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The Effect of Server Posture on the Tips of Whites and Blacks

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Abstract

This study examined the effects on tips left by black and white restaurant patrons of having a white waitress sit down or lean over at the table during the service encounter. A significant server posture by patron race interaction was obtained. Sitting at the table significantly increased the tips left by white patrons and marginally significantly decreased the tips left by black patrons. Potential explanations for this interaction are discussed along with its practical implications.

The Effect of Server Posture on the Tips of Whites and Blacks

Approximately 10 percent of the adult population in the United States (21 million people) eats out at “sit-down or family” restaurants every day (Media Dynamics, 2001). After completing their meals, 98 percent of these people leave a voluntary sum of money (called a “tip”) for the servers who waited on them (Paul, 2001). These tips, which amount to over \$20 billion a year, are an important source of income for the nation’s two million waiters and waitresses. In fact, tips often represent one hundred percent of servers’ take-home pay because income tax withholding eats up all of their hourly wages (Mason, 2002). Thus, knowledge about how to increase tips is of real applied value to these workers and to the managers who supervise them (Lynn, 2003).

Tipping has been the subject of numerous studies in social psychology and other disciplines (see Lynn, 2004a, for a review). Many of those studies have examined behaviors that servers can use to increase their tips. For example, researchers have found that servers earn larger tips when they:

1. introduce themselves by name (Garrity and Degelman, 1990),
2. repeat customers’ words when taking food orders (van Baaren, et al, 2003),
3. write friendly or helpful messages on the backs of checks (Rind and Bordia, 1995; Rind and Strohmetz, 1998),
4. draw smiley faces or other pictures on the back of checks (Guegen and Legohereel, 2000; Rind and Bordia, 1996),
5. give customers after dinner candies (Strohmetz, Rind, Fischer and Lynn, 2002),

6. touch guests on the arm or shoulder (Crusco & Wetzel, 1984; Hornik, 1992; Lynn, Le & Sherwyn, 1998; Stephen & Zweigenhaft, 1986),
7. smile at customers (Tidd and Locjkard, 1978), and
8. squat down next to the table sometime during the service encounter (Davis, Schrader, Richardson, Kring & Kiefer, 1998; Lynn & Mynier, 1993).

This paper contributes to the applied literature on tipping by examining the generalizability of server posture effects on tip size. Previous research on server posture effects has failed to look at the potentially moderating impact of customer race. However, Blacks and Whites might respond differently to having a server sit down, kneel or lean over at the table during the service encounter.

Blacks might respond more positively than Whites to sitting, kneeling or leaning servers, because these behaviors (which increase the server's proximity to the customer and signal that the server likes the customer) contrast more sharply with the way Blacks are usually treated in restaurants than with the way Whites are usually treated. Blacks are widely perceived in the restaurant industry as poor tippers and, as a result, many servers dislike waiting on Blacks and treat them poorly (Lynn 2004c). Thus, non-verbal signals of liking such as sitting at the table might be more appreciated and rewarded with tips among black customers than among white customers, who are used to being treated well by restaurant servers.

On the other hand, Blacks might also respond less positively than Whites to sitting, kneeling or leaning servers, because Blacks in the United States typically maintain greater interpersonal distances during social interactions than do Whites

(Halberstadt, 1985; Hayduk, 1983; cited in Argyle, 1988). Blacks preference for greater interpersonal distances in social interactions suggests that they may not appreciate having servers sit down or lean over at the table. In that case, these behaviors would not increase tips from black customers and may even decrease them.

Which of these two processes dominates the other and, therefore, which racial group responds more positively to having servers sit down or lean over at the table is an empirical question. Of course, it is also possible that the two processes cancel one-another out so that the effects of sitting or leaning at the table are not moderated by customer race. An empirical test of these possibilities would benefit servers by allowing the servers to tailor their non-verbal behaviors to their customers' races in a way that maximizes their tip income. The study reported below provides that empirical test.

Method

Data was collected by a White waitress at a steakhouse in Villa Park, IL. All of her White and Black customers from the month of February and March 2004 were included in the study until 300 observations were obtained. Other race and mixed race dining parties were not included in the study.

The waitress shuffled a deck of cards before each work shift and drew a card from the deck before greeting each of her tables. If the card was red, the waitress remained standing throughout the service encounter. If the card was black, she either sat down or leaned over at the table when greeting the table and/or taking the order. The server estimated that she sat down at the table twice approximately 85 percent of the time. Leaning vs sitting was dependent on whether or not there was enough room at the table to

sit down. Leaning was defined as putting elbows on the table or squatting with head level to the table, with the characteristics of the physical table determining which was done (e.g., lounge tables were higher than dining room tables, necessitating elbows on table rather than squatting). These different behaviors should have all increased the proximity of the server to customers, so we did not differentiate between them. Essentially, we assigned half the customers to an erect posture (low proximity) condition and half to a non-erect posture (high proximity) condition and then operationalized that condition in the best way the particular circumstances at the table allowed. However, future researchers may want to see if these different non-erect postures (ways of increasing proximity) have different effects on tipping.

Other than the manipulation, an effort was made to treat tables as usual and to deliver equal service to all. For each dining party, the waitress recorded the experimental condition, the race of the person paying the bill, the bill size, and the amount tipped. No other variables were recorded.

Results

A univariate analysis of variance with race and server posture as between subject variables and percent tip as the dependent variable produced a non-significant effect for posture ($F(1,296) = .34, p = .56$), but significant effects for race ($F(1, 296) = 90.98, p < .001$), and the race by posture interaction ($F(1, 296) = 5.96, p < .02$). Overall, sitting or leaning at the table produced only slightly larger tips than remaining standing (mean = 16.68% vs 16.03%; $n = 151$ and 149) and Blacks tipped less than Whites (mean = 12.3% vs 19.4%, $n = 128$ and 172). However, these main effects were qualified by an interaction

such that Whites tipped significantly more when the server sat down or leaned over at the table than when the server remained standing (mean = 20.5% vs 18.3%, $n = 86$ and 86 , $t(170) = 2.00$, $p < .05$) while Blacks tipped marginally significantly less under these conditions (mean = 11.6% vs 13.0%, $n = 65$ and 63 , $t(126) = -1.66$, $p = .10$).

Discussion

The results of this study replicate previous research findings that Blacks tip less than Whites (see Lynn and Thomas-Haysbert, 2003; Noll and Arnold, 2004; Willis, 2003). The size of the effect was an r of $-.48$ ($r^2 = .23$), which is much larger than that in previous research – e.g., Lynn and Thomas-Haysbert (2003) report a mean effect size r of $-.16$ ($r^2 = .03$). In large part, the unusually large amount of variance explained by race in the current study is attributable to the fact that 43 percent of the current sample was Black as compared to less than 20 percent in previous research. This fact explains the large effect size in the current study because (in general) a given between-group difference will explain more variance in a study with more balanced cells sizes than in a study with less balanced cell sizes. However, the unusually large amount of variance explained by race in the current study is also partly attributable to a larger than typical difference in average percent tipped by Whites and Blacks. The difference was 7.1% of bill size in the current study as compared to 3.6% in Lynn and Thomas-Haysbert's (2003) study and 3.0% in Noll and Arnold's (2004) study. It is not clear why the current study produced a larger than typical difference in the average percent tipped by Whites and Blacks, but one possibility is that the larger Black sample in the current study felt less social pressure to tip like Whites than did the smaller Black samples in previous studies. If the presence of

Whites in a restaurant exerts social pressure on Blacks to tip like the Whites, then a larger black sample would reduce the social pressure because it would mean a smaller number of white sources of influence and a larger number of black targets among whom that influence is diffused (see Latane, 1981).

More important than the size of the race effect in the current study, however, is the fact that it comes from the Midwest. The bulk of the restaurant-specific data on race differences in tipping comes from the South -- Lynn and Thomas-Haysberts' (2003) data came from restaurants in Houston, Texas while Noll and Arnolds' (2004) data came from a restaurant in Duval County, Florida. By replicating this previous research with data from a restaurant in Illinois, this study suggests that the Black-White difference in tipping is a national rather than just a regional phenomenon.¹

This study also replicated previous research finding that servers earn larger tips when sitting down or leaning over at the table (Davis, Schrader, Richardson, Kring & Kiefer, 1998; Lynn & Mynier, 1993). However, this finding was replicated only for White customers; having a server sit or lean at the table decreased the tips of Blacks in the current study. The negative effect for Blacks ($r = .15$) was comparable in size to the positive effect for Whites ($r = .15$), so that the two effects canceled one another out in the combined sample and produced a non-significant main effect. Presumably, previous studies found significant main effects because smaller samples of Blacks in those studies meant the main effect of posture was carried by Whites.

¹ National telephone surveys about general tipping habits also indicate that the Black-White difference in tipping is a national rather than a regional phenomenon (see Lynn, 2004, and Lynn and Thomas-Haysbert, 2003). The current study contributes to the literature by supporting the national character of the phenomenon using a different methodology and type of data than those represented by the national telephone surveys.

There are several potential explanations for the interaction of server posture with customer race observed in this study. First, the waitress was aware of the experimental conditions, so her expectations may have influenced the results (Rosenthal and Rubin, 1978). However, the server was not told what specific interaction the primary investigator expected – indeed, he did not know what results to expect himself. Moreover, when asked (some time after the fact) what results she expected when collecting the data, the waitress responded that she expected Blacks to tip less than Whites, but did not really expect the sitting vs standing manipulation to affect tips from Whites or Blacks. She also said that she did not really think much about the manipulation because she had been sitting down at the tables in that restaurant for two years.² Given that the server did not really think about the effects of the manipulation, much less expect it to interact with customer race, it seems unlikely that the interaction is attributable to experimenter expectancies. The main effect of customer race in this study could be due in part to server expectancies. However, the server had an incentive to maximize her tips from every table, so any expectancy effect would have to override that incentive. Moreover, the race main effect in this study was much larger than the typical expectancy effect in the literature ($r = .48$ vs mean $r = .16$; see Richard, Bond, and Stokes-Zoota, 2003) and other studies have demonstrated that the main effect of race on tip size is independent of server expectancies (Lynn and Thomas-Haysbert, 2003), so it is unlikely that even the race main effect in this study is solely attributable to a server expectancy effect.³

² The restaurant encouraged its servers to sit down at the table, so the waitress had done this many times before and was comfortable doing so. Also, the fact that sitting had no main effect on tipping may help explain why the server did not expect the manipulation to affect her tips.

³ This study does not contribute toward an explanation of Black-White differences in tipping, but other research suggests that the effect is mainly due to race differences in familiarity with the 15 to 20 percent restaurant tipping norm (see Lynn, 2004c; in press).

A second possible explanation of the interaction between server posture and customer race is that people welcome close proximity from servers of the same race but dislike close proximity from servers of other races. The server in this study was White, so the fact that sitting and leaning at the table increased tips from Whites but decreased tips from Blacks is consistent with this explanation. Unfortunately, the current study does not provide the data necessary to definitely test this explanation by examining the three-way interaction between server posture, server race, and customer race. However, other studies finding that both Blacks and Whites tip white service providers more than black service providers (Ayres, Vars and Zakariya, 2005; Lynn, et al., 2005; also see Willis, 2003) challenge the assumption underlying this explanation that people prefer servers of their own race. Thus, though possible and worth testing, this explanation seems unlikely to us.

A final potential explanation for the server posture by customer race interaction on tip size is that Blacks prefer greater interpersonal distances in their social interactions than do Whites. Sitting down or leaning over at the table increased the physical proximity of the server. Blacks may have tipped less in that condition because the proximity exceeded what they were comfortable with. Whites may have tipped more under that condition because the proximity did not exceed their comfort levels and was taken as a sign of liking. This explanation is consistent with other research finding that Blacks maintain greater interpersonal distance in social interactions than do Whites (see Halberstadt, 1985; Hayduk, 1983; cited in Argyle, 1988). Thus, though not definitively proven, this is the explanation we find most compelling.

Despite our inability to definitively explain the server posture by customer race interaction in this study, our demonstration of that interaction is of value. The current literature indicates that squatting next to the table increases tips and this fact is being communicated to servers (see Lynn, 2004b). Our study is the first to suggest that this behavior does not increase tips from all racial groups. Indeed, it decreases tips from Blacks when the server is White. Awareness of this finding would allow white servers to increase their tip income by matching their posture to the race of their customers. More research is needed to see if this interaction is itself moderated by server race. In the mean time, however, White waiters and waitresses should be aware that sitting down at the table increases tips only from White tables and that it appears to backfire at Black tables.

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