Doing Introductions: The Work Involved in Meeting Someone New
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As the gateway to personal social relationships, introductions are critical to sustaining everyday social life. This article provides the first detailed empirical analysis of naturally occurring introductions, elucidating the interactional work participants do to achieve a sequence as an introduction. Close examination of video recorded introductions between English-speaking persons coming together to socialize and/or do work reveals that: when a known-in-common person is present, parties treat mediator-initiated introductions as preferred over self-initiated introductions; when launching introductions, offers of identifying information are strongly preferred over requests; in formulating introducible persons, speakers select from many possible name forms and social categories/identities; and parties hold themselves and others accountable for a display of remembering persons with whom they have worked through introductions. This research thus demonstrates that, during introduction sequences, participants locally manage social norms fundamental to the maintenance of “face,” interactional affiliation, and social solidarity.

Keywords: Introductions; Unacquainted Persons; Opening Face-to-Face Interaction; Social Solidarity; Preference Organization

Human nature abhors a lack of knowledge, order, and understanding about the surrounding social world. To act socially, humans must define and make sense (Garfinkel, 1967; Heider, 1958; Lofland, 1973). But when confronted with a “stranger”—a person one has never “met” and thus a person with whom one has no mutually established personal acquaintanceship—one is confronted with a person
lacking definition (Goffman, 1963; Lofland, 1973). A stranger, then, embodies a locus of uncertainty.

Focusing on the initial phases of interaction between strangers, Berger and Calabrese (1975) constructed a theory of uncertainty reduction, central to which is the assumption that when strangers meet “their primary concern is to increase predictability about the behavior of both themselves and others in the interaction” (p. 100). They state causal relationships as axioms; for example, “as the amount of verbal communication between strangers increases, the levels of uncertainty for each interactant in the relationship will decrease. As uncertainty is further reduced, the amount of verbal communication will increase” (pp. 101–102). The theory, however, leaves unexplained a description of how strangers come to verbally and nonverbally communicate with one another in the first place so they can start to achieve uncertainty reduction. How is it that physically copresent unacquainted parties enter mutually ratified social copresence so they may begin interacting with one another for the first time?1

This article answers this question, and then goes beyond it by providing the first detailed empirical analysis of naturally occurring introductions, or the interactional practice of introducing—a sequence of actions through which involved participants explicitly identify self and/or other.

To “meet a new person” is to experience the unfamiliar. Previous research suggests that encountering those with whom we are unfamiliar impacts us on a physiological level, producing an increase in the release of cortisol, also known as “the stress hormone” (Dandeneau, Baldwin, Baccus, Sakellaropoulo, & Pruessner, 2007; Gunnar & Donzella, 2002; Levine, Lyons, & Schatzberg, 1997). Theorists have proposed a relationship between stress and identity, arguing that we experience stress when meeting new people due to an interruption in “identity processes” that results when we know we are being evaluated by others (Burke, 1991; Holroyd & Lazarus, 1982; Thoits, 1991). Meeting someone new is a time of mutual evaluation and assessment—a time during which we form “first impressions” of one another and decide if we will pursue a relationship with one another (Chaplin, Phillips, Brown, Clanton, & Stein, 2000; Kleinke, 1975; Taylor, Peplau, & Sears, 2000). The moments through which we meet new people provide the raw ingredients out of which we forge new social relationships (cf. Altman & Taylor, 1973; Pomerantz & Mandelbaum, 2005). And meeting someone new makes possible the formation of a new interpersonal tie, creating opportunities for links between, and within, social networks (cf. Granovetter, 1973, 1983).

Several previous studies of face-to-face encounters mention introductions tangentially or in passing. Firth (1972) mentions introductions as part of a cross-cultural comparison in which he makes “some broad generalizations” (p. 1) about verbal and bodily rituals of greeting and parting, suggesting that individuals must identify each other “preliminary to further action” (p. 30). Youssouf, Grimshaw, and Bird (1976) invoke introductions when discussing how Tuareg travelers seek the identity of those they encounter in the desert wilderness of the western Sahara, observing that “the identification of the other—as early as possible—is critically
important” (p. 801). In contrast to such studies that highlight the importance of verbal communicative behavior, Basso (1970) ethnographically describes how members of the Native American Western Apache community use silence—refraining from speaking—when encountering strangers, observing that “the Western Apache do not feel compelled to “introduce” persons who are unknown to each other. Eventually, it is assumed, strangers will begin to speak” (p. 218).

Previous work most directly relevant to the present study includes that of Goffman (1963), Sacks (1992) and Chen (1993). In his analysis of “face engagements,” Goffman registers observations about how parties manage the role of acquaintance-ship in social life. “One might say, as a general rule, that acquainted persons in a social situation require a reason not to enter into a face engagement with each other, while unacquainted persons require a reason to do so” (Goffman, 1963, p. 124). When he specifically mentions introductions, however, Goffman states that he is making presumptions and relying primarily on etiquette manuals and personal anecdotes as the bases for his claims. Following Goffman but working within the conversation analytic tradition, Sacks (1992) considers a single introduction sequence as part of analyzing a segment of talk from an audio recorded group therapy session, contrasting his observations with the rules of introducing generally prescribed by etiquette manuals.

Only one previous study, that of Chen (1993), focuses squarely upon introductions. The goal of Chen’s study was to fill a gap of information existing within the field of TESOL, specifically addressing the lack of instructions available to and for English language learners on the rules of who gets introduced to whom in an introduction involving three speakers of American English. Chen attempts to answer the question, “How does social status affect the sequencing rules of other-introductions?” (p. 16) by outlining four rules that learners of English need to know “in order to properly interact with native speakers” (p. 16). One rule, for example, is that “in situations of unequal status, a person of lower status will first be introduced to a person of a higher status (and then vice versa)” (p. 16). Built into the design of Chen’s study is the presupposition that the most important factor in determining “who gets introduced to whom” is whether the involved parties are of unequal or equal status. Because he makes this a priori assumption, and also because he does not use video recorded data, Chen does not attend to practical factors that often shape the introduction process, including parties’ ecological distribution (where involved participants are standing/sitting in relation to one another). Chen also does not explain exactly how participants’ relative status was assessed, and by whom (the research subjects? the analysts?), and whether the participants themselves actually displayed an orientation to “status” as relevant while doing their introductions.

What is lacking in prior work on introductions is a detailed description and analysis of how involved participants produce, use, and observably understand their own introduction sequences. The present research fills this void, extending and refining extant literature by elucidating the interactional work participants do to achieve a sequence as an introduction. This article does this by first outlining the work involved in building an introduction, describing the anatomy or recurrent
constitutive components of introduction sequences. Second, it explicates the work involved in launching an introduction sequence. Third, it presents an analysis of the work involved in formulating “who” an introducible person “is” so addressed-recipients can make sense of that person. Finally, this article elucidates the work involved in figuring out when to (not) do an introduction.

Data and Method
This article presents several findings resulting from a larger conversation analytic research project in which I systematically analyzed how both previously acquainted and unacquainted parties open their face-to-face interactions across a wide variety of settings (Pillet-Shore, 2008). From the years 2000 through 2003, I conducted fieldwork in the area of Southern California during which I gathered a corpus of 41 video recorded naturally occurring parent–teacher conference interactions. As a rule while working in the field, I set up and turned on the video and audio recording equipment as early as possible, usually before each scheduled meeting began. Following school protocol, teachers gave notice of my study to parent-caregivers when scheduling their conferences, allowing all parent-caregivers and teachers who volunteered to participate to sign informed consent forms well in advance of the start of each conference. While analyzing these parent–teacher conference data, I discovered that I had amassed a collection of openings of parent–teacher conference interactions. I subsequently decided to gather more video recorded data of the openings of naturally occurring face-to-face interactions in as many different settings as possible so I could study not only how parent–teacher conferences begin, but rather something much more basic: how face-to-face interactions begin. Starting in 2004, I took a two-pronged approach to gathering additional data from diverse settings, simultaneously sifting through several different preexisting data corpora to which colleagues granted me access, and going (back) into the field to gather new data, this time focusing on gathering video of encounters in private residences. Residents gave notice of my study to their guests in advance of the start of each encounter and set up and turned on the recording equipment before each scheduled encounter began.

As a result of this approach, I gathered a new residential data corpus containing 26 video recorded encounters (e.g., parties, study groups), and I searched through preexisting data corpora involving 34 video recorded workplace encounters (e.g., restaurant cashier interactions, meetings between students and teaching assistants, hair salon appointments, interactions between airport employees), and 40 video recorded residential encounters (e.g., family dinners, poker parties, and other casual get-togethers). My examination of over 78 hours of naturally occurring video recorded data yielded 244 openings of face-to-face interactions between English-speaking persons, including parties coming together to socialize (e.g., share meals, celebrate holidays, watch television, play games) and do work (e.g., house repairs, babysitting, discuss a health concern, discuss a student’s performance in school, discuss work experience, study together).
Across these data, participants are coming together to do different activities while inhabiting different social categories or identities (e.g., “host,” “friend,” “teacher”), in different places (e.g., homes, schools, offices). But all data involve parties coming together: (1) in some private territory—some territory to which they were granted access (e.g., a friend’s apartment, a teacher’s classroom); (2) for nonchance encounters—they are either prearranged, or the parties expect to encounter specific persons or persons inhabiting specific social categories; (3) for occasions of sustained, focused interaction. The present analysis builds from these commonalities, and I have observed participants to use the practices of introducing that I describe in this article across the many settings represented in my data set.

I analyzed these data using the methods of conversation analysis, repeatedly examining the video recordings and making detailed transcripts of participants’ actions to discover and capture in graphic form precisely what is said/done, when it is said/done, and how it is said/done (see Appendix for transcript notation conventions). The goal of this method is to uncover and document systematic practices through which participants accomplish social actions (Clayman & Gill, 2004; Heritage, 1984b). Toward this end, I collected every instance of incipient and/or realized introduction sequence that occurs in my data set and then examined each instance on its own terms while at the same time examining the instances as a collection. To develop the details of my analysis, I closely examined 73 introduction sequences.

Findings

The Work Involved in Building an Introduction Sequence

To successfully and recognizably bring off a sequence as an introduction, involved parties must: coordinate displayed attention between the unacquainted parties, deliver person reference formulations for persons treated as introducible, and ratify the relevance of the introduction sequence, displaying that they agree that the introducible parties are persons who have not previously met. This section outlines and briefly describes the recurrent constitutive components that participants use to satisfy these three conditions for producing a sequence as an introduction (most of which are exemplified in data extracts presented in subsequent sections of this article; e.g., see Excerpt 5. For additional exemplification and analysis of these recurrent constitutive components, see Pillet-Shore, 2008).

To build a sequence as an introduction, participants use the following constitutive components:

1. **Gaze/body orientation-coordinating actions**—parties achieve displayed mutual attention by deploying gaze/body orientation-coordinating actions along visual, aural, and tactile modalities (e.g., sudden gaze shifts to and between introducible persons; deictic gestures toward introducible persons; lexical indexical or deictic turn/TCU²-initial introducing utterance frames, such as “This is” launching speakers’ mediated introducing utterances, and “I’m” or “My name is”
launching speakers’ self-introducing utterances; phrasal breaks during introducing utterances).

2. **Person reference formulations**—speakers can formulate “who this is,” “who I am,” and/or “who you are,” using names and/or category terms descriptors. For each of these, parties make choices about how to formulate introducible persons (be they “self” or “other”), and their choices reveal their own understandings and analyses of what information is relevant in “this” particular moment for “these” particular coparticipants.

3. **Greetings**—to ratify the relevance of an incipient/in-progress introduction sequence and promote its development, introducible parties can deliver prototypical verbal/lexical greeting utterances (e.g., “Hi,” “Hello”) and/or body-behavioral greeting actions (e.g., hand waves, head tosses/bows).

4. **Person reference formulation repeats**—to ratify the relevance of an introduction sequence, parties can repeat just-announced person reference formulations (e.g., first names of introducible persons), doing “working to commit that name to memory” and thereby displaying their orientation to being accountable for remembering.

5. **How are you**—to ratify the relevance of an introduction sequence, participants can deliver “How are you” utterances inquiring about the current state of an addressed recipient.

6. **Claims of preexisting knowledge about introducible persons**—to ratify the relevance of an introduction sequence, introducible persons can deliver utterances claiming to already know about addressed-recipients (e.g., “I’ve heard so much about you”).

7. **Introduction-specific assessments of “how it is to meet you”**—to ratify the relevance of an introduction sequence, introducible parties can assess “how it is to meet” addressed recipients (e.g., “Nice to meet you”).

8. **Touch/body contact**—to ratify the relevance of an introduction sequence, introducible persons can do a form of body contact (e.g., a handclasp/handshake, an embrace).

Introducible parties do these components while visibly smiling, directing their smiles (via gaze and body orientation) to introducible addressed recipients. By smiling as they produce components (1) through (8), introducible persons visibly (and often audibly) display a positive affective stance toward those they are meeting for the first time, doing “being warm” and doing “being happy to meet” addressed recipients. This smiling also works to invite addressed recipients to reciprocate by smiling back, correlative inviting them to align in (momentary) affiliation or rapport (Glenn, 1995; Haakana, 2002; Jefferson, 1979; Jefferson, Sacks, & Schegloff, 1987).

In addition, introducible persons observably work to achieve overlap with one another when producing introduction sequence actions. One way parties recurrently facilitate coordination of overlap is by doing several of the above components (1) through (8)—in many cases getting to do more than one of these components by rushing-through transition-relevance places to secure additional turn-constructional
units (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). Another way they work to achieve overlap is by sound-stretching their utterances, elongating and prolonging the talk they deliver immediately after an introducible person has been formulated. In working to achieve overlap with one another during introduction sequences, introducible persons display that they are “happy to meet” one another simultaneously, a face-affirming, jointly produced state-of-affairs that promotes and engenders affiliation and social solidarity in the very first moments of incipient social relationships.

The Work Involved in Launching an Introduction Sequence

For the parties involved, one of the most important factors in the doing of an introduction is the question of who launches it. Parties observably distinguish between two types of introduction launch or initiation: (1) three-party mediator-initiation, and (2) two-party self-initiation.

Excerpt 1 shows an instance of a mediator-initiated introduction. Cohabiting sorority sisters Trisha, Jenelle, Kelsy, and Sher are talking as they eat breakfast around the kitchen island in their house when two people arrive. One of the arrivers is Olexa, a fellow sorority sister. Immediately after Olexa exchanges greetings with her sorority sisters (Lines 1 through 3), she acts as a mediator, initiating an introduction sequence at Line 4 between her sorority sisters and the young man with whom she is arriving.

Excerpt 1 [Sorority Breakfast g-1] (simplified)

01 Kelsy: He[y Olexa,
02 Olexa: [Hello, huh huh.hh
03 Trish: Hi:a:y,
04 Olexa: [Thisiz my little brother.hheh!
05 Jenel: Oh wo:w hi:.
06 Trish: [Hi:,
07 Sher: [Hi:ee,
08 Kelsy: He’s welcome.
09 Olexa: [,hh This is Trisha, Jenelle, Kelsy,
10 Olexa: [an’ Sher.
11 Jenel: [Hi,

Excerpt 2 shows an instance of a self-initiated introduction. Here, four people are gathering to play cards. Lines 1 through 3 show guest Dick talking to host Brad about hooking up speakers. During this speaker talk the video shows guest Glenda, who is seated at the card table, counting a deck of cards as recently-arrived guest Gabe moves to stand next to her. After Gabe has been standing in that position for 11 seconds, Glenda self-initiates an introduction with Gabe at Line 8.

Excerpt 2 [Poker Party b-2] (simplified)

01 Dick: These are speaker wires. Huh. Oh these are(n’t)
02 thuh speaker wires we bought at tuh
03 Brad: But shyou need thuh jacks.
04 (4.0)
05 Glenda: Now we’re back (to) fifty two.
A key finding observable in Excerpts 1 and 2 is that, when a known-in-common person is present, parties treat mediator-initiated introductions as “preferred” over self-initiated introductions. “Preferred” is a technical conversation analytic term that refers to systematic properties of turn and sequence construction. “Preferred” actions are those that are performed straightforwardly and without delay, whereas actions that are delayed or accounted for are termed “dispreferred” (Heritage, 1984b; Schegloff, 2007). When mediators initiate introductions, they do so straightforwardly and without delay. In fact, they do so immediately, as close as possible to the moment that the two unacquainted parties enter into one another’s presence.

We can see this in Excerpt 1. Arriving Olexa rushes to launch a mediator-initiated introduction almost immediately upon her arrival, choosing to do so only after first greeting her sorority sisters. The video shows Olexa to initiate the introduction at the exact moment that her brother (who is trailing her by a few feet) becomes visible entering into the kitchen and into copresence with her sorority sisters.

Mediators’ immediate launch of introductions is one way that parties display their orientation to a social norm that, if present, a known-in-common person should initiate an introduction between two unacquainted parties, thus preempting the possibility that one of the two unacquainted parties will move to self-initiate an introduction.

Another way parties display orientation to this norm is that, when unacquainted parties self-initiate an introduction in the presence of a person they know-in common, they do so after some delay—after they have been in each other’s presence for some time. Looking again at Excerpt 2, Glenda and Gabe are in the presence of known-in-common Brad, and are in each other’s immediate presence for one-and-a-half minutes before Glenda self-initiates an introduction with Gabe at Line 8.

Such delay is also observable in Excerpt 3, which shows people meeting up before going out to a party. At Line 1, two women, Astrid and Lilly, enter the living room of an apartment where three men, Joe, Duncan, and Lance, are sitting on a couch. From Lines 1 through 16, they engage in an opening sequence that is extended by the involved parties exchanging repeated greetings and howareyous (“How’s it goin’; “What’s up”) while laughing at seeing how one another are dressed for the party. It is only after this extended sequence that Lilly chooses to self-initiate an introduction with the three men at Line 17.

Excerpt 3 [FG a-1]

01 Joe: Hello,
02 Ast: hehh! huh huh.hh! ↑Hello::,
Before examining what happens next (after Line 20) in this interaction, it is critical to first look more closely at Line 17. Line 17 is significant, not only because it shows when Lilly chooses to self-initiate an introduction, but also because it shows how Lilly chooses to initiate that introduction.

To launch an introduction with the men sitting on the couch, Lilly has options: (1) she can explicitly request her recipients’ identifying information, for example by asking: “What’s your name?”, or “Who are you?”; (2) she can proffer candidate identifying information (a candidate name/category) about her recipient(s) (if she has some expectation about who she is encountering); or (3) she can offer identifying information about herself, for example by saying: “I’m Dave’s date”, or “I’m Lilly”.

At Line 17, she chooses to offer her own first name with “I’m Lilly”. In doing this, she is also choosing to not explicitly request that her recipients identify themselves. This is important because, through her choice, she respects another social norm: when launching introductions, speakers should not explicitly request that their recipients identify themselves. But why?

This social norm relates to what Goffman (1971) terms the “information preserve”: the set of biographical facts about the self to which an individual expects to control access while in the presence of others. Parties respect one another’s information preserve by avoiding explicitly asking others for their information. Instead, speakers recurrently offer self-identifying information, using these offers to implicitly invite recipients to reciprocate. This way, speakers meet their recipients halfway, and leave it up to them when and if they provide information about themselves.

This brings us back to the continuation of Excerpt 3, and the finding that parties orient to a social norm that a known-in-common person should be the one to initiate an introduction between two unacquainted parties. Look at what Astrid, the woman arriving with Lilly, does starting at Line 21 below.
At Line 21, Astrid first says “O:H.” Speakers use “oh” to express that they have “just now” undergone a “change of state” of knowledge—that a “light bulb” has just gone off for them (Heritage, 1984a). With her “O:H,” Astrid displays that she has just realized something. Then she says, “S:orry.” Through this apology, Astrid shows that what she has just realized is that she has done something wrong. Speakers regularly apologize when they do dispreferred actions, when they violate social norms. “Apologies index particular offenses and embody a claim to have offended someone” (Robinson, 2004, p. 291). Astrid’s apology works to remedy her wrongdoing. But what exactly has she done wrong? With her actions at Lines 23 and 25 (and beyond), Astrid relaunches a mediated introduction between Lilly and the men on the couch, identifying “Lance” and then repeating Duncan’s name as she points to each of them. In doing this, Astrid shows that what she has just realized is that she was the only known-in-common person in the room, and that what she has done wrong is fail to fulfill her duty as the known-in-common person to launch an introduction between Lilly and the men. She works to compensate for her lapse by mediating the rest of the introduction starting at Line 23.

How can we understand why the social norm exists that a known-in-common person should be the one to initiate an introduction between two unacquainted parties? An overarching answer to this question is that known-in-common mediators help introducible persons solve practical problems posed by the constraints of interaction.

First, mediators give unacquainted parties a reason to interact (cf. Goffman, 1963). To do an introduction, one has to look at a person one does not know. And looking at a person one does not know risks violating what Goffman (1971) called the “territories of the self” by looking at a person to which one has “no right of access.” If, however, a mediator launches an introduction between two unacquainted parties, that mediator solves this problem by explicitly providing them a reason to look at one another. Mediators give introducible parties license to look at each other by pointing their gaze toward one another (e.g., in Excerpt 1, mediator Olexa does a deictic pointing gesture simultaneous with her launch of the introduction sequence at Line 4, her outstretched right arm/hand directing her sorority sisters’ gaze toward her
brother and facilitating the introducible parties’ achievement of entry into mutual gaze).

Second, mediators help solve the practical interactional problem of “recipient design.” This concept refers to “a multitude of respects in which the talk by a party in a conversation is constructed or designed in ways which display an orientation and sensitivity to the particular other(s) who are the coparticipants” (Sacks et al., 1974, p. 727). At the moment of introduction initiation, mediators have an epistemic advantage (over the unacquainted persons) in their ability to recipient design their formulations of introducible persons. This observation might at first seem counterintuitive—one might wonder: “Why would I want a mediator to introduce me to someone when I know myself best?” Of course, we all know ourselves best, and certainly better than most mediators know us. But what matters during an introduction is who knows better how to design a summary of “who” we each “are” for the person we are “just now” meeting for the first time. Because mediators know something about both of the introducible persons, mediators are in a better position at the moment of introduction launch to know how to economically sum each person up in a way that will be meaningful and relevant to the other introducible person. One of the key advantages of having a mediator initiate an introduction is that mediators can use their knowledge of both introducible parties to help them establish “common ground” (Clark, 1992; Enfield & Levinson, 2006) more quickly than they would on their own. We will see data further exemplifying this as we turn to the next section, which explicates the work involved in formulating “who” an introducible person “is.”

The Work Involved in Formulating “Who” an Introducible Person “Is”

To do an introduction, speakers must somehow describe, sum up, or formulate previously unacquainted persons. But doing this is challenging and by no means automatic, because on the spot and in the moment, a speaker has to either construct him/herself by formulating “who I am” or, if acting as a mediator, s/he has to construct another person by formulating “who this is” on that person’s behalf. And there is a vast array of different ways that any one person can be formulated. For example, who am I? I can be formulated by name. But what form of name? Am I Danielle? Danielle Pillet-Shore? Dr. Pillet-Shore? I can also be formulated with category terms or descriptors that invoke and activate identities. But which ones? Any one person can be characterized in virtually countless ways. When describing an introducible person, speakers must select which category terms to use from “an enormous inventory of terms” (Schegloff, 1996, p. 459). For example, am I an assistant professor? Jordan’s teacher? Liana’s friend? Charles’s daughter? Stella’s mom? The simple answer is yes—I am all of these things. But when I am introducing myself, or being introduced by a mediator, the formulation of “Who I am” that should be chosen is one that is meaningful and relevant to the person I am just now meeting. This means that the same person can and will be formulated differently across different introductions, depending on the context. For example, in the field I have
been introduced as “the researcher,” but at a dinner party shortly thereafter I have been introduced as “Betsy’s daughter-in-law.”

During introductions, speakers select and design their formulations of introducible persons to help recipients solve a puzzle: “Who are you”? Or more specifically, “how do I make sense of who you are?” Firth (1972) characterizes this as “social uncertainty,” stating that parties reduce this uncertainty through explicit identification (pp. 4–5). But what constitutes sufficient identification?

As mentioned earlier, speakers can use names to refer to introducible persons. But names used in this way only instruct parties as to what they may call each other; names do not by themselves convey information about “who” a person “is” (Sacks, 1992; Searle, 1958).

Analysis of all introduction sequences present in the investigation’s data set reveals that recipients observably need the following pieces of information to socially pinpoint an introducible person and make sense of who that person is:

- connection and ownership—“Who do you know that I know?”
- social category, identity, or categorical relationship—“Who are you categorically to the known-in-common?”
- account for presence—“What are you doing here?”

During introductions, speakers provide these pieces of information economically. One implication of this is that speakers explicitly state this information when they judge it to not be inferable from the local context alone—when they anticipate their recipients will have trouble finding it in what they know and expect about the present occasion.

Excerpt 4 shows an introduction that occurs in a classroom as a parent–teacher conference is getting underway. The Teacher (T) mediates an introduction between the Mom (M) with whom she is just about to start the conference and a Visitor (V) to Teacher’s classroom. Visitor has just spent the school day discussing her recent trip to Pompeii with the students.

Excerpt 4 [PT.04.ES.04.11.00 b] (simplified)

01 T: Thisi (.) my friend Miss Holmes. = She’s
   jush-
02 M: [Hi:::
03 T: [s]tudying in here,
04 V: [Hello, = How are you::.
05 T: Thisi[zz]Kyle’s mom =
06 M: [Good.
07 T: = who also went to Pompeii Liz,
08 V: [Ahhh! -
09 T: [Yes. = I did.

In this introduction, Teacher formulates both Visitor and Mom. Looking closely at how she chooses to formulate each of them, we see first that Teacher formulates Visitor
for Mom by saying: “Thisiz (. ) my friend Miss Holmes. = She’s jus:- studying in here.”. In saying, “Thisiz (. ) my” Teacher connects Visitor to herself, “owning” Visitor. Then she says, “friend,” categorically formulating their social relationship. Then she gives a form of Visitor’s name, selecting, “Miss Holmes” (a name choice discussed below). Teacher then rushes to continue her formulation of Visitor, treating “my friend Miss Holmes” as not yet sufficient identification for Mom to be able to make sense of “who Visitor is.” In adding, “She’s jus:- studying in here,” Teacher explicitly accounts for Visitor’s presence, showing that she has judged this piece of information to not be inferable from the local context of the parent–teacher conference.

Next, Teacher formulates Mom for Visitor by saying: “Thisiz KYle’s mom who also went to Pompeii Liz.” In saying, “Thisiz KYle’s,” Teacher connects Mom to her student named “Kyle.” By telling Visitor that Mom “belongs” to Kyle, Teacher shows that she expects Visitor to recall which of her students that name refers to from Visitor’s experience of Teacher’s class earlier that day. Then Teacher says, “mom,” categorically formulating Mom’s social relationship to Kyle and activating her mom identity as most relevant. Then she says, “who also went to Pompeii Liz.” “Liz” is Visitor’s first name (her full name is “Liz Holmes”). And as mentioned earlier, Visitor has just spent the school day in Teacher’s class discussing her recent trip to Pompeii with the students. So Teacher uses this information about Mom to establish “common ground” between Visitor and Mom.

This is a point at which it is very clear that mediators have an epistemic advantage in designing formulations of who introducible parties are for one another. Because, though both Visitor and Mom each independently know that they have visited Pompeii, they do not yet know that they share this experience in common. Teacher, however, does know this, and chooses to inform them of their shared experience.

Juxtaposing Teacher’s formulations of Visitor and Mom, we can also see that they are asymmetrical in two ways: (1) Teacher explicitly accounts only for Visitor’s presence, treating the reason that Mom is “here” as transparently inferable from shared understandings about the local context; and (2) Teacher provides a name only for Visitor, telling Mom that Visitor’s name is “Miss Holmes.” This form of name is also important: When Teacher formulates Visitor as “Miss Holmes,” she is clearly choosing from among different possible name forms. Notice, seconds later (at Line 9) Teacher calls Visitor by her first name, “Liz.” So Teacher chooses to not offer Visitor’s first name directly to Mom. Instead, Teacher offers Mom “Miss Holmes”—the name form canonically used to refer to “professional” adults vis-à-vis students in schools. But there are no students present in the classroom at this point, so something else is informing Teacher’s choice to not give Mom Visitor’s first name.

In choosing “Miss Holmes,” Teacher chooses a form of name that professionalizes and legitimizes Visitor’s presence in her classroom, conveying that Visitor is here in an official capacity—she is not here for purely social reasons as might be implied by Teacher having categorized her as “my friend.” And in not directly giving Mom Visitor’s first name, Teacher chooses to identify Visitor with the more formal and socially distant name form, thus choosing to not grant Mom personal access to Visitor. Correspondingly, Teacher does not provide Visitor with any name at all for
Mom, treating “Kyle’s mom” as sufficient identification for Visitor to be able to make sense of who Mom is. By choosing these asymmetrical formulations of Visitor and Mom, Teacher reveals her assessment of what forms of identification her recipients need to make sense of the person they are just-now meeting.3

Thus, we can see that speakers do work to formulate “who” an introducible person “is,” making choices about which names to use, and which social categories and identities to call out. Their choices reveal their assessment of what forms of identification will help recipients make sense of unfamiliar persons. These choices also propose a way that the introducible parties can relate to one another during the present encounter (e.g., whether they are “here” for one another, or not, and thus whether they will pursue subsequent conversation “now” or not), and may influence whether they will pursue a relationship with one another going forward, and if so, what kind (e.g., peer-to-peer; professional-to-client).

The Work Involved in Figuring Out When to (Not) Do an Introduction

For an introduction to happen between two parties, both of them must agree that they have never met before—they must both ratify a version of reality in which the current encounter is their first face-to-face meeting. In all of the examples presented thus far, the parties do this. As mentioned earlier, parties display that they agree that it is their first time meeting by promoting and encouraging the progress of the introduction—doing specific actions that move it toward completion.

In Excerpt 5, the parties do this by shaking hands (Lines 11, 14, 16, 17, 20), greeting one another immediately after each person is named (Lines 4, 5, 6, 9, 11, 12, and 13), and saying “Nice to meet you” (Lines 14 and 15, and 18 and 19), something only persons encountering one another for the first time say to each other—on subsequent encounters, they say “[Nice/Good] to see you” (Pillet-Shore, 2008).

Excerpt 5 [LMG 11-27-04] (simplified)

01 Ja: Hi:: = How are you,
02 Pe: |This is Linda’s brother Jacob? =
03 Li: = My brother |
04 Da: |Hi :: |
05 Ja: |Hi: |
06 Je: |Hi: |
07 Li: | = Jac: o b: |
08 Pe: |This ’s Linda’s sister =
09 Da: |Hi there |
10 Pe: = Lacy? =
11 Je: = Hi(ee:?: ((Je extending right hand to La))
12 La: |Hi[: |
13 Da: |Hi(h)e =
14 La: = [Nice to meet you ((La and Je handshaking))
15 Je: |Nice to meet you = I’m Jeff =
If, however, parties encountering one another agree that it is not their first time meeting face-to-face, then they will not do introductions. They may repeat their names for each other, but while doing so they will work to show that they are only doing “reminding.” That is because parties orient to a social norm that an introduction between two people should only happen once.

The implications of this norm are quite taxing: This means that one needs to keep track of every single person with whom one has ever worked through introductions, even if one did so once, very briefly, a long time ago.

Is the human brain actually capable of doing this? Social cognition research suggests that we have cognitive limits—limits on our brain’s memory capacity, and even greater limits on the number of individuals with whom we can maintain personal relationships. For example, the total number of individuals for whom we are able to put names to faces is approximately 2000, and the total number of individuals with whom we can maintain personal relationships is approximately 150 (Dunbar, 1993, 1998, 2004; Hill & Dunbar, 2003). But, although we may be cognitively limited in these ways, what the present research has found empirically to be the case is that parties hold themselves and others morally accountable for a display of remembering individuals with whom they have worked through introductions.

Goffman (1963) theorized this to be the case:

An introduction ... ought ... to have a permanent effect, placing the introduced persons forever after in a special and accessible position in regard to each other.... Thus, the offense of forgetting may take two distinct forms: not knowing that one ought to know a particular person (the greater of the sins); and knowing that one knows the person, but not being able to remember his name. (p. 120)

Once two people have worked through introductions, it is critical that from that point forward both of them display that they remember having already met one another. This is because remembering people we have met is fundamental to the formation of interpersonal ties, the development of social networks, and the accretion of social relationships over time. By meeting our social obligation to remember others, we avoid committing, in Goffman’s terms, “the offense of forgetting”—an offense that, if committed, is “face-threatening” (Goffman, 1967) and thus requires remedy through apologies, accounts, and laughter. The act of forgetting another person threatens both involved participants’ “face” because it occasions negative inferences about why one person does not remember the other.

By displaying that we remember others, however, we maintain their “face” by treating them as worth remembering. And we maintain our own “face” by showing ourselves to be competent social actors capable of attending to and keeping track of others. In addition, by displaying that we remember one another, we maintain a
world-in-common and shared social reality, both of which are key in building social solidarity and social/relational harmony (cf. Heritage, 1984b; Pollner, 1974, 1975).

There are several different types of work that parties do to make sure they respect this social norm, showing that they remember meeting one another by not working through introductions more than once.

In Excerpt 6, Ted, a potential mediator, starts to launch an introduction between Mary and Rochelle by saying “This ih-,” but then he suddenly stops to instead deliver the pre-introduction utterance, “Have you met?” This utterance is specifically devoted to checking to see if an introduction is appropriate before one is launched. Notice, the discovery that Mary and Rochelle have “already met” immediately blocks the development of an introduction.

Excerpt 6 [PT.02.TR.03.22.00] (simplified)

This example shows the important role that timing plays in parties’ actions during incipient introductions. As Ted is announcing Rochelle’s name at Line 4, we can see several things: At Lines 5 and 6, both Rochelle and Mary start responding in overlap with Ted, and in overlap with each other, at the same time as one another, and with the same type of response as one another, all as a way of blocking an introduction from happening. In doing this, Mary and Rochelle inform Ted that an introduction is not appropriate between them, and they do so “urgently”—they both come in very quickly to overlap Ted. In doing this, Mary and Rochelle also show each other that they remember one another at exactly the same time, thereby maintaining a world-in-common and shared social reality. They also maintain one another’s “face” here by treating each other as “worth remembering.”

Another way parties can show that they are not doing introducing but instead are doing name-reminding can be seen in Excerpt 7. Here, the parties admit that they are committing the lesser of Goffman’s two sins of forgetting: knowing that they know each other, but not being able to remember the other’s name.

Excerpt 7 [Hanging Out a-1] (simplified)
At Line 3, Brian requests his recipient’s name, rushing to append “I forget” to his request. “I forget” is an account for his request that implicitly references his memory of having already met Andrew. And at Line 11, Andrew shows that he too is treating this sequence as only doing name reminding by quickly receipting Brian’s name: Notice how Andrew starts to repeat the name in overlap with the tail-end of Brian saying his name at Line 10, and then immediately goes on to say, “That’s right,” thereby claiming to “just now” remember Brian’s name.

What happens, however, if two parties display divergent stances toward whether (or not) they have previously met? What happens if one person commits the greater of Goffman’s two sins of forgetting by actively displaying that they do not remember the other person?

This research has found displayed discrepancies to be rare. When they do occur, however, parties work to reconcile them very quickly. In Excerpt 8, homeroom Teacher (T1) and Mom (M) are in the middle of a conference when a second specialist math teacher (T2) arrives. At Lines 1 and 4, T1 mediates an introduction between M (“Justin’s mom”) and T2 (or “Mr. Farley”). And at Lines 2 and 6, T2 treats M as someone he has not yet met with his actions.

Excerpt 8 [PT.05.ES.12.10.01 a] (simplified)

01 T1: /C30 /C160 Hi. ‘S Justin’s mom?
02 T2: /C30 /C160 Hi[:. Wanted to introduce myself.
03 M: [Hi, —
04 T1: /C30 /C160 Thisiz Mister Farley?
05 M: Yeah, = I [met chyou at thuh open house.
06 T2: /C30 /C160 [Hi.My name’s = Jason Far’ley.]
07 T2: [↑Yeah- Oh.
08 M: [huh huh
09 M: Yeah[p. I saw-
10 T2: /C30 /C160 Sorry, = Couldn’t remem|ber; hhh ((smiling))
11 M: /C160 [Yeah. = When Mist[er Appel was =
12 T2: /C160 [Hi:.
13 M: =leaving.

Starting at Line 5 above, M treats T2 as someone she has already met. M works to block further development of an introduction by rejecting the relevance of an introduction with T2, reminding him both that they have already met, and also specifically where and when: at the open house. M’s actions treat T2’s move for an introduction as an error, and work to explicitly correct him. Thus, M is proposing a version of reality in which they have already met and thus already have a relationship, but T2 is proposing the opposite.

As mentioned earlier, because such a discrepancy threatens “face” and undermines solidarity, parties work to reconcile it very quickly. We can see how T2 does this, working to reconcile the discrepancy with M in his response: At Line 7, he says “Oh,” showing that he has just undergone a change of state of knowledge (Heritage, 1984a);
then at Line 10, he smiles and laughs a little as he delivers an apology and an account, all of which work to remedy his face-threatening “offense of forgetting” M. In responding in this way, T2 yields to M’s version of reality, thereby reconciling their previous displayed discrepancy.

Thus, we can see that, during both incipient or realized introduction sequences, and non-introduction name-reminding sequences, participants locally manage social norms fundamental to the maintenance of “face,” interactional affiliation and social solidarity.

Concluding Discussion

This investigation has elucidated the interactional work participants do to achieve a sequence as an introduction, describing and analyzing how involved parties produce, use, and understand their own introduction sequences. This article first described the work involved in building an introduction, outlining the introduction sequence components participants use to: (1) coordinate displayed attention between unacquainted parties, (2) formulate persons treated as introducible, and (3) ratify the relevance of the introduction. This research thereby contributes to the social scientific literature on the openings of interactions (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973; Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Firth, 1972; Kendon & Ferber, 1973; Schegloff, 1986). The findings of this study are, however, limited to introductions that occur in some private territory during occasions of sustained, focused interaction. An opportunity for future analysis is the study of introductions that occur (or fail to occur) in some public (or nonprivate) territory and/or during occasions of nonsustained, non-focused interaction (e.g., at bars/pubs). Future research is also needed to establish how introductions work in other languages and cultures. For example, to follow up on Basso’s (1970) description of how members of the Native American Western Apache community refrain from speaking when encountering strangers, when strangers eventually do start to communicate, exactly how do they do so and what do those interactional moments look like?

Second, this article explicated the work involved in launching an introduction sequence, demonstrating that participants distinguish between two types of introduction launch: three-party mediator-initiation and two-party self-initiation. One key finding is that, when a known-in-common person is present, parties treat mediator-initiated introductions as “preferred” over self-initiated introductions. In other words, if a known-in-common person is present, that person should initiate an introduction between the two unacquainted parties. Another key finding is that, when launching introductions, speakers should not explicitly request that their recipients identify themselves. Rather, speakers recurrently offer self-identifying (or other-identifying) information, using these offers to implicitly invite recipients to reciprocate. This research thus contributes to the growing body of conversation analytic work on the preference organization of sequence-initiating actions (Robinson & Bolden, 2010) by documenting the discovery of a specific and unanticipated manifestation of the more general preference for offers over requests.
when accomplishing the transfer of something of value from one person to another (Schegloff, 2007). Though the phrase “something of value” usually connotes tangible, material goods and services (e.g., a loan of money, a ride, the last piece of pie), the research embodied by this article demonstrates that we should also recognize both a mediator’s initiation of an introduction sequence and a speaker’s delivery of self-identifying information as offers of something of value.

Third, this article analyzed the work involved in formulating “who” an introducible person “is,” demonstrating that speakers make choices about which names to use and which social categories to call out. Their choices both reveal their assessment of what forms of identification will help recipients make sense of unfamiliar persons, and propose a way that the introducible persons can relate to one another during that encounter. This investigation thus illuminates introductions as a key locus for participants’ presentations of self (Goffman, 1959) and/or other through their chosen formulations of “who” they “are.”

Finally, this article elucidated the work involved in figuring out when to (not) do an introduction. For an introduction to happen between two parties, both of them must display that they agree that they have never met before, because parties observably orient to a social norm that an introduction between two people should only happen once. Once two people have worked through introductions, it is critical that from that point forward both of them display that they remember having already met one another. By displaying that we remember others, we maintain their “face” by treating them as worth remembering, and we maintain our own “face” by showing ourselves to be competent social actors capable of attending to and keeping track of others. In addition, by displaying that we remember one another, we maintain a world-in-common and shared social reality, both of which are key in building social solidarity and social/relational harmony (cf. Heritage, 1984b; Pollner, 1974, 1975).

This article’s findings shed additional light on other research, for example studies of how managers and organizations work to quickly transform new hires and newcomers to work teams into productive employees—a process called “rapid on-boarding” (Rollag, Parise, & Cross, 2005). Rollag et al. found that one of the most consistent differences between “rapid” versus “slow” on-boarders was the presence or absence of what they term “manager-led introductions” (equivalent to what the present article has termed “mediator-initiated introductions”). According to their study, “slow on-boarders” cite the lack of sufficient manager-led introductions to co-workers as a primary reason why they did not get “up to speed” on work tasks as fast as they had hoped. For newcomers, manager-led introductions are an organizational permission slip for future interactions with co-workers who can help speed up the process of learning the most vital information they need to do their jobs. The research embodied by this article shows why and how this is so—why and how mediators are so important in providing newcomers access to other unfamiliar people by giving them explicit license to interact with them, and making sense of “who” they “are” for them.

Because, as mentioned earlier, to meet a new person is to experience the unfamiliar, we can further appreciate why the social norm exists that a known-in-common person should be the one to initiate an introduction between two
unacquainted parties. When a known-in-common person serves as a mediator, that person is, by definition, familiar. Thus, mediators serve as a handoff from the familiar to the unfamiliar, embodying a connection or social bridge that provides a link between two unacquainted people. Correlatively, mediators facilitate the formation of a new direct tie between two people in a social network. In addition, Goffman and Firth suggest that unacquainted parties open themselves up to the danger of potential exploitation when they interact. But when mediators launch an introduction, they credential introducible persons’ “social identity” and “reliability” (Firth, 1972), tacitly endorsing them as nonexploitative persons (Goffman, 1963). Thus, mediators virtually eliminate a risk implicated in self-initiating an introduction: that of offering a name and extending a hand to an unfamiliar person, and not getting a hand back—the risk of being snubbed.

Overall, this article has demonstrated that participants use introductions to work out and establish unacquainted parties’ access to one another. By initiating an introduction sequence with, or on behalf of, an arriving newcomer, parties both acknowledge that person, treating him/her as worthy of being included in a social network, and they also help that person define, make sense of and understand “who” surrounding unfamiliar people “are” such that s/he can subsequently participate in interaction with them. Thus, a fundamental finding of this research is that parties can use the practice of introducing as a resource for achieving social solidarity. Indeed, a mediator-initiated introduction is an act of social inclusion—one that may very well help satisfy our fundamental human need to belong (cf. Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Notes

[1] This article presents an analysis of how unacquainted persons who are “comembers of a subclass of proper conversationalists” (Sacks, 1975) begin interacting for the first time. For description of how “improper conversationalists” begin to engage in conversation (e.g., via use of a “ticket”), see Sacks (1975, p. 67).

[2] “TCU” is the conversation analytic abbreviation for “turn-constructional unit,” a fundamental unit of speech (e.g., a sentence; a word) out of which a speaker may construct a turn-at-talk in conversation (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974).

[3] Another case of a mediator choosing asymmetrical formulations of the introducible parties can be seen in Excerpt 1. Whereas Olexa formulates the man with whom she is arriving categorically as her “little brother,” omitting mention of his name (and thereby choosing to not offer her sorority sisters personal access to him), she formulates each of the women by first name only, treating “who” they “are” categorically (e.g., her sorority sisters) as transparently inferable from shared expectations about the local context.

References


**Appendix.** Transcript Notation Conventions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T:</td>
<td>Speaker identification: e.g., Teacher (T:); Mother (M:);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[</td>
<td>Indicates onset of overlapping talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>=</td>
<td>Utterances that are latched together, with no gap of silence between them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>The sound preceding the hyphen is cut off</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_:</td>
<td>Letter(s) preceding underlined colon: The pitch turns downward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:</td>
<td>Underlined colon: The pitch turns upward within the word</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.4)</td>
<td>Timed silence: Silence measured in seconds and tenths of seconds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(.)</td>
<td>A micropause of less than 0.2 seconds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:</td>
<td>The preceding sound is stretched</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.</td>
<td>Falling or final intonation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>,</td>
<td>Continuing or slightly rising intonation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?</td>
<td>Rising intonation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘</td>
<td>Indicates a rise in intonation weaker than a question mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>messy</em></td>
<td>Underlining: Emphasis or increased volume relative to surrounding talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I dunno”</td>
<td>Degree signs: Decreased volume relative to surrounding talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>!</td>
<td>Exclamation point: Indicates an abruptly punctuated sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>↑ ↓</td>
<td>Up or down arrow: Marks a sharp rise or fall in pitch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.hh</td>
<td>In-breaths; the more “h”s the longer the in-breath</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hh</td>
<td>Out-breaths (sometimes indicating laughter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(doubt)</td>
<td>Filled single parentheses: Transcriber doubt about talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>((cough))</td>
<td>Filled double parentheses: Scenic detail not easily transcribed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bold</strong></td>
<td>Indicates target utterance(s)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>