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I'll take the check!: a longitudinal replication analysis of gender biases in bill placement from restaurant servers

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ABSTRACT

Traditional gender scripts in restaurants assume that men wield money, while women are framed as 'accessories' who do not pay restaurant checks in mixed-gender settings. While some research has addressed how servers replicate this script at U.S. restaurants, no previous research has looked at this practice longitudinally over time. This study explores how bill placement practices are connected to gendered power dynamics via observations of server and customer interactions about the restaurant check placement. Drawing from audit studies from the 1970s and 2010s, this study examined historical trends in gendered check placements. Comparing data from the 1970s in Phoenix, Arizona, we examined data from an audit of 176 visits to restaurants in Phoenix in the 2010s. This study sent out two-person teams of one cisgender man and one cisgender woman, with the woman always requesting the bill. Results found little change between the 1970s and 2010s, as the majority of servers placed the bill in the middle of the table. That said, the percentage of men receiving the bill surprisingly *increased* over time, while the number of times women received the bill decreased to almost never. This data contradicts accounts of a decrease in sexism and sexist behaviour over time. Further, the type of restaurant and server characteristics (such as age and gender of server, average check price, type of food served) did not influence bill placement tendencies. Implications for understanding the behavioural practices of sexism, the patriarchal coding of restaurant check placement and the importance of tracking and studying mundane expressions of sexism are explored.

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gender bias; sexism; service industry; hospitality; gender role

Introduction

The act of dining at a restaurant is a complicated social dance, one that showcases the mundane and everyday practices of power and identity. Rules of etiquette are established before people enter a restaurant, and everyone in a restaurant manages a set of personal motives and expectations. Customer food preferences are balanced with perceptions of good service, a desired restaurant climate, and a broad set of rules about how men and women should behave. During server-customer encounters, information about food and beverages is often provided, and customers exchange money for meals and quality service, often with a set of expectations about how they will be treated. Servers and customers manage many subtle rules of interpersonal relationships. Through a set of gestures, postures, and comments, customers try to convey the message that they are engaging in a managed, albeit pleasurable,

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experience. Servers, on the other hand, must negotiate customers' expectations, particularly given that U.S. servers rely heavily on tips and are underpaid below minimum wage for their work (Parrett, 2011).

Gendered expectations are built into the structure of American groups, institutions, and practices (Acker, 1990; Lorber, 1994; Risman, 2004). Assumptions about femininity and masculinity are central to the division of labour in companies along with the rewards that one receives for complying with that labour. Gender norms also dictate how men and women should 'do gender' in culturally and situationally appropriate ways (West & Zimmerman, 1987), with hegemonic masculinity narratives emphasizing strength, rationality, potency, and financial power (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009) along with bravado, aggression, and brashness (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Women, on the other hand, are traditionally scripted to prioritize politeness, deference, and altruism (Mahalik et al., 2005), along with supporting men's wants and desires (Katz & Tirone, 2009). Women are also often burdened with financial dependence on men, which undercuts their autonomy and compels women to craft their behaviour around men as financial providers (Gupta, 2007).

Restaurants are gendered contexts that elicit a number of assumptions about gender roles; in particular, husbands more frequently determine when and where the couples dined (Martens, 1997). Consequently, sexist behaviours in restaurants, particularly when restaurant servers assume that men pay for the check and women are mere 'accessories' at the table, often infuses the gendered restaurant experience, a subject we take up in this manuscript.

Gender and restaurant climate

Food and eating behaviour also carry gendered meanings and connotations, as some foods are considered especially masculine or feminine, with sweet foods, salads, and fish assumed to be more feminine than masculine (Lupton, 1996; Martens, 1997), and large cuts of beef symbolizing the ultimate version of masculinity (Bourdieu, 1984; Greenebaum & Dexter, 2018; Rothgerber, 2013). Domestic foodwork, or the planning, cooking, and clean-up of food, are often considered women's 'duty' and optional for men (Szabo, 2014). Table manners for cutting, slurping, chewing food, and portion control have been constructed to be different for men and women (Visser, 1991). Restaurants typically advertise themselves as mixed gendered establishments though certain restaurants, bars, and coffeehouses cater to more stereotypically male or female clients (Bird & Sokolofski, 2005). Restaurants targeting women often have well-lit interiors with calm folk music, bright colours, diaper changing stations in the restrooms, and signs about 'home and hearth' (Bird & Sokolofski, 2005), while restaurants targeting men may have louder music, larger TV screens, images of women in bathing suits, and sports memorabilia on the walls (Newton-Francis & Young, 2015).

Restaurant servers also often follow the cues of their restaurant's climate, particularly as servers follow 'female rules of engagement' (Hall, 1993) by smiling frequently, being pleasant, showing attention to customers' desires, never interrupting or arguing, and deferring to male managers and customers (Hall, 1993; Koc, Aydın, Ar, & Boz, 2017). Customers' treatment of women servers also centres on men's definitions of 'acceptable' women, as women servers deemed beautiful receive bigger tips than women servers considered 'homely' (Lynn & Simons, 2000; Parrett, 2015). Further, women servers with large breasts, blond hair, and slender bodies receive better tips than women without these qualities (Lynn, 2009). Sexual objectification and harassment is often considered, for women servers, a routine part of their job (LaPointe, 1992; Szymanski & Mikorski, 2016).

Gendering check placement

Bill payment and check placement have also been informed by gendered power dynamics. The customer who is assigned the bill is often seen as the active agent who controls the purse strings. While servers do not have to decide who receives the check for solo diners, tables of two or more require that servers decide where to place the check (Jost & Kay, 2005). At mixed-gendered tables,

restaurant servers more often give the check to men. Furthermore, women report less comfort than men when in eating alone (Lahad & May, 2017). One English study of married heterosexuals found that husbands paid the entire bill 89% of the time (Martens, 1997), while 82% of the heterosexual men reported paying for dates when with female partners (Lever, Frederick, & Hertz, 2015). Servers trying to please customers and get a good tip are aware of these patterns and may treat male customers with more deference, respect, and friendliness compared to female customers. The corollary is that women are generally seen as 'bill avoiders' and cheap tippers when they are in the presence of men (Brewster, 2015; Wood, 1992).

While bill placement has received scant attention, few studies have examined the gendered aspects of bill placement. Surveys of customers found that many women diners sometimes worried about the sexism of restaurant servers (Chung-Herrera, Gonzalez, & Hoffman, 2010), and one interview study of servers found that their job was mostly about complying with the whims of male bosses and customers (LaPointe, 1992). An ethnographic study of a single restaurant found that, 'when dining in a mixed company, men are targeted as primary check payers by restaurant staff, who lavish better service their way' (Ruggless, 2000, p. 93).

How to study restaurant behaviour has puzzled researchers for some time. Audit studies offer a way to find precise information on the mistreatment of female customers. Audits come in many forms, but they almost always have a researcher generating data in a real-world setting (Gaddis, 2018; Ghoshal, 2018). Typically, audit studies send undercover researchers to a group or workplace and then compare the treatment of auditors who differ by a key factor such as gender, race, or sexual orientation (Vuolo, Uggen, & Lageson, 2016). By never announcing the presence of research actors in these covert studies, the targets do not know that they are being observed, though this can raise contemporary ethical issues. However, field experiments are often better than surveys and interviews at limiting the biases of social desirability, the Hawthorne effect and overdemanding recall (Gaddis, 2018). They also improve the scope of understanding restaurant practices over information gained from standard ethnographies because audits visit many more sites and have standardized ways of coding their observations.

A few studies have used audits to examine restaurant behaviour, and most of the time these audit studies addressed the mistreatment of racial and sexual minorities in restaurants (Brewster, Lynn, & Cocroft, 2014; Ro & Olson, 2020). A few audit studies explored gender biases in restaurants (Myers et al., 2010), finding that women waited longer than men to get their orders filled in a Boston coffee house (Myers et al., 2010) and that men received the bill in restaurants more often than women did (Laner, Axelrod, & Laner, 1979).

In the 1970s, three sociologists wanted to understand how the 'changing roles of women patrons' impacted server/customer interactions around bill exchanges (Laner et al., 1979). This team asked questions about how often men received the check and how servers reacted to the 'nonroutinized status articulation' of a woman asking for the check. The study sent five teams of mixed-gendered couples to 73 restaurants in Phoenix, Arizona. By changing the gender of those who ordered and asked for the check, the study revealed that women *never* received the bill when both genders placed their orders, though women received the check 14% of the time when they placed the order for the table. While women almost never received the bill, the typical response for all conditions was for the server to place the bill in the middle of the table (61%) and to direct the bill towards the male customer (30%). These findings led the authors to conclude that server–customer interactions were 'relatively stable' and that 'gender-role egalitarianism advocated by the liberation movement does not seem to have penetrated deeply into the relationship between restaurant servers and their patrons' (Laner et al., 1979, p. 398). The authors concluded their study with an optimistic call for longitudinal research, saying that 'a larger sample is now needed to confirm our impressions and to provide a baseline against which to measure change' (Laner et al., 1979, p. 398). Forty years later, our replication study followed this suggestion by studying restaurant behaviour in the same city (Phoenix, Arizona).

Have gendered restaurant behaviours changed over time?

Feminist scholars have often expressed interest in how gender expectations persist and change over time (Milkman, 2017). Scholars who have tried to address societal changes since the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s have offered a complicated and contradictory description of the ways that gender relations have become more or less equitable (Cotter, Hermsen, & Vanneman, 2011; Pedulla & Thébaud, 2015). In fact, gender advancements are so inconsistent that there have been a series of manuscripts calling for the gender revolution in the United States 'unfinished', 'uneven' and 'stalled' (England, 2010; Gerson, 2010; Scarborough & Risman, 2017). As such, the value of longitudinal studies of sexism remains high. Without comparative data, researchers cannot know how far gender role expectations have evolved or changed, including in mundane settings like restaurants. Servers and customers in restaurants may cling to old-fashioned ways of relating or they may have moved more towards greater equality and a recognition of the vast numbers of women who wield buying power and who have entered the workforce (Paynter & Leaper, 2016). No previous research has looked in a longitudinal manner at sexism in restaurants.

This study offered an analysis of bill placement practices some forty years apart. Laner, Axelrod, and Laner's (1979) early audit of server practices from the 1970s represented the starting point of the comparison, while our data from the mid-2010s functions as the comparison. When making such a comparison, we wanted to establish the extent to which sexist practices from restaurant servers improved, maintained or regressed over four decades. We also wanted to see if some server characteristics and restaurant qualities could predict the tendency of servers to give the bill to men versus women for different time frames. By always having women request the check in with a mixed gender duo, this study was driven by three main research questions: 1) How often did men and women customers receive the bill in the 1970s and 2010s?; 2) Have there been any increases or decreases in the frequency of women customers receiving the bill in the last 40 years?; and 3) What are some of the server and restaurant traits that increase the likelihood of female customers receiving the bill?

Materials and methods

To examine changes in gendered bill placement practices over time, we looked at data from two separate audit studies. The data collected by the authors followed in two stages. First, we incorporated all the data from the first audit study of bill placement practices (Laner et al., 1979). Second, we created a research design that mirrored the research design of the earlier study. We standardized the same characteristics of the auditors, measured the same variables, coded the attributes of variables in a similar fashion, and sampled from the same metropolitan area.

Population studied

This longitudinal study chronicled server practices across four decades. In being what is commonly called 'repeated cross-sectional designs' (Menard, 1991) or 'trend studies' (Babbie, 1995), this study compared samples from the 1970s and 2010s that gathered data in the Phoenix, Arizona metropolitan area. The first study centered on a convenience sample of 73 restaurants in the middle 1970s while the second study visited 140 Phoenix-area restaurants in the middle 2010s. To give some context to the clientele of Phoenix area restaurants; Phoenix is often called a 'sunbelt' city because of its southwest location, postindustrial economy, massive urban sprawl, and low rates of population density (Frey, 1995). Both studies looked at restaurants in the Phoenix area, but the city has boomed in size and space over the last 40 years. In 1970, the population of the Phoenix metropolitan area was 971,000 spread across 387 square miles (Rex, 2000). By 2018, the population had swollen to 4,857,962 residents across 14,565 square miles (US Census, 2020). Given that the city has dramatically grown since the 1970s, many of its year-round residents are now domestic migrants who were mostly born

and raised in California and throughout the Midwest states. Fifteen per cent of Phoenicians migrated from other countries (Ellis, Wright, & Townley, 2014), with Mexico being the largest home country (Arreola, 2012). A large section of the residents are also 'snowbirds' that temporarily live in the desert during the winter and the colder northern climates in the summer. Phoenix also has one of the largest public universities in the nation (Arizona State University) and records the hottest summer temperatures of any large American city.

In terms of population, the median age for the Phoenix metropolitan area was 36.9 in 2018, with 55% of residents identifying as White, 31% as Hispanic and 5% as Black. The median per capita income was $32,428, slightly below national levels. The poverty rate was 12.2%, slightly below national figures (US Census, 2020). Further, 31% held a bachelor's degree. Information about gender conservatism in Phoenix did not exist, but a composite index by the Institute for Women's Policy Research rated Arizona as the 14th best state for women (IWPR, 2015) and the city's annual Women's Marches have drawn as many as 20,000 participants since the inauguration of Donald Trump (Chenoweth & Pressman, 2018). Finally, the restaurant scene in Phoenix has been classified as a 'McCulture' environment or a setting that combines a large number of small ethnic restaurants with numerous casual chains in strip malls (Neal, 2006).

Auditor qualities

The 1970s study (Study 1) created several teams of auditors (Laner et al., 1979), with some of the auditing teams having same- and mixed-gender groups. Our study only looked at data from the five mixed-gender couples that went to restaurants in the Phoenix metropolitan area. Each mixed-gender couple was either married or cohabitating and identified as the same race, social class, and age range.

The 2010s study (Study 2) included a set of auditors (one cisgender woman and one cisgender man) who went to 140 Phoenix-area restaurants from May 2013 to December 2015. (Note that much of this study refers to gender in a binary manner even though we acknowledge that gender is far more expansive beyond the binary; that said, because this audit was in reference to an earlier study, we discussed gender in this study as a binary as well). The auditors were both middle-aged White individuals. The auditors chose restaurants that came from different price points, cuisine types, and sections of the city.

Protocol

Both studies have data from auditors where the female auditor did all the ordering and requesting of the bill. The couple in Study 2 ate during dinner times and followed similar protocols throughout their visits. Throughout the meal, the couple's actions suggested a preference for gender equity. Both auditors initiated conversations with servers, did their own ordering, and the female auditor always requested the bill. To standardize the protocols, this study only analysed the bill placement for couples where women explicitly requested the bill (Study 1, n = 36; Study 2, n = 140). It was assumed that this interaction would indicate that the woman wanted to pay for the meal and that the server might be unwilling or unable to follow this disruption of the traditional scripts of benevolent sexism. No identifiable information was collected, and this was an observational audit study. The IRB at the authors' university confirmed that no ethics board review was necessary for this study.

Sampling technique

Study 1 used an 'opportunity sample' but it never described the details of the project's sampling technique, except insisting that all restaurants were located in Phoenix, Arizona. In Study 2, auditors conducted a convenience sample of restaurants that existed in the greater Phoenix area. All

restaurants rested in what the US Census called a 'metropolitan statistical area' (MSA) or a dense urban region that had one large city surrounded by contiguous suburban municipalities. In Study 2, the auditors found suitable restaurants on popular social media sites like Yelp (Wright, Wallace, Bailey, & Hyde, 2013). These websites offered customers' reviews of restaurants, and the authors used filters to choose restaurants that had similar cuisines as the first study (for example, the restaurant had to have a 'sit down' option and it had to be some sort of 'American' or 'foreign' cuisine). The auditors purposely selected restaurants that had a wide price range of menu items and went to establishments distributed throughout the Phoenix MSA.

Sample qualities

Study 1 offered little information about restaurant characteristics. We know that 41% of the servers were under 29-years-old and that 46% of the diners had meals that they deemed as being inexpensive (Laner et al., 1979).

Study 2 sampled restaurants of many different types and price ranges. About 40% were connected to some sort of regional or national chain, and 30% were classified as American as they served items like braised short ribs, sandwiches, rotisserie chicken, pan fried salmon or meatloaf. Roughly 14% of the restaurants served pizza, 7% served Italian food, 7% served Asian food (such as Chinese, Indian, Korean or Thai), and 6% of the restaurants served Mexican food. The mean bill for two was $74.02 including tip, with 17% of the total bills being below $35.00 and 15% being above $100.00. Overall, this sample was skewed slightly towards more expensive meals, as the 'Food Away from Home' survey estimated that the average bill for a party of two was $22.14 before taxes and tip (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012).

Measures

Dependent variable

With regard to bill placement, none of the auditors reached for the bill when the server dropped it off. This meant that the server put the check somewhere on the table. Both studies made sure that there was ample open space on the table for this and that all possible barriers to check placement were removed. Observers in both studies created a three-point scale of the intended bill recipient. Bills placed closer to the male customer were deemed 'intended for man' while bills dropped closer to the female were considered 'intended for the woman'. Bills that were closer to the centre of the table or had an ambiguous placement, were classified as being 'intended for the middle'. The gender of the bill recipient was coded as 1 = intended for man, 2 = intended for middle, 3 = intended for woman.

Independent variables

The auditors in both studies took notes of server quality and restaurant type. Laner et al. (1979) described this process: 'Observations were made in restaurants ranging from franchised, fast-food operations to coffee shop and average American types, continental, foreign food (Greek, Mexican, Hungarian, Italian, French, and Chinese), and "haute cuisine" establishments' (p. 387–388). They also recorded the presumed gender and age of servers as well as the cost of the meal. Laner et al. (1979) operationalized and coded the independent variables in a binary fashion. Restaurants were considered franchised or not, American or not, foreign or not, and 'fancy' or not. A person's gender was considered male or female, while estimated ages were allocated to a four layered ordinal systems that started with under 29 years old and ended with over 50 years old.

Study 2 had the same predictor variables as the first audit, and the auditors in Study 2 tried to copy the way variables were operationalized and coded in Study 1. The auditors recorded the total amount listed on the bill (food costs, taxes, tips). The auditors looked for clues of the server's gender, looking at the server's name, clothing, hairstyle, weight/height and listening to comments about

gender. Gender was classified into a dummy code (female = 1, all others = 0). Previous research found that servers under 30-years-old were more likely to offer a bill to the man (Laner et al., 1979) so we created a dummy code of young servers (people under 30 = 1, all others = 0).

Several attributes of the restaurants were also documented for Study 2. Some restaurants were part of multi-location chains, while others were family-owned locations limited to one restaurant in Phoenix. National chains were identified by the 2009 Restaurants and Institutions magazine's list of the top 400 US Chains (similar to Wootan & Osborn, 2006; Wu & Sturm, 2013). These restaurants had 206,750 outlets in the US and reported the largest sales within the dining industry (Top 400 Chain = 1, all others = 0). We referenced the *Restaurants and Institutions* magazine to classify the type of food offered by the restaurant (similar to Wootan & Osborn, 2006). This sweeping typology had 15 categories of restaurants that differed by the country of origin and type of meal served. Restaurants were assigned to each category based on their identities and menu items. We decided to analyse the types of restaurants that were closest to the measures in Study 1. Accordingly, we created dummy variables for American, Asian, Italian, and Mexican food restaurants.

Analytical plan

For Study 1, Laner et al. (1979) provided one table on the univariate distribution of bill placement. Later, tables had bivariate crosstabs that revealed how the frequency of male or female placement varied by server characteristics and restaurant type. The authors did not calculate any inferential statistics that determined significant relationships between the independent and dependent variables in the 1970s data. Instead, they offered prose about the variables that seemed to make the biggest difference in bill placement practices. For Study 2, we ran a simple Pearson chi-squares (χ^2) to estimate significant associations between bill placement practices and server/restaurant qualities (data from 2013 to 2015). The nonparametric statistic of χ^2 was used because of the categorical dependent variable and Cramer's V indicated the effect sizes. Cramer's Vs were considered as trivial below .10, small between .10 and .20, moderate between .21 and .30, and large above .30 (Field, 2009).

Results

Table 1 shows the historical trends of men receiving the bill at Phoenix area restaurants. When combining both samples from Study 1 and Study 2, men received the bill 36% of the time, and women received the bill 6% of the cases. The modal category of middle table placement occurred in the pooled sample (58%). Thus, the typical way that servers responded to women ordering all of the food was to place the bill in the middle of the table.

Placing the bill in the middle might indicate some version of gender equity though it was notable that even when women placed the order and asked for the bill, 94% of the servers did not follow this, prompting them to hand the bill to the woman. Instead, the majority of servers placed the bill in the centre of the table and did not follow the cues of the woman at the table who had requested the bill. One-third of the servers countered the implied preferences of the customers and gave the bill to the man. Thus, servers almost universally missed, ignored or overrode the gender equity signals of the

Table 1. Gendered placement of the bill of a mixed-gender table in which the woman ordered and paid.

	Both samples		1970s		2013–2015	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Intended for Man	64	36%	9	25%	55	40%
Middle	103	58%	22	61%	81	57%
Intended for Woman	9	6%	5	14%	4	3%
Number	176		36		140	

Table 2. Gender differences of who gets the bill when the woman orders the food.

	1970s		2013–2015	
Variable	Difference	Direction	χ^2	Probability
Cost of Bill	Large difference	More Expensive Gave More to Man	2.24	.691
Woman Server	Minor difference		0.63	.969
Young Server	Large difference	Older Gave Less to Man	.940	.625
American	Large difference	American Restaurants Gave More to Women	1.34	.511
Foreign	Large difference	Foreign Restaurants Gave More to Men	-	-
Italian Cuisine	-	-	6.01	***.049***
Mexican Cuisine	-	-	.42	.870
Asian Cuisine	-	-	2.35	.308
Franchise	Minor difference	Chain Gave More to Women	2.95	.229

Data was described via prose in the 1970's study (N = 36) while 2013–2015 data was analysed by a Chi-square (N = 140).

customers sitting at the table. This ignoring of women's requests or preferences was a concrete example of a social arrangement in which women's preferences were discounted or neglected in order to instead cater to general patterns of deferring to men for payment or, at the very least, *not* acknowledging that women's request for the check meant that they wanted to pay for the bill.

Notably, Study 2's data suggest that the tendency to offer the bill to women has gotten *worse* over the last 40 years. Rather than seeing a gradual reduction in sexist restaurant server behaviour, the percentage of instances where women received the bill actually decreased over time. Study 1 in the 1970s started with a low percentage of 14% of female bill placement. That number decreased in Study 2 to a mere 3% in the 2010s. The tendency to offer the bill to men made a sizable comeback, as in the 1970s men got the bill 25% of the time while in the 2010s men got the bill 40% of the time. Thus, there were no signs of greater gender equity in that forty-year span as the sexism appears to have worsened over time.

Table 2 presents the explanatory part of this study. The Laner et al. (1979) study only offered crosstabs in their tables and never provided statistical tests for significance. Their prose and the contingency tables suggested that more expensive and 'foreign' restaurants had servers offering the check to men more often than in other types of restaurants. The authors also asserted that older servers handed the bill to men more regularly than younger servers in the 1970s sample. Still, without any chi-square tests or Pearson correlations, we cannot determine if group differences are large enough to reject the null for this earlier table. (The sample size in Study 1 was 36 cases, so rejecting the null would not be easy.)

Study 2 provided simple Pearson R correlations for the bill placement practices. This 2010s sample suggested that bill placement practices were rarely connected to the variables in our sample. Comparisons between the gender of bill recipients found that only Italian restaurants significantly differed in their bill placement, $\chi^2(2) = 6.01$, $p = .049$, Cramer's $V = .20$). The Italian restaurant variables displayed a moderate effect size, but all other variables offered weak statistically insignificant associations. A server's gender and age did not alter bill placement tendencies, and neither did the corporate ownership of the establishment versus local family-ownership of the restaurant. Thus, female servers were just as likely to offer the bill to men as were male servers, and national-chain restaurants and local restaurants had similar rates of offering the bill to male customers.

Discussion

This study gives renewed emphasis to the 'gender as structure' theory, which argues that gender biases are built into all organizations, groups and interactions in society (Acker, 1990; Lorber, 1994). Restaurants often reinforce gender biases in the types of jobs done by employees, the ways in which servers present themselves to customers, and in the hierarchies of payments given to different jobs (such as bartender versus host). This study suggests that restaurant servers in particular may reinforce traditional gender norms about who pays the bill and may react to cues for requesting

the check by ignoring women's status as earner/payer at the table. While this may seem like a relatively mundane aspect of sexism, we argue here that gender norms are communicated *through* the mundane, frequently insidious and hidden ways all too often tolerated as 'business as usual'.

By studying server and customer interactions in Phoenix restaurants, this paper identified the extent to which men or women received the bill for mixed-gendered tables. Using data from the 1970s and 2010s, the findings of this study revealed gendered patterns for each era and offered insight into how these patterns changed over time. This longitudinal analysis did not simply track the persistence of sexist actions, but also tried to determine if certain server or restaurant qualities impacted the tendency of servers to present the check to men or women. It is rare indeed to have such data, especially about routine interactions like these, and as such, we consider it a valuable contribution to look closely at something so often overlooked by researchers. In essence, we document here practices that most people have experienced or engaged in, but have rarely been recorded or noticed in systematic ways.

This study offered provocative results on the sexism of bill placements. One could argue that gender equity was often achieved because the bill was placed in the middle of about half of the meals. Conversely, a celebration of gender equity seems overstated because only 3% of the servers followed the request of the women to receive the bill in the recent sample. Moreover, the data offers a sobering and cautious rebuke of a 'progress' narrative about sexism in restaurant settings. When writing in 1979, at the end of the massive feminist mobilization in the 1970s, Laner, Axelrod, and Laner concluded that male diners regularly received the check and that the treatment of 'women in restaurants appears to be little affected by emergent norms of egalitarianism' (394). In a follow-up study 40 years later, gender egalitarianism has not improved. Consistent with the earlier study, the follow-up study showed that the most typical bill placement was still in the middle of the table (61% in the 1970s, 57% in the 2010s). However, this stability of this datapoint was deceptive, as a closer look at the instances of handing the check to men or women found that the chance of men getting the bill raised by 15% from the 1970s to the 2010s (25% to 40%) and the tendency of women getting the bill fell by 11% (14% to 3%). This suggests a regression of gender equality in restaurant settings and a vast increase in men receiving the bill compared to women.

Both audit studies explored server and customer qualities in relation to bill placement. The selection of predictor variables was established in the first study; Study 2 simply replicated their variables. Although earlier studies failed to provide calculations of statistical significance, we offered some cautious and speculative discussions of this matter. In general, the practices of bill placement did not relate to most of the independent variables in this study. Being a chain restaurant did not matter for bill placement. The cost of the meal was insignificant as well, a finding that surprised us given that more expensive meals occurred in restaurants that may seem to draw upon more traditional gender roles (such as presenting a wine list; hiring more male servers). The age of servers mattered slightly, as older servers presented the bill in a more egalitarian manner in the 1970s, while younger people practiced this approach more often in the mid-2010s, though these associations between age and bill placement never reached statistical significance. Both studies found that restaurants with American menus were slightly more likely to have servers who gave the bill to women, but this was minor and statistically insignificant. Servers at Italian restaurants gave the bill to men at higher rates, but this was the only factor that significantly impacted bill placement practices. Thus, gender bias in bill placement permeated the restaurant culture in general and did not merely reflect a certain kind of restaurant, the age of a server, or the type of food served.

The question of why bill placement matters also underlies this research, as we have focused our attention on a relatively minute and seemingly mundane aspect of life. Restaurants are places where people can go to relax, socialize, and unwind (and the recent loss of access to them during COVID-19 quarantines and lockdowns reflected how deep of a loss it is to not have access to these spaces on a regular basis). Restaurants provide a social context for romantic relationships to develop and flourish, for friendships to grow, for families and groups to acknowledge special occasions and celebrate together, for people to escape the tensions of work and home, or for solo diners to have

time to unwind and relax from work and other responsibilities (Oldenburg, 1999). In this sense, restaurants are not an insignificant space in human lives; rather, they help to mark, create and manifest social life, and are a part of who we are as a culture. The experience of going to a restaurant is one that reflects people's values, priorities, financial freedoms, curiosity, and investment in community. Thus, the study of restaurants – and all the complex ways in which they influence and reflect social life – is of great consequence. As we leave the era of COVID-19, we may soon find out how deeply one's favourite restaurants are missed or how much we care about restaurants as a centrepiece of social life.

In this sense, bill placement is one of the many actions taken in restaurants that reflect the values of the broader culture. It matters that women are rarely given the bill even when they order food and request the check, and it matters because it is yet another subtle way that women are stripped of their social power, denied access to equality and framed as less financially stable than men. It also weaves women into a system of financial dependence, even when that may not be reflected in their bank accounts; by handing the check to men directly or by refusing to give women the check when they request it, servers remind women that they are financial deferent to (or at the bottom of a hierarchy from) the men with whom they socialize, work and dine. While these choices sometimes reflect the preferences and patterns of the servers themselves, we also understand that many restaurants set expectations of their servers to *not* give the check to women as a conscious management decision (Tibbals, 2007). Many chain restaurants have policies to place the check at the centre of the table no matter what, and many local restaurants instruct servers (especially in high-end restaurants) to present the check to men no matter what. Still, our study found no difference between chain and non-chain, and less or more expensive restaurants, with regard to check placement, suggesting that no clear pattern emerges for either of these types of restaurants in terms of check placement. We hope that these tendencies will stop and that check presentation will become more egalitarian overall. The continued reminder to women that they have less power – socially and economically – damages the delicate social relationships established within (and beyond) restaurants. Restaurant policies and practices can better reflect gendered equality in all aspects of how restaurants train servers and in how servers interact with customers.

While this study offered some unique insights about restaurant server behaviour over time, it also had some limitations worth noting. Audit studies only track the behaviour of individuals and cannot explore the motives behind the actions of the servers. All of this data was collected in Phoenix, Arizona in the Southwest of the United States. Gender practices in rural, midwestern, or southern areas of the U.S. might display greater gender conservatism overall (Carter & Borch, 2005). Studying these practices in California, Oregon, Washington, or in the more liberal east coast states may also yield different data. Upcoming studies can explore how often men received the bill when men, or alternating men and women, did the ordering in mixed gendered dyads;researchers can also explore bill placement practices for groups of three or more people. The act of men ordering or requesting the check might alter the actions of servers because the Laner et al. (1979) paper found that the man got the check 53% of the time under these circumstances. Future studies could also change the race or class of the auditors to look at how these intersections impact the way customers are treated in restaurants (Brewster, 2015; Brewster et al., 2014), as the data in this paper cannot speak to racial discrimination more broadly. Future studies could also target restaurants with a more explicitly politically-left 'vibe' to see if this impacted server/customer interactions (Ketchum, 2018). Similarly, future research could target more vegan restaurants to determine whether the gender politics of restaurants that do not serve meat or dairy might also impact server/customer interactions (Wrenn, 2017). It may also be worthwhile to study this qualitatively by interviewing men and women about their perceptions and feelings of restaurant behaviour, as some men might perceive the pressure to pay as a form of losing power (that is, having to shoulder the expense) rather than having more power than women (who are perceived to not have as many resources). Finally, the first and second audits were done during different stages of the feminist movement, as data from Study 1 was collected during the peak of second-wave feminism, while Study 2 took place during an ebb in

public feminist activism in the U.S. (Staggenborg & Taylor, 2005) and before the election of Donald Trump (and subsequent political activism of the women's marches and #MeToo mobilizations, see Fisher, 2019). Different timings for the audits could have impacted the results of these studies.

In general, this study points to the need for more research on the routine practices of everyday sexism, particularly across contexts, geographical locations and settings. While restaurants represent one area for research, we also suggest that researchers take up questions about other mundane settings (such as cafes, bars, schools, work meetings, public transportation interactions, retail stores). This will allow for a more robust analysis of the workings of sexism or improvements in reducing or eliminating sexist behaviour, across multiple contexts. We also want more analyses of restaurants themselves, particularly as they sit at the core of social life. The discouraging results of this study – that sexism has actually *worsened over time* – point to the need to look at these ordinary and 'everyday' contexts more closely, and to compare these findings to the broader political and policy-level changes seen in the culture at large. We continue to hold that researchers must continue to examine contexts where people experience relaxation, pleasure, and leisure in order to understand the insidious workings of sexism and the influences of sexist behaviour on people's everyday lives.

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