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Who defines proper work? Stigma, service rules, and occupational visibility among women foot-massage technicians

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Abstract. Drawing on observations, semi-structured interviews, naturally occurring conversations, and workplace documents from a commercial foot-massage salon, this article examines how women technicians negotiate the status of their work across service encounters, organizational rules, and family relationships. A customer's remark that foot-washing girls are easy to fool shows how a derogatory label can enter a paid interaction while service continues. At the salon, glass panels, lighting, supervisory rounds, and rules on bodily proximity give the management's claim to proper service a visible and enforceable form. Technicians respond to disparagement by leaving remarks unanswered, rejecting requests outside the service menu, emphasizing skilled and honest earnings, and controlling who learns about their occupation. These responses depend on income, customer relations, managerial support, and family care. Claims to proper work can protect occupational dignity while reproducing moral distinctions between services and workers. I develop boundary communication as an account of how occupational classifications move between speech, material arrangements, bodily conduct, and selective disclosure. The case shows that organizational visibility and workers' control over visibility can pull in different directions, and that the costs of maintaining a respectable occupational identity are unevenly distributed.

Keywords: occupational stigma, boundary communication, foot-massage work, gendered service labor, selective visibility

1. Introduction

During a foot-massage session, a customer said "洗脚妹好骗" (roughly, "foot-washing girls are easy to fool"). Two women technicians present did not answer and continued the service. The remark paired a diminutive occupational label with an assertion that the workers could be deceived. Their silence left the encounter intact and the insult publicly unanswered. Because the session was still in progress, the scene also raises a question about the conditions under which a worker can challenge a paying customer. Their reasons for remaining silent are absent from the observed exchange.

Interviewees said that customers ordinarily called them "technicians" (技师). Some workers were cautious about naming their occupation at school meetings, on WeChat Moments, or in conversations involving their

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children. The salon, meanwhile, required lighting in service rooms, used transparent panels and supervisory rounds, and prohibited technicians from lying down with customers. Labels in conversation, disclosures at home, and workplace rules all shaped what this work could be taken to mean. They also assigned different people responsibility for sustaining its professional identity.

This article asks how occupational disparagement acquires force in everyday exchanges; how a salon turns its claim to proper service into rules that technicians must interpret and enact; and how workers manage occupational information as it moves among customers, relatives, and digital audiences. These questions link the immediate politics of interaction to the organizational and domestic conditions under which a service occupation becomes recognizable.

Foot-massage work combines manual technique, bodily contact, conversation, appearance management, and customer retention. Studies of beauty services show how class, gender, and migration shape encounters involving touch and bodily expertise [1, 2]. In this salon, the term "proper" (正规) carried several meanings. Managers invoked it to describe the service menu and protect the business's reputation. Technicians used it when drawing limits around acceptable requests. Family members could use it to judge whether the work was respectable. I treat "proper" as a classification used by participants; it does not establish legal compliance. A business's self-description, the judgments of its audiences, and its legal status are separate matters.

The analysis connects occupational labels, shop-floor rules, and the circulation of information about work. Research on dirty work explains how workers construct a positive occupational identity [3]; boundary scholarship shows how categories can organize both esteem and access to resources [4]. Here, a protective rule might help a technician refuse an unwelcome request while also giving managers greater authority over her posture, schedule, or manner. Income and learned skill can support a worker's decisions, though the ability to use those resources depends on the costs of refusing customers, resting, and arranging care. Following the distinction between resources, agency, and achievements [5], I examine decisions and constraints alongside earnings. I use boundary communication to trace how an occupational category is expressed in speech, enacted through rules, and made selectively visible beyond the workplace.

2. Occupational stigma, service labor, and boundaries

2.1. Stigma and its communication

Stigma develops in relationships between attributed and expected identities. A worker whose occupation is unknown may control its disclosure; once it is known, she must manage the judgments attached to it [6]. Labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination operate together under conditions of power [7]. The remark about foot-washing girls connected an occupational label to a claim about the workers' vulnerability. The customer occupied a paying position, making any reply consequential for an ongoing service. Its immediate effect lay in the distribution of speaking positions within a continuing service.

Dirty-work research distinguishes physical, social, and moral taints and describes how workers recast the meaning of their labor [3]. Statements such as we earn a living through skill or we do not steal can restore value to effort, expertise, and paid work. Positive identification may also coexist with selective comparisons that preserve an occupational hierarchy [8]. For foot-massage technicians, physical contact, a low-status service relationship, and sexualized assumptions are related sources of judgment. Which source matters, and whom workers compare themselves with when answering it, varies by encounter.

Stigma management communication theory organizes responses according to whether speakers accept a stigma as applicable to themselves and whether they contest the public meaning of the stigma. The available strategies include acceptance, avoidance, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, denial, and ignoring

or displaying the marked identity [9]. These distinctions help separate vague descriptions of an occupation from arguments about the value of labor. The meaning of a worker's silence depends on the encounter and her subsequent account. In the service encounter, continuing to work prevented an open dispute; avoidance of conflict, limited room to answer, and unwillingness to engage remain different possible interpretations. Interview accounts that connect earnings to personal equality provide more direct evidence of the meanings workers attach to such encounters.

Disclosure also has an audience and a route of circulation. A vague job description at a school meeting, a restricted WeChat audience, and a refusal to be filmed limit different kinds of exposure. Everyday practices divide work from home while bringing aspects of each across that divide [10]. Digital networks can bring customers, relatives, and other parents into the audience for the same disclosure, a problem described as context collapse [11]. The extent to which a technician anticipates that audience has to be read from her account and actions in context.

2.2. Organizational and symbolic boundaries

Symbolic boundaries classify people and practices; social boundaries concern patterned differences in resources and opportunities [4]. Technician versus foot-washing girl, proper versus improper, and skilled massage versus borderline service make different kinds of distinctions. Some designate expertise, others moral standing or service content. The analysis asks whether those descriptions connect to prices, commissions, requested bookings, respect, or support when refusing a customer. The allocation of work and earnings provides a separate test of how far such distinctions reach.

At the salon, boundary work also had a material form. Glass panels, lighting, and supervisory rounds made a service room observable. Uniforms and procedures set expectations for how technicians should appear and move. Organizational legitimacy depends in part on whether relevant audiences find an organization's conduct appropriate [12]. The management's claim to proper service was therefore enacted through arrangements that customers could see and managers could enforce. Those same arrangements subjected workers' time and bodies to inspection. Boundary communication refers here to the linked process through which a classification is articulated, built into rules, and maintained or contested before different audiences.

2.3. Emotion, appearance, and family care

Feeling rules govern how people are expected to experience and express emotion; the commercialization of those expectations makes emotional display part of paid service [13, 14]. Technicians judge whether a customer wants conversation, adjust their tone, and handle displeasure or inappropriate requests while the booking is underway. These demands intersect with the prospect of a requested return booking and with commission income. The analysis follows how organizations value these displays and how commissions shape workers' responses to offense.

Aesthetic-labor research examines how service firms recruit and organize bodily appearance as part of what they sell [15, 16]. Makeup, hair, clothing, and bearing were regulated at this salon. Managers' requirements, customers' stated preferences, and workers' accounts of requested bookings capture different parts of this process. Appearance can matter alongside technique, tenure, and customer relationships. Work on sexualized service labor further helps explain how appearance, proximity, and intimacy can acquire sexual meanings [17]. Sexualization here names the meanings attributed to appearance, proximity, and talk; project titles identify service categories.

Paid work also depends on time made available through care. Relatives watching children and partners sharing household tasks enabled some technicians to work evening or continuous shifts. Social reproduction

scholarship identifies the care and maintenance of life on which paid economies rely [18]. An increase in earnings tells us little about autonomy unless we know whether a worker can decide how to spend them, refuse a booking, and arrange her time [5]. The salon and household together set the conditions of occupational choice.

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Site and participants

The field site was a relatively large commercial foot-massage salon with reception and service rooms, a technicians' rest area, a staff canteen, and shared accommodation. Its menu distinguished standard foot massage, gold-tier and star-tier services, and SPA. A digital scheduling system allocated sessions and recorded requested bookings. The site brought project differentiation, management, and workers' daily lives into the same setting. The salon described itself as operating properly; the analysis examines this description and its associated rules. Project names are retained as workplace categories, while technique, duration, bodily contact, and presentation are examined separately.

Participants included experienced gold-tier technicians, locally married technicians, younger migrant workers including an ethnic-minority technician, a manager, and an owner. Age, education, marital and parental status, and migration history provided points of comparison; these attributes overlapped in individual lives. Managers emphasized reputation, business operation, and risk. Technicians more often connected the salon's rules to bodily safety, earnings, and family schedules. The accounts of experienced workers were compared with those of younger and less forthcoming technicians.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

The materials comprise fieldnotes from observation, semi-structured interviews and follow-up conversations, naturally occurring talk during service, and posted workplace rules and service materials. The researcher entered the salon as a paying customer and experienced its service. Observation was concentrated between approximately 11:30 a.m. and 5:00 p.m.; accounts of evening peaks and night shifts come chiefly from interviewees. Interviews were sometimes interrupted by scheduling alerts, arriving customers, group-purchase transactions, or managerial demands. Some conversations therefore took place over several sessions. The interruptions also showed how the allocation of paid time entered the research encounter. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, and identifying details of people and the salon are anonymized. Interview excerpts were translated from Chinese for this article, with source terms retained where their wording matters. Refusals of filming or further disclosure set limits on what the researcher could record and circulate.

The analysis combines thematic coding with attention to the sequence and audience of particular interactions [19]. Initial codes covered occupational labels, spatial rules, project categories, responses to disparagement, disclosure, work ethics, and physical strain. Recurrent accounts were compared with observed events and available service or posted materials. For instance, a fine could appear as a quality-control measure in a manager's account and as a possible cost of reporting a customer problem in a technician's. Silences, pauses, interrupted interviews, and refusals of recording were considered in their immediate settings. Field observation, a participant's own experience, and hearsay about the wider industry were distinguished during analysis.

The case traces practices in one salon. Manager-assisted access may have favored workers held in higher regard; the paid-service relationship may have encouraged polite exchanges. Daytime observation and fuller accounts from senior technicians provide less direct access to evening interactions and to the experiences of

workers who avoided in-depth conversation or recording. Claims concerning age, ethnicity, and migration are tied to the events described by participants rather than generalized to demographic groups.

4. Findings

4.1. Names and the distribution of occupational respect

In the customer's remark, "foot-washing" reduced a varied service to a single menial act, while "girls" placed adult women in a familiar and subordinate position. The addition of "easy to fool" made the positioning explicit. The two technicians completed the booking without replying. Other interviewees said that "technician" was the usual customer term, and the salon used titles such as "gold-tier wellness practitioner" and "gold-tier technician" to stress skill and health-related service. "Foot-washer," when used to dismiss the occupation, did different social work. Its meaning depended on speaker, tone, and relationship, as the particular insult illustrates. Professional names used in the salon and degrading names used by customers could thus describe the same labor while assigning it different value.

Some experienced technicians recalled being bothered by foot-washer early in their careers and becoming more comfortable responding to it as their earnings grew and their families accepted their work. Their accounts link occupational self-evaluation to material and relational resources. Regular income provided an account of the work's worth; family acceptance reduced the need to justify it among relatives. The worker's own title, the salon's advertising, a customer's address, and a family member's description could still differ. Experience did not settle the public meaning of the occupation, although it changed the resources available for answering a slight.

4.2. Making proper service visible and enforceable

The salon's glass panels, lit service rooms, prohibition on sharing a bed or blanket with a customer, and supervisory rounds made its stated service limits observable. Technicians reported that they could decline requests outside the menu, ask for a different assignment, call a supervisor, and seek police assistance when necessary. These procedures gave workers a possible route of support, although their availability in practice depended on the response they received after reporting a problem. The arrangement simultaneously displayed the salon's claim to proper service and equipped management to inspect what happened in a room.

Rules also reached the technician's body and time. Corridor posture, greetings, yielding to customers, eating customers' food, talk during a booking, and steps in the service were subject to direction. A managerial formulation that the customer had paid for your time made the service interval available for evaluation. Scheduling records, requested bookings, customer praise, and penalties for tardiness or late entry translated aspects of the encounter into administrative measures. The internal scheduling system organized assignments; customer-facing ratings recorded another kind of judgment. Workers' time and manner were exposed to both forms of evaluation.

Managers described fines and conduct rules in terms of service quality and staff protection. Some technicians worried that reporting a customer's behavior would lead others to see them as troublesome. A formal permission to report and a willingness to use it therefore occupied different places in everyday management. The practical meaning of a protective rule depended on who heard a complaint, how it was handled, and whether the worker incurred a cost. When reporting itself threatened a technician's standing, she might manage the encounter without invoking the stated procedure.

4.3. Service categories, appearance, and moral distinctions

Standard foot massage, gold-tier and star-tier services, and SPA differed in price, length, technique, clothing, and forms of bodily proximity. One interviewee described gold-tier work as pressing in earnest, emphasizing sustained physical effort. Other accounts described different conversational and distance expectations for star-tier service. Project rank, technical competence, and sexualized interpretation did not follow one scale. A softer tone or closer bodily distance might acquire an ambiguous meaning in an encounter, while a menu label alone said little about the conduct of an individual session. The salon's advertised limits and its differentiated products had to be negotiated together.

Uniforms made some of the distinctions visible. Star-tier technicians wore qipao; gold-tier and standard-service technicians wore short skirts with safety shorts. Technicians bore the clothing expense. Interviewees linked age, body shape, makeup, and conversational style to the likelihood of being specifically requested, while also describing the importance of technique and long-standing customers. Appearance requirements and bookings thus intersected with accumulated skill and customer relations. When a technician set skilled, proper work against "borderline" services (擦边), she added a moral hierarchy to the menu. That comparison could support her own claim to respect while casting doubt on other workers. Its material force depended on bookings, pay, and the support attached to each project.

4.4. Silence, refusal, and accounts of honest work

Workers answered disparagement in different ways. The two technicians did not engage with the customer's insult while the service and a social encounter with other customers continued. Experienced technicians described answering an inappropriate request by saying "we do not offer that service" and allowing the customer to leave. That reply attached an individual refusal to the salon's stated menu. Interviewees also said, "I earn my own money; what does it have to do with anyone else?" and "Once we are outside this door, nobody knows anyone; we are all equal." Such statements tied occupational value to wages and equal standing. "We neither steal nor rob" and "we earn money with skill, time, and physical strength" made labor effort itself a source of moral authority. Silence, refusal, and accounts of honest work addressed different objects: the immediate conversation, the scope of a booking, and the evaluation of the occupation.

Participants differed in their account of the industry's reputation. Some attributed prejudice to outsiders' unfamiliarity with proper salons. Others acknowledged businesses that advertised one thing and sold another, then distinguished their own work. The first account contested the generalization; the second narrowed its application. Responding to offense also required managing the emotional and financial stakes of the encounter. A technician had to decide when to argue, redirect a conversation, or end a customer relationship. Some senior, locally married workers spoke more readily about confronting a judgment, while some younger migrants were more cautious. Their skills, customer networks, and family support help explain the difference more precisely than age or place of origin by itself.

4.5. Selective visibility across home, WeChat, and the camera

Occupation was disclosed differently to different audiences. Some experienced workers could talk about their jobs among adult acquaintances but described themselves at school meetings or to other parents as "working nearby," "self-employed," or "doing photography-related work". The wish to present a child well in front of other parents made occupational disclosure part of mothering. Personal WeChat accounts also carried appointments and customer contact into hours outside the salon. Restricting Moments audiences or blocking customers kept aspects of family life from those work contacts. Some workers stopped pursuing contact with customers who became intrusive or whom they had already removed.

Young migrant technicians' refusals to be filmed or to give longer interviews placed limits on the researcher's access. Participants mentioned concerns connected with expression, relatives, romantic relationships, and the possible spread of images; the significance of a particular refusal depended on what that person said and the circumstances of the request. A refusal prevented a particular recording and its subsequent circulation. By comparison, a restricted WeChat audience controlled access to an existing channel of information. Public customer ratings presented a different audience whose evaluations workers could control less directly. Visibility, in these cases, involved decisions about the audience, the medium, and the persistence of a record.

4.6. Skill, earnings, and the cost of keeping an occupation respectable

Interviewees repeatedly described their earnings as "clean money" and said they had done nothing shameful. Senior technicians spoke about plantar reflex zones, pressure points, strength, and training when explaining what the work required. They learned through shop training, self-study, and adjustments made during repeated encounters. Such accounts connected expertise to knowledge, bodily judgment, and practice. Earnings paid for elders' care, children's education, and health or social-insurance costs. Some participants linked disposable income to a greater say within the family; photography, food preparation, financial planning, and advice to save money also figured in plans for the future. The language of clean earnings supported self-respect while assigning a lower moral standing to income coded as unclean. Family recognition of women's paid work was also tied to their performance of care.

Repeated manual pressure brought physical costs. Participants described calluses, joint discomfort, and pain at night; some used terms such as tenosynovitis for their symptoms. They adjusted pressure in response to customers over successive sessions. Conversation, tone, and sensitivity to customer preferences could affect requested bookings, favorable ratings, or sales of prepaid cards, according to interviewees. Under a commission arrangement, resting or taking fewer bookings could reduce income. Customer flow further shaped the worker's ability to plan time away from the salon. For some mothers, night work reduced time with children and depended on childcare from a mother-in-law or partner. Paid sessions, bodily recovery, and family care therefore competed for the same hours. Differences between the staff canteen and meals served to customers also made visible the contrast between the comfort sold by the salon and the daily provisions on which workers relied.

5. Discussion

5.1. Legitimacy in practice and the cost of its enforcement

The salon's account of proper service gained practical form in its spatial design, rules, and technicians' conduct. Lighting and glass made interactions observable; supervisory rounds and rules against lying beside customers turned announced limits into inspection routines. These arrangements made the business's preferred description more credible to particular audiences [12]. They also raised questions about whose behavior was inspected. Managers emphasized reputation and operational risk; technicians asked whether help would be available when they refused a customer. A worker's concern about being seen as troublesome demonstrates how a rule framed as protection can be difficult to invoke. Positive occupational identity [3] thus depended on organizational action and on who bore the costs of maintaining it.

5.2. How stigma crosses settings

Disparagement operated through a direct label, joking remarks, questions, and insinuations about the nature of the work. Its force was shaped by the customer-technician relationship and by the possibility that a dispute would affect a booking or a manager's evaluation [7]. At home, some technicians anticipated judgments that might touch their children or relatives and limited the information they gave to other parents. The anticipation of such harm and an event in which it actually occurred are analytically distinct. Earlier stigma research addresses both the control of discrediting information and the exposure of people associated with a stigmatized person [6]. The accounts here specify how a worker's position as a mother entered her decisions about occupational disclosure.

5.3. Boundary communication across speech, space, and media

Boundary communication names a sequence visible across the case: a classification is proposed in talk, encoded in service rules, and carried into decisions about disclosure. Stigma management theory distinguishes ways of responding to a devalued identity [9], while boundary research asks how distinctions connect with social relations and opportunities [4]. The combined view shows how the same occupational category moves from a customer's words to organizational procedures and to family or digital audiences. The links matter because no single setting contains the whole work of making an occupation recognizable.

Labels framed the work as either technical service or low-status bodily labor. Clothing, light, and supervisory rounds embodied the salon's approved presentation; fines and scheduling helped enforce it. Technicians adjusted descriptions of their jobs as they entered family gatherings or WeChat networks. An organization could require the professional identity to be displayed in a service room while a worker restricted its appearance before other parents. Silence in one encounter left one remark without an answer; refusing a camera prevented one image from being produced. Each action operated at a different point in the circulation of occupational meaning.

This account directs attention to implementation: what conduct a category permits, who can inspect a room, who receives information, and what happens when a worker invokes a rule. Evidence of a disparaging description establishes a symbolic boundary; a claim about unequal earnings requires a link to allocation or opportunity. Digital platforms can collapse audiences that workers otherwise keep apart [11], making disclosure a continuing task. The salon's public presentation and technicians' selective visibility can therefore conflict even as both respond to the same occupational stigma.

5.4. Respectability and the reproduction of stigma

"We are proper" could defend a technician's professional status and authorize a refusal. Statements such as "we rely on technique, not our bodies" and "we are not the women downstairs" achieved respect by drawing a demeaning comparison. Identity research describes how positive self-definitions can coexist with occupational ranking [8], and work on stigmatized labor identifies the exclusionary force of claims to respectable work [20]. In this salon, pressure from sexualized assumptions, earnings, and family judgment made those distinctions useful to speakers. The same words could place other women workers beneath them.

Once skill and borderline service become a moral opposition, differences in price, appearance, customer expectation, and bodily technique can be flattened into a ladder of respectability. A worker gains a favorable position while retaining the measure by which another worker is judged. The result is a redistribution of occupational stigma within the service setting. How the salon categorizes projects and deals with customer requests can reinforce or weaken that comparison. The distinction acquired material force where it informed assignment, earnings, or the handling of customer complaints.

5.5. Income, care, and unequal capacity to choose

Re-entering paid work, learning techniques, accumulating customers, and moving between positions gave technicians ways to alter their circumstances. Income supported family spending and personal savings; skill and customer relationships could strengthen bargaining capacity. Resources became agency when workers could use them to decide whether to rest, refuse a demand, or arrange family life [5]. A commission system made some of those decisions financially costly. Physical strain, night work, and care responsibilities could erode the room for choice that earnings had created.

Senior technicians' more assured responses can be understood in relation to practiced technique, a customer base, and family acceptance. Guarded disclosure or avoidance of conflict could also protect existing relationships and earnings. Their effects depended on the resources and relationships each worker was preserving. Gendered organizations can build expectations of continuous availability into seemingly general job requirements [21]. For workers responsible for care, the arrangement of a shift and the availability of another adult at home shaped what choices were feasible.

The experiences of younger migrants, including an ethnic-minority technician, show how kin and acquaintances helped workers find jobs and move between places. Those networks offered information and entry while directing choices toward positions known to their contacts. Interrupted education affected the qualifications and options some interviewees described. Intersectional analysis examines how social positions acquire force together within specific institutional and relational contexts [22]. Here, gender, schooling, migration, and family ties shaped pathways into work. Particular evidence about language, recruitment, or encounters is needed to explain the role of ethnic identification for any one technician.

Locally married workers described choosing nearby employment to spend time with children, while workers arriving from other cities discussed earnings alongside separation from family. A relative's unpaid childcare enabled some shifts after a mother returned to paid work. Income supported the household and household care supported the earning of income [18]. The costs carried by relatives, and the hours lost from a worker's own rest, belong in the assessment of what the job made possible.

6. Conclusion

Occupational status in this salon was made through competing descriptions of the same labor. A customer's label diminished skill and assigned women a vulnerable position; managers used titles, service categories, and visible rules to make a claim to proper service. Technicians answered such judgments through refusals, accounts of skilled and honest earnings, and decisions about where their occupation could be seen. These practices linked the service room to household relationships and digital communication. Managers and workers differed over the forms of visibility they wanted and the costs of enforcing a boundary.

The salon's rules could help a technician reject an unwelcome request, provided she could use the reporting and refusal procedures without penalty. Claims to proper work could also depend on comparisons that degraded other services and workers. Income, skill, customers, and family support affected the options available to each technician; commissions, physical strain, and care schedules shaped their price. Boundary communication captures how occupational categories travel between speech, space, bodily conduct, and information control. In this case, professional recognition required continuing work from technicians as well as managerial support, and the burden of that work fell unevenly.

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