

2022

Black diners and tipping: An analysis of tipping culture amongst black restaurant diners

Steven McIntyre

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.jwu.edu/studentpub_cfit



Part of the [Business Commons](#)

BLACK DINERS AND TIPPING: AN ANALYSIS OF TIPPING CULTURE AMONGST
BLACK RESTAURANT DINERS

Black diners and tipping: An analysis of tipping culture amongst black restaurant diners

Steven McIntyre

Johnson & Wales University

Hospitality Capstone

HOSP 6900

Abstract

Tipping began as a means to gain prompt service. Today the practice serves as a primary source of income within the service industry. Within that time, Black diners have achieved the perception of being poor tippers. Throughout this paper, the author will discuss how the Jim Crow era aided in tipping. Additionally, this research examines how the government intervened to ensure discrimination in the workplace was eliminated. Finally, the paper will discuss the correlation of tipping in the United States society, its relations to cultural norms, and social constructs. These topics will support the tie discrimination has to tipping. This project utilizes second-hand research to strengthen the findings. Tipping connects to discrimination, and black diners have not benefitted from the system.

Contents

Introduction..... 3

Literature Review..... 3

 The History of Tipping..... 4

 Discrimination in Service..... 5

 Tipping as a Social Construct..... 7

 Tipping as a Cultural Norm..... 8

Methodology..... 9

Findings..... 9

Conclusion 10

References..... 11

Black Diners and Tipping: An Analysis of Tipping Culture Amongst Black Restaurant Diners

Introduction

TIPS is an acronym meaning *To Insure Prompt Service*. Over several years, black diners have received a negative reputation as bad tippers. There is a perception that this issue is associated with discrimination.

From the history of tipping to surveys conducted on the topic, this report will showcase how discrimination plays a part in tipping. Additionally, the relationship between other races will be examined to build a foundation on the tipping practices of black diners. Further, the research will showcase a key reason for lower tips. Tips are generally given based on good service. With the stereotype that black diners tip poorly, the service the restaurants receive is also poor. The relationship between these two occurrences creates a paradox in building vital service.

Finally, this report will examine the social construct of tipping. Within black neighborhoods, is the practice of tipping normalized? For patrons to tip appropriately, there must be a place to practice tipping standards. The idea some diners may not experience this can play a significant factor in the lack of tipping.

Literature Review

The literature review will cover topics that validate the idea of discrimination being a critical factor in tipping. Beginning with the history of tipping, the review will show the practice's origins. Following that, the review will highlight discrimination in service to black diners. This area will begin to focus on the Jim Crow era. After highlighting the history of

tipping, the idea of tipping as a social construct will be covered. Finally, the review will cover tipping as a social norm in the United States.

The History of Tipping

Tipping as a practice became popular during the Reconstruction Post-Civil War era (Greenspan, 2018). Wealthy patrons discovered the tradition that has ties to early medieval times. The system connected to the servant and master relationship was prominent in that period. If a servant performed pleasingly, the master would give an additional *tip* to thank the servant for their work.

As the practice became more spread, its popularity dropped. Fewer wealthy Americans did not want to pay additional money to provide quality service. The Americans found the course “inherently condescending and classist” (Greenspan, 2018, par. 5).

Despite this, restaurant owners used this method as a scapegoat for recently freed slaves. As the laws were changing, the freed African Americans faced a paradox. Many of these formerly enslaved people needed jobs. For most, sharecropping was the primary job skill available (Blackmon, n.d.). If a formerly enslaved person did not find work there, the service industry provided a means of income; This came with jobs like barbers, servants, and waitpersons. The primary issue with the restaurant workers was employers would not pay a full wage. Instead, the restaurant workers prompted their workers to gain tips. By recognizing this system, African Americans were placed in a system that allowed them to be taken advantage of.

As more restaurant owners found a means to subsidize wages, African American workers became more dependent on tipping. They do not benefit from the system; many African Americans could not use it.

Discrimination in Service

In 1964, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Within this law, Congress “prohibits discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin. Provisions of this civil rights act forbade discrimination based on sex and race in hiring, promoting, and firing” (US Department of Justice, n.d., par. 2). In addition, the law ended Jim Crow era laws. These laws prohibited restaurants from separating diners based on race. Unfortunately, some did not follow these laws and treated black diners poorly.

In 1991, several black college students returned from a local NAACP conference. The students were eager to dine at a local Denny’s restaurant. Unfortunately, the group was required to pay a cover charge and prepay for the meal. No other guests in the restaurant were needed to do such (Selmi, 2002). As a result, the Department of Justice began an investigation that found more than 4,300 complaints against the national brand. Denny’s reputation against black diners started to escalate.

As a result of numerous lawsuits and allegations, the company was required to pay \$46 million in settlement money (Dirks & Rice, 2004). The company paid the funds in 1993, and despite the damage to its reputation, it faced similar allegations in 1999. Black diners once again were the targets of unnecessary bias and discrimination.

In these cases, black diners faced discrimination in several ways. The idea of good customer service is an afterthought for Denny’s restaurants. Giving a tip in these situations is not ideal. Black customers dealt with problems requiring legal action. Denny’s is not the only restaurant accused of discrimination; unfortunately, it may not be the last.

Black diners face a wide range of discrimination, some on a smaller scale. This form of subtle racism can populate several states. Through the popular stereotype of black diners not tipping well, restaurant servers avoid giving top service to this group. As a result, servers can

Rationalize discriminatory service delivery to African Americans by couching such mistreatment within the context of their economic dependence on customer gratuities. In other words, they can justify giving less attention to Black patrons (i.e., discriminate) because they do not perceive that they will be fairly compensated for their efforts.

(Brewster et al., 2014, pp. 5-12)

If a server feels no additional compensation is granted for their job, it is an excuse not to give top service. Black diners are not given a chance to avoid these stereotypes. The perception is built the moment they enter the restaurants. Servers often will pass on tables with black diners due to these ideas. If tips are based on service and black diners often receive lower service, would it not equate to a lower tip?

Tipping is a practice that has grown into the primary source of compensation for some servers (Brewster et al., 2014, pp 5-12). The service for black diners can be of lower quality. Should these patrons have to pay a tip for a lesser-quality service? Progress in the hospitality industry must include the rectification of this system. While some believe that going to an automatic gratuity system would be the solution (Meadows, 2019), the question remains if that is feasible for the industry. If an implicit bias is built in, what will it take to remove it?

Consumer racial profiling (CRP) is an issue that is prevalent in the restaurant industry. Beyond this project's scope, the restaurant industry is built on this concept. Removing this aspect from this industry would cause a significant shift.

Tipping as a Social Construct

An issue that arises at the end of every meal is how much to tip. People from several communities never know the answer. Whether it is a certain percentage based on service, based on food, or a simple dollar amount, within the black community, this question comes with an extra barrier. Within many affluent black communities, there is a lack of fine-dining or sit-down restaurants. Linda Wallace for Diversity Inc. stated:

Industry experts cited two reasons chains have not aggressively pursued these markets: a belief that they can't make money and a perceived problem with tipping. Across America, there is a widespread belief among restaurateurs that African-Americans and members of some immigrant ethnic groups just aren't good tippers. This perception, they say, shapes strategic decisions about restaurant placement and customer policies, yet it is rarely discussed publicly because bringing it up might appear racist. (Lynn, 2004, p. 15)

In the restaurant industry, there is a significant need for education. In the previously mentioned neighborhoods, not many establishments depend on tipping. Without this additional knowledge, teaching those about standard tipping procedures is difficult. In a national survey by Lynn, participants were asked, "Thinking about tipping overall, not your own practices, how much is it customary for people in the United States to tip waiters and waitresses?"(Lynn, 2004, pp. 15).

Once answered from a list of choices, the participants were asked demographic questions about ethnicity, sex, age, education, income, and household size. According to the survey, black participants were less familiar with the standard tips than white participants. In addition to these numbers, the black respondents were likelier to leave a flat tip than a percentage of the overall check.

These revelations validate that most black diners are unaware of the tipping practice. Thus, when they dine at a restaurant, there is a knowledge barrier. There are solutions to this besides belittling customers and giving poor service. One method that has helped is suggested tips at the bottom of checks. This allows any diner to know what a good tip for their meal is. This method has gained popularity. Some restaurants have gone the extra step and permitted customers to circle their appropriate recommendations. An additional method is used with digital POS systems that allow guests to tap the correct tip amount.

The critical item to recognize is the knowledge of tipping. Black diners did not create the system that uses tipping. As a result, the perception arises that they are bad tippers because they do not know how to tip. Just as servers can answer questions regarding menu items, conversations can be made for tipping.

Tipping as a Cultural Norm

Throughout this report, black diners have been the focus. However, it is essential to create a comparison between other races. Within the data collected, the worst tippers were teenagers and foreign customers (McCall & Lynn, 2009). This finding is based on demographic information without the mention of race. This information can make sense upon observation. Typically, teenagers do not have access to disposable income. The very thought of them in a restaurant could strain finances. This group also may be unaware of the cultural norm that comes with tipping. As restaurant managers and servers, there should be an offering of grace when these tables arrive.

In addition to teenagers, foreign guests were the worst tippers (McCall & Lynn, 2009). In some countries, tipping is considered offensive (BBC, 2018). Restaurant workers are paid a

living wage without relying on *tips* in other countries. Countries such as China, Japan, Switzerland, Brazil, and Denmark do not participate in the practice. (Dhillon, 2014).

Methodology

For this project, the data collection is from secondary sources. This is a working paper to analyze the topic of Black tippers. Additionally, this paper uses scholarly articles as primary sources. In addition, this paper uses surveys as a means to validate information found in academic papers.

Findings

Throughout this paper, the role of tipping in American dining culture has some connection to discrimination. The practice allowed newly freed black workers to interact with discrimination firsthand (Greenspan, 2018). During this time, the black workers tried to establish a new life in freedom. Instead, a system was created to make a systematic difference in their lives. While unable to have many jobs beyond sharecropping (Blackmon, n.d.), the new workers succumbed to the unfair treatment that tipping birth.

The issue of discrimination with tipping became such an overwhelming problem the United States government passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (U.S. Department of Justice, n.d.) to combat the issues surrounding discrimination. This act made it illegal to discriminate against diners for any reason. However, this did not stop the actions from happening. As shown in 1991, discrimination against black diners continues to grow (Selmi, 2002). Once again, the government had to intervene to ensure discrimination was not occurring.

To correlate tipping as a social construct creates a barrier some diners cannot overcome. As people from different social backgrounds may tip differently (Lynn, 2004), it is confirmed

that discrimination plays a role again. The perception that black diners will come to and tip poorly promotes a lesser quality service as some believe the effort is unnecessary.

Finally, despite the research showing foreign diners and teenage diners are considered the worst tippers (McCall & Lynn, 2009), some black restaurants still experience discrimination (Lynn, (2004), Brewster, Z. W., Lynn, M., & Cocroft, S. (2014), and Dirks, D., & Rice, S. K. (2004)). The practice is not seen often in countries besides the U.S (Dhillon, 2014). This may correlate with the newly freed laborers' absence to create the system.

Conclusion

Black people played an integral role in the systems of tipping we see today. As a result of leaving sharecropping and a need to work, black people became tied into a system where the consumer determined their income. Decades later, we are still using that system. Many believe it is time to leave that system in the past and move on. However, without the knowledge to grow, restaurants will continue to use tipping.

As a result, black diners will continue to deal with subpar service based on false perceptions. While this is not the case with all diners, there is a thread that supports this idea. As black diners can dine at more sit-down restaurants, perhaps there will be a proper introduction to this social norm—an introduction without discrimination and bias.

References

- BBC. (2018, October 7). How does the world tip? In some places, it's actually offensive! BBC.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/business-45746752>
- Blackmon, D. A. (n.d.). *Sharecropping* | *Themes* | Slavery by another name. PBS.
<https://www.pbs.org/tpt/slavery-by-another-name/themes/sharecropping/>
- Brewster, Z. W., Lynn, M., & Cocroft, S. (2014). Consumer racial profiling in U.S. restaurants: exploring subtle forms of service discrimination against black diners Zachary W. Cornell eCommons.https://ecommons.cornell.edu/bitstream/handle/1813/71598/Lynn64_Consumer_racial_profiling.pdf?sequence=1
- Dhillon, K. (2014, April 28). Hate tipping? Here are 12 countries where you don't have to. Business Insider. <https://www.businessinsider.com/hate-tipping-here-are-12-countries-where-you-dont-have-to-2014-4>
- Dirks, D., & Rice, S. K. (2004). "Dining While Black": Tipping as a social artifact. *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 45(1), 30–47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010880403260105>
- Gaines, A. (2021, July 5). Black people don't tip. Can you take that table? An Injustice! Retrieved July 24, 2022, from <https://aninjusticemag.com/black-people-dont-tip-can-you-take-that-table-ab23ec10127b>
- Greenspan, R. E. (2018, October 15). How Americans tip at restaurants has a troubling history. TIME.
<https://time.com/5404475/history-tipping-american-restaurants-civil-war/>
- Haley, A. (2020, April 16). Should tipping in American restaurants be eliminated? CORE. Retrieved https://scholarsarchive.jwu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=mgmt_student
- Lynn, M., & Brewster, Z. (2015, January 21). What's behind racial differences in restaurant tipping? The Washington Post. From

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/01/21/whats-behind-racial-differences-in-restaurant-tipping/>

Lynn, M., Pugh, C. C., & Williams, J. (2012). Black–White Differences in Tipping: The Moderating Effects of Socioeconomic Status. *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly*, 53(4), 286–294.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1938965512458177>

Lynn, M. (2004). Ethnic differences in tipping: A matter of familiarity with tipping norms. *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 45(1), 12–22.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0010880403260101>

Meadows, M. (2019). How does automatic tipping affect racial discrimination in Puget sound area Restaurants? Scholarly Publishing Services from

https://digital.lib.washington.edu/researchworks/bitstream/handle/1773/43586/2018_Meadows%2c%20Michael%20-%20Michael%20Meadows.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

McCall, M., & Lynn, A. (2009). Restaurant servers’ perceptions of customer tipping intentions. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 28(4), 594–596.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2009.03.010>

Selmi, M. (2002). The price of discrimination: The nature of class action employment litigation and its effects [SSRN Scholarly Paper]. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.363380>

US Department of Justice. (n.d.). Legal highlight: the civil rights act of 1964. U.S. Department of Labor. Retrieved August 14, 2022, from <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/oasam/civil-rights-center/statutes/civil-rights-act-of-1964>

Williams, J. (2003, July 11). The Tipping Divide. NPR. From

<https://www.npr.org/2003/07/11/1329241/the-tipping-divide>

Winters, M. (2021, December 14). Here's how much you should tip restaurant workers. CNBC.

<https://www.cnbc.com/2021/12/14/how-much-you-should-be-tipping-restaurant-workers.html>