‘Because they tip for shit!’: The Social Psychology of Everyday Racism in Restaurants

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Abstract
Despite the notion that racism and discrimination are things of the past, racial minorities continue to experience such treatment in everyday interactions, often occurring in commercial transactions. In this paper, we analyze data from a survey of restaurant servers (N = 200) and a qualitative field study. Both were designed to explore the racial climate in restaurants. Our findings show that servers not only observe their co-workers practicing discriminatory behaviors but also report doing so themselves. Referring to this trend as ‘tableside racism’, we argue that restaurant servers engage in racist discourse, which functions to create and sustain stereotypes about black patrons. These workplace interactions shape the service that is extended to black patrons, thus resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy wherein they receive poor tips and treatment from blacks that reflect inferior service. To illustrate the process of server discrimination, we situate our findings in a social psychological framework.

Considering the history of race relations in the United States, it is not surprising that research continues to provide ample evidence of the discrimination racial minorities face in various interactions. Research has documented racial discrimination in housing markets (Yinger 1986), automobile purchasing (Ayres 1991; Ayres and Siegelman 1995), quality of homeowners’ insurance policies (Chan 1999), and mortgage lending (Ladd 1998). These transactions, however, occur infrequently in comparison with everyday forms of consumption (e.g. shopping; eating out), and yet, there has been little systematic research into the extent and nature of racial discrimination in these contexts (see Antecol and Cobb-Clark 2006; Siegelman 1998, p. 70; Yinger 1998). A promising body of literature addressing the issue of consumer discrimination in everyday interactions has only recently surfaced in scholarly journals and books. Gabbidon (2003) recently surveyed the scholarly literature on racial discrimination while shopping in retail stores and found only three articles addressing the issue despite the fact that racial minorities, like all Americans, spend a substantial amount of time in retail settings.

The limited number of studies on the topic that do exist have been inspired by the more established area of inquiry exploring law
enforcement officers’ tendency to use individuals’ race as a basis for stopping, investigating, and detaining/arresting people rather than probable cause or even a reasonable amount of suspicion that a law has been violated. Scholars working in this area refer to this phenomenon with the now popular concept of ‘driving while black or brown’ (see Tomaskovic-Devey et al. 2004). Subsequent research extends the scope of investigations into racial profiling by exploring African Americans’ experiences with everyday commercial transactions. From this research emerged concepts such as ‘shopping while black’ (Gabbidon 2003; Harris 2003; Williams et al. 2001), ‘hailing a cab while black’ (Ayres et al. 2005), and ‘dining while black’ (Dirks and Rice 2004). These lines of inquiry can more generally be conceptualized as constituting unique but related dimensions of everyday racism.

According to Essed (1991), everyday racism includes the racial attitude and actions infused into the fabric of society. Everyday racism reflects ‘systematic, recurrent, and familiar practices’ that minorities face on an everyday basis (Essed 1991, p. 3). Everyday racism is distinct from the individual racism of racist individuals and instead reveals the systemic qualities of a racist society (Essed 1991). Despite evidence of the everyday racism that black Americans continue to face (e.g., Essed 1991; Feagin 1991; Feagin 2006, 2001, Feagin and Sikes 1994; Swim et al. 2003), there continues to be a shortage of scientific investigations in this area. The lack of scholarly attention to such discrimination is especially evident in the context of dining away from home – a quintessential American activity (see Scarborough Research Group’s 2006 research report on restaurant patronage).

The shortage of studies on ‘dining while black’ is surprising given the economic implications surrounding this phenomenon. Over the last decade, for instance, numerous litigations of racial discrimination have been levied against restaurant establishments, the most widely publicized cases being Haynes v. Shoney’s (Watkins 1997) and the cases against Denny’s family restaurant (Relin and Gaskins 1995; Rousseau 1997). Shoney’s was mandated to pay $132.5 million to the 21,000 persons involved in the class action lawsuit, while Denny’s paid 54 million dollars to the plaintiffs who experienced discrimination. Legal fees alone make any lawsuit costly regardless of the verdict (see Lynn 2004b).

Discrimination has also been implicated in lost revenue resulting from reduced black patronage (see Lynn 2004a, p. 14). In 2007, African–American purchasing power was estimated to be $845 billion and is projected to grow at a much faster rate relative to whites (Humphreys 2007). In fact, by 2012, it is estimated that black purchasing power will account for nearly 9% of every dollar spent in the U.S. economy (Humphreys 2007). Yet, relative to the U.S. adult population, blacks spend less money eating out (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2007) and are less likely to frequent full-service restaurants, in particular (Scarborough Research 2006). Differences
in restaurant patronage are likely to emerge, in part, in response to the discriminatory treatment that African Americans encounter in these settings.

Dirks and Rice (2004), for instance, recently documented evidence of a ‘culture of white servers’ within restaurant establishments. They argue that such a culture is characterized by a strong anti-black belief system and reflected in the racist and stereotypical language that servers use to privately disparage African Americans. Such disparaging language then shapes the quality of service that servers provide to their black patrons (Dirks and Rice 2004). If African Americans experience tableside racism, it should not be surprising that they, relative to whites, are less likely to ‘dine in’ and more likely to ‘carry out’ (Rousseau 1997; Scarborough Research 2006).

What we will refer to as tableside racism is restaurant servers’ use of stereotypes, assumptions, and ‘status beliefs’ (Ridgeway and Erikson 2000) to not only predict the dining behavior and tip quality of black customers, but to act on these predictions. Tableside racism can include both overt and subtle forms of discrimination. As we will see, our data show that tableside racism is distinctively anti-black. Although there are many racist features of society both institutionally and ideologically, we will focus on the ways servers construct and reproduce a racist workplace culture. We argue that racist discourse among servers perpetuates stereotypes that blacks are undesirable patrons. These stereotypes ultimately function to solidify racist status beliefs (Ridgeway and Erikson 2000) among servers’ and these beliefs in turn facilitate a self-fulfilling prophecy – when a prediction or assumption shapes one’s behavior, leading the prediction to ‘come true’. Restaurant servers adhere to negative stereotypes about black patrons and therefore feel justified in delivering minimum/inferior service to them, who in turn tend to reciprocate with lower than average tips thus confirming the stereotypes (see Dirks and Rice 2004).

Given this brief introduction, it is clear that racial discrimination – tableside racism – occurs in the restaurant industry. However, we do not know how pervasive such behaviors are. Likewise, research has offered little insight into the pervasiveness of racist and stereotypical server discourse that is said to reflect an anti-minority ‘culture of white servers’ (Dirks and Rice 2004). Finally, we lack knowledge on the motivations underlying discriminatory server behaviors. To address these gaps, we present both quantitative and qualitative data on servers’ anti-black attitudes and behaviors. We also offer an explanatory framework, based in social-psychological theory, within which tableside racism can, in part, be understood.

Our study is guided by the following questions: How do servers perceive black patrons? Is there a racist culture among workers reflected in their discourse that promotes anti-black beliefs and attitudes? Do servers act on these beliefs by providing inferior service to black customers? Is a social
psychological framework useful toward gaining a more nuanced understanding of servers’ discriminatory behaviors? Next, we describe our research methods and data. Then we offer a social psychological framework within which anti-black server discourse and behaviors can be better understood.

Methods

In this study, we employ both quantitative and qualitative research designs to gain insights into the racial climate of restaurants. Triangulating methods continues to be underutilized despite the fact that multi-method studies have yielded valuable insights into the social world that would not have been possible using single method approaches. Triangulation allows researchers to ‘capture a more complete, holistic, and contextual portrayal of the unit(s) under study’ (Jick 1979, p. 603). It also functions to improve validity. When different methods yield similar results researchers can have more confidence ‘that the results are valid and not a methodological artifact’ (Bouchard 1976, p. 302). Studying discrimination with mixed methods is especially useful given the social unacceptability of racist beliefs (Bonilla-Silva 2001, 2003). By asking people to report their own and others’ behavior paired with participant observations and in-depth interviews, we can see both what servers do and what they say they and others do.

Field study

In 2002, the first author conducted a field study during which she worked full time as a restaurant server for approximately 1 month in a medium-sized city in the Midwest. She took detailed jottings which she turned into extensive fieldnotes within one day of observation. Fieldnotes included details of observations describing servers’ actions and conversation. The managers and all of the servers were aware of her dual role as a server–researcher. Data derived from participant observations were supplemented with in-depth interviews with a convenience sample of eight white servers. In the text below, servers from the field study will be referred to by their first names (which are pseudonyms). Owing to the small sample size used in this study, readers should refrain from generalizing the sentiments expressed in the servers’ quotations that we present. The survey questionnaire was developed after we examined the insights gained from the field study. We report the qualitative data from the field study mainly for illustrative and validating purposes.

Survey of restaurant servers

In 2004, the authors designed and administered a survey to servers (N = 200) working in restaurants located in a large Southeastern city in the United States. Restaurant servers, who represent the largest segment of the restaurant
industry labor force (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2007), were asked a variety of questions concerning the racial climate of their restaurants. We specifically wanted to know about servers’ racist discourse and discriminatory behaviors. Using the local phone book, we identified 78 ‘chain bar and grill’ restaurants. To be considered a chain bar and grill, and thus be included in the sampling frame, the restaurant must have been operating in at least two locations in the local area. We made no assumptions about the ownership of these establishments (e.g., corporate, private, franchise). From the list of 78 establishments, we randomly selected 40 restaurants to be included in our sample. All 40 restaurants were contacted and 18 agreed to participate in the study, thus giving us a 45% organizational response rate. Sampled establishments are clearly not representative of the universe of full service restaurants. In fact, with regard to size (i.e., number of employees), only larger restaurants are included in our sample (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2007). Once access was granted, we attempted to request the participation of all servers who were present at the time of our visit, aiming to gather a minimum of ten questionnaires per restaurant. These data collection procedures resulted in the completion of 200 self-administered questionnaires.

Data

The sample included 200 individuals who were working as restaurant servers and/or bartenders in the summer of 2004. Nearly 61% of the sampled respondents were female, with the remaining 39% being male. The majority of sample respondents were white (86.2%). The remaining respondents self-identified as black (7.2%), Native American (.5%), Hispanic (1%), Asian (2.1%), or other (3.1%). Owing to the small number of black servers (n = 14) in our sample, we refrain from discussing any racial differences in item responses. Their ages ranged from 17 to 43 with a mean age of 24 years. Experience in the restaurant industry varied a great deal, but 81.8% of the sample respondents had worked in two or more restaurant establishments. On average, servers had been employed with their current restaurant for 17.4 months. The majority of the respondents had obtained some post-high school education, with 22.5% having obtained a Bachelor’s degree.

We did not take formal measures to ensure that the study sample was representative of any particular segment of the restaurant industry, but there is no evidence that would suggest that these study subjects are dramatically different from other servers working in similar types of restaurants. However, comparing these data with national data on restaurant servers and respondent characteristics used in other published research indicates that the average sample respondent in this study is less likely to be female, is more likely to be under 25 years of age, and more likely to possess a college degree (see Lynn 2007; National Restaurant Association
In all of these cases, the differences are minimal with the exception of educational attainment. Only 7% of all those working in foodservice occupations report attaining a Bachelor’s degree, whereas 22.6% of sampled respondents for this study did so (National Restaurant Association 2006). This, however, is consistent with the enhanced level of educational attainment in the area where the sample was selected (U.S. Census Bureau 2006). In the following section, we present the data that describes anti-black sentiment, racist workplace culture, and server discrimination. Additional information about data collection procedures and sample demographics are available upon request.

**Blacks as undesirable patrons**

Research has consistently shown that many servers harbor negative attitudes about waiting on African-American customers. Blacks are perceived to tip poorly (Harris 1995; Lynn 2000; Mallinson and Brewster 2005; Noll and Arnold 2004; Rusche 2003) and be more demanding and difficult to wait on (Dirks and Rice 2004). Consistent with extant findings, our data also reveal a considerable amount of negativity toward black restaurant guests. We asked our respondents to write in the race of their ‘ideal’ and ‘least ideal’ customers. Table 1 clearly demonstrates that blacks are overwhelmingly considered to be the ‘least ideal’ racial category of customers to wait on. But why? To gain additional insights, we asked them to describe characteristics of their ‘ideal’ and ‘least ideal’ customers.

**Table 1.** Servers’ Ideal and Least Ideal Races to Serve

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race of Patrons</th>
<th>‘Ideal’ (frequency)</th>
<th>‘Least Ideal’ (frequency)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whites</td>
<td>64.7% (123)</td>
<td>6.01% (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blacks</td>
<td>2.6% (5)</td>
<td>54.6% (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Minorities</td>
<td>3.2% (6)</td>
<td>8.7% (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Preference</td>
<td>29.5% (56)</td>
<td>30.6% (56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100% (190*)</td>
<td>100% (183*)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Caption for Table 1.
*Original N = 200. Since each entry was counted separately (i.e. an entry like ‘black/Asian’ was counted as two entries), the totals do not add up to the same N. Corrected totals do not reflect the number of respondents, but rather the number of responses. Missing and ambiguous data were omitted here.*
Most characteristics of least ideal customers listed included items such as tipping quality and customers’ behavior or personality. Blacks were explicitly described as poor tippers whose demands exceed the acceptable limit. One server was explicit in this view when she wrote, ‘because they tip for shit!’ While many servers listed one particular reason, the next server cited several of the most common stereotypes of black diners in one response: ‘They tend to be demanding, unappreciative, and they DO NOT TIP!’ (emphasis original). One server went further, calling blacks ‘pushy’ and suggested that they have ‘too high expectations’. This is not an uncommon attitude about blacks who seek to get what they want in life, whether in restaurants, work, or politics (see Wellman 1993). Some servers mentioned that black patrons make them feel bad in some way, suggesting that blacks were intentionally rude to the server. ‘They will try to make you feel like crap. They will try to get free food and do not tip.’ One server suggested that black customers tip her according to how they see her: ‘They tend to see me as inferior and their tipping practices reflect it.’

In line with contemporary racial politics, a fair amount of servers used linguistic strategies to soften their racist statements (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000). ‘I hate to be like that, but from experience, they [blacks] are the worst tables to wait on.’ The fact that about 30% of servers in the study indicated that they have no preference in the race of their customers may also reflect the commonness of contemporary ‘race talk’. One server cited black customers as being ideal, explaining:

I recognize most other white servers anticipate giving poorer service (for whatever reason). With intentional high service to this group I have experienced open appreciation.

In a similar vein, Brad, a white server, admitted in an interview that racism is common, but that he tries to avoid it:

I think a lot of restaurant employees are just, I mean our population in general, that most people are racist. It is very unfortunate. I give everyone an equal chance.

Of course, not everyone abides by these ‘politically correct’ rules, like the server who wrote in ‘not black!!!!’ when asked to describe the race of her ideal customers. Given the widely held belief among servers that blacks are undesirable patrons, in both tipping and behavior, we understand this to be an important element for making sense of anti-black discrimination in restaurants.

**Tables ide racism**

To assess the extent to which a ‘culture of white servers’ (Dirks and Rice 2004) exists within the restaurant industry, we used five items to measure servers’ racist discourse:
1. ‘How often do you observe racist comments made about customers by co-workers?’
2. ‘How often do you observe racist comments made about customers by managers?’
3. ‘How often do you observe co-workers stereotyping black customers?’
4. ‘How often do you observe co-workers referring to customers using “code” words/language?’
5. ‘How often do you and your co-workers discuss the race of your customers?’

Response categories for each of these were never (1), sometimes (2), often (3), and always (4).

**Anti-black restaurant discourse**

An important way that anti-black sentiments are ‘spread’ (Ridgeway and Erickson 2000) in the workplace is through the use of stereotypes, blatantly racist comments, and code words (Dirks and Rice 2004). Of the 191 respondents who provided an answer to the question about how often they hear their co-workers make racist comments, 17.3% reported to *often* or *always* hear such comments, while an additional 46.1% reported to hear such comments at least *sometimes*. Only slightly over a third (36.6%) of the respondents reported to *never* hear their co-workers make racist comments. The overwhelming majority of respondents, however, reported to *never* observe their managers making such comments (74%). However, a substantial minority (22.4%) of sample respondents reported that they did observe managers make such comments at least *sometimes* and 3.6% reported that their managers *often* or *always* make such comments.

Consistent with Dirks and Rice’s (2004) findings, the use of code words to discuss customers is quite common among restaurant servers. Of the 194 servers who responded to this question, 38.1% reported *sometimes* observing customers being referred to with coded language, while an additional 31.5% reported observing the use of such code words *often* or *always*. Only 30.4% of the sample respondents reported to *never* observe the use of code words to refer to customers. These code words are likely to be used when servers discuss the race of their customers with one another, of which 59% of the sample respondents reported to do at least *sometimes*. An additional 16.4% of the servers reported to *often* or *always* engage in such discussions with their co-workers. Only a quarter (24.6%) of the sample respondents reported to *never* discuss the race of their customers with co-workers. Survey findings also demonstrate that racial stereotyping of black restaurant guests occurs quite frequently. In fact, nearly three quarters of the respondents (73.4%) reported to *sometimes* or *often* observe such stereotyping, while an additional 13.5% reported to *always* observe such behavior. Only 26 (13.5%) of the servers reported that
they never observe co-workers use stereotyping discourse when referring to their black guests.

**Discriminatory behavior**

We assessed the frequency of server discrimination in two ways. Response categories for each of the items below were never (1), sometimes (2), often (3), and always (4). To explore self-reported racial discrimination using both direct and indirect measurements, respectively, we asked:

1. ‘How often does the quality of service that you provide vary according to the customers’ race?’
2. ‘How often do you give customers poor service because you think they will not tip well?’

The indirect measure is based on extant research demonstrating the widely held sentiment that racial minorities in general, and blacks in particular, tip below average (Dirks and Rice 2004; Mallinson and Brewster 2005; also see Brewster and Mallinson forthcoming). The prevalence of observed racial discrimination was measured with two questions:

1. ‘How often do you observe co-workers treating black patrons poorly?’
2. ‘How often do you think your co-workers give customers poorer service than other customers based on the customers’ race?’

Respondents who reported that they did not know how often their co-workers engage in discriminatory behaviors occur are not considered here.

**Observed discrimination**

As shown in Table 2, when questioned about the treatment of African-American guests, 38.7 percent of the respondents reported to sometimes observe co-workers treat their black customers poorly and an additional 14.1% reported to observe such behavior often or always. Thus, over half (52.8 percent) of the servers indicated that they observe black guests being treated poorly, at least sometimes, by their co-workers. Servers also report observing co-workers giving poor service based on the customer’s race. Of the 163 respondents who provided an answer to this question, 65 percent reported that they sometimes observe their co-workers providing inferior service to racial minorities and an additional 13.5 percent believe that such behavior occurs often or always. Only 35 (21.5 percent) respondents reported to never observe such differential treatment in their workplace.

**Self-reported discrimination**

With regard to self-reported discriminatory treatment of racial minority restaurant guests, findings show that 31.8% of the sample respondents
reported that the service they provide sometimes varies according to the customers’ race and an additional 6.7% reported that the quality of their service is often or always contingent on the race of their customers. Examining survey findings derived from our indirect measure of self-reported discrimination shows that slightly over 40 percent (42.1 percent) of the respondents admit to sometimes providing poor service to customers whom they think will not tip well. An additional 7.1 percent admitted to do so often or always. Some servers admitted seeing anti-black discrimination in their workplace but denied doing it themselves. The following statement demonstrates this well:

I’m very conscious of racism in this restaurant. I give the same service to all tables, regardless of sex, age, or race ... Many servers in this restaurant will say things like ‘I’m not waiting on that table (of black people); they won’t tip!’ Their service and tips in turn reflect this attitude.

Table 2. Frequencies and Percentages for Discrimination and Anti-Minority Discourse Measurements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Always</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poor service due to race</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(21.5)</td>
<td>(65.0)</td>
<td>(11.7)</td>
<td>(1.8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor treatment of black patrons</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(47.1)</td>
<td>(38.7)</td>
<td>(8.9)</td>
<td>(5.2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor service due to perceived tip</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(50.8)</td>
<td>(42.1)</td>
<td>(5.6)</td>
<td>(1.5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service varies according to race</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(61.5)</td>
<td>(31.8)</td>
<td>(4.6)</td>
<td>(2.1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: cell percentages in parentheses

The internal reliability of responses on observed discrimination, if the items were scaled, is acceptable (α = 0.71).

The internal reliability of responses for self-reported discrimination, if the items were scaled, is acceptable (α = 0.74).

The internal reliability of responses on anti-minority discourse, if the items were scaled, is acceptable (α = 0.77).
This quote not only suggests that servers are aware of the discrimination their co-workers practice, but also of the notion that discrimination may lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy. In an interview, Jill noted a similar connection:

... I have seen lots of servers, who, like me, get these generalizations in their head, they start to believe in it and then they act on them, treat people like shit because of that fact, and I’m like, well maybe you’ve missed a couple of really good tips because of that.

The data presented above demonstrate a considerable amount of racial discrimination and anti-minority workplace discourse within the context of restaurant establishments. These results constitute the first attempt, to our knowledge, to quantitatively assess the pervasiveness of anti-black server sentiments and behaviors. In the following sections, we attempt to make sense of these findings by situating them in a social-psychological framework. In doing so, we apply several key concepts including cognitive schemas and bias, stereotype activation, self-fulfilling prophecies, and attribution errors. Using these concepts will allow us to demonstrate the social psychological process whereby servers acquire anti-black beliefs and how these ultimately shape their behavior.

The social psychology of anti-black culture in restaurants

Looking at human behavior as a process of interaction is fundamental for understanding people’s action in context. We argue that discriminatory behavior toward black customers is, in part, the outcome of an interactive process between customers, servers, and managers. In this section, we will elaborate the stages of this process by situating our findings into a social-psychological framework. The process we outline is illustrated in Figure 1.

Workplace culture and racist discourse

According to Ridgeway and Erickson (2000), status beliefs, or stereotypes, are maintained and reproduced by spreading these beliefs throughout the culture by both individuals and institutions (Ridgeway and Erickson 2000). Within restaurants, the persistent status belief that black customers are poor tippers is spread and taught to others through racist discourse among servers (Ridgeway and Erickson 2000). It is likely that new servers are recruited, however subtly, into this racist workplace culture. For example, Sandy, who had only been serving for about two months, had already become aware of this discourse:

I hear a lot of people talking about African Americans coming in, and I mean, I’ve experienced that [a poor tip from black patrons] like, maybe once, but I have also experienced it with Caucasians and everyone else.

In this view, servers can spread to other servers the status beliefs that pigeonhole black customers as bad tippers.
These beliefs are mainly spread in the workplace through the language that restaurant servers use to describe their experiences with serving black customers. In the field study some servers used clever, though derogatory, terms to describe their tables as indicated in the following field note:

There have been derogatory terms formulated toward blacks in the dining room. As a table of 4 people is called a 4-top, and one of 2 called a 2-top, a table of blacks (regardless of how many) has been sometimes called a ‘black-top’. The first time I ever heard this was when I was working as the ‘seater’. A waiter came up to me and asked me not to seat him any more ‘black-tops.’

Managers also sometimes perpetuate racist workplace stereotypes. For instance, after peering out of the kitchen into the dining room to see a large
amount of black customers dining, the first author observed a manager groan, ‘It must be welfare Monday’ (fieldnotes 2002). Our survey findings substantiate managers’ role in sustaining an anti-black work culture. In fact, nearly a quarter of our respondents reported to observe their managers making racist comments at least ‘sometimes’ while at work. Similarly, Dirks and Rice (2004) found that restaurant servers use code words to disparage black diners when they are in the back, out of earshot of the customers. These code words include terms such as Canadian, cousins, moolies, and even white people to refer to blacks in the dining room. A phrase, ‘those Canadians left me a horrible tip’ really means ‘those blacks ...’

In some cases, these code words draw explicitly from stereotypes observed in the larger culture. In the field study, for instance, a waiter came around the corner into an area hidden from customers, looked down at the bill and money in his hand and said, ‘Damn, I just got the gold-tooth treatment.’ When asked what he meant by his statement, he explained that when a black table gives their server a bad tip, it is like giving him the ‘gold-tooth treatment’ (fieldnotes 2002). Sometimes, these code words are promoted by management such as the Denny’s restaurant code word ‘blackout’ that was used to say that there were ‘too many black customers in the restaurant at one time’ (Dirks and Rice 2004, p. 4). Language is an extremely important way that status beliefs and stereotypes can be spread and reproduced in the workplace. When stereotypes and status beliefs are spread through language, servers develop categorization processes that place blacks in the ‘bad tipper’ category, thus fostering the development of negative cognitive schemas or cognitive biases.

Social cognition: Schemas and bias

Cognitive schemas are mental guides that help actors categorize and process information so that they do not have to interpret as new each time they encounter something. This is exemplified by Fiske’s (2000) notion of a ‘cognitive miser’ who uses mental short-cuts to access category-based information and to place those encountered into ‘piles’ based on this categorical information. The cognitive miser is a master at categorization processes and cognitive efficiency (Tomaskovic-Devey et al. 2004).

Fiske and Taylor (1984) argue that stereotyping is influenced by role-schemas (those that contain knowledge about large social categories) because we base behavior expectations on group membership such as age, race, or sex. Similarly, cognitive bias theories suggest unconscious biases (schemas) can determine behavior that creates a climate conducive to discrimination and prejudice (Fiske 2000, 2004; Tomaskovic-Devey et al. 2004). Schaller (1991) argues that social categorization processes lead to in-group favoritism, thereby biasing the processing of information (p. 27). Information is processed in biased ways and is therefore part of cognition, making the actor unaware of these in-group biases and related behaviors.
Because of this, black customers may be judged by a stricter standard (Correll and Ridgeway 2003).

Cognitive bias can emerge as performance expectations, which can be influenced by status characteristics like race or gender (Correll and Ridgeway 2003). Since these status characteristics are external, it is often what actors first use to lump people into categories. Take for example the servers who cited ‘past experience’ as cause for expecting blacks, as a group, to tip poorly. One server noted, ‘In the past, I have waited on similar tables and not received a tip, or a 5% tip.’ Another server held firmly to performance expectations based on status characteristics: ‘Blacks and Hispanics don’t tip above $3.00 no matter how large the bill.’ Not only did this server generalize behavior of two racial/ethnic groups, but also associates customers’ race with a concrete dollar amount. Essentially, servers say ‘I do not expect blacks to perform well as tippers and therefore my service will reflect this expectation.’

We argue that white customers are expected to leave fair tips and are therefore given service that merits them. Black customers, on the other hand, are expected to tip poorly and are therefore given poor service that merits bad tips. These performance expectations can thus become self-fulfilling prophecies if expectations shape service quality, and service quality influences tip size. In other words, if servers anticipate a poor tip, they may receive a poor tip, not because the customers are inherently bad tippers, but because they were given inferior service. In short, server discrimination is, in part, a function of the interaction between servers’ cognition and the social climate in which they work.

**Stereotype activation**

Kawakami et al. (2002) argue that categorization processes automatically activate stereotypes and that these stereotypes can unconsciously determine the actor’s behavior (p. 12). Bargh et al. (1996) agree that this process is unintentional and that because stereotypes are activated automatically with only the presence of activating features (i.e. race, gender), actors can behave in accordance with these stereotypes without even knowing it. Fiske (2000, 2004) is in moderate agreement with these assertions, but points out that these explanations suggest that actors are helpless and are therefore not responsible for the behaviors that might be triggered by these unconscious mechanisms; ‘a lack of intent often implies a lack of responsibility’ (2004, p. 121). She argues instead that actors can resist these automatic processes if they are so motivated. Brad admitted that these stereotypes are activated, but that he resists the effect these might have on his behavior:

My first instinct [when he sees a table of blacks in his section] is like ‘oh, no’. They prevalently give poorer tips, but it doesn’t decrease the service. When I

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talk to them I talk to them the same way I talk to everyone else and I serve them the same way. I don’t feel that anyone deserves to be treated poorly because of a misconception, because it could be a misconception.

Based on the evidence documenting the amount of discrimination occurring in restaurants, however, it is doubtful that many servers are as conscious of avoiding stereotypes as Brad says he is. In restaurants, it is relatively acceptable to allow stereotypes of black customers to be activated and prejudiced behavior to follow. In the following note from the field study, a server invoked this common stereotype and was fully supported by her co-worker. In fact, the interaction most likely worked to decrease the amount of the anticipated tip:

A waitress had a black family of seven at her table, most of whom were children. I saw the signs and heard the indications that they were running her and being rude about it. ‘The bill is already $100 and I bet I get like $5 from them’, she said. Another waitress chimed in, ‘Yeah, if you’re lucky. I think their favorite number is two, so you’ll probably get $2.’ The first waitress agreed, ‘I know. It doesn’t matter if the bill is $20 or $200, from them. $2 is what you get’ (field notes).

Although it is within the cognitive bias/categorization process where stereotypes are activated, the stereotypes and models for categorization must be introduced somewhere. In this case, it is arguably introduced by the racist discourse among servers. We can see how the interaction between the two servers above could influence their behavior at the table, thus delivering sub-par service to black patrons.

**Self-fulfilling prophecy**

Performance expectations and stereotypes can shape behavior in a self-fulfilling way (Correll and Ridgeway 2003, p. 31; Oxoby 2002). When stereotypes such as these are spread in a workplace, the idea becomes much more believable, and perhaps a *self-fulfilling prophecy*. For example, since there is frequent talk about the supposed terrible tipping behaviors of blacks, when a server approaches a table of black customers stereotypes have begun to shape how the server processes information, and those stereotypes are activated unconsciously, leading the server to approach the table with low expectations for tipping performance, which in turn functions to shape the server’s behavior. As the server–customer interaction unfolds, it may become apparent to the black customer that the service they are receiving is not worthy of a large tip. This notion is supported by Dirks and Rice (2004) as well.

**Attribution errors**

Servers probably don’t attribute the poor tip to a self-fulfilling prophecy. Instead, they make what Pettigrew (1979) called the ‘ultimate attribution
error’. This error is the result of reasoning that occurs when desirable behaviors of in-group members are often attributed to internal factors such as personality, where undesirable behaviors are attributed to external factors such as the weather or the fact that the actor in question might be having a bad day (Mason 2001). On the other hand, when out-group members are concerned, undesirable behaviors are attributed to internal factors such as personality, while desirable behaviors are linked to external factors (Mason 2001). For example, a white customer who tips a white server poorly may have this behavior attributed to poor service quality or the financial inability to leave a tip, but when a white server is tipped poorly by a black customer, the customer’s personal character is brought into question and he or she is deemed a bad person. Furthermore, when whites tip poorly, their behavior is rarely, if ever, attributed to their race, but for blacks, bad tips are frequently, if not always, attributed to their race.

In this process of attribution, servers make sense of customers’ behavior by drawing on the schemas they’ve acquired from their workplace culture. Within this anti-black workplace environment, it ‘makes sense’ to attribute poor tips to blackness. It is the cultural norm. One server conveys this point succinctly: ‘Most of us here extremely dislike waiting on large tables of black people ... because they seem to believe that tipping is optional and are usually rude to us.’ Another server went beyond the tipping stereotype to attribute other behaviors to black customers’ race: ‘They [blacks] **always** want things their way and **always** have something to complain about’ [emphasis added].

Conversely, when whites tip well, they are seen as simply fulfilling their expectations, but when blacks tip well, servers are often surprised and may chalk it up to their own good performance (‘they must have thought I was a really great server’), or say things like, ‘that was a really good tip for a black person.’ A server in Mallinson and Brewster’s (2005) study further substantiates this point in the following statement: ‘... if I get a good tip from a black person, I’m surprised, or even a decent tip, I’m surprised generally’ (p. 3). This surprise illustrates the notion that schemas ‘often persist stubbornly even in the face of contrary’ information (Fiske and Taylor 1984, p. 171). While Fiske and Taylor (1984) argue that schemas are persistent, they suggest that discrepancies are the most common catalysts for schema change (p. 177). Given the social components of cognition, it takes more than individual self-reflection on these discrepancies to change the schema or bias. Since the situational environment shapes the way we think, as how we think shapes the environment (Morgan and Schwalbe 1990), servers need the cognitive cooperation of others to affirm those discrepancies and begin to construct new non-racist schemas.

**Discussion and conclusion**

Tableside racism is an important matter to explore because it is yet another way that blacks are discriminated against during everyday activities (Essed
In this paper, we have presented quantitative evidence revealing anti-minority discourse and discriminatory behaviors among a community sample of restaurant servers. We subsequently use qualitative data to situate servers’ reported racist discourse and discriminatory behaviors within a social psychological framework. While our study does shed light on important aspects of everyday racism, it does have some limitations and weaknesses that should be noted.

First, owing to the size of our samples any generalizations should be made with caution. Second, the pervasiveness of anti-black discourse and behaviors should be interpreted as conservative estimates of reality—arguably only the tip of the iceberg. When soliciting information about sensitive topics (like discrimination), respondents may be inclined to respond in socially desirable ways. There are surely respondents who reported never discriminating, but in reality do discriminate. In some cases, however, subjects’ may project their own attitudes and behaviors into their responses to questions about the attitudes and behaviors of their co-workers (observed discrimination; see Fisher and Tellis 1998). It is thus likely that some observed discrimination is in reality self-reported discrimination that respondents are projecting onto their co-workers. Alternatively, asking people to speculate on and report others’ behavior can lead to somewhat misleading results. Therefore, we encourage readers to consider results on self-reported and observed discriminatory behaviors together. Doing so, we believe, provides a more holistic representation of the racial climate of restaurants.

Finally, the use of words like ‘racist’ in the survey instrument also likely contributed to reporting biases (see Koss 1996 for a discussion of this problem with regard measuring sexual assault using the term ‘rape’). As an anonymous reviewer rightly pointed out, subjects’ political and racial ideology may affect their interpretation of what constitutes co-workers’ ‘stereotyping’, ‘poor treatment’, and ‘racist discourse’. Thus, our survey data do not permit us to speak to the type of stereotyping, poor treatment, and racist discourse that respondents report observing. This is a primary reason we chose to present field data along with the survey data in this paper. We also attempted to minimize reporting biases by ensuring subjects’ anonymity and self-administering the questionnaires. It may also aid the accuracy of these reports that both researchers are white. We leave it to future research to assess how successful our approach was in documenting the pervasiveness of anti-black discourse and behaviors. Specifically, we suggest assessing the validity of subjects’ self-reports by incorporating objective measurements into future research designs. Validating servers’ reported discriminatory behaviors, in particular, would go a long way toward gaining additional and needed insights into the racial climate of restaurants.

It is also important to note that the social psychological explanation that we outline here is a partial—yet complementary—explanation for anti-black server sentiments and discriminatory behaviors. Brewster and Mallinson (forthcoming), for instance, offer a more structural explanation.
for discrimination and anti-black server sentiments. The authors suggest that servers’ proclivity to discriminate emerges, in part, out of their motivation to express agency in an otherwise constraining restaurant serving labor process. Yet, another perspective argues that African American below average tipping practices stem from their lack of knowledge about US tipping norms (Lynn 2004a,b), rather than subtle forms of discriminatory treatment, as we (and others, e.g., Dirks and Rice 2004) have argued. In other cases, discriminatory treatment is likely to result from racist ideologies that are developed and sustained external to the restaurant environment and yet reflected in the service they extend to black guests. However, irrespective of the approach, all of these researchers (Brewster and Mallinson forthcoming; Dirks and Rice 2004; Lynn 2004a,b) recognize the economic and human harm that results from anti-black server sentiments and actions. Further research should continue working toward identifying and delineating the various causal processes that have been put forth, including the social psychological framework that we outline in this paper.

Despite these limitations and shortcomings, our study does shed light on the contemporary everyday racism within the context of restaurants. We have argued that anti-black server sentiments and behaviors should be understood, in part, as occurring in response to a restaurant culture that shapes and is shaped by servers’ cognition and discourse. Consistent with Dirks and Rice’s (2004), we also suggest that this racist culture functions to construct and sustain the racial stereotypes that servers use to inform the quality of service they provide to their black guests. While some of the tableside racism is likely to be unconscious and unintentional, this does not excuse its persistence or its consequences. All too often, as Fiske (2004) suggests, responsibility is shirked due to lack of intent. Social psychological processes such as cognitive bias and unconscious stereotyping are difficult to dismantle and eradicate because they are so abstract and seemingly so intangible. How can one’s cognition be altered? While this could be a topic of an entirely different paper, for now, we suggest only that these processes can be altered by sharing and spreading new status beliefs that do not automatically trigger negative stereotypes. Another way might be to make actors, specifically restaurant servers, aware of their cognitive biases and stereotypes in hopes that they will be motivated to suppress their activation while serving tables (Devine 1989). Lastly, with time servers may learn to use contrary evidence of stereotypes, such as good tips from blacks, to reconstruct their racial schemas. A key way to do this is to avoid and reject pejorative code words.

The use of code words is a vivid example of what Bonilla-Silva (2003) called ‘racism without racists.’ By using code words to disparage black patrons, servers are able to avoid appearing openly racist, while simultaneously engaging in discriminatory behaviors (see also Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000). Racism has taken a new form that is often masked as or attributed to something other than racist beliefs. Regardless of any policies, formal
or informal, that the restaurant companies may construct to alleviate or evade servers’ racial discrimination, servers simultaneously find ways to resist these, if not for their own racist views, but to gain control over their work and income (Brewster and Mallinson forthcoming; Paules 1991). Perhaps most important, federal anti-discrimination legislation is being disregarded or even subverted as a result of ‘racism without racists’ processes (Bonilla-Silva 2003).

To be sure, the discrimination black customers experience in restaurants is arguably less demeaning as it once was, particularly in the South. Black patrons nevertheless continue to be met with disrespect and inferior service. They are seen by white servers as undeserving of enjoyable dining experiences. While the discrimination in which servers engage is less overt than it was in the past, our research reminds us that racism is not dead. It is, perhaps, not even dying but rather just changing in form (see Bonilla-Silva 2001, 2003; Feagin and Sikes 1994). Within the ideology of colorblindness, racism and discrimination are seen as past realities for black Americans (Bonilla-Silva 2001, 2003; Gallagher 2003). Colorblind racism encourages the subtlety of racism, meanwhile discouraging complaints of discrimination from minorities. Under this ideological rubric, racism and discrimination are things in black people’s heads; things they use to ‘get something for free.’

As scholars have noted, colorblind racism is perhaps more damaging in some ways than overt racism (e.g. Gallagher 2003). If people, including sympathetic whites, believe that all racial barriers to success (and to dining privileges) have been removed, the blame for lack of success (and poor tips) can only be attributed to something inherent in the ‘black character’. This view is crippling for it implies a collective shoulder shrugging and a ‘well, we tried, but they failed’ attitude. Timothy Tyson (2004) perhaps offered the best articulation of how legislation does not instantly or even necessarily change how people think (also see Feagin 2006). When describing store and bar owners immediately after Jim Crow segregation was overturned, he quoted an interviewee who told him, ‘They didn’t just open the door up and say, ‘Y’ all come in, integration done come.’ Somebody was bruised and kicked and knocked around – you better believe it.’

Considering the enduring and changing nature of racism in the United States, the need for future research on everyday forms of discrimination will continue to be called for. We encourage future researchers to devote a portion of their energies toward further developing our understanding of tableside racism in particular – an area of inquiry that has only recently been given serious attention.

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