

Getting Acquainted: The Hidden Value of (In)Significant Others

by

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Abstract: *In the context of modern personal life, acquaintances are becoming a growing feature of people's personal communities. However, their significance is often framed in terms of their instrumentality. What we understand less is how these distant interpersonal relationships hold meaning and value in everyday lives. In this paper, I argue that acquaintances are valuable contributions to everyday life in order to challenge previous assumptions of their insignificance. To do this, I draw on data from seven semi-structured qualitative interviews in order to investigate the role and significance of acquaintances in participants' lives. I hope to build understanding of the often hidden value of acquaintanceships and how these relations contribute to shaping a person's sense of who they are.*

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Introduction

[Acquaintances are] that personal touch that makes the whole experience what it is and the whole work environment or living environment [too]...it makes my daily experience the way it is. You know, if you only go through your day interacting with the one or two people who you are truly friends with, it just doesn't fill your day...it's hollow, essentially. (Finley)

This quotation comes from one of my interviewees, Finley. Here, Finley is illustrating an interest of mine that led to this study. Acquaintances are often relationships that we do not think too deeply about—they are an afterthought or overlooked as relatively insignificant components of our social worlds. As Finley points out, however, acquaintances help to make “the whole experience what it is.” By conducting this research, I aimed to expose the often hidden value of acquaintances that make them a significant and meaningful piece of our personal lives.

Exploratory in nature, my thesis focuses on investigating how participants understand both the role and significance of the acquaintances in their lives in shaping who they are more broadly. That said, the research question guiding my project is: *How do people who have undergone a recent life change perceive and experience the role of weak ties in their lives?* This question is situated within a body of knowledge and literature addressing the anthropology of modern personal life and the anthropology of the self. My project adds to these conversations by producing new knowledge that contributes to a greater understanding of interpersonal relationships and how acquaintances contribute to shaping the self. Particularly, my study questions previous assumptions about the relative importance of acquaintanceships as being restricted to their instrumentality—as simply information and networking resources—by

exploring their role in shaping identities and how acquaintances are positioned within personal and social life.

My analysis centres around key findings that aim to highlight the often hidden significance of acquaintanceships in modern life and for shaping who someone is. I draw on current understandings of acquaintanceships as components of everyday life in order to articulate the deeper complexities of “good” and “bad” acquaintances. Moreover, the value of acquaintances is often underestimated despite being “indispensable to individuals’ opportunities and to their integration into communities” (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1378). These relationships can link people to social networks other than their own, providing access to information that is socially distant from their personal network, such as new job opportunities. Additionally, Small’s (2017) study of who people talk to when they have a problem found that his participants often confided in their weaker relationships as opposed to their immediate social ties. These perspectives highlight the instrumental value of acquaintances; however, I will argue that the significance of acquaintances as features of everyday life exceeds this instrumental value.

Furthermore, an important perspective in the literature highlights that interpersonal relations shape the self (Carsten, 2004; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001; Eramian, 2018; Morgan, 2009); however, the role of acquaintances in shaping selves is not commonly discussed. To address this gap, my findings use Morgan’s (2009) ideas of stories and the concept of personhood to consider the role acquaintances can have in the constitution of persons. By questioning ideas about the significance of acquaintances as being restricted to their instrumentality and by looking at their role in shaping selves, this study seeks to expose the deeper meaning and role of acquaintances in the lives of participants through qualitative

interviewing. Ultimately, I question previous assumptions of acquaintances as being insignificant relations.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The following subsections provide an overview of important scholarly conversations regarding the role of acquaintances in modern personal life. First, I draw on Granovetter (1973), Morgan (2009), Spencer and Pahl (2006), and Simmel (1950) to situate my research in the anthropology of modern personal life and then to outline current understandings of acquaintanceships. With the addition of Small (2017), the following subcategory highlights the significance of acquaintances in the existing literature, which has focused heavily on their instrumentality. Finally, I draw on the concept of personhood and Morgan's (2009) ideas of stories and acquaintances to frame my research within the anthropology of the self.

Acquaintances as a feature of modern life

In order to locate my focus on the value and role of acquaintanceships, it is important to step back and situate these relations as an element of modern personal life. Within the changing nature of modern life, acquaintances have become a central component of everyday experiences and people's personal communities. Granovetter (1973) argues that people's acquaintances, or weak ties, are becoming more numerous as growing macro-level structures create favourable conditions for weak tie relations to form. While smaller face-to-face communities featuring strong social bonds among members have characterized much of human existence, many modern societies in contrast are largely comprised of strangers and weak tie relations. Morgan (2009, p. 119) characterizes this shift as "the intensification of urban life," where factors such as the

changing nature of occupational and labour positions, growing local and international transportation systems, social mobility, and the development of communication systems, particularly the Internet, have led to people coming into contact with increasingly more people in their daily lives. This can be seen in people's daily routines and habits: "many of the activities which generate acquaintances are to do with the regularities of modern life" (Morgan, 2009, p. 125). For example, going to the same workplace, the grocery store, and the structure of many leisure activities result in the development of acquaintances through repeated exposure to the same people in these spatial and temporal contexts. As such, acquaintances have become a consequence of everyday life.

Spencer and Pahl (2006) highlight competing perspectives regarding the position of acquaintances in the modern era. On one hand, some scholars raise concerns that social life is undergoing fragmentation and that personal and social life is in decline. This is because people are withdrawing from wider social involvement and community to focus on their "little circles," or their personal social bonds isolated from the community at large, resulting in the deterioration of "the quality of social relationships" as individuals neglect broader communal engagement (Spencer & Pahl, 2006, p. 15). This points to concerns about unhappiness and isolation as social relationships become more fleeting and transient with the rise of individualism, which is sometimes said to be undermining people's obligations and responsibilities to the collective and communal life (Spencer & Paul, 2006).

On the other hand, however, Spencer and Pahl (2006) argue that this is not necessarily the case. They discuss the perspective that communities are not declining but indeed are shifting in their forms given the changing conditions of modern society. They use the frame of personal communities to characterize an individual's micro-social world, which refers to the "wider set of

significant ties in which people are embedded” (Spencer & Pahl, 2006, p. 43). Although the authors are using the concept in relation to friendships, personal community is a useful tool for thinking about acquaintances as well. They are a mode of relating to others in modern personal life as they “represent people’s significant personal relationships and include bonds which give both structure and meaning to their lives” (Spencer & Pahl, 2006, p. 45). As such, the scope of personal communities can be broadened to avoid limiting them to close ties; rather, personal communities are constituted by a wide range of relationships that an individual perceives as important within their social worlds. That said, my research seeks to demonstrate that acquaintances can hold significant places within people’s personal communities and are a valuable component of relating in modern personal life.

Morgan (2009) discusses acquaintances as a feature of the public realm and social cohesion. As I discussed above, the nature of modern life commonly leads to individuals gaining a stock of acquaintances; that said, their value is often overlooked. These relations add to the quality of public life through the ways in which “people within such spaces relate to each other and to the wider social and political contexts within which they find themselves” (Morgan, 2009, p. 121). Likewise, acquaintances are central to navigating the complexities of modern society. Due to their instrumental value, weak tie relations act as resources for individuals by connecting people’s social networks. Consequently, they also play a role in social cohesion by linking individuals’ personal communities and enabling the diffusion of socially distant information, influences, and ideas across groups of people (Granovetter, 1973).

The complex nature of the modern world has resulted in increasing opportunities for interactions between individuals to take place, leading to the development of acquaintances as a consequence and feature of everyday public life (Morgan, 2009). Through my research, I aim to

show how acquaintances can hold valuable places in personal communities, which are shaped by the relations deemed meaningful to an individual and are typically thought to be reserved for strong ties. In order to do this, next I will further consider how the existing literature characterizes what an acquaintanceship is.

Defining acquaintances

Past literature directed towards understanding acquaintanceships is minimal; however, there has been some notable discussions, many of them brief, of these distant interpersonal relationships that aid in a broad understanding of these “sociologically highly peculiar relation[s]” (Simmel, 1950, p. 320; see also Morgan, 2009).

According to Simmel (1950), relations with other people are based on having some form of knowledge about the other person. The individuals involved do not need to possess equal amounts of knowledge about the other person, and this knowledge is never absolute. Knowing about the other person in some fashion creates the possibility for interactions and relationships to take place. Moreover, Simmel explains that relationships with strong ties “are built upon the person” and are characterized by having a deeper knowledge of the other’s personality (p. 324). However, acquaintanceship is a special form of relation where the individuals involved in the interaction do not actually need to know the other person intimately; rather, one simply needs be aware of the other person’s existence (Morgan, 2009; Simmel, 1950).

Acquaintances are characterized by a particular kind of knowing about the other person that “involves no actual insight into the individual nature of the personality” (Simmel, 1950, p. 320). Instead, the relation centres around knowing either the facet of the individual that is presented to the outside world or what is seen “in the purely social-representative sense”

(Simmel, 1950, p. 320). Morgan (2009), however, builds on Simmel's explanation and adds that acquaintances are non-interchangeable. Although an acquaintance may not have any degree of knowledge about the other individual's personal life, these relations are distinct in that they cannot be interchanged with another person to replace that same relation. Morgan (2009) also maps our social world into intimates, acquaintances, and strangers, elaborating on the fluidity and blurriness of the boundaries between these tie relations. He highlights that acquaintances can transform into other forms of relations as well, such as an acquaintance becoming a close friend and vice versa.

The fluidity and fuzzy boundaries of acquaintances contribute to the complex role of these relations. However, their complexity, along with their value, is often overlooked and limited to their instrumentality. Acquaintances are characterized as “friendly relationships” by Spencer and Pahl (2006, p. 76), who describe them “as people who are pleasant to each other and who might engage in limited sociability, but intimacy is avoided.” The authors refer to acquaintance's instrumental value—such as exchanging favours and practical support—while stressing the contextual nature of weak ties for individuals. For example, workmates might provide support and assistance at work, but because the relationship “does not extend beyond the workplace,” the acquaintance remains specific to the setting in which they know each other, and their involvement in each other's lives is contingent upon both parties being in that workplace setting (Spencer & Pahl, 2006, p. 76). However, even though these relations are typically limited to the setting in which they were formed, my findings will demonstrate that this does not negate their value in participants' lives.

Significance of acquaintances

Next, I will consider scholars' discussions of the ways that weak ties matter and are significant to people's lives. As suggested above, weak ties are important contributions to social networks.

That said, current literature on the role of acquaintance relations and their significance focuses heavily on the practical and material considerations of weak ties. First, Granovetter's seminal paper *The Strength of Weak Ties* explains the instrumental value that weak ties can offer. He explains that social networks can be divided into strong ties and non-bridging weak ties on one hand and bridging weak ties on the other. Non-bridging weak ties are acquaintances that have few connections that are not already tied to "ego" (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1370). Bridging weak ties, however, are ties that are not enmeshed in ego's social circle and have additional ties unknown to ego. As such, Granovetter (1973; 1983) argues that weak ties connect ego to other social networks and allow for the diffusion of ideas, influences, and information socially distant from ego by linking social networks. Granovetter (1973, p. 1371) sums up the practical value of weak ties by stating: "those to whom we are weakly tied are more likely to move in circles different from our own and will thus have access to information different from that which we receive."

While discussing the practice of acquaintanceship, Morgan (2009, p. 110) highlights another practical aspect of weak ties in terms of conversational practices between strong ties and weak ties. He explains that "safe" topics are typically the limit in conversations with weak ties, whereas strong ties can deal with "dangerous" topics where more of the self is exposed. He relates this assumption to ideas of closeness and distance between relationship types. However, Small (2017) contradicts this assumption by demonstrating through his study of who a group of graduate students go to for support that conversations between weak ties can, in fact, host

“dangerous” conversation topics. These interactions are an example of where aspects of the self and one’s personality are more exposed in weak tie interactions as opposed to only knowing that which is presented on the outside (Simmel, 1950). This further shows that weak ties possess a value that reaches past the instrumentality that Granovetter (1973) discusses, indicating that they can hold meaningful roles in personal communities.

Small’s (2017) study highlights that who we say we turn to for social support may not be who we actually speak with. He outlines three major reasons that resulted in a group of first-year graduate students from three separate programs turning to weak ties for social support. First, he explains that participants avoided strong tie relations because 1) there was greater risk involved in the interaction, such as uncomfortable situations or receiving a poor reaction that harms their relationship with the strong tie, and 2) confiding in multiplex relationships, where the strong tie may have multiple roles to the person (such as both the supporter and a parent), presents the risk of the multiplex relation responding while taking on an undesired role (for example, responding as a parent instead of as the supporter). Second, participants often sought cognitive empathy, or the person’s ability to understand and relate to their situation. Because social networks contain greater numbers of weak ties as a result of modern personal and social life, the likelihood of encountering a weak tie that could empathize with their situation is greater than that of a strong tie. Finally, participants sometimes confided in weak ties “simply because the confidant was present and available when needed” (Small, 2017, p. 110). As shown by the above examples, weak ties can play a valuable role within social networks that exceeds the instrumental.

Acquaintances and the self

A prominent conversation in the literature regarding acquaintances and selfhood focuses on how strong ties shape selves; however, scholars have suggested that acquaintances do contribute to the constitution of selves. Morgan (2009, p. 115), for example, draws a comparison between acquaintances and short stories, explaining that each are “fragmentary insights into other worlds” that have their own role to play building identities and selves. If we accept that selves are relational, as numerous scholars have demonstrated (see Carsten, 2004; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001; Eramian, 2018; Morgan, 2009), the contribution that acquaintance relations make to the constitution of selves has been largely overlooked.

How can we understand what selves are? Drawing upon personhood as a framework to interpret and analyze my findings, my project aims to contribute to the scholarly conversation of the ways in which weak ties shape the self. Personhood can be defined as “what it means to be a social agent in different historical and cultural contexts” (Carsten, 2004, p. 84). The typically Western, Eurocentric notion of personhood, of an autonomous, individuated person, has often been used in contrast with ideas of relational personhood, typically thought of as non-Western, where the self is built out of relations with others (Carsten, 2004; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001; Eramian, 2018). Eramian (2018, p. 6) points out that some scholars have suggested that all “persons are both relational and individual.” Moreover, Comaroff and Comaroff (2001) cast a shadow over the classical distinction between individuated and relational personhood by explaining some deeper complexities they found in Southern Tswana people’s way of being in the world, demonstrating that many factors, both autonomous and relational, play into the making of selves.

However, little has been said pertaining to how weak ties play a role in shaping selves, instead focusing on their potential to play a part. Morgan (2009) makes a fleeting point that our interactions with acquaintances help to shape selves through the stories about and presentations of the self that are portrayed during these interactions with acquaintance relations. Similarly, Goffman (1959) considers the structure of social encounters, comparing them to a theatre where the self is a performed character that is presented in social interactions. He considers the self as a performer who can learn and create impressions upon an “audience.” Therefore, presenting segments of one’s personality during interactions with acquaintances shape selves since “the adjustments in the face of the others are not simply assumed, like a mask; but are incorporated into our identities” (Morgan, 2009, p. 6-7; Simmel, 1950).

Newcomb (1969, p. 259) also describes the importance of encounters with other individuals because they allow each party to collect information about the other person, constructing their orientations “toward each other and toward the common world.” Likewise, acquaintances vary from friendships in the “nature of the emotional bond or the sense of commitment” (Spencer & Pahl, 2006, p. 76), which speaks to their role as fleeting glimpses into other worlds (Morgan, 2009). That being said, the focus thus far has mainly been directed at how strong ties shape selves with limited conversation and research on how weak ties play a role in the relational constitution of selves.

Although scholars like Goffman and Newcomb are mainly focused on interactions as Morgan (2009) states, this demonstrates that persons are constantly engaging in encounters with other persons, are presenting themselves and telling stories about themselves, and are creating selves and identities in the process. Although this process is culturally and temporally variant, personhood “is *always* a social creation” (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001, p. 276), and the role of

relationships, including acquaintance relations, cannot be removed from understanding how the self is shaped. This brings me back to my research question. I will add to the conversations above by looking at how people who have undergone a recent life change perceive and experience the role of weak ties in their lives. Additionally, I will consider how acquaintanceships contribute to shaping the self.

Methods

The following section provides a description of and justification for the research methods used to conduct my project. I explain and justify my study population and then outline my chosen methods, including a brief summary of the research instruments that I used. I highlight the process of my analysis, and I conclude by considering the limits of my project and its ethical concerns.

Studying acquaintances can present challenges because they are not relations that people typically reflect on. My population of interest consisted of individuals who recently experienced a life change within the last year. Life changes were considered anything from finding a new job, moving, getting married, or starting a new school program. By looking at those who experienced a recent life change, my intent was to find participants who might be more likely to think about the role of acquaintances in their life, since they may have been less connected to their core support systems and might be more reflexive of the encounters they have with new people amid the shifting conditions of a life change. As Small (2017) has shown in his study of who people talk to when they are in need of a confidant, people often turn to their weak ties. Moreover, he used similar criteria for selecting his research participants, choosing to focus on first-year graduate students because they were in the midst of experiencing changing contexts through a

major life shift. My interviewees were all women from diverse sociocultural backgrounds; two women were visible minorities, most interviewees were in their early twenties, and one was in her late seventies.

As Kirby and McKenna (1989) explain, research methods are chosen based on the type of data you wish to collect. My research combined the use of two methods to get at interviewees' perspectives on the roles of acquaintances in their lives: vignettes and semi-structured qualitative interviews. During seven interviews ranging from 45 minutes to two hours, I asked participants to respond to a series of three vignettes followed by subsequent interview questions. Four interviews were conducted in person and three took place over the phone. I decided on this number of interviews based on past honours projects that have successfully gathered sufficient data within the project timeline.

The first method I used in my research was vignettes, which are hypothetical situations crafted to present a specific element of what the researcher wants to know more about (Finch, 1987; Hughes, 1998; Hughes, 2008). As Finch (1987, p. 107) describes, data produced from participants' responses to vignettes elicit “commonly understood norms, concepts and rules” about the presented situation. As mentioned, people may struggle to talk about acquaintances since they are often considered insignificant; therefore, vignettes were used to help my interviewees find a way into the topic and begin reflecting on their acquaintances by portraying fixed situations that centred the interview on these kinds of interpersonal relationships.

However, Hughes (2008) explains that vignettes are often criticized for oversimplifying the real world element being portrayed because of detached responses from participants responding as distanced third parties. Alternatively, the intentional selectivity of vignettes helps to focus participants on responding to a particular component of the research, making vignettes

an effective strategy for getting at cultural norms and for looking at participants' attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs towards acquaintanceships (Finch, 1987; Hughes, 1998; Hughes, 2008).

The vignettes used for this project concentrated on three instances of acquaintanceship and were designed to assist me with tapping into participants' normative ideas and perceptions about the role of weak ties in their lives. These include an instance of 1) a favourite work acquaintance moving jobs, resulting in the loss of a weak tie, 2) a single mother asking an acquaintance who she ran into for advice, and 3) a person learning about a quality they did not realize they possessed until after an encounter with an acquaintance (see appendix I).

The second method I used was semi-structured interviews, which are guided conversations "focused on the experiences you want to know more about" and can be justified as an ideal method for my project for two major reasons (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p. 67). First, because semi-structured interviews involve the use of an interview schedule to guide the conversation, both the researcher and interviewees are kept on track throughout the interview process. At the same time, this allows for space to ask follow-up or probing questions to further understand the experience or idea being shared and to explore key themes or patterns that emerged in previous interviews in following ones (Berg & Lune, 2012). Moreover, using the same set of questions allowed me to compare responses across interviews to then search for underlying patterns and themes in the data (Berg & Lune, 2012).

The second justification is that interviews are an extremely useful method for getting at participants' experiences and perspectives about the aspects of the world that the researcher is interested in (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). The interaction allowed me to ask questions that get at participants' understandings and perceptions of the role and significance of acquaintances in

their lives to elicit the categories participants used to make sense of these relations (Berg & Lune, 2012; Kirby & McKenna, 1989).

The main topics that I covered in my interview guide (see appendix I) were separated into two sections. The first section focused on participants' experiences, perceptions, and understandings of their acquaintanceships. The questions explored the meaning of weak ties and their involvement in everyday life. The following section focused on the role of weak ties in shaping participants' sense of self while inquiring about acquaintances they were fond of or dreaded seeing.

Data analysis was an ongoing process throughout the research. My data consisted of recorded interview transcripts that I coded according to themes, key concepts, and ideas stemming from the literature, as well as the patterns and themes that emerged while I transcribed and compared my interview data. Coding is a means for analyzing qualitative data that essentially sorts and labels data into themes and subthemes that speak to the research question (Spencer et al., 2014). I created a final set of 24 codes used to describe and explain my findings. I did an initial coding of each interview while I transcribed the recording; then, I went back through each transcript for a second round of coding using my completed code book once I finished the transcription process.

The codes and categories used in this project aim to describe and explain the role and significance of acquaintanceships in interviewee's lives and in shaping aspects of the self, using the literature's current understanding of acquaintance relations as a framework. I focused on analytical codes to capture participants' understandings of these complex interpersonal relationships. For example, I used the code "Good/Bad Acquaintance" to grasp how participants described the acquaintances in their lives. "Value" was applied to the way participants expressed

how their acquaintances are meaningful and the purpose of (not) having them. A final example is “Stories,” which was used to denote the stories that participants specifically share with acquaintances. These ranged from actual conversation topics, personal narratives, or more implicit stories about aspects of their person that they wanted acquaintances to see or know.

As an exploratory qualitative study, my findings are not representative of the wider population; that said, they allow for an in-depth exploration of the categories and beliefs used by informants to make sense of the role of acquaintances and how they are significant to modern personal life. Being a minimal risk study, the risks or discomforts associated with participating in my research were unlikely to surpass those incurred in day-to-day life. Potential risks to my participants included discomfort depending on what participants chose to share; for example, since I asked about their thoughts and experiences with personal relations, participants may have felt minor discomfort if some of those relationships were difficult ones. To mitigate the possible harms, I gave interviewees the option to refrain from answering any questions, stop the interview at any point, and choose to have all of their data withdrawn from the study up until a specified point. I replaced all names with pseudonyms and removed identifying information from interview transcripts and results to ensure confidentiality of my findings.

Findings

The interviews that I conducted for this study produced a large amount of rich, salient data. I chose to orient my project towards three main themes that best spoke to the role and significance of acquaintanceships in participants’ lives. First, I outline informants’ perceptions of what constitutes good and bad acquaintances. Second, I consider interviewees’ perspectives and understandings of how weak tie relations are meaningful and possess value beyond the

instrumental. Finally, I consider how participants portrayed the role of acquaintanceships in shaping their selfhood.

Good and bad acquaintances

Although the literature's focus on acquaintanceships is not as profound compared to scholars' emphasis on close relationships, interviewees demonstrated that the role acquaintances played in their lives is not a neutral one. Participants expressed what they determined to be good and bad acquaintances, consequently highlighting the complexity of these interpersonal relationships.

Good acquaintances are people that interviewees liked seeing and talking to and who they enjoyed running into. For example, Davis describes the acquaintances she is fond of: "when I run into them we just, we have the perfect amount of catching up and then we go about our lives...when you see each other you're like super happy." These types of acquaintances were discussed in a positive light, and participants perceived them as bringing joy to their everyday lives. In other words, good acquaintances caused participants to experience *micro-affections*¹, or short instances of happiness, care, or support when unexpectedly encountering a good acquaintance, as they move through daily life.

In the context of workplace relationships, good acquaintances were often referred to as work friends. Angela states:

It's more than acquaintances but less than friend friends. Because it's not just like someone that you know, like I would say you probably know them more intimately...like they share more of their personal life details, but...they don't seem to hang out outside of work, so they're like between acquaintances and friend friends; work friends.

¹ I am grateful to Dr. Fiona Martin for creating this term.

A perspective that emerged from responses to vignette one, which describes someone losing this kind of work friend because they got a new job, highlights that work friends seem to be a deeper relationship than other, more fleeting acquaintances; however, participants were careful to differentiate these ties from their circle of intimates. Work friends are confined to the workplace—participants typically do not spend time with them outside of work, and therefore they cannot be “friend friends.” Despite this limitation, Angela explains that “they’re people that care about each other but in a very like specific place and context.” Therefore, I argue that these relations embody what a good acquaintance can be. Angela describes work friends as being more than acquaintances but less than those in her close circle. Although participants may consider different labels for the array of relations that characterize their acquaintanceships, because they are not intimates, work friends can still be seen as within the space of acquaintanceship that Morgan (2009) describes—not intimates or strangers, but falling somewhere in between. These examples speak to the complexity of how acquaintance relations are positioned within participants’ personal lives, which points to the deeper levels of value and significance that weak ties are capable of holding within personal communities.

Those who reflected similar interests in the stories that were shared between the participant and the acquaintance were also portrayed as good acquaintances. Angela describes her good acquaintances as: “People that are good conversationalists...that have interesting stories to tell.” Furthermore, good acquaintances consist of the people who reflected or reciprocated the characteristics that they either see themselves as having or that they look for in potential friendships, something that I will return to in my final finding.

Good acquaintances were also described as being supportive and willing to help. As Ezra says, “My acquaintances are generally involved in a supportive way.” Ezra further explained that

she would study with her acquaintances from school, specifying that “we’re not friends but let’s study together because we’re in the same boat.” This is similar to Small’s (2017) use of the concept of cognitive empathy as one explanation of why people talk to weak ties about their problems. Because Ezra and her acquaintances from her school program are dealing with the same situation, they are able to relate and empathize with each other’s circumstances. Likewise, Nellie’s reference to good acquaintances heavily focused on the people that “you can call on” when she needed support or help. She emphasized the involvement of her acquaintances as “support in transition” whenever she moved to new locations throughout her life. This illustrates another key aspect of how those seen as good acquaintances play a positive and supportive role that goes beyond a simply instrumental value or resource in interviewees’ lives.

Acquaintances who take an interest in the participant’s life by asking the participant questions about themselves can also be placed in the good acquaintance category. May illustrates this when she states: “If I feel if this person is just all about himself, I wouldn’t bother spending more time with this person.” As such, being seen as a good acquaintance requires that interactions are not one sided; rather, some level of reciprocated interest in the other person was stressed. However, there is an interesting tension here that leads into what participants perceived bad acquaintances to be. Whereas good acquaintances are expected to help and support each other, bad acquaintances ask questions that are too personal, overshare, and are too needy.

For example, Groove says of one acquaintance: “...he was just so nosey. Like you know when you’re not friends with someone and they wanna know everything about you, and it’s just like I don’t want to tell you.” Likewise, Ezra speaks to the bad acquaintance quality of oversharing when responding to vignette two, where a mother asks for advice about a problem. She cautions that there is a point where conversation matter can become “too deep or too

personal” and “close to oversharing”; however, she also illustrates the complexity in this tension between good and bad acquaintances when she struggled to explain what exactly the level of oversharing may be. Ezra says: “I think...it’s not necessarily the same level for every person. And I think that you have to look for indications about that with the specific person you’re talking to.”

Moreover, the topics and stories discussed during interactions with bad acquaintances were either superficial or they contrasted with the stories and interests that participants wanted to share. This perspective was highlighted by Ezra when asked to explain if there are any acquaintances that she dreads seeing. She explained that if an acquaintance’s personality clashed with hers, then “I don’t want to talk to them as much and there’s no evolution there. If we’re not talking much, then, it doesn’t evolve into something deeper. It just stays at that superficial level.” Contrary to good acquaintances, who take sufficient interest in the participant and create a more enjoyable interaction by sharing similar story topics, interactions with bad acquaintances remain surface level or shallow. There is little or no evolution of the acquaintanceship as these interactions lack a deeper component of mutual sharing and occur less frequently since, as Ezra explained, she does not want to communicate with these acquaintances.

Differing expectations of the acquaintanceship also created perceptions of bad acquaintances. If an acquaintance expected too much from the relationship, like favours and advice that a person might typically reserve for friends, they were considered to be bad acquaintances. May says: “If someone’s not your friend and [they] keep asking you [to do] things for her, asking for favours, it can be annoying.” Likewise, when asked if she thinks there is anything difficult about acquaintance relations, Groove says:

Just perceptions of it, like if you have someone that you count as an acquaintance and they don't count you as an acquaintance. So like I feel like the struggle with that is the expectations from it, so they expect you to do things friends do.

Similarly, Nellie explained an instance of a bad acquaintance who expected to be invited and brought along to an event she was attending. Nellie explains of this needy acquaintance: "she got very, very invasive of my space...she just wouldn't take no for an answer."

Finally, bad acquaintances emerged from forced interactions where the interaction with the acquaintance was uncomfortable and felt awkward, again pointing to questions of how acquaintances are positioned in our personal communities. These awkward run-ins with acquaintances seemed to emerge when there was no context or setting to the relationship, leading participants to express feelings of uncertainty of how to navigate the interaction. When explaining her experience of running into acquaintances that she used to attend school with but has not seen in the same school setting for several years, Davis says, "you don't even know what to ask about, and that makes me uncomfortable." In other words, acquaintanceships were better positioned to thrive when located in a specific context to frame the relationship, such as at work or in class, where the context provided conversation topics and opportunities for these encounters to take place.

Meaning and value of acquaintanceships

Acquaintanceships were valued by participants in ways that exceeded the instrumental, asserting that these relations are a critical component of their everyday experiences and can hold a meaningful place in participants' personal communities.

First, participants confirmed the instrumental value of weak ties that Granovetter discussed. For example, when asked what she would share with her acquaintances, May explains

that she would ask them, “maybe just about non-personal stuff, like if they ask me about how do you do this...which restaurant would you go to.” As Granovetter (1973) explained, weak ties are useful as sources of information and the diffusion of ideas and influences by acting as a link between social circles. The following quote from Angela further articulates weak ties’ instrumental value that interviewees affirmed:

I also think I definitely use them as resources, like I definitely [have] acquaintances in a lot of different kinds of spheres...like I needed a real estate lawyer and a lot of the women I dance with are lawyers, so I went to dance one week and was like, “do you have any recommendations for a good real estate lawyer?”

However, the value of participants’ acquaintances was not limited to their instrumentality. Interviewees demonstrated that acquaintances have a value in and of themselves as components of modern personal and social lives. Finley describes her acquaintances as “friends at different levels.” Nellie expresses that they are a means for “providing us with back-up.” Finley also emphasizes, “I think acquaintances are your pool of future friends.” She highlights the value of acquaintances for providing conversations and relationships at different “depths,” serving to balance out the types of interactions she has on a daily basis to fulfill her “people quota.”

Another perspective that interviewees shared is the value of acquaintances for social engagement. When asked about what meaning acquaintances have to them, participants often expressed their answers in terms of acquaintanceship’s sociality. For example, interviewees expressed perceptions such as “[acquaintances are] a sense of variety” (Groove). Likewise, acquaintances are valuable for “social interaction” (Davis), “social stimulation” (Angela), “human contact and conversation” (Groove), “social variety” (Nellie), the “personal touch” that makes you “feel connected” (Finley), and so on. This category of meaning that interviewees

attributed to their acquaintances, as social interaction and fulfilment in everyday life, indicates that their involvement as a feature of public life, as Morgan (2009) mentions, is valuable beyond the instrumentality of weak ties. Acquaintanceships provided participants with their daily social engagement, marking the acquaintance role as a meaningful component of interviewees' personal communities. Ezra's description illustrates this: "There are not a lot of people who I consider friends. So my main interaction throughout any given day is acquaintances." These examples demonstrate that weak ties have a deeper level of meaning and involvement in participants' personal lives. They are imperative for fulfilling one's "people quota" by providing various kinds of social interaction.

Another perspective expressed by some participants was that acquaintances are valuable as a collective, not as individuals. The role of these relations and what people get out of their acquaintanceships is valuable, but the individual themselves is not necessarily. In other words, while the specific role an acquaintance may play is important and would impact the individual if the role was removed, the individual who fills that acquaintance role is expendable. For example, Angela says:

I would definitely feel the absence of my acquaintances, like if they weren't there...and like I miss their presence but it's always filled again...if I lose one dance friend, another one's just gonna pop right up in their spot; if I lose one coworker, another one's gonna pop right up in their spot.

This is contrary to Morgan's (2009) claim that acquaintances are non-interchangeable relations. He suggests that despite a lack of deeper knowledge about the other person, acquaintances are distinct in that they cannot be interchanged for another person to fulfil the same relation (Morgan, 2009). However, some participants suggested that perhaps it is not the person, the

specific acquaintance per se, that is non-interchangeable; rather, the role that the acquaintance fills in a participant's personal community is what cannot be removed or substituted. This was further revealed in interviewees' responses to the first vignette, which portrayed a hypothetical situation of Cam's workplace acquaintance, Mel, moving cities. All participants expressed that although the relationship was likely meaningful to Cam's daily experience at the workplace, the two would not stay in touch after Mel leaves. Angela explains: "I think he'll miss her presence, I mean miss his morning coffee person catch up, but there will probably be a new person that he'll probably develop the same relationship with." When speaking about her own experiences with workplace friends leaving, Ezra adds: "being in situations like that, you talk a little bit, like not long after you leave from the situation where you were forced to be around that person...then it just kind of trails off."

These examples speak to two central ideas. First, they further exemplify the above discussion of the contextual nature of acquaintanceships in modern personal life. Once the "work friend" leaves the workplace, there is no longer a frame for Mel and Cam's relationship to take place, resulting in its discontinuation. Davis reflects on her personal experiences, saying that: "I don't think they would stay in touch...especially because a lot of what [they] bonded over was that work place dynamic [and] [they] don't have that anymore."

Second, when thinking about acquaintances as valuable relationships in the collective sense, participants expressed that Cam will replace Mel's presence at work with another acquaintance. That said, this suggests that the role the acquaintance plays, not the actual person, is what constitutes the element of non-interchangeability in participants' personal communities.

Shaping selves through acquaintanceships

My third major theme illustrates that acquaintances play a role in shaping participants' sense of self. An important perspective in my data was that interviewees tended to try to mirror the qualities they perceived in their good acquaintances. For instance, Ezra describes the acquaintances she is fond of seeing and interacting with: "They kind of reciprocate the kind of things that I talk to them about. And that's kind of validating." While describing a specific acquaintance that she enjoys, Groove explains, "She's just real. She's just like, relatable, like I don't like people sugar coating things and she doesn't." Often, like Ezra and Groove, participants described acquaintances they were fond of—or "good" acquaintances—as those who shared similar interests or traits during interactions with their acquaintances. Therefore, participants conveyed the ability to construct who they are during interactions with acquaintances when the qualities they put forth were validated and reciprocated. Davis explains how this can occur when she discusses her acquaintances from class:

I feel like I can like make jokes and...just say stuff more openly than even sometimes I can do with my friends because sometimes with your friends you like wouldn't make a joke because you don't want to sound stupid...I don't really consider myself like a funny person in like real life...but I feel like in my classes, because that's something I want to be, I kind of put it on a little bit...it's like you're testing out certain things around people who you don't see as often, right. You're just like trying out little bits and pieces.

By testing out different qualities with her acquaintances, Davis was able to experiment with the characteristics she wanted to possess. To return to Morgan's (2009, p. 6-7) point, this act of self-making articulates that "the adjustments in the face of the others are not simply assumed, like a mask; but are incorporated into our identities." If the "little bits and pieces" that Davis tries out

prove to be successful, the characteristics can be integrated into Davis's sense of self. At the same time, Davis shared the perspective that she samples characteristics for her own repertoire of traits from interactions with acquaintances. Davis says: "Your acquaintances can...show you little bits of diverse personalities and you get to [adopt] those things." As such, in addition to confirming the traits participants see themselves as having or wanting by reciprocating and mirroring the trait, acquaintances can help to shape selves by showing participants qualities they like and want to take on for themselves.

Acquaintances' ability to serve as a sample of new qualities and traits connects to the concept of relational personhood. Since selves are relational (Carsten, 2004; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001; Eramian, 2018), persons are constituted through their interactions and relations with other persons. Typically discussed in terms of close relationships, this study found that interactions with acquaintances are no exception and play a role in constructing selves. Weak ties contributed to the relational shaping of selves by showing participants diverse sets of qualities that they can take on for themselves and by validating the parts of their person that participants presented to acquaintances.

Additionally, my participants demonstrated ways that their identities were constructed through their acquaintances' perceptions of who they are. This is done through the stories that participants told of themselves, which expose small snippets of their character that they could then tailor to the specific identity they wanted their acquaintances to see them as having. For example, Angela says: "I tend to tell stories that make me seem like I have a funny social life...but also like I do have a reputation for just ridiculous shit happening to me, and I definitely think I do kind of curate the stories I tell to people to propagate that."

As Morgan (2009) describes, acquaintances are like short stories that provide glimpses into other worlds. May explains that she will modify these glimpses and stories to show her acquaintances a particular part of herself that will fit the interaction with the specific acquaintance: “If this person is kind of awkward then I’ll pretend that I’m just like not a talkative person, but if this person like, what I heard is like nice person, like an outgoing person, then maybe I’ll be more outgoing when I try to talk to the person.” Finley provides another example when she explains that she will tell specific stories based on humour to her acquaintances so that they will think she is a funny person. Depending on the acquaintance’s reaction to the story, Finley’s perception of how her acquaintance see her confirms or denies her perception of being a funny person. As such, acquaintances serve to validate or refute the characteristics the participant is attempting to embody.

Conclusion

My acquaintances...have a lot of meaning to me...they're people that I think you don't realize you miss them until you see them. (Davis)

This project allowed me to explore the perspectives my informants used to make sense of the role of acquaintances and how they are significant to modern selves. My study centered around the question: *How do people who have undergone a recent life change perceive and experience the role of weak ties in their lives?* I addressed this question through three major themes elicited from my interview and vignette data. First, I considered the complexity of acquaintanceships through interviewees’ understanding and perceptions of what good and bad acquaintances are. Second, I discussed some key ideas interviewees expressed regarding the value of

acquaintanceships in their lives, demonstrating that the significance of weak ties exceeds the instrumental. Lastly, I explored how acquaintances contribute to shaping the self.

Future research is necessary to elaborate on the understandings presented in this thesis; for example, one direction for additional research is to consider how social media influences acquaintanceships in modern life. Moreover, all participants in this study were women. Future research investigating men's experiences and perceptions of their acquaintances would also be critical for considering if gender influences understandings of these interpersonal relationships. Regardless, the importance of acquaintanceships within social and personal lives should not be ignored. My project speaks to this by questioning previous assumptions about the importance of acquaintanceships as being insignificant relations and highlights elements of their often hidden value. That said, research on the role and significance of acquaintanceships is integral for a greater understanding of both how people's personal communities are constructed in modern personal life and how selves are shaped through the hidden value of these seemingly insignificant relations.

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Appendix I: Interview Guide

Thank them for coming. Consent form

Give brief overview/description of the project. Explain why they are chosen study population

Section 1: Vignettes

Vignette 1: [Losing an acquaintance]

Cam has been working at an office downtown for a few years now. Overall, he enjoys the job and he and his coworkers usually get along very well. Mel sits in the desk next to Cam, and although they never talk or spend time together outside of work, for the past few months Mel and Cam usually start the day by going to grab a coffee together (and consider each other to be ‘work friends’). They often chat about their weekend, share news about their families, about their work or talk about anything that is happening at their workplace. One day, Mel comes into work and tells Cam that she got a new job and will be moving cities in two weeks.

1. How would you describe the relationship between Mel and Cam?
2. In what ways do you think Mel leaving will matter to Cam?
3. Do you think Mel and Cam will stay in touch? Why or why not?

Vignette 2: [Using an acquaintance relationship]

Gale is a single mother. One day the school calls and tells her that one of her children has been getting into trouble at school more frequently. Gale wants to find some advice on how to approach her child about what is going on at school. While at the library renewing some books later that day, Gale runs into James, an acquaintance whom she met at a friend’s dinner party a couple weeks ago. James asks how Gale and her children are doing. Gale brings up the issue at school and asks for his advice on what to do.

1. Why do you think Gale brings up the matter with James?
2. Are you surprised that Gale asked James for advice? Why or why not?
 - a. Would you say this is a normal thing to do? Out of the ordinary?

3. How do you think James felt about the encounter? (*As an acquaintance that met Gale a couple week ago, how do you think he would feel about being asked for advice?*)

a. Do you think he should try and help Gale and provide advice or guidance?

Why or why not?

Vignette 3: [weak ties and self-making]

Nora frequently takes the same bus as Kari on the way to work each morning, and they have become familiar with each other. Although they don't consider themselves as friends, sometimes they will chat when they see each other and other times they will just say hello. One morning as the bus arrives at Kari's stop, Nora sees her running to catch the bus, something that has occurred quite often over the past two weeks. Nora rolls her eyes as the bus waits for Kari once again. She thinks that Kari should work on being more punctual, and that she is quite inconsiderate to make a bus full of people wait for her. Kari comes to sit with Nora and shares that she's grateful that the bus keeps waiting for her, as her daughter's daycare started opening later in the mornings and it's been stressful getting her daughter to daycare now while still making it to work on time. Nora thought about how much she had judged Kari for being frequently late for the bus. She was bothered by this because she had never realized before that she could be a judgmental person.

1. Does it make sense to you that Nora felt the way she did about Kari's situation?
Why?
2. Do you think this situation would have been different if it was between close friends?
Why or why not?
3. Would Nora have had the same realization if Kari was a friend?

Section 2: Experiences and perceptions of weak ties (their understanding of their acquaintances)

1. How do you think about the difference between a friend and an acquaintance?
 - a. What do you mean when you say they don't know you?

- b. Do they know part of you? Is that part inaccurate?
2. (Think of those people that you know but do not know deeply.) Could you tell me about these acquaintances [*use their category*] in your life, describing one or two specific examples?
 - a. How do you know them? Where do you typically see them, and what for?
 - b. Thinking of one of the examples you described to me, what were the last few conversations like with them? What kinds of stories and topics do you talk about with your acquaintances?
 - c. How did you meet them? How are your recent encounters different from when you first met?
3. In what ways do you feel your acquaintances are involved in your life?
 - a. Is there anything that you rely on your acquaintances for in particular?
 - b. Could you tell me about an example of that? // of why you wouldn't?
4. What meaning do your acquaintances have to you? (*How are your acquaintances meaningful to you?*)
 - a. What do you think the main value (*purpose*) of having acquaintances is?
 - b. Why do you feel you have acquaintances?
 - c. Could you give me an example from your own experience?
 - d. (Is there anything that you think is difficult about acquaintance relationships?)

5. Can you give me an example of a time where an acquaintance became a friend or a friend became an acquaintance?
 - a. Why do you think this happened? (What led to this?)
 - b. Did this have a significant impact on you?If no:
 - a. Is this something that you think could happen? Why or why not?

6. Can you think of a recent example where you talked to an acquaintance about a problem going on in your life? (*pay attention to the category of the problem—personal/professional etc.*)
 - a. How did you feel talking to them about it? Did you intend to talk to them?
 - b. Did you feel better talking to an acquaintance about it opposed to a friend or other relation? Why or why not?
 - c. Was it helpful to speak with them?

Section 3: Personhood—understanding of selves through acquaintances

1. What kind of person do you want your acquaintances to see you as? (How would you like them to see you?)

2. How would your acquaintances describe who you are? (*What kind of person do your acquaintances think you are?*)

3. When interacting with your acquaintances, what kinds of stories do you tell of yourself?

- a. Can you give me an example or two?
 - b. Why do you choose these particular stories?
4. Are there any acquaintances that you are especially fond of and why?
 - a. An example of an acquaintance that you particularly enjoy talking to and why?
5. Are there any acquaintances that you are not very fond of? Why?
 - a. An example of an acquaintance that you particularly dread seeing, and why?

Section 4: Follow up

1. Thank you for answering my questions and sharing your thoughts with me. How did it feel to share all of this information with me, as someone you have just met?
2. Is there anything else you would like to add?
3. ***Ask for pseudonym***

Appendix II: Recruitment Poster

DO YOUR ACQUAINTANCES MATTER?

I WOULD LOVE TO HEAR YOUR THOUGHTS!

• • •

Have you experienced a recent life change (moved, had a child, new job, marriage, etc.)? Want to share your thoughts about the people in your life whom you consider to be acquaintances and the role they played?

Join an anthropological study exploring the significance of our acquaintances by a Dalhousie honours student in social anthropology. Participation includes a single interview up to one hour in length

Contact Briana Kelly at briana.kelly@dal.ca if you are interested in participating or to find out more information!

Briana Kelly
briana.kelly@dal.ca

Appendix III: Consent Form



Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

CONSENT FORM

Getting Acquainted: The Hidden Value of (In)Significant Others

You are invited to take part in research being conducted by me, Briana Kelly, an undergraduate student in Social Anthropology, as part of my honours degree at Dalhousie University. The purpose of this research is to interview people who have experienced a life change within the past year to look into how participants understand both the role and significance of the acquaintances in their lives. The purpose of conducting this research is to further understand the value and role of acquaintances in participants' lives and to explore what role people's acquaintances have in shaping who they are using semi-structured qualitative interviews and vignettes or short stories. I will write up the results of this research in a paper for my class, called the honours thesis.

As a participant in the research you will be asked to comment on a series of short stories about acquaintance relations and answer a number of interview questions about the role acquaintances play in your life. The interview should take about an hour and will be conducted in a quiet public location of your choice, such as the Halifax Central Library or a café (or by phone). With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded. If I quote any part of it in my honours thesis, I will use a pseudonym, not your real name, and I will remove any other details that could identify you from the quote.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You do not have to answer questions that you do not want to answer, and you are welcome to stop the interview at any time if you no longer want to participate. If you decide to stop participating after the interview is over, you can do so until March 10, 2019. I will not be able to remove the information you provided after that date, because I will have completed my analysis, but the information will not be used in any other research.

Information that you provide to me will be kept private and will be anonymized, which means any identifying details such as your name will be removed from it. Only the honours class supervisor and I will have access to the unprocessed information you offer. I will describe and share general findings in a presentation to the Sociology and Social Anthropology Department and in my honours thesis. Nothing that could identify you will be included in the presentation or the thesis. I will keep anonymized information so that I can learn more from it as I continue with my studies.

The risks associated with this study are minimal, but include potential discomfort as I will be asking about your personal relationships. However, you are welcome to withdraw from the interview at any point and to refrain from answering any questions you do not wish to answer.

There will be no direct benefit to you in participating in this research and you will not receive compensation. The research, however, will contribute to new knowledge on the value of our acquaintances and how our acquaintances help to shape who we are. If you would like to see how your information is used, please feel free to contact me and I will send you a copy of my honours thesis after April 30.

If you have questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact me or the honours class supervisor. My contact information is briana.kelly@dal.ca. You can contact the honours class supervisor, Dr. Laura Eramian, at the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Dalhousie University on (902) 494-2523, or email leramian@dal.ca.

If you have any ethical concerns about your participation in this research, you may contact Catherine Connors, Director, Research Ethics, Dalhousie University at (902) 494-1462, or email ethics@dal.ca.

Participant's consent:

I have read the above information and I agree to participate in this study.

I agree that the researcher can audio-record the interview with me.

I agree that the researcher can use anonymized direct quotations from me.

Name:

Signature:

Date:

Researcher's signature:

Date:
