Racialized Workplaces, Modern Racist Attitudes, and Racial Stereotypes: A Recipe for Race-Based Restaurant Service

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Black American consumers have been shown to be vulnerable to discriminatory treatment in full-service restaurants, or what is colloquially dubbed “tableside racism” or “dining while Black.” This enhanced vulnerability is assumed to stem from restaurant servers’ economic concerns about Black customers’ tipping practices. In this talk we present preliminary results from a recent study that we conducted to further explore the dining while Black phenomenon. The average server in our study is found to not only overstate the Black-White tipping differential but also to endorse racial stereotypes that depict Black customers as uncivil, demanding, and opportunistic in their complaining behaviors. Stereotypes about Black customers’ tipping and dining behaviors are in turn found to mediate the effects of customers’ race on servers’ prospective reports of service quality. That is, all else being equal servers in this study report that they would give Black customers lower quality service because they perceive these customers to not only be poor tippers but also to be more likely to exhibit problematic consumer behaviors (e.g., incivility, demandingness, and opportunistic complaints). Finally, our results indicate that the indirect effects of customers’ race on service quality through the endorsement of these stereotypes are most pronounced among study participants that work in a racialized restaurant environment and/or harbor contemporary racist attitudes. Our results underscore the limits of economic based explanations for racially discriminate restaurant service and highlight the “anything but race” cliché that is epitomized in much of the contemporary discourse surrounding racial inequities in America.

Zachary W. Brewster is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at Wayne State University. His primary research interests are in the area of race and ethnic relations. His work mostly focuses on exploring the pervasiveness and nature of racial discrimination in the restaurant industry.

Gerald Roman Nowak III is a first-year AGRADE student. He was the 2016 recipient of the Lucille Makarov Memorial Scholarship. Gerald is a member of the International Sociology Honor Society (AKD) and the North Central Sociological Association (NCSA). His research interests including presenteeism and racial inequalities in consumer markets.

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