Race Relations in the Hospitality Industry:  
Key Issues for Theory Building and Testing  
by  
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Despite meaningful progress in relationships between racial and ethnic groups within the United States since the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, racial and ethnic discrimination and prejudice remain a part of modern life (Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami & Hodson, 2002). Ironically, some of the more visible signs of prejudice and discrimination can be found in the hospitality industry. Restaurants in particular have a long history of prejudice and discrimination against ethnic minority consumers (Whitaker, 2009).

As one of the top journals in both hospitality management (journal impact rank = 6/35 in Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism) and sociology (journal impact rank = 13/137 in Sociology), the Cornell Hospitality Quarterly has published several articles that shed light on this important issue of race relations in the hospitality industry. Five of those articles are brought together in this curation. Together, these articles document racial prejudice and discrimination on the part of restaurant servers and the role played by race differences in tipping in creating and sustaining that racial prejudice and discrimination. They also discuss various means by

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which restaurant managers and executives can reduce the racial conflict in their establishments and in the hospitality industry at large. Specifically,

- Dirks and Rice (2004) present the results of a qualitative study finding that “White American restaurant workers actively participate in derogatory stereotyping of black American customers, engaging in the use of racial code words and derogatory ethnic labels, while discriminating—both overtly and covertly—in their service interactions with black customers.”

- Noll and Arnold (2004) present the results of two quantitative studies—one a survey of restaurant servers finding that a substantial percentage of both white and black servers perceived their black customers as poor tippers, and the other a server diary study finding that the black customers of two waiters did in fact tip significantly less than the waiters’ white customers.

- Lynn, Pugh, and Williams (2012) report on two quantitative studies finding that Black-White differences in tip size among those who do tip actually increase with the consumers’ socio-economic status, though Black-White differences in stiffing (or not tipping at all) decline with the consumers’ socio-economic status.

- Lynn (2011) provides evidence that Black-White differences in tipping are largely (though not entirely) due to differences in awareness of tipping norms and argues that public service campaigns educating everyone about those norms might reduce race differences in tipping and the racial animosity it generates.

- Brewster (2012) develops a “social psychological model of racialized customer service in restaurants” that he uses to organize the literature and to identify potential solutions “for curbing race-based service.”
The increasing ethnic diversity of the U.S. population means that race relations will take on even more importance over the next decade. Hence, there is a strong and growing need for critical theory development and testing that builds on this curated research stream. Specifically, the articles featured in this *CHQ* curation highlight the need for further research in five important areas. First, scholarship is needed on the nature of racial discrimination in the restaurant and other hospitality contexts. While evidence of overt racism continues to surface, social scientists generally agree that most contemporary racial prejudices become manifest in subtle and covert ways (Bonilla-Silva 2010). Further, scholars have noted that cognitive racial biases can function to unconsciously undermine the quality of interracial interactions even among those who have a strong commitment to racial equality (Dovidio, et al. 2002). Despite such acknowledgments there have been limited attempts to document the subtle ways in which hospitality customers receive service that is informed by their race. In the absence of such research, industry operators will continue to have a difficult time identifying and thus combating all but the most overt incidences of race-based service in their establishments.

Second, additional work is needed that advances our understanding of the interracial tipping differences that, in part, sustain server biases towards customers of color. As a point of departure, researchers should further elaborate on the idea that racial differences in tipping behaviors reflect corresponding differences in consumers’ familiarity with tipping norms. Specifically, whereas Lynn (2011) has focused on injunctive norms, which specify the tipping behaviors that are perceived to be acceptable or expected, descriptive norms, or how people are perceived to actually tip, have been overlooked. Thus, an examination of the role of descriptive and injunctive tipping norms
towards understanding racial tipping differences is needed.

Further, because consumers’ familiarity with tipping norms has only been measured at the national level (e.g., familiarity with the national 15-20% injunctive tipping norm), how consumers’ tipping behaviors are shaped by what they perceive to be normative in more localized settings remains unknown. Given the racially segregated nature of our society (e.g., communities, interpersonal networks) it is possible, for instance, that racial tipping differences might be better understood as an artifact of different, yet overlapping, local descriptive and injunctive tipping norms to which members of different racial groups adhere.

Third, while each of the papers featured in this curation identify interracial tipping differences as a partial cause of race-based service, it is important to recognize that many servers in our nation’s restaurants and hotels refrain from discriminating against customers of color even when they perceive these customers to be less likely to adequately compensate them for their efforts. Yet, research working towards establishing a profile of these non-discriminating service workers is surprisingly absent. As such, hospitality operators are precluded from hiring those workers whose behaviors are not likely to be influenced by economic concerns stemming from their negative perceptions of minorities’ tipping practices. To facilitate more informed hiring decisions we encourage scholarly efforts devoted to identifying and testing potential moderators of servers’ proclivities to discriminate in their service delivery in response to perceived racial tipping differences.

One potentially fruitful line of research in this vein would be to examine the role of servers’ moral concerns about discriminatory service delivery, in particular, and racial inequities, more generally. Drawing from sociological (e.g., Etzioni 1988) and
criminological theories (e.g., Wikström and Sampson 2006) that critique the limits of economic models of human behavior (e.g., profit maximization motive), future research might find, for instance, that servers with strong moral restraints are more likely to refrain from discriminating against minority patrons, or to discriminate less frequently, despite expressing race-based concerns about their tipping practices. That is, servers who view service discrimination as morally wrong might be expected to give all clients their best efforts because for these servers providing good service is a desirable end in itself, regardless of the size of tip they expect to receive. If future research finds support for this idea, the next logical step would be to develop valid and reliable instruments that hospitality operators could use to screen out applicants for serving positions who do not have a strong moral committed to equitable service delivery.

Fourth, in three of the featured articles in this curation it is argued that consumer discrimination in the full-service-restaurant market is a partial outcome of the workplace environment within which servers’ negative attitudes towards customers of color are shaped, sustained, or exaggerated by high levels of racialized and stereotypical language that servers and managers use to implicitly or explicitly denigrate minority patrons (Brewster 2012; Dirks and Rice 2004; Noll and Arnold 2004). Consistent with this line of argumentation there is rich history of research in the area of social psychology that has shown prejudicial attitudes and behaviors to emerge from, and be sustained by, individuals’ desire to conform to what they perceive to be the prevailing norms of the groups in which they claim membership (e.g., Allport 1954/1979; Sherif and Sherif 1953).

Nevertheless, empirical tests of the effects of prejudicial discourse within restaurant and hotel establishments on discriminatory server behaviors are limited. As
such, many questions regarding the significance of such discourse remain outstanding. It is not clear, for instance, whether observing coworkers using coded argot to describe minority customers is a sufficient condition to encourage servers to discriminate in their service delivery, as these authors suggest (cf. Brewster 2012 and Dirks and Rice 2004, in particular), or rather, if such effects are contingent on other individual or environmental factors. In short, further research is needed that not only documents the effects of the anti-minority discourse but also the boundaries of these effects. The knowledge generated by such efforts would be of great use to hospitality executives and managers as they attempt to devise and implement targeted, and thus cost effective, interventions to curtail discriminatory service stemming from such discourse.

Finally, while each of the featured pieces identifies theoretically or empirically informed solutions that should abate race-based service, so far there have been no attempts to systematically assess the effectiveness of these proposed interventions. Until such evaluation research is conducted, restaurant and hotel operators will likely be reluctant to design and implement many of the interventions offered by these authors; given the resource commitment that would be required to do so, their reluctance is understandable. Thus, researchers need to work towards identifying empirically validated “best practices” for curbing race-based service. Equipped with such information restaurant and other hospitality industry operators would be able to implement interventions enthusiastically because they would be confident that their investment would improve the service experience of their minority consumers.

Through the process of “bridge building” between theory and practice, the Cornell Hospitality Quarterly is committed to helping the hospitality industry not only address its
own racial problems but also take a leadership role on race relations and serve as a role model for other industries and segments of society to emulate. Accordingly, CHQ is interested in continuing to provide an outlet for top quality academic work (of either a qualitative or quantitative nature) that advances our understanding of, and ability to improve, race relations in the hospitality industry.

References


