

The Effects of Personal Background on Tipping Behavior

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(Mark was a bartender and manager at Copper Creek brew pub in Athens, GA for much of his college career at the University of Georgia. When given an assignment to do a research paper for a Sociology class, this was what he chose to write – and received an “A” for the paper. His dad enjoyed it and asked permission to include it in these short stories).

Tipping is a unique economic phenomenon. Why should customers knowingly spend more than they have to for goods and services? Most people understand, of course, that their server or bartender makes at least a portion of their income from tips, and so they choose to tip. I will not discuss in any more detail the reasons that people tip in this paper. I will, however, discuss what factors cause people to tip the way they do.

As a manager at a brew pub, I have, on the one hand, heard my employees complain many times that even though they gave a particular customer great service, he or she did not tip accordingly. On the other hand, I have seen my employees do a poor job and still receive a good tip. When I started in the service industry, I believed that I could make as much money as I wanted by giving great service, but after enough time I realized that I was only a part of the equation.

Literature Review

Any bartender will tell you that every customer is different. Giving equal service to two different customers does not necessarily mean that you will receive equal tips. I was surprised when I could not find any literature that dealt with my question: how do customers with different backgrounds respond differently to equal levels of service? There are studies about how customers respond to compliments (Seiter 2006), laboratory studies about how customers respond to a pat on the arm (Parrett 2006), and also basic studies on how customers relate tip percentage to their appraisal of the service provided (Bodvarsson and Gibson 1994). All of these studies miss one thing: every customer is not the same. These studies fail to take into account that the amount of a tip given does not only depend on the level of service, the presence or absence of compliments, etc. It is also dependent on the attitudes and background of the customer.

Methods

I did my research in a college town in the southeast. My professor chose my methods for me because this research was done for a class on qualitative methods. The purpose of this research was to help me learn how to properly conduct qualitative sociological research. The topic, however, was my choice. I chose bartending because, as a bartender, it was a convenient topic, but also because I think that it gives a window into our culture. All kinds of people go to bars, and there is a lot of social interaction that takes place. I conducted semi-structured interviews and used passive observation and participant observation. I felt that using two methods of data collection would help me triangulate my data. That is to say it would let me view the data from two different

perspectives. When observing, there is always the chance that you are missing meanings, and when conducting an interview, there is always the chance that you are not getting the whole story. I hoped that using the two different methods would bring me closer to the truth than either method alone would.

I interviewed a 32-year-old male whom I will call Ron, a 26-year-old male whom I will call Brick, and a 25-year-old female whom I will call Veronica. All three of my participants were white. I used my connections as a long time bartender in the town to find two of the participants, and I worked with the third (Ron) for about five years. Because I used connections to find my interview participants, I would call this a snowball sample. Two of the participants work only from nine or ten at night to three or four in the morning while the third (Ron) alternates between three p.m. to nine p.m. shifts and nine p.m. to close shifts. I tried to pick participants from varied bars, but my sampling method (and the town I did this research in) left me with a fairly homogeneous sample. All three bartenders cater mostly to college age students, but that is to be expected when researching bartenders in a college town.

I conducted formal interviews with my participants in informal settings. I met them at their places of residence and was offered a drink (alcoholic) each time. I accepted the offer each time, but I did not finish the drink any of the times. Two of my participants drank one beer during the interview while the third (Brick) drank two beers. I felt that it was important to accept the drink offers to put my participants at ease. I asked questions about how long the participant had been a bartender, why they started bartending, when they worked, what was required of them as a bartender, how they perceived their customers, how they defined good service, and finally how their customers treated them. I let my interviewees know that I, too, am a bartender in the hopes that this would help them open up. I thought that they would be more forthcoming with information if they knew that I was “one of them.”

All interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed. I then coded the transcribed interviews. I used grounded theory and found codes such as good tip, bad tip, grateful, ungrateful, money, hierarchy, and many more.

For the observation, I focused on the bar that I have worked at for more than four years. As a manager of this bar, I had easy access to all the customers and staff. I also had prior relationships with many of the customers, and I had a good understanding of the types of customers that frequent the bar. The vast majority of the customers at this bar (and therefore in this study) are college age. I know this because, by law, I have to check identification before I serve a drink.

I observed passively and actively in this study. I observed while I was working, and then wrote down notes afterwards. I did this for one hour at a time on two separate occasions. I also observed while I was sitting at the bar, which allowed me to write notes as events happened. I did this for one hour on one occasion. In the former, I was a participant in the action. I was serving drinks, and I was seeing all tips as they happened. In the latter, I tried to be as much of a “fly on the wall” as possible. I tried to make my note taking inconspicuous, and I tried to blend in with the other customers. As a participant, I could only observe what was happening with and to me, while as a “fly on the wall” I was able to look at the whole bar. I only took note of events if they met certain criteria: the bartender could not have a strong personal relationship with the customer, and the level of service would have to be what I considered “good”. I define

“good” service as follows: the bartender acknowledges the customer as quickly as possible, asks for their drink order politely, and makes the drink correctly and promptly. If the bartender had a strong personal tie to the customer, the resulting tip would not be a good indication of how that customer usually tips. If the service was excessively good or bad, then the level of service was not kept standard. I took note of many things about the customer such as how they were dressed, how they got the attention of the bartender, how they reacted when they had to wait, and of course, how they tipped.

When I analyzed my observations, I divided the customers in my study into four groups: Average Joes/Janes, Struggling Students, Rich Kids, and Fraternity/Sorority Members. The reason I did this is that I was seeing patterns in my research, and I found myself already subconsciously assigning my research participants to these groups. My research notes are very repetitive: person X does action X, person Y does action Y, person Z does action Z. When I began this study, I was very aware of my prejudices against certain customer groups, and I did my best to account for them, but even in doing that, I found myself proving my prejudices true.

It is impossible to answer the question of how a customer’s background affects their tipping behaviors without standardizing the level of service provided by the bartender. In a previous study on the same topic, I defined good service as follows: “the bartender acknowledges the customer as quickly as possible, asks for their drink order politely, and makes the drink correctly and promptly (Babcock 2007).” My interview subjects echoed my definition when I asked them “what would you consider good service?” Veronica replied:

“um... I would say good service is getting someone’s drinks to them as quick as you possibly can even if it’s not as quickly as they wanted them. Sometimes it’s busy so you have to multitask and I would say good service would be getting the drinks to them in a timely manner and making the drinks properly so sometimes that may include testing the drinks with a straw to make sure they taste right. Especially if it’s a drink that you’ve never made before or you are not familiar with.”

I felt that getting each individual’s perceptions on “good service” was important before I asked him or her more in depth questions about how their customers treated them. I felt like this would give me insight into what they thought was expected of them. Also, this information would act as a baseline to compare extremes against.

It was important before discussing tipping experiences with my subjects to find out how they defined a “good tip.” I felt, again, that this would give me more insight into what each person expected from a customer and give me a baseline to work with. When asked “what do you consider a good tip” all of my subjects responded not with the simple “dollar a drink” I expected, but with detailed systems that involved what kind of drink was being made, how busy the bar was, and what method of payment was used. Brick, for example, said:

“...when I tip cash versus credit card I tip differently. If I’m tipping cash to a bartender I do not know and the service is good, I will tip at least a dollar per

beer, sometimes as much as two bucks for a liquor drink um depending on – on what I order and the quantity I order and that kinda stuff.”

Ron commented on the difference between tipping on the total amount of a tab versus tipping when buying drinks one at a time:

“I would say 95% of the time I tip 20% of the tip um a lot of times when I’m in a bar, and I’m ordering drinks one at a time, I will always – usually always try and tip a dollar each time.”

The overall consensus was that a good tip is a dollar per beer and two dollars per cocktail if paying cash and twenty percent of the total if paying with a credit card.

Observation Findings

Average Joes/Janes The most distinguishing feature of this group is its lack of a distinguishing feature. The people in this group dressed casually. Men wore jeans or shorts and a t-shirt or short sleeve collared shirt. Women wore “practical” clothes like jeans and tank tops. Sometimes they would wear a subdued dress. This group does not stand out in a crowd. Neither their actions nor their dress bring undue attention to them. They are not loud and they are not rude. These people make up about half of my sample.

While these people do not stand out in the bar scene, they do stand out in my research. There is not a single incidence of people from this group acting angry or rude to the bartender. They tend to tip well, however, they do not go overboard. They are a bartender’s bread and butter. An example from my notes is fairly indicative of the group: *-I notice that a man and woman have been repeatedly “cut” in front of. The woman is wearing a short sleeved grey polo style shirt and fitted jeans. Her hair is pulled back in a ponytail. The man is wearing a white t-shirt and cargo shorts. His hair is covered by a hat that says the name of his college. They are having trouble getting to the bar so I get their attention and ask for their drink order. They thank me and comment on how busy it is. They tip one hundred percent.*

While all people from this group did not tip one hundred percent of the bill, the rest of the example is representative of their behavior. They were not aggressive about trying to get to the bar. They were generally patient and friendly, and generally left a good tip (as defined previously).

Struggling Students The Struggling Students are very easy to pick out of a crowd. They only come to the bar during “happy hour” or on days when we have drink specials. They always pay with cash, and they tip what they can. This group is very interesting for their self-assignment. They make a point to say that they are “struggling students” or “poor college kids”, and that they would tip more if they had more money. They seem to harbor guilt about the amount that they are able to tip when, in reality, they are tipping a satisfactory amount, generally a dollar a drink. When they are not able to tip a dollar a drink, they almost always apologize, and say that they will make up for it next time. There is a good example of this in my notes:

-A man wearing a dirty white oversized t-shirt and jeans walks into the bar. He has a full backpack on, and his blond hair is long and unkempt. He asks me if it is still happy hour. I reply that it is. He asks for a beer which I pour. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a wad of dollar bills. He gives me three dollars for a beer that costs \$2.25 and sheepishly asks if he can have his change back. He apologizes multiple times and says that he is a “poor college kid” and that he will “catch me on the flip side”. He only stays for one beer. Note: this man did come back the next week and tip me two dollars apiece on two beers.

This group seems to be the most aware of tipping. They see it as very important, and they almost seem to view it as a measure of themselves. No other group seems to be as emotionally connected to tipping as the Struggling Students.

Even more so than the Average Joes/ Janes, the Struggling Students tend to be very polite and patient. They wait until the bartender notices them. I almost never saw them proactively try to get the attention of the bartender.

Rich Kids The Rich Kids generally stand out the most. They wear flashy clothes and jewelry, and they tend to come to the bar with an entourage. They buy drinks for their friends and sometimes even strangers. They tend to wave cash or a credit card at the bartender to get their attention, and they also tend to get angry when it is busy and they have to wait.

While they do spend a lot of money at the bar, they usually tip below average, and haggle about price. Many times I observed Rich Kids telling the bartender or me that they deserved a free round of drinks because they spent so much money. Two examples from my notes stand out:

-A man wearing a colorful, fitted button down shirt and a gold necklace is waving an American Express Platinum card at the bartender. His hair is neatly gelled in front. He is actually reaching his arm across the bar. The bartender asks for his drink order and he asks for ten shots of Patron tequila. The bartender tells him that it will be \$70. He responds that he doesn't care. The bartender asks to see his I.D. and he is 21 years old. I know from family experience that to have an American Express Platinum card you must have at least \$500,000 invested with American Express. This makes me believe that one of his parents is the main cardholder and is therefore footing the bill. As the night goes on he continues to add to his tab. When he finally closes it the total is \$145. He tips \$5.

-A woman has spent around fifty dollars buying drinks for herself and her friends. She is wearing heavy makeup and a gold sparkly dress. She asks the bartender for a round of drinks “on the house”. He apologizes and says that he is not allowed to do that. She replies, “there goes your tip”.

The rich kids seem to be either unaware of tipping norms or they just don't care. They are rude to the bartenders and expect to be served before anyone else because they are spending so much money. Many of the Rich Kids seem to be spending money that they did not earn. This is evidenced by the amount of “parent's cards” in this group. Like the American Express Platinum card in the example from my notes, many Rich Kids used American Express Gold and Platinum credit cards for which they were probably not

the primary card holder. I, of course, cannot be sure of this, but it is unlikely that many college age students have the net worth to have one of those cards.

Fraternity/ Sorority Members This group requires the most description because I know that the first question a reader of this paper will ask is “how do you know that subject was in a fraternity or sorority?” I have a lot of experience with this group so I feel like “I know one when I see one”. This is a prejudice that I have had to fight while doing this research. Even when I feel that it is obvious that someone is in a fraternity or sorority, I do not label them as such unless I have adequate proof. Adequate proof means that I either get verbal confirmation, see Greek letters on their person, or know from previous interaction that they are in a fraternity or sorority. This has caused me to put many people that I believed were in this group into other groups. Based on their behavior, the ones that I had to put into other groups usually went into the Rich Kids group. Some of them went into the Average Joes/ Janes group, but none went into the Struggling Students group.

Due to my self imposed restrictions, dress is not an important distinguishing feature for this group, but I did notice trends. Almost to a person, men tend to wear polo shirts and khaki shorts with either flip flop sandals or New Balance shoes. Women are always dressed provocatively in low cut and short dresses. These dresses tend to be very colorful. They also wear heels.

They are usually in groups of four or more unless there is one man and one woman together. They tend to be less rude than the Rich Kids, and they tip slightly better, but they are still ruder than average and do not tip well. They wave money and credit cards at the bartender, but with less frequency than the Rich Kids. By the quality of their clothes and accessories (cell phones, etc.) they seem to have access to money, but are much more value minded than any other group besides the Struggling Students. They order drinks as a group, but pay separately, and they are the most likely to ask for the cheapest drink that we have. A few examples from my notes follow:

-A group of what appear to be sorority girls asks to see a dollar shot menu and gets agitated when I tell them I will be with them in a minute. It is very busy, and I am trying to make three drink orders at a time.

-I go back to the above mentioned girls and ask for their order. They order ten shots and pay with exact change. No tip.

-A group of fraternity brothers becomes angry when I ask them to limit their shot order to two different kinds of shots. They say that since they are paying for it they should be able to get whatever they want. I remind them that are only paying one dollar per shot, and that there are many other people waiting. They become less angry and one person in the group apologizes for their behavior. He adds five dollars to the tip and tells me that I am doing a good job and that he is glad that he is not me. I thank him.

The last example shows that while Fraternity/ Sorority Members have a rude streak they treat the other bartenders and me better than the Rich Kids do.

Interview Findings

I found that my interview subjects group customers in more general groups. When asked if their customers fit into groups, they all referred to Fraternity/Sorority Members and Rich Kids as overlapping groups. They also made reference to “regulars” and “service industry people”

Earlier I discussed a problem with identifying Fraternity/ Sorority members. When my subjects mentioned Fraternity/ Sorority members, I asked if they felt confident identifying members of this group. This comment from Veronica is typical of their responses:

“...within the undergraduate group there’s fraternity and sorority um groups and they’re usually pretty easy to pick out of the crowd based on their dress, their appearance, their behavior.”

The Fraternity/ Sorority Members spoken of in my interviews fit the same stereotypes that I brought forth in the observations section. The bartenders in my study referred to them as rude, impatient, and cheap. A quote from Brick is typical of what was said about Fraternity/ Sorority Members:

“I hate to say this but a lot of times the Greek crowd is a very specific subset of how they tip and usually they don’t tip. I don’t know if that’s because, again, they’re, they’re not accustomed to what it’s like to make money off of working for tips, and a lot of times the whole stereotype of “on daddy’s credit card.”

When asked about certain groups of customers, Veronica made a point of telling me how disrespectful she feels that the Fraternity/ Sorority Members are:

“...generally the fraternity slash sorority group um don’t usually give much respect to bartenders as well as you know just young – the younger crowd typically doesn’t give as much respect as other customers because they don’t understand the value of things and how much things cost and how hard people work and they don’t see the point in being polite to their bartender or asking for things nicely or tipping well because they have no idea what it means to work hard...”

Overall, my interview subjects said the same things I found while I conducted my observations: Fraternity/ Sorority Members are ruder than average and do not tip well. They wave money and credit cards at the bartender, and by the quality of their clothes and accessories (cell phones, etc.) they seem to have access to money, but are much more value minded than any other group.

I did not plan to include regulars or members of the service industry in this paper, but they were discussed frequently enough that I felt I would be remiss not to. Regulars are customers that come back day after day and get to know the bartender. They are generally well liked by bartenders because they tend to tip better than average, or at least

consistently well. Bartenders may occasionally give them special treatment to keep them coming back. Ron referred to regulars often in his interview:

“I know that they’re (regulars) probably gonna be in there a lot of times and they usually take care of me so I try and help them out, like I may buy them a beer every once in a while um a lot of the times we’ll ring up their drinks – ring up multiple orders of their drinks on happy hour prices so they can get it cheaper.”

Members of the service industry are also well liked by bartenders. They know what it is like to live off of tips so they tend to tip accordingly. From my own experience I know that there is also a widespread belief among members of the service industry that “you should take care of your own”. Brick describes his feelings about them:

“um... I think first of all maybe because I work in a bar I group service industry people in their own – their own setting, no matter if they’re Greek or not. Service industry, to me, has their own class...”

When asked about members of the service industry, Veronica echoes this sentiment: “They treat us very well and they always tip well.”

Regulars and members of the service industry represent a special case when looking at the determinates of tipping behavior. They come from different backgrounds but consistently tip well. They represent a special type of customer and would be a good subject for a paper focused only on them.

Conclusion

This study is by no means an exhaustive look at the topic of how background affects tipping behaviors, but it is a good dialogue starter. To generalize my findings would be a misuse of them, but I feel confident that if I did this research on a larger scale I would have similar results. As a bartender, I observe bar interactions everywhere I go, and I have seen these same behaviors across the country. I tried to push my prejudices out of my mind before I started this study, but I found that all of my prejudices were reaffirmed. I was amazed at how justified my interview participants and I felt using words like “always” while doing this research. The patterns of behavior in the bar environment are incredibly predictable. What my interview participants and I perceived as the presence or absence of money in the customer’s background had a major bearing on how much they tipped.

People who appeared to have ready access to money tended to tip less and were ruder to the bartender serving them than were those with less money. People that did not appear to have the same access to money tipped better and were more polite. These findings, if reproduced and expanded, could be developed into a Marxist style theory that would show a negative linear relationship between wealth and tipping. People that work in the service industry tend to be in a lower financial class than the fraternity/ sorority members of the world. Because of that, I would like to find some cases of fraternity/ sorority members (or even just people from wealthy backgrounds) that work in the service industry. I would be interested to see which of the two factors (being part of the

service industry or being from a wealthy background) have a greater effect on tipping behavior.

More importantly, however, I feel that I learned a few things about doing sociological research. When doing my “fly on the wall” observations, I realized that I was leaving a lot of details out. I learned that it is important to use “thick” description when writing field notes because you forget a lot of what you think you will remember. When doing participant observation, I found that it was very difficult to observe myself. I found it hard to analyze how I affected the interactions I was involved in. When doing my interviews, I found that the level of formality I provided was a good and a bad thing. I felt that my participants felt comfortable talking to me, but they may have left out some of the more mundane details that may have been important to this study. I feel that this is the case because they felt that, as a bartender, I “knew what they meant”.

I would like to have a chance to redo this project from the start with the information that I have now. I would do the interviews in a more structured way, and I would use more “thick description” when writing my field notes. One problem with choosing a topic that I am so familiar with is that I feel that I could write theories about the determinates of tipping behavior without having done any of this research. I made it a point, however, to base my conclusions only on the data I generated during the course of this study to keep with the spirit of the assignment. This problem illustrates the point Erin Winter brought up in class that “everybody is a sociologist.” This is to say that everybody thinks that they know, from personal experience, why people do what they do. I struggled greatly with this.

Finally, and probably obviously, I would like to do this research on a much greater scale. Three hours of observation and three interviews generate nowhere near enough data to develop a cogent theory. I would like to do this research in many different cities across the country and at many different types of establishments (i.e. from dive bars up to fine scotch and champagne bars). It would be interesting to see if trends arose in tipping behaviors by region and by establishment type.

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The End