Effect on Restaurant Tipping of a Helpful Message Written on the Back of Customers' Checks

BRUCE RIND[1]
Temple University

DAVID STROHMETZ
Monmouth University

Research has shown that servers can increase their tip percentages by writing "Thank you" or by drawing a happy face on the backs of customers' checks. In the current study, a third approach of this type was tested. An experiment was conducted in which a female server either did or did not write a helpful message about an upcoming dinner special on the backs of checks before delivering them to customers. It was predicted that adding the helpful message would increase tip percentages because of reciprocity, in which customers would tend to respond to the server's "tip" with an increased tip of their own. Results were consistent with this prediction: Mean tip percentages increased from about 17% to 20%.

More than 1 million people in the United States work as waiters or waitresses (Statistical Abstracts, 1990). Although these servers are generally paid by their employers, their major source of income usually comes in the form of tips from customers (Lynn & Mynier, 1993; Schmidt, 1985). Because tips are so important to the livelihood of most servers, knowledge about factors that affect customers' tipping behavior is valuable. Over the last decade, a growing number of studies have identified a variety of such factors.

Factors affecting tipping can generally be grouped into three categories (Rind & Bordia, 1996). The first concerns characteristics of the dining party, including party size, method of payment, alcohol consumption, and mood (Cunningham, 1979; Freeman, Walker, Borden, & Latané, 1975; Lynn, 1988; Lynn & Latané, 1984). The second concerns characteristics of the server, including attractiveness, dress, and gender (Lynn & Latané, 1984; May, 1978; Stillman & Hensley, 1980). The third concerns server–diner interactions, such as having servers briefly touch their customers (Crusco & Wetzel, 1984; Hornik, 1993; Stephen & Zweigenhaft, 1986), make additional nontask visits (May, 1978), squat during their initial interaction with customers (Lynn & Mynier, 1993), personalize their interaction by giving customers their first names during the initial contact (Garrity & Degelman, 1990), and display a

maximal smile during initial interaction with customers (Tidd & Lockard, 1978).

More recently, two additional studies involving server–diner interactions were conducted, which focused on manipulating what appeared on the checks delivered to customers at the end of their meals. In one study, a female server received higher tip percentages when she wrote "Thank you" on the back of the check than when she did not (Rind & Bordia, 1995). In the other study, a female and male server either did or did not draw a happy face on the back of the customers' checks, with the result that tip percentages increased for the female but not for the male server (Rind & Bordia, 1996). The current investigation similarly involves manipulating what appears on the back of customers' checks. A server either did or did not write a message on the check informing the customer of a dinner special sometime in the future. The message consisted of four sentences, representing a nontrivial effort by the server. The content of the message was designed to be helpful to the customers—that is, to alert them to a good deal. As such, it was expected that customers would perceive the message as a helpful "tip" for them that cost the server some time in writing up, which would have the effect of increasing their willingness to return the favor by leaving a larger tip. This expectation follows from research on reciprocity, in which individuals feel obligated to return a favor to a person doing them a favor (Regan, 1971).

Method

Subjects

Eighty-one dining parties eating dinner at an upscale restaurant in northern New Jersey served as subjects. The restaurant was located in a private country club, and its menu was buffet style; servers catered to all needs of customers, except for serving them the food. The dining parties consisted of a total of 315 customers, with a mean of 3.89 customers per party ($SD = 2.72$); the range of customers in the 81 dining parties was from 2 to 10.

Procedure

The experiment was conducted over a 3-week period during March and April 1997. A female server in her 20s, who worked the dinner shift, acted as the experimental accomplice. She had had 2 years' experience waiting on tables, all at the current restaurant, prior to this study. She was given a stack of 3 × 5 index cards. On half of these cards was written "message," while on the other half was written "no message." The cards were thoroughly shuffled, such that the order of the two types of cards was random. At the end of a

dining party's meal, when it came time for her to present the dining party with a check, the server reached into her pocket and randomly selected a card. This procedure ensured random assignment of dining parties to the message and no-message conditions. If the server selected a card with "message" written on it, then she wrote on the back of the check the message "We have a special dinner on (date specified). The menu will feature delicious seafood. Why not give it a try? It's great!" The server wrote down the appropriate date for the next time a special seafood buffet was being served, usually in about 1 week's time. If the server selected a card with "no message" written on it, then she wrote nothing on the back of the check.

To avoid potential confounding, the server was instructed to behave in the same way, regardless of condition, when delivering the check. The server delivered the check with a neutral facial expression, while saying "Here's your check," and then immediately left to avoid further contact with the dining party. After the dining party left, the server recorded on the same 3 × 5 index card just used to determine the dining party's condition the amount of tip left by the party, the amount of the bill before taxes, and the number of customers in the dining party.[2] The dependent measure was the tip percentage.

Results

Of the 81 dining parties served, 40 were in the message condition, while 41 were in the no-message condition. The mean bill amount per dining party was $51.52 ($SD$ = $47.64), which worked out to be a mean of $13.25 per person. Tip percentages were calculated for each dining party by dividing the tip size by the bill amount and then multiplying this quotient by 100.

It was hypothesized that writing a helpful message would increase tip percentages, compared to writing nothing. To assess this hypothesis, the mean tip percentages in these two conditions were contrasted. Consistent with expectations, the mean tip percentage was statistically significantly greater in the message condition (M = 19.91%, SD = 7.77%) than in the no-message condition (M = 16.95%, SD = 5.91%), $t(79)$ = 1.93, p = .028, one-tailed, effect size r = .21.

We also examined the relationship between party size and tip percentage. Consistent with previous research findings (Freeman et al., 1975; Lynn & Latané, 1984; May, 1978; Pearl & Vidman, 1988; Rind & Bordia, 1996),

[2]The server also attempted to record information on gender of the bill payer for each dining party by observing who paid or by checking names on credit-card slips. However, because she was unable to determine gender for a sizable minority of bill payers through these methods, these data were excluded from analysis. In retrospect, recording gender composition of the dining parties would have been more feasible.

dining party size was negatively correlated with tip percentage, $r(79) = -.23$, $p < .05$, two-tailed. Lynn and Bond (1992) have shown that correlations between dining party size and tip percentages can be biased because of the use of tip percentages as the dependent measure. They presented a method for correcting the tip percentage: corrected percentage tip $= (T - A)/B$, where $T =$ the tip, $B =$ the bill, and $A =$ the y intercept when predicting T from B. The correlation between corrected tip percentages and dining party size was nonsignificant, $r(79) = .17$, $p > .10$, two-tailed. To examine the relationship between tipping and dining party size further, we calculated the semipartial correlation between these two variables, adjusting tip size by holding bill amount constant. This correlation was also nonsignificant, $r(78) = .16$, $p > .10$, two-tailed.

Discussion

Results of the current experiment support the prediction that adding a helpful message to a check would increase tip percentages. This finding adds to those of previous studies that have shown that adding information to the back of customers' checks can increase tip percentages. Rind and Bordia (1995, 1996) found that writing "Thank you" and drawing a happy face on the backs of checks increased tips; they attributed these increases to the beneficial effects of creating a perception among the customers of the servers' friendliness. In the current experiment, adding a message may also have engendered perceptions of friendliness. More likely, however, adding the message created the perception on the part of customers that the server was doing something extra for them—that is, giving them a useful tip about a future dinner, and incurring the cost of spending the time to write out a relatively lengthy message to do so. This perception, it follows, then heightened the likelihood that customers would reciprocate the tip and extra effort by the server with an increased tip of their own (cf. Regan, 1971). As plausible as this explanation may be, however, the resolution concerning the precise mechanism for the increased tip percentage in the message condition requires further research.

In the current experiment, the female server's customers spent a total of $4,173 over a 3-week period, which is equivalent to $1,391 per week. By the addition of a helpful message concerning a future dinner special on all checks, the server would have increased her tips from $236 to $277 per work week, which represents an increase of $41, or 17.4%. For the more than 1 million servers in the United States, systematic use of this technique could mean millions of dollars of extra income annually.

The current study also examined the relation between dining party size and tip percentage, which has been found to be an inverse one in many

previous studies (cf. Lynn & Bond, 1992). Initially, a statistically significant inverse relation was uncovered. After correcting tip percentages based on Lynn and Bond's (1992) procedure, however, this inverse relationship disappeared, as it has in other reanalyses (e.g., Lynn & Latané, 1984; Rind & Bordia, 1996). The current result, along with those of previous analyses, adds further to the weakening of this relationship.

The current experiment was conducted in an upscale restaurant in a country club in the northeastern United States using only one female server. The generalizability of the current findings thus needs to be examined in future research by varying location and restaurant-type factors, and by using different servers, male as well as female.

References

Crusco, A. H., & Wetzel, C. G. (1984). The midas touch: The effects of interpersonal touch on restaurant tipping. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, **10**, 512-517.

Cunningham, M. R. (1979). Weather, mood, and helping behavior: Quasi-experiments with the sunshine Samaritan. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **37**, 1947-1956.

Freeman, S., Walker, M., Borden, R., & Latané, B. (1975). Diffusion of responsibility and restaurant tipping: Cheaper by the bunch. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, **1**, 584-587.

Garrity, K., & Degelman, D. (1990). Effect of server introduction on restaurant tipping. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, **20**, 168-172.

Hornik, J. (1993). Tactile stimulation and consumer response. *Journal of Consumer Research*, **19**, 449-458.

Lynn, M. (1988). The effects of alcohol consumption on restaurant tipping. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, **14**, 87-91.

Lynn, M., & Bond, C. F. (1992). Conceptual meaning and spuriousness in ratio correlations: The case of restaurant tipping. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, **22**, 327-341.

Lynn, M., & Latané, B. (1984). The psychology of restaurant tipping. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, **14**, 549-561.

Lynn, M., & Mynier, K. (1993). Effect of server posture on restaurant tipping. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, **23**, 678-685.

May, J. M. (1978). *Tip or treat: A study of factors affecting tipping behavior.* Unpublished master's thesis, Loyola University of Chicago.

Pearl, R. B., & Vidman, J. (1988). *Tipping practices of American households in restaurants and other eating places: 1985-1986.* Champaign, IL: Summary report to the IRS under contract TIR 86-279 with the Survey Research Laboratory, University of Illinois.

Regan, D. T. (1971). Effects of a favor and liking on compliance. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, **7**, 627-639.

Rind, B., & Bordia, P. (1995). Effect of server's "Thank you" and personalization on restaurant tipping. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, **25**, 745-751.

Rind, B., & Bordia, P. (1996). Effect on restaurant tipping of male and female servers drawing a happy, smiling face on the backs of customers' checks. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, **26**, 218-225.

Schmidt, D. G. (1985). Tips: The mainstay of many hotel workers' pay. *Monthly Labor Review*, **108**, 50-61.

Statistical Abstracts of the United States. (1990). Washingtin, DC: Department of Commerce.

Stephen, R., & Zweigenhaft, R. L. (1986). The effect on tipping of a waitress touching male and female customers. *Journal of Social Psychology*, **126**, 141-142.

Stillman, J. W., & Hensley, W. E. (1980). She wore a flower in her hair: The effect of ornamentation on nonverbal communication. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, **1**, 31-39.

Tidd, K., & Lockard, J. (1978). Monetary significance of the affiliative smile: A case for reciprocal altruism. *Bulletin of the Psychonomic Society*, **11**, 344-346.