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"Getting" and "Making" a Tip

The waitress can't help feeling a sense of personal failure and public censure when she is "stiffed."

—*William F. Whyte*, "When Workers and Customers Meet"

They're rude, they're ignorant, they're obnoxious, they're inconsiderate. . . . Half these people don't deserve to come out and eat, let alone try and tip a waitress.

—*Route waitress*

The financial and emotional hazards inherent in the tipping system have drawn attention from sociologists, and more recently anthropologists, concerned with the study of work. In general these researchers have concluded that workers who receive gratuities exercise little control over the material outcome of tipping and less over its symbolic implications. In his study of Chicago cabdrivers, Fred Davis (1959) found that drivers employ diverse strategies to increase the odds of getting a favorable tip, including padding fares with fictitious charges (for example, charging for extra luggage); embarrassing a passenger into relinquishing a bigger tip by creating a scene over making change; tailoring the ride to

fit the perceived temperament of the passenger (fast for businessmen, slow for old people); and subjecting passengers to hard-luck stories. In addition, cabdrivers develop typologies of passengers (the Sport, the Lady Shopper, Live Ones) in an effort to predict and explain the outcome of individual fares. Davis (1959:164) concludes, however, that "in the last analysis, neither the driver's typology of fares nor his stratagems further to any marked degree his control of the tip." A study of tipping among users of a suburban cab company in California (Karen 1962) revealed that the rendering of special services to passengers did not increase the likelihood of receiving a gratuity, and that on the whole tippers and nontippers are consistent in their tipping behavior. The driver's ability to control the outcome of a tip is thus presumably minimal.

Previous observations of restaurant servers support the thesis of limited worker control. Suellen Butler and William Snizek (1976) identify three strategies adopted by waitresses in an effort to manipulate the material rewards of their work: increased ritualization (exemplified by the wine ritual); friendly rapport or "buttering up" the customer; and product promotional activity, in which the waitress attempts to sell her customers more—and more expensive—menu items and so increase her 15 percent tip. While the authors were unable to investigate the efficacy of the first two strategies, they suggest that both are risky and largely ineffective. Only product promotional activity, which was directly tested by the authors, was found to be effective in increasing tip earnings.

Several observers of restaurant work have reported the existence of customer typologies similar to those used by cabdrivers. Gerald Mars and Michael Nicod (1984:54) note that waiters categorize customers

on the basis of crosscutting criteria such as length of stay and size of party but comment that these systems of classification are "unpredictable" and "dependent on unreliable verbal and appearance clues." James Spradley and Brenda Mann provide an extensive list of customer types recognized by cocktail waitresses and note that "it was important to the waitresses to make such fine distinctions" (1975:61). There is some indication that servers adapt their performance to fit different categories of diners, but the control function, if any, of customer typologies remains unclear from the authors' descriptions.

While some attention has been directed toward the worker's ability to control the financial outcome of the tipping transaction, it has been assumed that the emotional hazards of tipping are an evil the server is helpless to combat. This view is most clearly expressed by Whyte who writes that "the waitress can't help feeling a sense of personal failure and public censure when she is 'stiffed'" (1946:129). His contention is substantiated by the testimony of his informants: a restaurant owner recalls a waitress who would occasionally break down and cry, "I failed . . . I failed today. After all I did for them, they didn't like me" (1946:129). A waiter comments:

> This tipping business is a great evil. You know, waiters have inferiority complexes. They are afraid to tell people they are a waiter. . . . It's the tipping system that does it. (Whyte 1977:372)

And a headwaiter observes:

> When they were calling each other mister, I said to them, "Look, you are no gentlemen. Gentlemen do not take tips. And therefore you should not call one another mister." It is this tipping

> system that is the evil. That's the really degrading part of it. (Whyte 1977:372)

Along similar lines, Mars and Nicod (1984:74–75) report that overtipping may underscore the "socioeconomic superiority" of the customer, while disproportionately small tips may cause the server to feel "degraded, embarrassed, nonplussed, or otherwise upset." These comments suggest that servers adhere to a kind of symbolic illogic which compels them to interpret small and large tips alike as a negative reflection on themselves; thus, while a small tip is interpreted as an insult, a large tip is read not as a compliment, but as a sign of the server's social and economic subordination. Further, they suggest that servers perceive tips as symbolic statements about their personal qualities and social status.

Making a Tip at Route

A common feature of past research is that the worker's control over the tipping system is evaluated in terms of her efforts to con, coerce, compel, or otherwise manipulate a customer into relinquishing a bigger tip. Because these efforts have for the most part proven futile, the worker has been seen as having little defense against the financial vicissitudes of the tipping system. What these studies have overlooked is that an employee can increase her tip income by controlling the number as well as the size of tips she receives. This oversight has arisen from the tendency of researchers to concentrate narrowly on the relationship between server and served, while failing to take into account the broader organizational context in which this relationship takes place.

Like service workers observed in earlier studies,

waitresses at Route strive to boost the amount of individual gratuities by rendering special services and being especially friendly. As one waitress put it, "I'll sell you the world if you're in my station." In general though, waitresses at Route Restaurant seek to boost their tip income, not by increasing the amount of individual gratuities, but by increasing the number of customers they serve. They accomplish this (a) by securing the largest or busiest stations and working the most lucrative shifts; (b) by "turning" their tables quickly; and (c) by controlling the flow of customers within the restaurant.

Technically, stations at Route are assigned on a rotating basis so that all waitresses, including rookies, work fast and slow stations equally. Station assignments are listed on the work schedule that is posted in the office window where it can be examined by all workers on all shifts, precluding the possibility of blatant favoritism or discrimination. Yet a number of methods exist whereby experienced waitresses are able to circumvent the formal rotation system and secure the more lucrative stations for themselves. A waitress can trade assignments with a rookie who is uncertain of her ability to handle a fast station; she can volunteer to take over a large station when a *call-out* necessitates reorganization of station assignments;[1] or she can establish herself as the only waitress capable of handling a particularly large or chaotic station. Changes in station assignments tend not to be formally recorded, so inconsistencies in the rotation system often do not show up on the schedule. Waitresses on the same shift may notice of course that a co-worker has managed to avoid an especially slow station for many days, or has somehow ended up in the busiest station two weekends in a row, but the waitresses' code of noninterference (discussed in Chapter 6), inhibits them from openly objecting to such irregularities.

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A waitress can also increase her tip income by working the more lucrative shifts. Because day is the busiest and therefore most profitable shift at Route, it attracts experienced, professional waitresses who are most concerned and best able to maximize their tip earnings. There are exceptions: some competent, senior-ranking waitresses are unable to work during the day due to time constraints of family or second jobs. Others choose not to work during the day despite the potential monetary rewards, because they are unwilling to endure the intensely competitive atmosphere for which day shift is infamous.

The acutely competitive environment that characterizes day shift arises from the aggregate striving of each waitress to maximize her tip income by serving the greatest possible number of customers. Two strategies are enlisted to this end. First, each waitress attempts to *turn* her tables as quickly as possible. Briefly stated, this means she takes the order, delivers the food, clears and resets a table, and begins serving the next party as rapidly as customer lingering and the speed of the kitchen allow. A seven-year veteran of Route describes the strategy and its rewards:

> What I do is I prebus my tables. When the people get up and go all I got is glasses and cups, pull off, wipe, set, and I do the table turnover. But see that's from day shift. See the girls on graveyard . . . don't understand the more times you turn that table the more money you make. You could have three tables and still make a hundred dollars. If you turn them tables.

As the waitress indicates, a large part of turning tables involves getting the table cleared and set for the next