Encounters at the counter: the relationship between regulars and staff

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A greeting and its partner, the snub, are actions that issue in and from the problem of solidarity, because they organise the interaction with reference to possible collecting and segregating. In this organisational sense any greeting, any snub, any return greeting is the product of a division of labour which orients and re-enforces its own features: interactional similarity, difference, nothingness, somethingness, self, other, collecting, segregating. (McHugh, Raffel, Foss, and Blum 1974: 133)

What is a regular?

Amongst the forms of relating to place, one that remains common enough yet seemingly overlooked by the social sciences is ‘the regular’ (though see: Morgan 2009 pp70-72). While it is the name for a repetitive, definite and predictable pattern of things happening or being positioned, it is the regular, as one of the possible forms of relating to a place, that I want to concentrate on here. The regular is the person that goes to the same place recurrently. That there are regularly for shops, bars, cafes, sports clubs, parks and all manner of other places points towards the commonality of this figure. It is not an official, legal or other institutionally defined role and that perhaps begins to explain why it has not engendered much inquiry into its nature. Yet these are persons who are of significance both to the custodians of those places and to other regulars in those places.

Let’s remind ourselves of some of the things we can say about those persons who are regulars. The regulars visit a particular place regularly without being its employees or its residents. Yet they are not all one thing, they could be customers, users, walkers, visitors and a series of other possible entities for a place who have the possibility of visiting it once, twice, irregularly or, of course, regularly. Their becoming regulars appears purposeless in that it is hard to imagine oneself saying ‘I will become a regular of X’. Instead people find themselves becoming regulars as the after-effect of returning to the same place over and over again. It is not without consequence nor, perhaps, responsibility since in becoming regulars persons are recognisable and made recognisable by their regularity. They begin to belong in a place and make that place what it is. And once recognised as regulars, small tokens of cognisance of one another emerge in exchanged nods, smiles, greetings. Some of these grow into the small talk of the acquainted and a tiny few transform into new friendships. What I want to begin to describe in what follows are the appearances of ‘doing being a regular’, to borrow and adapt that fruitful phrase of Harvey Sacks (1984).

Cavan’s (1966; 1973) study of US bars provides the precursor and indeed touches indirectly upon the very idea of the regular. Rather than the bar, the particular place that I will be using, for a number of reasons not least that with Chris Philo I undertook a two year project into its part in city
life ¹, is the cafe. It in itself is as common a place, as the regular is a common member of it. Cafes have not only regulars but also counter and/or waiting staff that are responsible for the cafe. Being a competent staff member of a cafe involves recognising, orienting toward and, often, building relationships with regulars. The regulars are economically important to the cafe because of their repeat business, for spreading its reputation by word of mouth and establishing the crowd that constitutes much of the character of the cafe (Laurier and Philo 2007). It’s useful to compare the cafe to the supermarket chain to begin to appreciate the special nature of the regular. Large supermarkets struggle to have the sort of relationship between staff and customers that could produce a high proportion of customers recognisable and treated as regulars. In any of its outlets, the loyalty card attempts to secure something of the relationship but customers and staff are too interchangeable to sustain this social form. The problem of providing a place which can sustain regulars is one which Raffel (2004) highlights for Starbucks and other large cafe chains. In the study that I undertook what was striking was that individual Starbucks branches, and even the most anonymous cafes in places like airport departure lounges, had regulars. About the only place where cafes struggled to have regulars, regardless of whether they were part of global chains or individually owned, was where they were dominated by tourists.

The further elements of the regular that come into our view with the cafe is that they have a ‘usual’ drink. Their ‘usual’ becomes a way of identifying them and perhaps making inferences about the character of the regular. Those kinds of person who, in the face of the proliferation of espresso-based coffees in recent years, continue to ask for their ‘just plain old coffee’ and thereby mark their generational allegiance and resistance to new-fangled frappuccinos and their like. Those kinds who ask what the coffee of the day is and discuss the growing conditions on that estate. Those who always have a half decaffeinated latte with soya milk. For each regular anyway, the staff are expected to know their tastes and usually end up knowing something more of them by their tastes. They have a time of day they are turn up at. They have a rhythm of days of the week that appear on. They have preferred places to sit. In fact they begin to build biographies as Cavan notes of the bar regulars:

While the patrons of public drinking places can exist without a valid biography (or without any biography at all) with respect to their lives in the outside world, some who patronize any given establishment regularly may create or have created for them a kind of biographical reputation within the bar. Regular patrons of a bar may find their presence and their activities within the bar being strung together in a kind of narrative, eventually to be read as a statement attesting to the kind of person they are. Sometimes this biography is localized only within the bar, but sometimes it contains imputations of more generalized attributes. (Cavan 1966: 82)

Regulakers can and do make small talk about the weather, the news of the day and a host of other topics that are accessible to them as members of the same society relating to one another in public (Coupland 2000). The small talk between staff and customers formed a large part of Goffman’s (1971) elaboration of the everyday encounters of, amongst others, customers and cafe staff, in what he called ‘supportive’ and ‘remedial’ interchanges (or what we might also call the maintenance and repair of relationships). Cavan’s (1966) ethnographic study of bars predates the close attention to talk of Goffman’s later work but nevertheless she documents the special nature of bars in as ‘open regions’ where by their very presence at the bar patrons can be expected to be available for small talk. Picking up where Goffman studies of the maintenance and repair of public relationships left off, Maynard and Zimmerman (1984) made an important early contribution to our understanding of how it is that despite seemingly only having general topics that they could talk about, unacquainted

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¹ The ESRC-funded ‘The Cappuccino Community: cafes and civic life in the contemporary city’ (R000239797)
persons still successfully (and unsuccessfully) introduce ‘their personal biographies’ (Maynard and Zimmerman 1984: 301). Their study also brought to light how pre-topical talk amongst unacquainted persons sets up markers of the distance or intimacy between before they got to the topic itself (see also: Svennevig 1999). Rather than the exogenous studies common to many approach from the psychology or sociology of relationships they described “the work by which members may analyze and formulate a relationship as distant or intimate” (Maynard and Zimmerman 1984: 302)

Because of their repeated encountering of one another, regulars and staff, as Cavan (1966) noted earlier, become less and less like Maynard and Zimmerman’s unacquainted persons. They acquire shared topics based on the past experiences of their encounters which means that pre-topical talk ought no longer to be required. Through repeated meetings they acquire other topical resources such each other’s usual appearances and so can remark on departures from them (e.g. ‘no tie today?’) or elaborate on those usual features (e.g. ‘another gorgeous handbag’). Events of their lives that they report (such as parties, promotions, weddings etc.) can be tracked as part of building their relationship. So it is that, in the materials that follow, we will see and hopefully recognise that regulars and staff can become surprisingly intimate with one another while still sustaining the distance of their place-based relationship.

Distinguishing the regular from the ‘stranger on a train’

A stimulating comparison can be made between the regular, who expects repetition and ongoing relations with the places they have adopted, and the persons who meet each other once in their life. These persons are ‘strangers on a train’, persons whom we are brought together with for one extended period during their lives, strike up a conversation. In doing so, revealing parts of their mutual biographies which they would keep secret from many of their friends, and then never encounter each other again. It seems odd that persons who begin their encounter as strangers may reveal more than those in search of acquaintanceship (Svennevig 1999). If we look back to Simmel’s (2009 (orig, 1908)) excursion on the social form that is the stranger.

The stranger is fixed within a certain spatial area—or one whose delimitation is analogous to being spatially limited—but the position of the stranger is thereby essentially determined by not belonging in it from the outset, and by introducing qualities that do not and cannot originate from the stranger. The union of the near and the far that every relation among people contains is achieved here in a configuration that formulates it most briefly in this way: The distance within the relationship means that the near is far away, but being a stranger means that the distant is near (Simmel 2009: 601)

The stranger for Simmel is the wanderer who has arrived in a place recently and then ceases their wandering and settles into the place. Where the community of the place might like to treat that person as external to them (as an ‘outsider’ to use a similar concept) Simmel notes that they are a member of the community just as ‘the poor’ and its ‘inner enemies’ are. For strangers on a train there is no such residence in the place nor is there a community to which they will both belong. Through the lack of such connections to family, community or work they then also lack any shared relational (persons to whom they are related). By dint of their lack of persons to whom any other their stories could be retold to they are then ideal recipients for private thoughts and secrets. A secret told to a stranger can travel no further since the secret of no exchange value to them.

Yet sharing a secret is the last step in realising one of these special encounters. Before we become interested in what such a person’s response might be to our secrets we have to find we have other things that we share such as music, ambitions, humour, hobbies, passions etc. To return to the
regular, by the very nature of their relationship, there will be future meetings. In the repeated 
establishment of intimacy and distance, should they pursue intimacy in the way that strangers on a 
train can, then unlike them they will then face the repeated future encounters with that other. An 
imintiy at odds with the distance the idea of the cafe as a place for public sociability that mixes the 
already intimate, friends, enemies, acquaintances, regulars and staff.

**Relationships as ongoing *in situ* accomplishments**

What the staff and their regulars pose for us then is a social relationships which falls between 
relationships in public between either intimates or strangers. This then is part of the array of public 
relationships that Morgan (2009) collects as ‘acquaintances’. Yet to say that a regular is an 
acquaintance of another regular, or of the staff, marks their membership of a wider more general set 
rather than tells us anything more about the specific nature of the ongoing lived relationship 
between regulars and staff. Starting from the specifics of the regular-staff relationship instead we 
can examine them in terms of their identifying particulars as just this sort of relationship. This shift 
of perspective is toward treating a relationship as a form of togetherness constituted, displayed and 
analysed in the actions that support, maintain and repair it. In common with the rest of the chapters 
in this collection it is a turn toward lived orders of practice. Maynard and Zimmerman's work, as I 
noted earlier, pursued this through how the introduction of topics could be used to reproduce the 
relationship:

practices for introducing a topic display and accomplish particular features of social 
relationships, such as the distance and intimacy of involved parties. We regard "relationship" 
as something that is subject to ongoing, step-by-step management within talk between 
persons, rather than as a state of affairs that underlies their talk (Maynard and Zimmerman 
1984: 302)

One set of materials through which relationships have been examined is in those occasions where 
relationships are explicitly formulated (Edwards 1995; Enfield and Stivers 2007; Schegloff 2007; 
Stokoe 2010). This focus on relationship reference overlaps with the material that follows but 
neither regulars or staff were formulating their relationship explicitly as 'regular, friend, 
acquaintance' etc. While it is not explicit it remains relevant given that:

participants relied on shared understandings of the activities, competencies, responsibilities, 
rights, and/or motives regarded as appropriate or inappropriate for incumbents of specific 
relationship categories to perform a conversational action (Pomerantz and Mandelbaum 2005: 
160)

Quite, then, what a regular does, is able to do, is accountable for, and the analysis of their motives in 
doing so, turns then on relationship categories and categories that in turn provide grammars for 
those relationships . Identifying the relationship then does not determine what happens, though it 
can serve as a device to make sense of what is happening, what just happened and what will happen 
in the future. However the key difference here to those that conceive of the relationship as 
something that members of society have and that what it is can thus be assumed, is that 
ethnomethodology and conversation analysis take the relationship between regulars and staff to be 
generated, regenerated and degenerated in practice. As Pomerantz and Mandelbaum continue, the 
imintiy and distance of any relationship is then produced through a number of practices that make 
it recognisable to persons:

(i) tracking inquiries + providing further details on one's own activities,
(ii) discussing one's own personal problems + displaying interest in discussing the other's personal problems,
(iii) making oblique references to shared experiences + taking up the other's talk about shared experiences, and
(iv) using improprieties + taking up the other's improprieties by using additional, stronger improprieties, or laughter. (Pomerantz and Mandelbaum 2005: 161)

Pomerantz and Mandelbaum’s list of elements of how we maintain and monitor relationships is not an exhaustive one but it does begin to suggest some features for investigation. For the staff and regulars their recurrent encounter lends itself to picking up where each last left off (e.g. ‘how was the concert?’ ‘feeling better today?’) Staff and customers can use improprieties that by the norms of waiting service may have all the more force. Where the regular-staff relationships may diverge is around the over-hearable quality of conversations between regulars and staff makes the cafe an unsuitable site for disclosing personal problems (though cafe staff did report this happening in the earlier study (Laurier and Philo 2003), it is the exceptional case). Also what the staff and the regular appear to lack is a set of shared experiences outside of their sharing of the cafe and its world to refer to or take-up when talking with others present (Mandelbaum 2003).

**Regulars and the order of the service**

In all of this, and what I have under-examined until now, is that this distinct relationship of the regular emerges out of the background of the service encounter in shops and cafes. A related area of work we can thus look to is on how service encounters are accomplished. Early work by Merritt picked up on the use of questions/answers and requests/acceptances in adjacency pairs (Merritt 1976) and ‘okay’ as a marker of task completion (Merritt 1978). Though, as later studies pointed out, the service encounter in supermarkets has some peculiar adjacency properties in that ‘how-are-you?’s can be happily ignored by customers (Coupland, Coupland, and Robinson 1992; Kuiper and Flindall 2000).

Beyond the verbal aspects of the sales encounter, the customer’s movements around the space of shops or markets are themselves analysable by staff in terms of whether (and what) they are browsing, about to purchase, whether they are in need of assistance etc. (Brown 2004; Clark and Pinch 2009; Lamoureux 1988; Lee and Watson 1993). The cafe has an order of service distinct from that of retail shop spaces, one which bears closest resemblance to the restaurant and the bar (Cavan 1966). For both of the latter the idea of service is one which draws upon hosting more than it does the buying and selling of goods (though see: Traverso 2001). That said, the production of orders at the counter in cafes remains closely related to retail counters by the very fact of how transactions over the counter are organised (Brown 2004).

When making an order at the counter the regular has a distinct object - ‘the usual’ - which reshapes the order of service. With the rise of espresso variants on the ‘cup of coffee’ and the ever more elaborate frappuccinos, even a single order may take several lines to describe in sufficient detail and thus and by having a ‘usual’ makes the regular’s order faster for staff (Bartlett 2005). Quite why this might be becomes evident when we see how their orders get done:

Encounter 13 (STAR)
1 S: Hi. The Americano?
2 C: Yeah
3 S: Anything else today?
4 C: No thanks (hands over money)
5 S: Three four five ten out of twenty. Thank you.
Here the member of staff already knows what the regular usually has and can compress the full order into an opening first turn that does both the greeting and shortcuts to the placing of the order (there are other ways in which the order is compressed see: Kuroshima 2010). This latter part merely needs confirmed by the regular. What’s interesting for our purposes here is then that being a regular can mean less rather than more is said between staff and customer. The quality of that more is merely the adequate, for all practical purposes, description of the ordered drink. Returning to a concern with relationships we can see that the object to be bought (e.g. the usual form of coffee, tea etc.) has in fact become the shared experience which indexes the relationship.

Jefferson and Lee (1981) raise the more intriguing issue of how one part of maintaining a relationship - discussing problems and displaying an interest in personal problems - misfits with the service encounter. In the diverse encounters they examined between troubles-teller and troubles-recipient, when the recipient of the troubles shifted to offering advice they then reconfigured the relationship from one of, for instance, as friendship to a service encounter and found their advice rejected. Equally during a service encounter, problems also arose when one relationship contaminated the other. In part this is because they generate two foci which sit at odds with one another: ‘while in a Troubles-Telling the focal object is the ‘teller and his experiences’, in the Service Encounter, the focal object is the ‘problem and its properties’ (Jefferson and Lee 1981: 411). For the encounters that we shall see the regulars are not bringing troubles for either sympathy from a friend or advice from a professional. Yet, as we shall see, their status as more-than-mere-customers does, at points, raise problems for both the staff and the regulars themselves.

The study site

The cafe which the data comes from was first studied as part of the earlier mentioned project on cafe & city life and the opportunity presented itself for a return study six years later when the cafe requested a follow-up recording of its daily custom. It was selected in the initial study because it had a high proportion of regulars compared to other cafes involved in the project. In the intervening years the cafe had changed location to a brand, and grand, new premises. In doing so it had lost old regulars and gained new ones. It had also altered the order of its service. In its previous, fairly cramped, premises customers selected their tables on entry and then the waiting staff came to their tables to take their order. Customers could also place their orders at the counter but this was reasonably uncommon. In the new premises with varied table sizes and more complex lunchtime bookings the staff collected the majority of customers on entry and selected their tables for them and at that point the previous order of service resumed. What this means is that in distinction to the branches of Costa, Starbucks, Nero and many other contemporary cafes, customers did not usually place their order at the counter, the order was taken by the waiting staff once customers were seated. As a consequence the customers’ order of service was organised into four broad parts: table selection, placing the order, receiving the order and paying the bill. In the fragments we will examine below the majority occur before the order of service gets underway, slipping in ahead of table-selection.

In the first study of the cafe one camera had been used and during the second study two cameras were used to record a working day in the life of the cafe. Customers were informed of the recordings via posters and flyers on the tables and were able to have their recordings deleted if they so wished (problems arising from this approach are discussed in Laurier and Philo 2006). One camera roved around the cafe and the other was fixed above and behind the counter. The latter provided by far the best recordings for comparative purposes while also being the least problematic in terms of the

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2 The video recordings of the initial study had turned out to be useful in marketing the cafe.
sensitivity of topics discussed. Because of the order of service in the cafe this meant that the placing of orders was rarely recorded since they were almost all placed at individual tables. However, and as we shall see, greetings, partings and other sociable elements of the cafe-going of regulars and other customers did occur in this part of the cafe space. I myself had become a regular of the cafe in the intervening years and in doing so acquired a regular’s knowledge of other regulars, the staff and the internal geography of the cafe.

**Greeting cafe regulars**

The episode below is typical of the arrival of customers who are not recognised as regulars. In this case there is an absence of greeting, though greetings are also used commonly enough less as greetings than to bring the arriving customers into the order of service:

*Transcript 1*

‘Is it a...’ is used to form a question while also securing the customers’ attention before then providing the matter in hand. By its very asking this question also establishes a form of entering the cafe where the waitress will be involved in table selection rather than the customers having free reign. Here, my purpose is not so much to consider how the order of service is recognised by newly arrived customers as to provide a contrast with the arrival of a regular:

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3 All customers were warned filming was taken place several days in advance & during the filming with posters and flyers. During that day (and afterwards) they could visit the project website and, if they wished, have their recordings erased by the researcher.
Transcript 2

The waitress’s first-pair part greeting is responded to with a second-pair part greeting in return. The doing of greetings in itself does not differentiate a regular’s arrival in the cafe from that of other customers. What does differentiate the course of action from other customers is that the regular does not break stride and instead continues rapidly toward a table. As is noted in the caption in the fourth frame it is his ‘usual table’. Knowledge of where this regular usually sits is known in common by both other regulars and staff. His rapid and direct path to his table is quite different from the slow trajectory of the previous women who are then also caught by the waitress just as they reach the point where they might begin to survey the cafe for selecting a table. The very pace and trajectory of the regular is indicative of his rights to do so in this space, his desire to get straight to business and steer clear of the extended greeting sequences we will see below. It is not just the regular’s pace and trajectory toward his table, the waitress herself checks to see who’s entering the cafe in frame 2. Having identified the regular she does not change pace or alter course in ways that would prefigure intervening in his table selection. There is thus a paired relationship made observable and recognisable by the trajectory and pace of both parties (Ryave and Schenkein 1974; vom Lehn 2006).

What this give us is a place that is owned by and looked after by a staff where a visitor can rush straight to a position within it and set themselves down after only the briefest greeting. It seems not that far from having rented a hotel room and is, indeed, not so far from that form of temporary tenancy since by buying drinks and food in cafes what you are always also doing is acquiring some rights to sit at a table for a while, to rest, read the news, meeting a friend or conduct some other business (Laurier, Buckner, and Whyte 2000). Part of the extra rights one acquires as a regular is to circumnavigate the order of service and go straight to one’s usual table. When the cafe first opened customers could go directly to their tables, as was the order of service in its previous premises and it was only later when they realised they ended up with seating problems that the waiting staff began to direct customers to tables on their arrival. As part of introducing the new order of service they placed a sign just ahead of the point where the two customers stopped in the first transcript saying
‘wait here to be seated’. A sign however that regulars were told that they could ignore when it was introduced. Part of the rights of regulars then are to compress the order of service in this way as was the case with Bartlett’s (2005) ordering sequences.

**Partings with regulars**

The order of service ends with the payment of the bill and then partings are usually done. There are less ways of producing the relationship between regulars and the staff here. Though as we shall see more of below it does provide a slot for small talk, the exchange of news and so on. One repeated feature that does make visible the ongoing nature of the relationship is the intermittent use ‘see you’ rather than ‘bye’. What the news delivery by regulars does often provide is when they are about to go on holiday or depart on business trips. In parting staff then keep track of regulars who are leaving the place for a while.

In this case one of the regulars has been talking to one of the owners about his holidays while she took his order. On leaving he he inquires at some length about where they get their pastries, he pays his bill and then:

**Transcript 3**

Having exchanged thanks with one another, the regular begins to walk away from the counter. The owner offers him wishes in frame 3 of transcript 3 ‘have a good hols’, though then self-repairing this wish given that it might be incorrectly placed in relation to another visit. In overlap the regular meantime provides a show of his commitment to the cafe ‘I’ll be straight back’ in response to her holiday wishes. Cafe staff (and many other service staff such as hairdressers, bank tellers) use ‘have you been on holiday/are you going on holiday’ as a topic for small talk. This then provides further resource for wishing their customers well for holidays, inquiring into them on their return. As McCabe and Stokoe (2010) note inquiries about holidays are a constant prop for the unacquainted
and acquainted alike. Here it signals how regulars' lives as regulars are set-up to be tracked by members of the staff (Pomerantz and Mandelbaum 2005).

**The Intimacy of Regulars**

As we have noted already regulars have greater rights to table selection and thus can compress this format of the order of service. What skipping the earlier slots of the order of service also results in is missing the slot for extended greetings and the ritual 'how-are-yous' at the counter on arrival that generate the relationship beyond that of just another customer. In transcript 4, a regular attends to this by approaching the counter later in the order of service.

By approaching the counter he also controls which members of staff he will greet. The staff’s order of service is organised not only around the sequencing of orders but also the geography of the cafe. Each member of staff is responsible for a spatially proximate collection of tables. As a result regulars that stay at their table will, at that stage, only speak to the member of staff allocated to their table. To select which members of staff he will greet he thus has to make his way to the counter. By his very trajectory he is also displaying his availability and intent to make small talk with the staff.
Transcript 4

When the waitress sees him approaching she does indeed repeat her ‘hallo’ (in the 3rd frame) thus providing an accentuated greeting displaying her pleasure at seeing him (Schegloff 1972). A greeting which he returns and then, in overlap, they continue their greeting moves with mutual ‘how are you’s This second step in the sequence of greeting by its mutuality displays their relationship as one in which news updates are expected. ‘How-are-yous’ when only produced by the staff are part of the production of the service encounter and are not ordinarily returned (Kuiper and Flindall 2000).

In her response the waitress (Amy) adds a formulation of the identity of the regular in age and gender terms (i.e. ‘how are you young man’). Clearly there are a number of possible related standardised relational pairs (e.g. staff-customer, friend-friend etc.) By addressing him as ‘young man’ then this positions her not just as older but as perhaps too old to be paired in a romantic relationship. It is also pursuing intimacy in being mildly provocative, where the ‘young man’ phrase has entered the British repertoire of quotes from comedy shows. It featured as a catchphrase in a series of sketches from the Harry Enfield’s Television Programme (BBC 1990) where two elderly women tried to take advantage of various youthful men (i.e. “The Lovely Wobbly Randy Old Ladies”). While playful it also succeeds in framing the upcoming hug as affectionate rather than serious. Initially its pursuit of intimacy is not taken up by the regular verbally at least. That a hug is incipient is itself is made apparent by the waitress coming out from behind the counter. The counter itself provides a variety of resource in the encounters between staff and customers, not least of which is as being a device for maintaining a minimal distance between the staff and the customers. Thus, by coming out from behind the counter Amy is making herself available for a greeting hug. The regular has however also set himself in place for potential hugging by standing back from the counter rather than walking right up and leaning over it.

The course of the greeting hug continues with the arms of both the regular and Amy going out for a hug in overlap. The greeting hug them comes off as a mutual hug rather than one person hugging the other. By accomplishing the hug as from both sides then the relationship also comes off as being
mutual. The regular’s ‘You all right’ in the 5th frame of transcript 4 is also in close overlap with the hug being launched. In mid-hug Amy (6th frame) responds positively and returns the question. As shown elsewhere (refs) these opening questions provide the possibility of warning of some form of trouble ahead if they are not answered with positive responses. They also index the relationship of waitress and regular as having both the rights to inquire after one another’s general state and the background knowledge of their being ‘good’ and ‘all right’.

Hugs themselves are key cultural objects during greetings (and elsewhere) in showing intimacy with others while also ripe for being misjudged, awkward or misunderstood because their acceptance and appropriateness in whatever relationship varies by cultural background, generation, by family, by individual, by workplace, and so on. What is striking here is that the strength of relationships formed between regulars and staff in this cafe allows them to hug one another. Except that of course part of what is in play is the shift between friend, regular and perhaps a slightly more precious form of customer, a ‘favourite’. How then is the hug done to express their relationship. Their gazes are kept apart from one another to avoid the intimacy of eye contact at such close quarters. In its duration, the hug is brief, punctual almost. It establishes a friendliness without further intimacy. In fact their gazes do not return to potentially reciprocal positions until the waitress is safely back behind the counter. For either to have picked up the gaze or watched the other could have produced a number of other stances toward the other from tenderness to unwanted attention.

After completing their greetings and checks on one another’s status as without problems or troubles to be shared, the regular does move on to his status as ‘with’ someone. In the last frame of the strip:

Regular: I’m with mammy so
W’tress: [Wi your mammy

Waiter: [((look over shoulder and sees regular))
Regular: For a wee spot of dinner
Waiter: Hullo
Regular: There he is
Regular: How are you handsome you all right
W’tress: Aw:::

Mention that he is ‘with’ brings him back into an order of service in customers consistently attend to their with-ness on arriving if they are not together as they walk in (as we will see more of below). It’s of interest as well in establishing his relationship with the older woman he is with for the benefit of the staff. One of things that is known about him as a regular is that he is usually alone or with girlfriends. The waitress’s voicing of her response is louder, catching the waiter’s attention, and has an air of adult-child about it in its repetition to check who he’s with. It perhaps continues the earlier pursuit of intimacy which again is not taken up directly by the regular given he continues with providing what they are the cafe for and thus orienting to the order of service. At this time in the early evening/later afternoon the staff routinely ask new arrivals whether they are in for coffee or dinner. Where the waitress could take this as information she instead provides an assessment ‘aw::’ as to the apparent sweetness of a son out for dinner with his mum.
Transcript 5 (continues directly from 4)
Having greeted the waitress the regular then moves on to the waiter. Bound up with the regular’s greeting is the endearment ‘how are you handsome’, once again indexing their familiarity as does the regular’s further use of ‘pal’ in his positive response to the waiter’s inquiring ‘are you well?’.

Having not prefigured any larger troubles during the greetings, the regular then does initiate a problem presentation ‘I’m a bit worried’ (transcript 5, 5th frame). In this second slot, after initial greetings, the problem is likely less serious by its second position and is also further established as minor ‘a bit worried’. In fact by being pre-formulated as a worry it indicates that this problem is not yet manifest, is only potential and potentially personal. Once the regular’s worry is elaborated ‘I’ve got football this evening’ it is immediately responded to with a sharp intake of breath by the waitress showing concern (transcript 5, 5th frame). Coming in at this point her audible intake shows not only concern but an understanding though of what it’s hard to say; it might be that he has double-booked himself. What we do have though in her response is that display of interest we might expect of those person building a relationship of intimacy with us (Pomerantz and Mandelbaum 2005). It stands in opposition with the indifference of requests for help to the emergency services noted Jefferson and Lee later in their article.

However instead of revealing a personal worry, Amy’s show of concern sets off a repairing restart from the regular that indicates his playing is not in question and the upshot of the problem ought not to have yet been inferable. This time Amy receipts, not as an immediate cause for concern, though still showing interest if in a less emotive tone, ‘oh whereabouts?’ As his concerns are elaborated - ‘like if I eat dinner now’ - he is in fact making the football relevant to Amy and the waiter as a problem for the cafe staff. ‘I’m gonna get the worst stitch amn’t I’ (transcript 5, 7th frame) should he end up eating too much, either through his own over-ordering or their powers of persuasion, then he’ll suffer later when he plays football. He gets an appreciative laugh from the waiter in the pay-off of the mildly dramatic expectation of the worry being turned around as humorous. Taking up a solution to the worry as a problem relevant to the upcoming food order, the waitress offers general advice (which the manageress just-off-screen to the right in frame 3 agrees with). We can note though the sensitivity here though to the agency of the customer and the accountability of selecting their specific dish in that she only provides a formulation ‘light’ rather than one of the dishes that is actually on the set or specials menu.

The regular accepts their advice and in a lovely orientation to his status as a regular and thus what the staff will know about him he adds ‘but you know what I’m like.’ Which is an interesting attribution of knowledge of his self to others which is on a parity with what family or close friends might otherwise know (i.e. what foods we like and how much we eat (Laurier and Wiggins 2011)). What we also have though is very close to the switching between relationships that Jefferson and Lee (1981) traced through troubles-tellings. What it does here though is something perhaps more subtle and related to the group of recipients involved. This regular is the favourite for Amy, for the rest of the staff, while he is also a liked regular, he is not of the same status with them. The shift to a worry which is related to his appetite by its topic re-includes all of the staff as potential advice-givers. And indeed we have an appreciative laugh from the waiter, advice from Amy and an agreeing ‘yeah’ from the manageress. The ‘but you know what I’m like’ refocuses the attention on Amy and does then get an appreciative and almost motherly laugh from her.

What this begins to give us then is a sense of are some of the cafe specific knowledges of the regular which then build an intimacy with them through a shared sense of their tastes, their likes and dislikes. While within the family this is part and parcel of eating together here within the the cafe is both the nature of their transaction and also asymmetrical since the staff when they eat, eat quietly in a corner.
Accounting for absence

One of the features of regular contact between family members and friends is that they seek and provide updates for one another (Drew and Chilton 2000). As was captured in the earlier extract the feature appears is largely absent from cafe regulars and staff even though they see each other more often than many of their friends, family and work colleagues. Part of the reason for regulars and staffs not doing so is, of course, that those closer relationships come with expectations and rights about sharing and keeping track of one another’s daily news, significant events and calendars (Brown, Taylor, Izadi, Sellen, and Kayle 2007; Pomerantz and Mandelbaum 2005; Sacks 1992). Nevertheless when the regular re-appears after a prolonged absence it does then make noticeable their absence which is then an accountable matter. When regulars do not appear it is not of course a notifiable and potentially serious matter in the way it is when a husband’s wife fails to return home at the end of the day. When the regular reappears after their disappearance, they are likely to be asked ‘have you been away?’ and this is occasioned not so much by a desire to ‘oil the wheels of social interaction’ (McCabe and Stokoe 2010: 1128) as to genuinely account for their absence. It is here where we again reconnect to Jefferson and Lee’s (1981) study of the rejection of advice. The trouble is related to two subtly different potential inquiries with different relationships in play. The first is around catching up with potential news that may account for an absence and the second is learning why a relationship has been transformed/ended. In the first case, the inquiry collects acquaintances and friends that we see regularly, for the second case, it is the relationship between the service and its customer.

In the following a regular has arrived, and in this case they have not been in the cafe in a while. After doing greetings and a hug:

Transcript 6
Before we move on to accounting for their absence, we can pick up on the regular and Amy having a hug. As with the previous hug with the 'young man' this one combines a 'how are you' with the hug, doing that same production of the hug as a marker of friendship. In transcript 6, frame 2 the regular is then asked by Amy 'what you been doing' and then by the waitress in black 'have you been away'. In between he is apologising for having failed to see Amy waving at him from a bus a few days earlier. Amy picks up the previous question 'have you been away' with 'I know' in an emphatic tone and redoing it as ‘where you been away’. This little flurry of questions nicely showing a joint and genuine interest over what has happened in his absence and doing ‘making a fuss’ over the regular. For his part he does then provide the preferred response here that he has been away.

‘What you been doing’ is interesting because it conforms with an invitation for news delivery between friends and acquaintances and is thus not quite the expected ‘have you been away?’ In one sense it indexes a greater degree of intimacy between this waitress and the customer. However it also perhaps marks a different sort of issue that customer has been absent not because he cannot come because he is no longer part of this place but instead that he has not come because his attentions have been elsewhere. And if we consider some of the alternative explanations for a regular’s absence it is that the regular has in fact become a regular of a competing cafe or given up frequenting cafes altogether. Either of which would spell the transformation and potential death of this relationship and like refusals, rejections and divorces they are not what the other who is committed to the initial course of action usually hopes for. The second waitress’s question is thus on safer territory in that it expects absence from their shared place to be the cause of his absence from the cafe. Indeed the regular orients to their relationship by including not only the preferred response that yes he has indeed been away rather than started taking his business elsewhere but that he is going to be ‘going away’ in the future. These remarks preface the longer account he gives later of the various places his work has taken him that meant he wasn’t in this part of the city and then following that, that he will be leaving the country for at least a couple of months with his work.

In terms of where they placed in the unfolding arrival of the regular in the cafe these accounts for absence bear comparisons to how guests are greeted on arrival at the doorstep (Béal and Traverso 2010). In Béal and Traverso’s study they documented how noticing of punctuality or lateness provided for teasing which thus was also an early way of re-establishing the intimacy of the hosts and their guests. Here of course these are not host-guest relations, they are staff–regulars though as I argued at the outset of the article, the cafe provides for relations of hosting as part of its good service. In terms of then of the regulars special status as a regular there is a similar desire to re-establish and re-examine their relationship from the first few minutes of their encounter. As such providing the reasons for the regular’s absence and the warning of his future absence orient toward their ongoing relationship which in a gentle way is marking that their relationship is coming to an end.

The regular talked with these two waitresses for a few minutes passing on his news of his job changes. An emergent asymmetry here is that the waitresses do not provide news of what has been happening with them because by the very fact that they are waiting on him in the cafe their job can be assumed to be roughly the same unless they indicate otherwise. It is the regular who has been absent and thus broken the very pattern of attendance that gave him his status. Should a member of the staff also disappear for an extended period of time by the nature of their regularity of encounter the regular is then entitled to notice their absence. The ‘have you been away’ or ‘where have you been’ is thus also used by regulars in pursuing accounts of the staff. However the staff member’s accountability is asymmetrical also since they are employed rather than customers visiting at their discretion.

The order of service continues to be relevant over the longer trajectory of the customer’s visit to the cafe, shaping how much of those future matters will be dealt with here thus departing from friends
visiting one another as a host & guest. Later in the encounter all the waiting staff orient to this departure by making sure that they either say goodbye to him or make a final date when they will goodbye. For the time being, when the greeting and news delivery are completed the regular then departs to eat/drink without the waitresses. The order of service in cafes (unless it’s a take-away order) creates a gap in the middle of the encounter while the regular then sits at their table engaging in whatever activities (e.g. meetings, newspaper-reading, texting, daydreaming etc.) The encounter is closed by the regular’s departure from the cafe at which point their relationship to the staff as a regular becomes a matter of potential concern again.

Concluding thoughts

What I have found myself returning to in considering how intimacy is generated and absence accounted for is an asymmetry around the regular. They have a certain vulnerability in fact as the staff come to know more and more about their lives and yet the regulars knowledge of the staff is predominantly through their workplace. This is part of the particular geography of this public place in that it has customers than enter within it and form relationships with its staff, relationships distinct from those between the staff themselves as fellow workers within a business. The vulnerability of the regular is in a developing intimacy; they are describable and memorable in terms of their daily habits. As we saw, some regulars delight in this ‘but you know me’, while others may be surprised to discover that they have lost the anonymity that public space appears to offer.

The ambition of many cafes (and other places of hospitality) is to build up relationships with its regulars that borrow from and sometimes come to appear like close acquaintanceships or friendships. What we have followed here are how those relationships are ongoingly generated and maintained, if asymmetrically, by both parties. Looking to Jefferson and Lee’s (1981) original analysis of the conflicts between troubles-telling and problem-presenting I traced out similar adjustments around what aspect of the staff-regular relationship was being made relevant. Whether they were pursuing the relationships as friends or returning to the order of service or refreshments that divided them back into staff and customer. Other elements of the maintenance and repair of relationships were apparent in the tracking of customer activities and the use of improprieties.

While the regular finds themselves a regular almost without motive or plan they then find themselves in a relationship which creates commitments. This is made apparent to them when either party returns after an absence or the relationship is being altered or ended. On return after an absence the reasons for regulars’ absence would be pursued and greetings would be upgraded, even up to the level of hugging. Equally, regulars mark their departure from daily attendance to the staff and have that departure responded to as a significant matter by the staff. In doing so our departure from this category within a public place becomes one of the practices of parting and departure that are oriented toward a community and to a shared place in the city. We discover in these farewells and wishes to visit again, our relationship to the staff that have been our hosts through the order of service.

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Bibliography


