

## Getting Acquainted with Acquaintanceship

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He was bald, smartly if conservatively dressed and aged around sixty. He always seemed to be reading *The Daily Telegraph* and, although this may be a false memory, he seemed to be concentrating on the racing pages. He occupied the same seat in the station buffet, almost every morning. He paid no interest to the arrival or the departure of trains. He occasionally exchanged a few words with one or two other people. And then, one day, he was no longer there. Or possibly it was me who no longer made this regular journey, stopping briefly in the buffet when I arrived too early or if the train were late.

It was incidents like this that stimulated my developing interest in acquaintanceship, which I am currently developing as a book to be published by the Open University Press. The man in the buffet was clearly not an intimate such as a friend. But, over the weeks or months, he was also more than a stranger. I developed some (real or imagined) knowledge about him, at least enough to make up stories about him and why he was in the buffet at this time in the morning. He could be seen as a passing acquaintance. Other acquaintances, such as taxi drivers or shop assistants, are more fleeting. Yet others, such as neighbours or workmates, emerge as more fully rounded individuals yet these too are rarely intimates. We might even speak of celebrities or fictional characters as acquaintances.

What has this to do with the Sociology of Health and Illness? First, in common with many areas of modern social life, everyday contact with health agencies and professionals involves waiting. (The theme of “waiting” itself deserves more detailed sociological attention). In the waiting rooms – as in my station buffet – we encounter others who become more than strangers but who are rarely intimates. Further, the professionals we deal with frequently have detailed, intimate and embodied knowledge of us although they, themselves, are not intimates. The others that we encounter through our regular or irregular passages through the health service form part of that complex, loose set of acquaintances.

I feel that acquaintanceship has been a neglected area of social enquiry, overshadowed by both the apparent stress on intimacy in late modernity and the allure and threat of strangers in our urbanised environments. At the very least, acquaintances may provide us with fleeting insights into worlds other than our own. But, more profoundly, they may also be seen as part

of the wider patterns of connectedness that makes social life possible.

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