

Ingratiation and Gratitude: The Effect of Complimenting Customers on Tipping Behavior in Restaurants

JOHN S. SEITER¹

*Department of Languages, Philosophy,
and Speech Communication
Utah State University*

The present study examined the role of ingratiation on tipping behavior in restaurants. In the study, 2 female food servers waited on 94 couples eating dinner, and either complimented or did not compliment the couples on their dinner selections. Results indicated that food servers received significantly higher tips when complimenting their customers than when not complimenting them. These results and their implications are discussed.

Approximately 1.4 million people in the United States work as food servers (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2003), yet, unlike most U.S. employees, are not entitled to a standard minimum wage. As a consequence, many food servers depend on tips to make their living. In addition, Mims (2002) noted that because current tax rules charge servers based on the value of the meals they serve, an 8% tip is needed just to break even. It is clear, then, that from an applied perspective, understanding the variables that affect tipping behavior can be crucial to some employees. Lynn and Latané (1984) suggested that such knowledge would also help managers and proprietors make better use of tipping behavior as an indicator of customer satisfaction.

From an academic standpoint, the study of tipping behavior is also important. For example, Seiter and Gass (2004) noted that although investigations of influence tactics' effectiveness in real-world contexts can help to inform theory and research in persuasion, too often scholars have focused on strategy preferences or strategy selection while neglecting to examine actual strategy effectiveness. Because tipping and the factors that influence it can be conceptualized as persuasion, it is clear that the study of tipping behavior can help to meet the need for such research. With that in mind, the purpose of the present study is to examine whether a particular type of influence tactic—that is, the use of ingratiation—has an effect on customers' tipping.

¹Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to John S. Seiter, Department of Languages, Philosophy, and Speech Communication, Utah State University, Logan, UT 84322-0720. E-mail: jsseiter@cc.usu.edu

Literature Review

Extant literature indicates that several variables influence tipping behavior. Many of these factors, however, are out of the server's control. For example, customers tend to leave larger tips when the weather is pleasant, when there is desirable background music, and when the restaurant is elegant or in an urban area (Crusco & Wetzel, 1984; Cunningham, 1979; Davis, Schrader, Richardson, Kring, & Kieffer, 1998; Garrity & Degelman, 1990; Milliman, 1986; Rind, 1996; Rind & Strohmetz, 2001). Research also suggests that tipping behavior is affected by customers' characteristics, including size of the dining party, amount of alcohol consumed, customers' gender and ethnic background, and method of payment (Freeman, Walker, Borden, & Latané, 1975; Lynn, 1988; Lynn & Bond, 1992; Lynn & Latané, 1984; Lynn & Thomas-Haysbert, 2003).

Despite such findings, research indicates that servers can control some variables that influence tipping behavior. Past studies, for example, have reported that a number of nonverbal behaviors, such as smiling, a light touch on the shoulder, or squatting at eye level with a customer tend to increase tips (Crusco & Wetzel, 1984; Davis et al., 1998; Hornik, 1992; Hubbard, Tsuji, Williams, & Seatriz, 2003; Lynn & Mynier, 1993; Stephen & Zweigenhaft, 1986; Stillman & Hensley, 1980; Tidd & Lockard, 1978). Studies also have found that servers who introduce themselves by name, leave candy, present particular images (e.g., happy faces or American flags on the back of checks), or deliver certain messages (e.g., jokes, "Thank you," "The weather is supposed to be really good tomorrow") receive significantly higher tips than do those who do not (Garrity & Degelman, 1990; Gueguen, 2002; Rind & Bordia, 1995, 1996; Rind & Strohmetz, 1999; Seiter & Gass, 2005; Strohmetz, Rind, Fisher, & Lynn, 2002).

In addition to identifying variables that affect tipping behavior, researchers have proposed various explanations for why certain variables are effective. A common explanation is consistent with impression management theory (see Goffman, 1959; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Schlenker, 1980; Tedeschi & Riess, 1981), which argues that people try to control their behavior in order to create desired impressions, which, in turn, might lead to favorable outcomes. Rind and Bordia (1995, 1996), for example, suggested that by drawing happy faces or writing "Thank you" on their checks, servers created likable impressions, which may have resulted in larger tips.

According to impression management theory, when people desire to be seen as likable, one of the more common self-presentational strategies they use is ingratiation; and one of the more common ingratiation tactics is to compliment others (see Jones, 1964, 1990; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Jones & Wortman, 1973). A substantial amount of previous theory and research

suggests that ingratiation can be highly effective. For example, following a meta-analytic review of 69 ingratiation studies, Gordon (1996) concluded that ingratiation is positively related to perceptions of increased likability (see also Higgins, Judge, & Ferris, 2003; Jones, 1964, 1990; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Schlenker, 1980).

However, as Blickle (2003) recently argued, although many studies have shown that ingratiation generates liking, a question that naturally follows is how does it relate to compliance? More specifically, we found no studies that explored the role of compliments on tipping behavior. With that in mind, and given previous research findings regarding the effectiveness of ingratiation, we propose the following research hypothesis:

Hypothesis. Food servers will receive significantly higher tips when they compliment their customers than when they do not.

Method

Participants

Study participants were 94 parties who were observed while eating dinner at two restaurants in northern Utah. One of the restaurants belongs to a well-known franchise, and both restaurants can be described as casual dining establishments in the mid-price range.

Prior to data collection, an issue arose concerning how many guests should constitute a *dining party*. First, we wanted to be sure that whoever was paying the bill received a compliment. Rather than guess who the bill payer was or worry about customers “going Dutch,” we decided to compliment each person at the table. As such, we worried that complimenting every person at a crowded table might make servers’ compliments seem insincere or transparent. Consequently, we decided to limit the study to tables with two customers each. In total, 188 customers served as participants.

Procedure

The data were collected by two female communication students (both 22 years old) who worked part time as food servers. Both were instructed to treat their customers no differently than they normally would during their regular server duties, except right after taking customers’ orders, at which point they either complimented the customers’ choice of menu items or did not. To help the servers randomly determine which tables would receive which treatment, each server carried six pennies in her pocket: three marked

with ink and three without a mark. Before she approached a table, the server removed a penny, checked it, and then returned it to her pocket. If the penny was not marked, the server gave no compliments. If it was marked, the server complimented each of the two guests. Specifically, after the first person in the party presented his or her order, the server said, "You made a good choice!" After the second person ordered, the server said, "You did good [sic], too!"

After each party left, the server recorded the total amount of the check and the total amount tipped. The dependent variable was tip size as a percentage of the total bill. This was calculated for each party by dividing the amount of the tip by the amount of the total bill (before taxes) and multiplying by 100.

Results

To investigate the effect of compliments on tip size as a percentage of the total bill, a one-way ANOVA was conducted. The analysis indicated significant differences in tipping behavior between conditions, $F(1, 92) = 4.60$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .05$. Specifically, customers left significantly larger tips ($M = 18.94$, $SD = 6.70$) when their server complimented them than when their server did not ($M = 16.41$, $SD = 4.40$).

Discussion

Jones (1990) argued that ingratiation is perhaps the most common form of impression management. The present study found that at least one type of ingratiation, the use of compliments, was persuasive. Specifically, in this investigation, food servers received significantly higher tips when they complimented their customers' choice of menu items than when they did not. While a nearly 2.5% increase in tips may seem a small amount, the improvement is close to 13%, which is clearly nontrivial. An additional \$2 to \$5 per shift over a 5-day workweek would amount to \$10 to \$25 per week. This could translate into hundreds of dollars per year for each food server and millions of dollars annually if you consider the nearly 1.4 million food servers in the U.S. collectively.

The implication for food servers is clear: Although flattery may not get you everywhere, it might help you make a living. Moreover, assuming that higher tips reflect greater customer satisfaction (see Davis et al., 1998), the results of the present study should be of interest to restaurant owners who want to foster a pleasant dining atmosphere and encourage patrons to return.

In addition to its practical applications, this study should interest scholars. First, it extends previous research by investigating an influence tactic not yet examined in restaurant settings and is consistent with previous research demonstrating that even minor changes in food-server behavior can affect tipping behavior significantly. Second, as noted earlier, although persuasion research has been criticized for neglecting to study influence behavior in real-life settings, this study investigated such behavior in a naturalistic context. Finally, although much research has concentrated on studying the effects of ingratiation on liking and performance appraisals, Blickle (2003) argued that it has neglected to study the effects of ingratiation and compliance gaining. It is hoped that this study helps to fill that gap.

Despite its contributions, the present study is limited in several respects. First, only female servers were used, making generalizations to male servers impossible. Second, observations were confined to restaurants in one geographical location. Third, the study examined only one type of compliment based solely on patrons' menu choice. What if, as an alternative, the compliments were more personal in nature (e.g., "You look great in that color" or "You have a wonderful smile!")? Fourth, it is also possible that some compliments might backfire. For example, Vonk (1998) referred to the *slime effect*, which occurs when ingratiators are perceived as unlikable as a result of their behavior. Finally, it is possible that the effectiveness of compliments depends on when they occur (e.g., during introductions or at the time the bill is presented). Future research should examine these issues in addition to investigating tipping behavior in other organizations. For instance, the use of compliments might facilitate persuasion in sales contexts (e.g., see Seiter & Cody, 2004).

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