

# Watch, listen and learn: Observing children's social conduct through their communication

Amanda Bateman, University of Waikato, New Zealand, abateman@waikato.ac.nz

## Abstract

*This paper argues for the use of conversation analysis (CA) and membership categorisation analysis (MCA) (Sacks, 1992) to investigate children's social conduct. A majority of prior research in this area has tended to focus on limited theoretical perspectives situated in developmental psychology, resulting in a dichotomous presentation of either prosocial or antisocial behaviour (see Bateman & Church, 2008 for an overview). Although the use of predefined categories "antisocial" and "prosocial" may be helpful for the organisation of data, there is a concern that these pre-defined classifications lead to children themselves being categorised as either consistently prosocial or antisocial (for example Nelson & Crick, 1999). This view encourages stigma and the labeling of children rather than offering further insight into children's social worlds (Bateman & Church, 2008). This problem represents a shortfall in information regarding the complexity of peer interactions and how they are locally managed by the children themselves, disregarding the range of social competencies engaged in by the participants.*

*Therefore a shift in theoretical approach is argued for here as this informs of how social order is produced through verbal and non-verbal communications between the participants themselves (Butler, Fitzgerald & Gardner, 2009; Sacks, 1992a; 1992b;). Analyzing children's social conduct through observing their communication offers an innovative, theoretical shift which is becoming more valued in many different areas of early childhood and particularly for the study of social relationships in education. This paper will outline the concept of communication as perceived from an ethnomethodological (EM) perspective, provide a background to EM and conversation analysis (CA), discuss some findings from research and then discuss the practical application of these findings for practice.*

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## The argument

Whilst prior research addressing the issue of children's perceived prosocial and antisocial behaviour is informative, it has often been restricted by reflective accounts of children and adults' perspectives through the use of self-reports and peer nominations (see Parrott & Giancola, 2007 for an overview). This is problematic as it has led to the presentation of a dichotomy of either prosocial or antisocial children, consequently encouraging negative stigma and inappropriate labelling (Bateman & Church, 2008). Reflective and hypothetical methodologies are problematic when children's immediate conduct and their contextual interpretations are being investigated as perspectives of incidents change in their intensity

and meaning through time, altering the immediate interpretation of an interaction. An approach to the study of children's conduct which informs research through categories which are meaningful to the observer rather than the observed can be restrictive as it influences the data by shaping it to fit the designed model rather than the data freely informing the researcher (Lepper, 2000; Psathas, 1995).

It is therefore argued here that a more authentic picture of the social relationships which children initiate, negotiate and maintain can be obtained through a method which privileges the collection and analysis of naturalistic data. This inductive approach can examine the internal cultural organisation which emerges from the interactions between children in their natural environment as they network together in dyads or groups. Detailed observations and subsequent data driven analysis are presented without the limitation of 'preconceived and pre-formulated identities, personality characteristics, or social "variables", "forces" or "factors" (Psathas, 1999, p. 141). Through applying an inductive approach to children's conduct through observing their verbal and non-verbal communications, the research can provide an informed account of what the children are actually doing when they socially interact.

## **An introduction to the methodology**

Ethnomethodology (EM) has emanated from the sociological work of Schutz, Goffman and Mead whose interests were in the reflexive analysis of everyday social interaction (Atewell, 1974; Hassard, 1990). Goffman's research interests became specifically focused on the syntactic organisation of human behaviour in everyday activities (Pomerantz & Fehr, 1997). This line of work was developed by Garfinkel who had a shared interest in how people interacted (Atewell, 1974) and founded the concept of EM (Pomerantz & Fehr, 1997). Garfinkel (1967) presents EM as a tool with which people's sense-making, interpretation and reaction towards others' interactions can be analyzed through actions-in-context.

Before discussing the usefulness of an ethnomethodological approach to the study of early childhood conduct, it is important to acknowledge the special issue of the Australian Journal of Communication (*Australian Journal of Communication: Ethnomethodological approaches to communication*, 2009) which provides a crucial contribution to the field of CA and MCA. In the special issue, the contributing authors provide a succinct and illuminating insight into the usefulness of EM, CA and MCA for the study of social order. In line with the authors of the special issue, the present paper perceives "communication" from an EM point of view where,

EM is not so much interested in the notion of communication as the transmission of messages, but rather...how people *interact* with others in society. That is, what people say and how they say it is understood in terms of the activities accomplished in and through *interaction*. (Butler et al., 2009, p. 2-3)

This model of studying social order through communication not only affords a closer look at how people construct their social worlds but also involves the detailed analysis of what is assumed as normal daily interactions to the people being observed (Silverman, 2006). The inductive characteristic of EM avoids preconceptions which may influence analysis, yet it encourages the emergence of data which guides the researcher (Garfinkel, 1967). Therefore, through observing unique incidents of children's social interactions directly as they occur, the individual uses of these behaviours can be seen first-hand and in context through the emerging data. An ethnomethodological framework allows for the study of, "the orderliness of social life as experienced, constructed and used from within" (Pollner & Emerson, 2001, p. 119). An inductive approach to the analysis of children's social conduct offers a unique data driven insight which would otherwise be limited by predefined hypothesis (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006).

This more specific focus on the co-construction of social organisation through membership in EM research has been highlighted, "EM studies the world exclusively as a members' phenomenon. It is concerned with what members find there and what members do with what they find, with members' problems then, and members' solutions'" (Eglin, 2002, p. 819). With regard to the investigation of children's social conduct, Hester (1991) supports the use of an ethnomethodological framework in the analysis of deviance in schools and informs that, "The social facts of deviance, from an ethnomethodological point of view, are constituted through the use and operations of members' methods of practical reasoning" (p. 443). This suggests that, rather than simply labeling children's behaviour as "deviant" ethnomethodology offers a more detailed analysis of what the children are actively achieving through their interactions. This methodological approach is therefore appropriate for the analysis of children's social conduct as it offers a unique insight into how behaviour is used to co-construct social organisation and establish membership through everyday communications.

## **CA and MCA**

CA is "perhaps the most visible and influential form of ethnomethodological research" (Maynard & Clayman, 1991, p. 396). Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson's development of CA and MCA affords the ability to finely analyze the details of talk-in-interaction which are evident in social organisation through the detailed transcription of audio and visual recordings (Butler, Fitzgerald & Gardner, 2009; Dowling, 2007). As CA has a wide range of elements in its framework, this paper does not aspire to provide a thorough review (see Hutchby & Woofitt, 1998; Schegloff, 2007b; Sidnell 2010 for introductions). Rather, the following discussion sets out to familiarise the reader with some key features of CA and MCA relevant to the study of children's social conduct.

CA encourages unmotivated looking when approaching the analysis of talk-in- interaction, where repetitive themes emerge from data through the iterative process of investigation. This aspect of data-driven analysis is imperative in the use of CA, where the risk of the

researcher applying their own set of categories prior to the analysis is highlighted as unacceptable (Schegloff, 1996a). The concept of unmotivated looking has been challenged where it is argued that the analysis of data emanates from the researcher's motivation for investigation, therefore declaring the 'looking' motivated (see Psathas, 1990 for a discussion). In CA research, the topic under investigation must serve as the motivational aspect of the research process. The subsequent data analysis should then be approached with an open mind where no pre-theorised categories are used, therefore allowing the data to guide the emerging themes found within (ten Have, 2000). This perspective allows the data to inform the researcher, and in doing so provides an essential insight into the phenomena which motivated the investigation. Therefore, in relation to the study of social conduct in early childhood, CA offers an unrestricted insight into how social conduct is implemented by the members in everyday social situations.

CA is effective for researching the daily organisation of social interactions as it allows the researcher to, "take singular sequences of conversation . . . and examine them in such a way as to find rules, procedures, inferences, and category devices that have been used to generate orderly features" (Owenby, 2005, p. 57). Everyday interactions are established through the order of turn taking, an element of which is identified as an adjacency pair whereby a first pair part (FPP) utterance from one person initiates an interaction from another person in the form of second pair part (SPP) utterance (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974). This "mutual orientation between speaker and hearer is the most basic social alignment implicated in spoken interaction" (Goodwin & Heritage, 1990, p. 292). Through their sequential turns at talk the members make demonstrably relevant issues which are perceived as important to them through their verbal orientation. In doing so, researchers gain access to how these turns at talk work to establish the wider co-construction of social conduct.

The concept of turn taking in the construction of social interaction is foundational in the field of conversation analysis (see Sacks et al., 1974). It is evident that in the activity of conversational turn taking membership categories are produced, and contextual social identities are constructed (Psathas, 1999). The use of MCA as a research method allows an adult observer access to the everyday interactions which form the social organisation in children's worlds as they make reference to certain membership categories and not others. The speakers actively display their intentions through both their verbal and non-verbal communication to other members of their community, including the researcher, therefore allowing insight into their social lives which would otherwise not be accessible. The use of MCA offers benefits for research with young children as direct observations of children's social construction through their orientation to categories is offered (Butler, 2008). Through using MCA the children's physical and linguistic perceptions of events are directly recorded therefore providing an essential insight into their understanding of daily interactions in situ (Hester & Francis, 1997). The immediate use of resources which are applied to everyday social organisations can in turn offer further understanding of the social activities which constitute relations in children's unique cultures.

In order to investigate the use of membership categories in social organisation it has been suggested that the analyst is a member of the society in which the talk was made and therefore is aware of the rules for interaction which are applied in the shared society. This cultural familiarity was a concept used by Sacks to defend his analysis in his early work (Anataki & Widdicombe, 1998). However, Schegloff (1991) addressed this issue by emphasising the importance of how the hearer translates the talk, by analyzing the categories that people orient and make relevant to. This clarifies that the identity and categorisation is made relevant by the participants rather than the analysts; if an observation is made of "something culturally familiar in the data" you should 'be obliged to say how it is there for the participants' (Schegloff, 1991, p. 10). This perspective is important for the use of CA and MCA in research investigating children's conduct where the adult observer is recognisable as not belonging to the immediate culture of being a child. The participant's orientation to categories in social contexts highlights what is perceived as important to them, and this is subsequently observable to the researcher.

Through reference to membership categories in these turns at talk, aggressive or affiliative behaviour is used as children align themselves verbally and through embodied action (Goodwin, 2006). It is this mutual understanding of the unspoken rules and social structure which sequential interactions are built on and from which social organisation emanates (Schegloff, 2007a). Literature regarding the social reinforcement of negative stigma through MCA indicates that society's application of membership categorisation devises organise people depending on their category bound activities; if a person belonging to a category deviates the norm in some way they become noticeably different and are 'marked out' (Hester, 1998, p. 139). The exclusion of specific children is therefore noticeable as a co-construction of social order and is achieved through reciprocal interactions between members of a group (Goodwin, 2006).

As acknowledged earlier, children's social interactions have often been analysed through the use of an outsider's perspective of events using psychological theory whereas CA and MCA investigate social worlds from an insider's perspective through analyzing aspects of interactions which the members themselves orient to through their verbal and non-verbal communications (Sacks, 1992a; 1992b). Approaching the study of children's conduct through analysing these communications offers insight into the everyday activities children are engaged in from within. This is particularly useful as it affords, "the perspective from within the sequential environment in which the social action was performed" (Seedhouse, 2005a, p. 252). By employing CA and MCA to investigate children's social worlds, an important insight into the aspects of interactions which the children themselves find important is afforded. Research using CA and MCA to investigate children's social worlds demonstrate how productive this perspective is in establishing a true representation of the interactions which form children's everyday lives (for example: Butler, 2008; Butler & Weatherall, 2006; Church, 2009; Cobb, Danby & Farrell, 2006; Cromdal, 2001; 2009; Danby & Baker, 2000; Goodwin, 2006; Hutchby, 2005; Maynard, 1985).

## Lessons from research

The micro-analysis of CA and MCA provides an insight into the context relevant interactions children engage in with each-other to fulfil their personal and social goals as well as enabling researchers to further understand the verbal and non-verbal strategies the children use in gaining their goals through their physical alignment and talk-in-interaction (Gardner & Forrester, 2010; Goodwin, 1998). The following is an example of an interaction lasting fifty-five seconds and is adapted from the authors PhD research. Although this may seem like a very limited amount of time, the complexity of social order is evident through the communications of the participants during this time. The example illustrates how four-year-old children demonstrate their co-construction of social organisation through their verbal and non-verbal communication in their early childhood playground. Please see appendix for transcription conventions.

### *A glimpse at children's co-construction of social organisation*

This observation begins with Tina and Katie who are standing together in the playground as they briefly discuss their snacks. Tina and Katie make their affiliation to each other evident through their verbal and no-verbal communications.



11      Katie: hhh?

12      Katie: ↑what are they.

13      Tina: ↓berries?

14                    (15.3)

However, the dynamics of this affiliation change when Katie's friend Mel enters the playground. Katie runs towards Mel whilst shouting her name with arms outstretched, leaving Tina to follow.



- 15      Katie: Mel ((Katie starts running across the playground towards Mel. Tina  
16                      runs with her))
- 17      Mel: Katie.

When Tina reaches Katie and Mel she puts one hand on Mel's shoulder and leans in to speak to her. Katie reacts to this immediately as she takes her hand off Mel to speak to Tina, emphasising the word 'no' as she looks at Tina. Tina shows her understanding of her exclusion as she lifts her hand off Mel and utters the expression, 'mmhm'.



- 18                      ((Katie and Mel hug each-other. Mel lifts Katie slightly off the  
19                      floor and then puts her down. Tina moves close to Mel, puts her  
20                      hand on Mel's shoulder, leans in and speaks to her))
- 21      Tina: ( )
- 22      Katie: no. ((lets go of Mel and turns to speak to Tina))
- 23      Tina: °↓mmhm↑° ((lifts her hand off Mel and lifts her heels off the floor  
24                      and back down as she backs away from Mel))
- 25      Mel: ((looks at Katie and then back to Tina))

Once Katie has excluded Tina she bends down to fasten her buckle. Whilst Katie is bent down Mel turns to Tina and begins a conversation with her, using the MP3 player Tina is wearing as a tool with which to access an affiliation with Tina. Tina replies and so Mel and Tina are now in an affiliated interaction together.



26 Katie: *((bends down to tighten her shoe laces))*

27 Mel: have you got that thing. *((looks at the MP3 player around Tina's neck))*

28 Tina: °yeah (0.6) it's there°

The affiliation between Tina and Mel is observably considered illegal by Katie who makes this demonstrable when she stands up.



29 Katie: *((stands upright and turns to face Tina))*

30 Katie: ↑don't ↓pla:y with us *((creaky voice))*

31 Tina: °↓why↓°

32 Katie: ↑co::↓z i=said so *((creaky voice))*

Tina's exclusion is made even more explicit by Katie in her following action as she physically pulls Mel into the playground with her. However, as Tina has not yet been excluded by Mel she grabs hold of Mel's hand and runs along with them into the playground.



- 32      Katie: ((holds Mel's hand and runs, pulling  
33                    her across the playground))  
34      Mel:    a:r:g:h  
35                    ((Tina grabs on to the sleeve of Mel's jumper and runs along with  
36                    them, smiling. Katie looks at Tina, stops running and lets go of  
37                    Mel's hand. Mel and Tina stop running))

Once Katie notices that Tina is still with them she stops, and excludes Tina once again. Katie subsequently walks over to Mel and holds her hand. The girls then stand and look at each other for three point six seconds before Katie pulls Mel off to another part of the playground.



- 38      Katie:    i don't wa:nt tina to pl:a::y. ((walks between Mel and Tina, grabs Mel's  
39                    hand and pulls her away from Tina))  
40                    ((The girls stand and look at each-other)) (3.6)

This time Tina does not follow; Tina now stands by herself for four seconds and then runs over to where Mel and Katie are.



41 Katie: come on ( )

42 ((Katie runs, pulling Mel with her. Tina stands on her own for 4

43 seconds and then runs in the direction of Mel and Katie.))

Once Tina reaches Katie and Mel she starts a conversation with Mel, who has not yet initiated an exclusion of her. Tina initiates affiliation with Mel by using her coat as a conversational tool (Sacks, 1992). Tina does this by making reference to the fact that herself and Mel do not have coats on, whereas Katie does. This observation makes an affiliation between Tina and Mel as they both belong to the category of people who are not wearing coats. Therefore Tina is now the one being excluded, as she is the only member present who is wearing a coat.



43 Tina reaches

44 Mel and Katie))

45 Tina: you haven't got one of them have you?

46 (6.3)

47 ((Mel starts walking toward the climbing frame. Tina follows with Katie

48 behind her)) (4.7)

49 Tina: i ( ) we don't need our coats look (0.6) we don't need our coats on

50           it's not that cold?

51           *((Katie has a coat on, Mel and Tina do not))*

52    Mel:    i was freezing this morning but now it's gone warm.

Finally, at the end of the fifty-five seconds, the girls all hold hands and walk into the playground together.



53           *((Mel walks back into the playground. Katie runs to catch up with Mel*

54           *and holds her hand. Tina falls behind slightly but runs to catch*

55           *up with Mel and Katie. Tina puts her hand out and Mel holds it. The*

56           *girls continue into the playground together))*

## **Implications for practice and further research**

This detailed analysis of a brief everyday interaction demonstrates that observing children's communications offers an important insight into their social conduct. Within research studies taking this perspective, children's social competence has been observed in their natural settings where observations of verbal and non-verbal communication demonstrate how conduct is established. In observations of children's interactional competences it is observed that children use their language to co-construct social organisation and cultures (Bateman, 2010; Butler, 2008; Butler & Weatherall, 2006; Goodwin, 1990; Goodwin & Goodwin, 1987; Kitzinger, 2007). Through this approach an insight into the production of interactions which the children value and count as meaningful in their everyday lives can be discovered.

This holds meaningful implications for practice whereby early childhood teachers gain a deeper understanding of children's competencies in the complex organisation of social order. It subsequently becomes apparent that labelling children is inappropriate and

insufficient as it leads to a distorted self-image for the child where they are only recognisable by one aspect of their multifaceted personality. The findings also reveal the importance of affiliations in children's worlds and the consequences associated with the threat of losing such a strong affiliation, as was observable when Tina encroached upon the close dyadic affiliation between Katie and Mel. Understanding the reason behind such exclusion sheds light on these situations which are often difficult for teachers to address.

This leads to a revisit of the debate of the role of the early childhood teacher with regard to intervention and the question 'should early childhood teachers intervene in children's disputes or not?' As we see from the excerpt, although Tina was excluded on two occasions she learnt how to become affiliated or 'make friends' with the girls through the process. So surely this would indicate that we should not intervene, otherwise how do children learn to cope with such conflicting everyday situations? However, what about when children choose to exclude? If we are to take a philosophical stance against intervention, then who is to teach children about democracy and equal rights of contribution for all?

## Conclusion

Whereas other methods make available a review of a situation through children's and researcher's interpretation of events, the analysis of the use of everyday verbal and non-verbal interactions offers an insight into how social networks are co-constructed through direct observations of talk-in-interaction (Goodwin, 1990). An argument for the use of CA and MCA has been offered here for the study of children's conduct as the sequential turn taking and orientation to membership categories provide a unique insight into how children produce their own social worlds. Direct observations of children's interpretations of social interactions can be analyzed using CA to investigate the sequential nature of how and why children use specific behaviours through establishing what is happening directly between the children. The use of MCA offers further benefits as observations of how children use group membership in social construction can be revealed through their orientation to actions with peers, and how they interpret the actions of others in order to co-construct their social order.

The rigorous nature of CA and MCA is particularly useful for an investigation into young children's social conduct as "understanding analytically what action is (or actions are) being done by some unit of talk is not accessible to casual inspection and labelling; it requires examination of actual specimens of naturally occurring talk in interaction" (Schegloff et al. 2002, p. 5). Through employing the method of MCA and CA, aspects of children's social worlds which they themselves perceive as relevant can be observed and made accessible for analysis through their everyday activities. CA and MCA equip researchers with a tool for the investigation of the sequential orderliness of children's social activities through their talk-in-interaction. This provides researchers of childhood disciplines access to their unique culture which would otherwise be inaccessible. Through the investigation into the sequential turn taking in children's social interactions important findings can be revealed as talk-in-

interaction alignment is oriented to and built upon in children's cultures. This methodology is therefore particularly relevant for an investigation into children's social conduct as the various types of actions which are evident can be revealed. The perspective of children having limited types of behaviours is then challenged and a more informative picture of the complexities involved in children's interactions can be afforded.

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## Appendix

The conversation analysis symbols used to transcribe the data are adapted from Jefferson's conventions described in Sacks et al. (1974).

=	the equals sign at the end of one utterance and the beginning of the next utterance marks the latching of speech between the speakers. When used in-between words it marks the latching of the words spoken in an utterance with no break.
(0.4)	the time of a pause in seconds
::	lengthening of the prior sound. More or less colons are used to represent the longer or shorter lengthening.
?	a rising intonation in speech
.	a falling intonation in speech
↑	a sharp rise in tone
↓	a sharp lower in tone
<u>Underscore</u>	marks an emphasis placed on the underscored sound
<b>Bold</b>	words which are underscored and bold indicate heavy emphasis or shouting
°degree sign°	either side of a word indicates that it is spoken in a quiet, soft tone
(brackets)	utterance could not be deciphered
((brackets))	double brackets with words in italics indicate unspoken actions
.hhh	audible in-breath
hhh	audible out-breath