of this study include the very small pool of respondents relative to the total number of hair and beauty workers in Australia. Furthermore, although there were responses from every state and territory, the data appears skewed towards Victoria and urban centres. There was also a bias towards Australian born (84%) and Anglo European (89%) respondents. In contrast, the 2016 Australian Census reveals that 73% of hairdressers and 57% of beauty therapists were born in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2016). This suggests some limitations with these data in terms of whose experiences were captured. For example, this may mean that the specificity of some rural/regional worker and migrant worker experiences were occluded. It is possible that experiences of the pandemic may have differed geographically in Australia despite the first lockdown being nationwide. Furthermore, JobKeeper or other supports were difficult to access for non-permanent residents. These aspects are largely missing from the data because of the limit of the sample. Future studies may wish to be more targeted to capture a broader range of stories, particularly via interviews, to glean more detail. Future research may also seek to garner more 'expert' views directly from peak bodies in the industry to provide another dimension to understanding how the pandemic has affected/is affecting hair and beauty workers broadly.

Despite these limitations, the survey results offer preliminary insights into hair and beauty worker experiences in Australia during 2020, and the multiple factors that ought to be considered in subsequent decisions around lockdowns. The findings have several implications. Financial support was noted as key to well-being by many respondents, and this should be a key consideration if future lockdowns are required. The results also indicate that ability to provide mental health supports for workers in businesses who are forced to remain open should also be a key consideration, especially the toll on those whose work is already constituted by emotional labour. The fact that many workers surveyed felt physically unsafe working in salons given the bodily nature of their job is also important to consider when designating future 'essential' work. The intersection of employment relations, and the relative power of owners versus non-owners in such situations, might also be considered. Leaving it up to business owners to decide to shut ought to be avoided given the tensions and stresses that this appears to cause for employees in particular.

Notably, there have been no further nationwide lockdowns in Australia since March 2020, but smaller state-based lockdowns have seen salons shut. These latter lockdowns have not always come with financial support from the Government, nor necessarily with consideration of the other factors raised throughout this article around balancing the role

that salon workers play in the lives of their clients with the risks to workers themselves in terms of physical and mental health issues. It is hoped that the findings in this article will contribute to elevating the conversation around the role that hair and beauty workers play for some clients as emotional labourers and the intersecting issues faced by this workforce from questions of the bodily to employment relations especially during the pandemic. What remains to be seen is how understanding these dynamics might factor into future government decisions about this workforce in precarious times.

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Résumé

Lors du premier confinement dû au Covid-19 décrété à l'échelle nationale en Australie en 2020, les coiffeurs et barbiers ont été autorisés à rester en activité alors que les salons de beauté et autres commerces similaires ont reçu l'ordre de fermer. Cet article offre des pistes de réflexion sur l'impact de la pandémie sur les travailleurs des salons de beauté pendant cette période, en particulier le travail émotionnel supplémentaire requis. Sur la base d'une enquête menée auprès de travailleurs de salons de beauté situés en Australie (n=92), cet article examine le travail émotionnel qu'implique le travail en salon, ainsi que l'impact des perturbations liées au Covid-19 sur ces travailleurs. Les résultats de l'enquête révèlent la variété des révélations émotionnelles que les travailleurs des salons de beauté reçoivent habituellement des clients et comment ces révélations se sont poursuivies pendant cette période, ainsi que les émotions ressenties par les travailleurs eux-mêmes. Il ressort ainsi que de nombreux travailleurs des salons de beauté, qui étaient à ce moment-là eux-mêmes confrontés à des niveaux élevés de vulnérabilité physique, émotionnelle et financière, devaient continuer à jouer leur rôle émotionnel auprès des clients pendant cette période d'anxiété et de stress élevés. Ce travail tend à indiquer que les décisions futures devraient prendre en compte l'impact sur tous les travailleurs qui restent en activité pendant les confinements – et la meilleure façon de les soutenir –, en particulier les travailleurs émotionnels, et pas seulement ceux qui sont généralement décrits comme « essentiels ».

Mots-clés

beauté, coiffure, Covid-19, salons de beauté, travail émotionnel

Resumen

Durante el primer confinamiento nacional en Australia debido a la COVID-19 en 2020, se permitió que los peluqueros y barberos siguieran funcionando mientras se ordenaba el cierre de los salones de belleza y negocios similares. Este artículo ofrece algunas aportaciones preliminares sobre el impacto de la pandemia en los trabajadores de salones de belleza durante este período, en particular, sobre el trabajo emocional adicional requerido. A partir de una encuesta a trabajadores de salones de belleza localizados en Australia (n=92), este artículo considera el trabajo emocional involucrado en el trabajo del salón de belleza junto con el impacto de las interrupciones provocadas por la COVID-19 en este grupo de trabajadores. Los resultados de la encuesta revelan la

variedad de las revelaciones emocionales que los trabajadores del salón generalmente reciben de los clientes y cómo estas revelaciones continuaron durante este período, así como las emociones experimentadas por los propios trabajadores. Los resultados de la encuesta sugieren que se esperaba que muchos trabajadores de salones de belleza, que experimentaban niveles elevados de vulnerabilidad física, emocional y financiera, continuaran con sus roles emocionales hacia los clientes durante un período de alta ansiedad y estrés. Este artículo sugiere que la futura toma de decisiones debería considerar el impacto sobre todos los trabajadores que permanecen activos durante los confinamientos (y la mejor forma de apoyarlos), en particular los trabajadores emocionales, y no solo aquellos en los que normalmente se piensa como 'esenciales'.

Palabras clave

belleza, COVID-19, peluquería, salones de belleza, trabajo emocional