

Running Head: Ingratiation

The Effect of Generalized Compliments, Sex of Server,
and Size of Dining Party on Tipping Behavior in Restaurants

Abstract

This study examined the effects of food servers' gender, the use of generalized compliments, and the size of dining parties on tipping behavior in restaurants. Four food servers (two males and two females) waited on 360 parties eating dinner and either complimented or did not compliment the parties on their dinner selections. Results indicated that food servers received significantly higher tips when complimenting their parties than when not complimenting them, although as the size of the party increased, the effectiveness of compliments decreased. These results and their implications are discussed.

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Unlike most employees in the United States, food servers are not entitled to a standard minimum wage because it is thought that the tips they earn will compensate for lower pay. At the same time, most of these food servers are not entitled to tips either. Indeed, in most cases, restaurant patrons provide gratuities voluntarily after having been served. Consequently, for the approximately 1.4 million people in the US who work as food servers (Statistical Abstracts, 2003), an understanding of variables that influence tipping behavior is not only desirable, it can be critical to making a living. Lynn and Latane' (1984) suggested that such an understanding might also assist managers and proprietors make better use of tipping behavior as an indicator of customer satisfaction.

Besides its obvious applied benefits, the study of tipping behavior is also important for academic reasons. Seiter and Gass (2004) argued that studying the effectiveness of influence tactics in real world contexts is important for informing theory and research in persuasion. Because tipping and the factors that influence it can be conceptualized as persuasion, it is clear that the study of tipping behavior can help meet the need for such research. With that in mind, the purpose of this study was to examine the interaction of several variables and their effects on tipping behavior. Specifically, we investigated servers' use of ingratiation, the size of dining parties, and the gender of servers on tipping behavior in restaurants.

Review of Literature

Extant literature suggests that servers are able to influence customers' tipping behavior. For example, studies have found that servers who mimic customers'

communication behavior, introduce themselves by name, leave gifts, 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 those who do not (Garrity & Degelman, 1990; Gueguen, 2002; Rind & Bordia, 1995, 1996; Rind & Strohmetz, 1999; Seiter & Gass, 2005; Strohmetz, Rind, Fisher, & Lynn, 2002; van Baaren, Holland, Steenaert, & van Knippenberg, 2003). Similarly, servers who use certain nonverbal behaviors, such as smiling, light touches on customers’ shoulders, or squatting at eye level with customers tend to earn larger tips than servers who do not (Crusco & Wetzel, 1984; Davis, Schrader, Richardson, Kring, & Kieffer, 1998; Hornik, 1992; Hubbard, Tsuji, Williams, & Seatriz, 2003; Lynn & Mynier, 1993; Stephen & Zweigenhaft, 1986; Stillman & Hensley, 1980; Tidd & Lockard).

In addition to identifying such behaviors, previous researchers have offered various explanations for why they may be associated with larger tips. One 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 behaviors in order to create desired impressions, which, in turn, might lead to favorable outcomes. According to this 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). Although a considerable amount of research indicates that ingratiation is associated with likeability, as Pratkanis (2007) has noted (see also Gordon, 1996), few studies have examined the persuasive effects of

compliments on behavior. Those few studies examining compliments indeed point to the effectiveness of ingratiation. Three studies, for example, found that ingratiation increased compliance with requests to complete a survey (Hendrick, Borden, Giesen, Murray, & Seyfried, 1972), to purchase merchandise (Cody, Seiter, & Montaigne-Miller, 1995), and to participate in a “stop junk mail” crusade (Pratkanis & Abbott, cited in Pratkanis, 2007). A fourth study found hair stylists received significantly higher tips when complimenting their customers than when they did not offer compliments (Seiter & Dutson, 2007).

Finally, and most pertinent to the present project, Seiter (2007) examined the effects of compliments on tips left by two-person dining parties in restaurants. 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!” Results indicated that food servers received significantly higher tips when offering compliments than when not offering them.

Despite the contributions of Seiter’s (2007) study, it is not without limitations. For instance, the study was confined to parties with just two people. From an applied perspective, this is a concern. Indeed, larger dining parties are common and previous research suggests that the size of a dining party might affect tipping behavior (see Freeman, Walker, Borden, & Latane, 1975). In addition, larger parties might affect the ways in which complements are enacted and perceived. First, as party size increases, complimenting each person takes more time. As such, it might become tedious or burdensome for both servers, who may have other duties, and customers, who may be anxious to eat. With that in mind, we wondered whether a more parsimonious approach, whereby servers compliment all the diners in a party at once (e.g., “You all made good

choices!"), might be an effective approach. While the research mentioned above suggests that individualized compliments were associated with larger gratuities, it is not yet clear whether generalized compliments will be. With that in mind, we ask the following question:

RQ1: Is there a difference between the tips received by food servers who give customers generalized compliments and the tips received by food servers who do not give compliments?

Second, party size might influence the perception of compliments for a couple of reasons. First, it is possible that diners in larger parties are less likely to hear compliments. Indeed, after placing an order, people in larger parties may be more likely to strike up conversations with other diners rather than pay attention to the server. Second, Seiter (2007) noted that complimenting every person at a crowded table might seem insincere or transparent. If so, it is possible that the use of ingratiation could backfire. For instance, previous research on the "slime effect" indicated that actors who ingratiate their superiors while acting the opposite way toward subordinates are judged as dislikeable and are suspected of ulterior motives (Vonk, 1998). With that in mind, we ask the following question:

RQ2: Does the size of dining parties moderate the effect of compliments on tipping behavior?

Besides being confined to two-person parties, Seiter's (2007) study included only female food servers. As such, the author called for further investigations that included both genders, an important consideration in view of previous research suggesting that a server's gender has the potential to influence tipping behavior. One study, for example,

predicted and found that drawing a happy face on the back of customers checks increased tips for female servers but not for male servers (Rind & Bordia, 1996). The prediction was based on the idea that people are perceived more favorably when their behavior is consistent with gender stereotypes and that drawing happy faces was most consistent with stereotypes of females as being warmer and more expressive than males.

Although these findings might lead one to suspect that female servers could benefit from the use of compliments more than male servers, additional theory and research suggests the opposite may occur. For example, Carli (2004) argued that, because of gender stereotypes, males have a wider bandwidth of acceptable persuasive behaviors than females. Moreover, Language Expectancy Theory (Burgoon & Siegel, 2004) suggests that males who violate expectations in a rewarding way may be most persuasive. With these inconsistencies in mind, we ask the following research question:

RQ3: Does food servers' gender moderate the effect of compliments on tipping behavior?

Method

Participants

Three hundred and sixty parties eating dinner at four restaurants in northern Utah were observed in this study (dining party is the unit of analysis in this study). Two of the restaurants belong to well-known franchises and all four can be described as casual dining establishments in the mid-price range. Party size ranged from 1 to 17 with the median party consisting of three diners. Of those parties examined, 3.1% consisted of one diner ($n = 11$), 45.8% consisted of two diners ($n = 165$), 21.1% consisted of three diners ($n = 76$), 14.7% consisted of four diners ($n = 53$), 5.6% consisted of five diners ($n = 20$), 3.1%

consisted of six diners ($n = 11$), 3.3% consisted of seven diners ($n = 12$), 1.4% consisted of eight diners, ($n = 5$), .8% consisted of nine diners ($n = 3$), and .3% each consisted of ten, fourteen, fifteen, or seventeen diners ($n = 1$ each). All totaled then, 1154 customers served as participants. Before data analysis commenced, parties larger than 7 were eliminated because they appeared too infrequently and because not all of the parties of this size received both treatment conditions. This resulted in eliminating twelve parties resulting in 348 parties for analysis.

Procedures

The data were collected by two female students majoring in Communication (both 22 years old), one male student majoring in Communication (age 24), and one male student majoring in English (age 26), who worked as part-time food servers. All four were instructed to treat their customers no differently than they normally would during their regular server duties, except for right after taking the 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, they all carried six pennies in their pockets, three marked with ink and three without. Before approaching a table, each server removed a penny, checked it, and then returned it to his or her pocket. If the penny was not marked, the server gave no compliments. If it was marked, the server complimented the guests after they had all completed their orders. For two-person parties, the servers said, "You both made good choices!" For parties with more than two people, the servers said, "You all made good choices!"

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 ($M = 18.75$, $SD = 7.9$, range = 0 to 63).

Results

The research questions were addressed by computing a hierarchical multiple regression analysis. In order to address the first research question, the compliment/no compliment condition was effects coded (i.e., no compliment condition = -1; compliment condition = 1) and entered simultaneously with server gender (also effects coded: male = -1; female = 1) and number of diners in the party on the first step of the equation. Entering the experimental condition simultaneously with gender and number in party allowed us to determine the unique contribution of the compliment condition. The overall model produced a significant multiple R^2 explaining 7% of the variance in tipping behavior, $R^2 = .072$, $F(3, 344) = 8.94$, $p < .001$.

As the results in Table 1 indicate, the compliment condition produced a significant increase in tipping behavior, $\beta = .20$, $t = 3.80$, $p < .001$ ($M = 18.75$ for no compliment condition; $M = 20.31$ for compliment condition). Compliments increased servers' tips by an estimated 3.1% (95% C.I. = 1.5 to 4.8). Party size also had a significant main effect, $\beta = -.20$, $t = -3.85$, $p < .001$. The unstandardized coefficient points to a 1.2% decrease in estimated tip for each member added to the party (95% C.I. = -1.8 to -.58). Although the main effect of party size was not of interest in this study, the result does confirm previous research on the effect of party size on tipping behavior (e.g., Freeman et al., 1975). There was no main effect for server gender, $\beta = .038$, $t = .71$, $p = .476$ ($M = 18.78$ for males; $M = 18.73$ for females).

The second and third research questions asked whether the effect of compliments is moderated by party size or server gender. Following Cohen and Cohen (1983), the interactions were analyzed by multiplying the compliment variable by each of the moderating variables and then entered on the second step of the hierarchical regression equation. The addition of the interaction terms resulted in a significant overall increase in the variance accounted for by the model, $R^2\Delta = .02$, $F\Delta(2, 342) = 3.35$, $p = .036$. As depicted in Table 1, the party size by compliment interaction was significant, $\beta = -.51$, $p = .015$. The server gender by compliment interaction, however, was not significant, $\beta = -.12$, $p = .621$.

The significant party size by compliment interaction was further examined by computing separate regression equations for the no compliment and the compliment conditions (e.g., Cohen & Cohen, 1983). This analysis indicates that party size has a significant negative effect on tipping behavior only in the compliment condition (compliment condition: $B = -.40$, $p < .001$; no compliment condition: $b = -.07$, $p = .375$). In light of this result, we also wanted to determine at what point the effect of party size made giving compliments result in lower tips than withholding compliments. To do this, estimated tip percentages were computed by multiplying unstandardized coefficients (associated with the compliment and no-compliment equations) by party size (in increments of one), adding the result to the intercept (compliment = 26.19; no compliment condition = 18.608), and graphing the results. The results are depicted in Figure 1. At a party size of four diners, the estimated tips for the compliment and no compliment conditions become essentially equal and at a party size of five diners, the estimated tips in the compliment condition are lower than in the no compliment condition.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of generalized compliments, party size, and gender on tipping behavior in restaurants. While other research found that servers' gender is associated with tipping behavior (Rind & Bordia, 1996), this study did not. On the other hand, generalized compliments and party size were significantly associated with differences in such behavior. Specifically, our first major finding was that, overall, food servers received significantly higher tips when they complimented their dining party's choice of menu items than when they did not. This finding is consistent with previous theory and research suggesting that ingratiation, perhaps the most common form of impression management (Jones, 1990), is persuasive (Cody et al., 1995; Hendrick et al, 1972; Seiter, 2007; Seiter & Dutson, 2007). While, at first glance, a roughly 3 percent increase in tips may seem a small amount, an additional \$1 to \$5 per shift could translate in to 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 US collectively.

However, before recommending the use of generalized compliments by food servers, we should note that such compliments were not associated with higher tips for all of the servers in our study. Indeed, a closer inspection of the tips earned by each server showed that one of the female servers received lower tips in the compliment condition than in the no compliment condition. At this point we can only speculate on reasons why this might be. For instance, the authors perceived this server to be less nonverbally expressive than the others. If so, perhaps she was perceived by guests as less sincere when giving compliments. Future research should explore this explanation and others. Meanwhile, practitioners considering the use of ingratiation should keep in mind that, our

results were statistically significant even with this food servers' data included. Without it, the three other servers would have increased their tips by about 4% from 16.34% in the "no compliment" condition to 20.21% in the "compliment" condition. Considering this and other research indicating the effectiveness of compliments (see above), alongside the ease with which compliments can be given, we suggest that sincere compliments are a positive means by which most food servers can bolster their incomes.

The second major finding of this study was that the effectiveness of generalized compliments depended on the size of the dining party. Specifically, as the size of the party increased, the effectiveness of generalized compliments decreased. With two or three diners in a party, compliments were associated with larger tips. With four diners, compliments seemed to make no difference. However, when parties contained five or more diners, tip size in the compliment condition dipped below tip size in the no compliment condition.

Earlier, we suggested two possible reasons for why compliments might be ineffective with larger parties. First, with more potential for sideline conversations while an order is being taken, diners in larger parties may be less likely to hear compliments. Given the results of this study, this explanation seems unlikely. To be sure, if this were the case, we would not expect tips in the compliment and no compliment conditions to be any different because, in essence, the two conditions become comparable (i.e., in each condition, compliments are not received, either because they are not given or not heard). Instead, the results seem more consistent with research on the "slime effect," suggesting that those who ingratiate are less likeable if perceived as having ulterior motives (Vonk, 1998). Future research should investigate the viability of this explanation.

Meanwhile, from an applied perspective, the implications of this finding are clear: food servers wishing to increase their tips should confine their use of generalized compliments to parties of four or less. Although this suggestion may seem limiting, keep in mind that nearly 70 percent of the parties in this study were composed of 2 to 3 diners. If this number is representative of typical dining parties, servers would have the opportunity to give compliments to the majority of parties they wait on.

In addition to its practical applications for food servers, the results of this study should be of interest to others. For instance, assuming that higher tips reflect greater customer satisfaction (see Davis et al., 1998), restaurant owners who want to foster a pleasant dining atmosphere and encourage patrons to return should be aware of our findings. Moreover, this study should interest scholars. First, it extends previous research by investigating conditions under which an influence tactic is effective and is consistent with previous work demonstrating that even minor changes in food server behavior can significantly affect tipping behavior. Second, as already noted, 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 a considerable amount of research has concentrated on studying the relationship between ingratiation and liking, Blickle (2003) argued that it has neglected to examine the relationship between ingratiation and compliance gaining. It is hoped that this study helps to fill that gap.

Despite its contributions, this study was limited in several respects. First, observations were confined to restaurants in one geographical location and to compliments based solely on patrons’ menu choice. Perhaps other locations or other types of compliments (e.g., those that are more personal in nature) might produce different

results. Moreover, 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). Finally, it would be interesting to know whether generalized compliments are just as effective as individual compliments. Future research should examine these issues.

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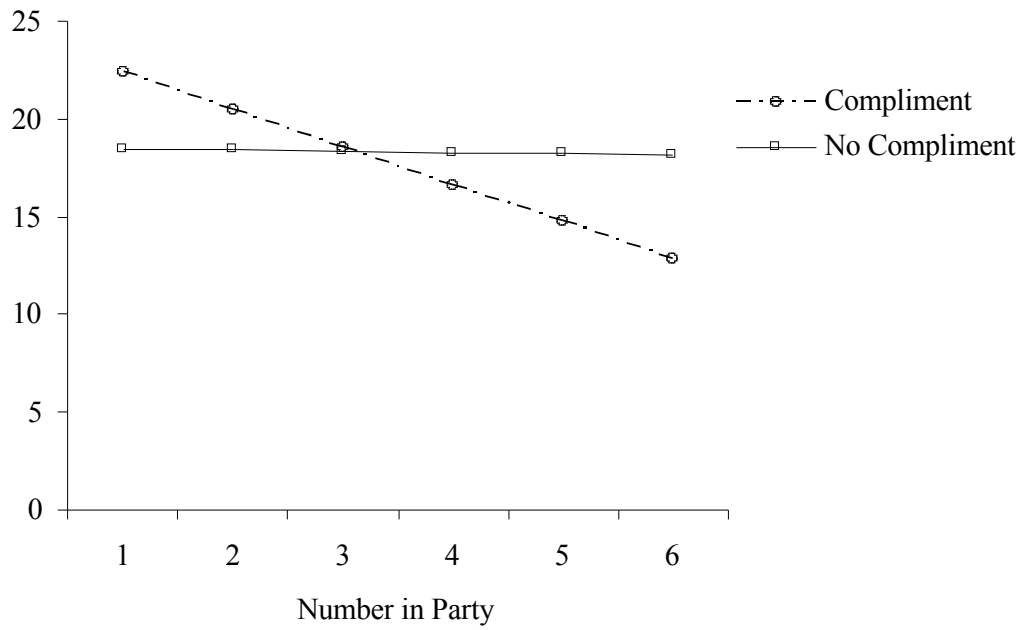
Table 1
 Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Tipping Behavior
 (N = 348 Parties Observed).

Variable	R^2 Change	B	$SE B$	β	p
Step 1	.072				< .001
Compliment Condition		3.14	.828	.20	< .001
Server Sex		.610	.855	.04	.476
Size of Party		-1.19	.308	-.20	<.001
Step 2	.090				.036
Condition X Sex		-.845	1.02	-.12	.621
Condition X Size of Party		-1.50	.532	-.51	.015

Notes: Step 1 $F(3, 344) = 8.94, p < .001$; Step 2 $F\Delta(5, 342) = 3.35, p < .015$.

Figure 1

Plot of Estimated Tip Percentages for the Compliment and No Compliment Conditions.



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