
Toddler agency and conversation analysis

Bryndis Gunnarsdottir and Amanda Bateman

Conversation analysis (CA) can be a useful tool for research when investigating toddlers' social interactions, because it can showcase their capabilities and agency through in-depth analysis of their verbal and non-verbal actions. This article argues that by using CA to analyse the details of toddler conversations within the peer group, we can not only discover the true complexities and social capabilities of toddlers but also find out what is important to them and how we, as early childhood teachers, can support and empower them. The study of toddlers' social worlds through CA has important implications for planning for quality care and education in

Introduction

Examining the social reality of toddlers has increasingly become a significant issue within early childhood education and care (ECEC) because of the growing number of these children in ECEC settings around the world (OECD, 2001, 2006, 2011, 2015; Woodhead, 2007). How these young children are spending their time in the ECEC settings and the impact it is having on their lives is a research topic worth examining, because children's early experiences have a great influence on their future lives as well as on their lives in the here and now. Valuable research has already been published in the last decade indicating that children can benefit socially, developmentally, economically and academically from attending ECEC settings (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Greve, 2005; OECD, 2006; Løkken, 2004; Sylva et al., 2006). Looking at what children are doing in these settings and how they are influencing their environment and making use of it for their own benefits has also been researched to some extent (Alvestad, 2010; Bae, 1996; Corsaro, 2003, 2015; Denzin, 2010; Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993; Greve & Solheim, 2010; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008; Ryan, 2005). What is needed, though is more research on how this relates to the toddler age group.

This paper will examine how using CA can be beneficial when researching the social lives of toddlers within ECEC settings, and how it has the potential to deepen our already

existing understanding of the subject, as well as giving us new knowledge that can have a great impact on the quality of the care and education children are receiving in these settings. This will be achieved initially with a general discussion on the toddler peer group, followed by a specific focus on how CA has been useful for researching the toddler age group, and finally how this research can inform teacher practice.

The toddler peer group

William Corsaro (2015) has extensively researched the peer group and the peer culture for decades. He defines 'peer culture' as "a stable set of activities or routines, artifacts, values, and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers" (Corsaro & Eder, 1990, p. 197). He identifies two major themes in children's initial peer cultures: children try to get control over their lives and they want to share this control with other children. This they do through cultural routines, which they construct within the peer group. These routines both provide the children with security, because they are predictable and give the children a sense of belonging to a group, and empower them because the security gives them space to develop, interpret and construct new knowledge. Corsaro uses the term 'interpretive reproduction' to explain this collective action:

The term *interpretive* captures the innovative and creative aspects of children's participation in society. In fact ... children create and participate in their

own unique peer cultures by creatively taking or appropriating information from the adult world to address their own peer concerns. The term *reproduction* captures the idea that children are not simply internalizing society and culture but are actively contributing to cultural production and change. (Corsaro, 2015, p. 18).

One of the most crucial factors within this theory of interpretive reproduction is that the focus is on participation and how children reproduce and interpret their world rather than on how the individual child internalises the adult world. It is not the individual that is being examined; but the routines within the peer group (Corsaro, 1992).

Most of Corsaro's research on this topic has been with children over the age of 3 years, and he has done extensive work with pre-schoolers in the US and Italy (Corsaro, 1979a, 1979b, 2003, 2005; Corsaro & Eder, 1990; Corsaro & Molinari, 1990). He has, however, in collaboration with Luisa Molinari (1990) also conducted a study in an Italian *asilo nido* (an ECEC for under 3 year-old children) and found that those toddlers did indeed construct their own routines, often consisting of re-arranging furniture in the room. They then shared those routines with each other and participated in the construction of the routine as a group. These routines, Corsaro and Molinari argued, gave the children control over the physical environment they were in. Examining those routines further could provide interesting information on toddlers' social lives within ECEC.

In many countries around the world the view of the child as a competent and strong social being has all but overtaken the traditional view of the deficit child (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). This understanding has, however, not always found its way to toddlers. The dominant understanding of child development (e.g. Piaget's theory of stages of development: Piaget, 1959) still categorises toddlers as egocentric and unable to play well with others. Although stage theories like Piaget's have been critiqued, these deficit views still dominate the discourse (Salamon, 2011), with catch phrases like the 'terrible twos' still being widely used by parents and carers alike, and social commentators making claims like

[t]he vast majority of development in children is done on their own or with adults, not with other children, who are in their own fantasy worlds and find it

hard at so young an age to co-operate and enjoy each other's fantasy worlds" (Oliver James, cited in Naughton, 2014, p. 15).

Research into the social lives of toddlers, showcasing their agency and capabilities, will hopefully help to shift such discourse regarding toddlers as well as shedding more light on their competencies.

A few other researchers have studied the social worlds of toddlers. According to research conducted by the Norwegian Gunvør Løkken (2004), toddlers express their understanding of each other's meaning and purpose in play through body language because they often do not have a common verbal language. Their friendship is based largely on physical interactions, repetition, impressions, and humour. Through interactions and play they develop 'us-culture', togetherness in a group that forms over time. Løkken (2000) maintains that the toddler style is "recognisable in varied ways of running, jumping, trampling, twisting, bouncing and shouting, falling ostentatiously and laughing ostentatiously" (p.173). Through these physical characteristics, toddlers construct their own rituals and routines, games and community.

Anne Greve's (2005, 2007, 2008, 2009) research on toddler friendship supports Løkken's research, and she concludes that the "common we" is important as toddlers seek each other out to create meaning together and relate to each other through physical play and humour (Greve & Solheim, 2010). The "common we" is a method children use to build their togetherness in the peer group (Bateman, 2012, 2014), which is important because in the peer group children learn strategies they need to negotiate and navigate a tricky social play world. The skills toddlers can learn through social interactions in the peer group can be vital for building social relationships and friendships (Ashby & Neilsen-Hewett, 2012). This aspect of the toddler peer group needs to be emphasised and fostered, because it is crucial for the children to feel a sense of belonging. It can be empowering for a child to experience being one of the 'we'. This feeling of belonging is emphasised in both *Te Whariki*, the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, and in the Australian early-years learning framework (*Belonging, Being and Becoming*). Both of these frameworks place a strong emphasis on children and families being secure and feeling content within the early-years setting, because it is the basis of all further development and learning for the child (Austalian Government Department

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of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009; Ministry of Education, 1996). For teachers to be able to provide the conditions for toddlers to build those social relationships and a sense of belonging, we need to know more about what it looks like and what is important for the children. One way of examining these skills is through a detailed study of social interactions through conversation analysis.

Conversation analysis in toddler research

Studies utilising CA are based within the paradigm of social constructionism, which holds that the social world is constructed through "... shared processes of communication and social interactions" (Hammersley, 2013, p. 36). Within social constructionism, different methods of research have emerged, many looking at both *how* we construct our shared world as well as *what* we are constructing (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011). One of these methods is conversation analysis, which was developed in the 1960s as a reaction to the quantitative focus on the study of human interactions. It was Harvey Sacks's study on the structure of interactions at the Center for the Scientific Study of Suicide in Los Angeles in 1963-64 that marked the beginning of CA as we know it (ten Have, 1999). Sacks was interested in investigating "the levels of social order which could be revealed in the everyday practice of talking" (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008, p. 15). Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) were the first to discuss "the organization of turn-taking for conversation" (pp. 696-697), where they claim order is observable in any conversation. They argued that routine conversations are a structurally ordered and organised phenomenon and turn taking is fundamental for conversation and interactions. The focus of study is naturally occurring interactions between two or more people, the process and structure of interactions that co-produce social order through analysing turns at talk, and people's understanding of and responses to those interactions (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008; Sacks et al., 1974). In CA, video or audio recordings of naturally occurring interactions are analysed by identifying "recurrent distinct interactive practice" (Peräkylä & Ruusuvaori, 2011, p. 534), or items in talk that the participants themselves orient to as significant.

Although CA is called *conversation analysis*, it is not only interested in verbal conversational talk. It does indeed analyse 'talk-in-interactions',

what is said in those interactions and how it is said, but it also examines the subtleties of gaze, gesture and tone of voice (Bateman & Church, in press; Filipi, 2009; C. Goodwin, 1987, 1993; Kidwell, 2005). What is actually being studied is the "interactional organization of social activities" (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008, p. 12). Seminal CA work on the importance of studying paralinguistic features of interaction (such as gaze, tone of voice and touch) with older children has been conducted by Marjorie Harness Goodwin (1990; 2008; 2011; Goodwin & Cekaite, 2012; Goodwin, Cekaite, & Goodwin, 2012; Goodwin & Kyratzis, 2012). Her research has shed light on the complexities of children's interactions and has given an inside view of how interactive and fascinating the processes of creating and maintaining the peer culture is. She and her husband, Charles Goodwin (1993), have analysed interactions through the combination of both verbal actions and non-verbal gesture and gaze, as well as looking at voice prosody for shifts in tone and pitch, in order to enrich their understanding of social lives (ten Have, 1999).

The following transcription taken from Bateman (in press) demonstrates how paralinguistic resources are identified with CA transcription conventions formulated by Jefferson (Sacks et al., 1974) (see appendix for full list of transcription conventions). In this interaction, the children are using puppets to play out a story that has just been read to them by their teacher. The \$ sign indicates that Sienna is smiling as she talks, the double brackets note the gesture, and the pauses are recorded in tenths of a second (for example, on line 16). Gaze is noted as important in the interaction here, as Matai looks at his puppet as he speaks to it (line 22), treating the puppet as he would a human recipient of his talk. Sienna responds to Matai (also marked by her gaze towards him) as she tells him that it is *his* turn (not the puppet's) by placing emphasis on *your*, and Matai continues his pretence of 'being' the puppet through the act of ventriloquism (Bateman & Church, in press), as he talks for the puppet with his gaze fixed on it. (For further exploration of these issues please see the article).

- 14 Sienna: \$what can ↑ this: ↓ monster
do\$ ((*lifts puppet*)
15 *up to 'audience' and waggles it*)
16 (2.2)
17 \$I can [fl::y\$ ((*holds it in the air*)
18 Matai: [>°oh oh ay ay< ((*pulls curtain*
over to the

- 19 *side with his bird puppet*)
20 Sienna: whe::°sh° ((*moves the puppet*
through the air and
21 *then lands it behind the theatre*)
22 Matai: right your o::n ((*looking down*
at his puppet)
23 Sienna: now it's your: turn no::w
((*looks at Matai*)
24 Matai: no wait I need to go shower
((*looking at puppet*)

This inclusion of gaze and gesture has been especially useful when investigating toddlers' social worlds. For example, Mardi Kidwell's (2005) research on toddlers' and their caregivers' gazes found that "[*being looked at* is a complex communicative matter" (p.443), where the toddlers responded differently to different types of 'looks' from adults. Further work by Kidwell (2009) demonstrates how toddlers also monitor the gaze of their peers to respond to the situation around them and the likelihood of caregivers intervening, therefore showing how intelligently toddlers 'read' their social environment. Anna Filipi (2009) used CA to analyse the structures of gazes as well as the gestures and pointings of infants' and toddlers' communication with parents, showing that they are capable of complex interaction long before they can communicate verbally. Michael Forrester and Sarah Cherington (2009) examined the development of conversational repair skills by following a young child (Forrester's daughter) from the age of 1 year to the age of 3 years 10 months. Their results indicate strongly that a very young child has the capability to take part in complicated conversations and that the child understands and can interpret others' responses competently. Burdelski and Morita's (2017) study of Japanese toddlers' initial assessments in conversations shows how able they are to 'read' social interactions and figure out what is an appropriate response within conversations even at such a young age. These previous studies illustrate that CA is a useful tool when examining toddler interactions.

Informing ECE teacher practice

Studying the 'social activities' of toddlers inherently involves looking at gaze, gestures and body language as their verbal language skills are still evolving. The detailed examination of turn taking and problem solving within interactions in the toddler peer group therefore has the potential to showcase the subtleties and complexities of social interactions between

very young children, we can see them as 'knowledgeable' (Bateman & Church, in press). Because adults are not members of the toddler peer group, looking at the toddlers' interactions in natural settings in great detail through CA can give us a unique view of their conversations and social interactions, and it can help us see what is important to the children themselves (Church, 2007). CA is a particularly useful tool for early childhood teachers to use in their research with children; they can become teacher-researchers who are precise in their analysis of video footage that explores social relationships and peer groups in their centres. CA can also provide teachers with insight and reflection into their own teaching practices where they video-record their interactions with children and examine them in detail to reveal more about how they use questions, and the responses of the children to those questions.

CA has, then, the potential to showcase toddler peer culture and the communication and interaction that goes on within the peer group, as well as the potential to understand further teacher-toddler interactions. This method allows us to "focus on what children do, rather than what we *think* they do, or what we *think* they think or feel" (Bateman & Church, in press, p. 3). By using video recordings, a researcher can develop an in-depth analysis of what toddlers do and how they do it through examining their verbal and non-verbal interactions and by examining how they communicate what is important to themselves and their peers. The best way to understand what is important to young children, is to look for repetitions in interactions and shared routines, which signal things they value and look for in their social relationships with their peers. Conversation analysis is an excellent tool to examine what is important because it can capture all the nuances in their interactions, which can also give us an opportunity to showcase their agency through shining a light on their complex interactions with others.

Final words

This paper has discussed how CA can be a useful tool when doing research in the toddler peer group. It has the potential to offer new and interesting data as we go deep into a social group that adults no longer have access to. It has discussed how we can utilise CA methods to look beyond the superficial and the verbal, and by also examining the non-

verbal communication we can identify what is important to the toddlers themselves. This investigation into the toddler social world can also help us showcase their agency by focusing on what they are capable of rather than what they are lacking. The social world of toddlers is a complex and tricky world and the more we know about it, the better equipped we are to support and assist them in their daily lives in ECEC settings around the world.

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Appendix: CA transcription conventions

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

| | |
|-------|--|
| [| the beginning of an overlap |
|] | the end of an overlap |
| = | 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 |

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| - | abrupt break from speech |
| <u>Underscore</u> | marks an emphasis placed on the underscored sound |
| Bold | underscored words in 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 |
| \$dollar\$ | Dollar signs indicate the talk was in a smile voice |
| *creaky* | Asterisks indicate the talk was in creaky voice |
| >arrows< | utterance spoken quickly |

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