

Restaurant service linked to customer demographics, race, research finds

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Restaurant servers are more likely to give better service to patron types they believe are more inclined to tip well, a Wayne State University researcher has found, a principle that has significant consequences when African-Americans are at the table.

In an effort to determine whether servers based their service levels on perceived tipping differences across customer demographics, Zachary Brewster, Ph.D., assistant professor of sociology in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, analyzed data derived from a survey of 200 servers in 18 restaurants in a southeastern U.S. [metropolitan area](#).

In "The Effects of Restaurant Servers' Perceptions of Customers' Tipping Behaviors on Service Discrimination," published recently in the *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, servers reported their perceptions of the tipping behaviors of 18 different table scenarios involving a number of [demographic characteristics](#) including race, [sexual orientation](#) and age, with combinations featuring small and [adult children](#).

Brewster found that sensitivity to demographic differences predicted whether servers reported giving excellent service at the prospect of receiving excellent tips. While other research has shown race to be a factor in service levels, his study initially was not about [racial discrimination](#) in restaurant service.

Brewster was surprised, however, that a customer's race became such a

salient variable in the study.

"Though not the focus of this study, race became a salient issue, in that the findings suggest that African-Americans, in particular, may be at risk for not only having excellent service withheld from them, but for receiving poor service in some cases," Brewster said.

Researchers also found that servers who had performed other restaurant duties, such as hosting or bartending, tended to be more sensitive to demographic differences, which predicted their propensities to differentially allocate excellent service.

Brewster said another factor that may exacerbate the problem of poor service to African-Americans, although not one addressed in the study, is an ongoing amount of racialized talk in the restaurant industry that functions to exaggerate servers' perceptions of African-Americans' tipping behaviors.

He pointed out that while the tipping difference between white and black customers has been shown to be significant enough to raise some important issues, the actual amounts are not intrinsically remarkable.

"We're talking cents, not dollars, controlling for other factors," he said.

But despite the study's limitations, Brewster believes it opens possibilities for future research in other parts of the country, using larger, more ethnically diverse survey samples (61 percent of respondents were female and 86 percent were white). Future research also could target other customer attributes for their effects on servers' decisions to exceed formal service expectations, as well as additional service industries.

"What we learned is that tipping motivates servers to provide excellent

service, but more so for people perceived to be good tippers," Brewster said. "The latent consequence of that, however, is discrimination against some customers."

He believes that armed with that knowledge, restaurant operators can address the situation.

"If restaurants promoted tipping norms for specific levels of service quality for their own establishment, over time people would learn those norms and become familiar with different conceptions of service quality across restaurants," Brewster said. "Servers could come to expect to be rewarded for the [service](#) level provided, irrespective of customer demographics."

Provided by Wayne State University

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