Socialization: Parent–Child Interaction in Everyday Life

Sara Keel (Routledge, 2016)

Amelia Church

University of Melbourne, Australia

achurch@unimelb.edu.au

In this book, Sara Keel makes an important contribution to studies of children's talk in ethnomethodology and conversation analysis by showing the interactional competencies of children aged 24–36 months. This book is highly recommended not only for scholars interested social action, but to students, practitioners and researchers in early childhood wanting to know more about the interactional competencies of very young children. In ordinary family life, children's increasingly complex abilities in managing to elicit responses from others are on display; Sara Keel shows us how children and parents manage social practices and the varied yet universal practice of these actions from a very young age.

From the first pages, Keel emphasizes the dynamic and reciprocal nature of human social interaction and shows us the range of approaches children use to get (desired) responses from parents. Furthermore, Keel positions children as active and competent communicators who participate in sequences of interaction from a very young age, thereby illustrating 'young children's emerging interactive competence' (p. 4). Focusing on assessments, sequences of talk show children and their parents orienting to specific conditions, invoking responsibilities of speakers, and the relevance of context in how assessments are heard, responded to and pursued.

Chapter 2 provides a useful introduction to sociology's concerns with the methods of socialization – from Durkheim then Parsons' interest in parental roles in shaping normative behaviours of their children, to the theory of reproduction, notably Bourdieu's work that invokes apprenticeship in particular social environments and behaviours. Subsequent approaches that focus on the language through which social action is achieved (e.g. Hymes ethnography of speaking; the influential work of Gumperz and Goffman; Mead's research in social psychology) bring us closer to the ethnomethodology of Keel's research. The analysis here focuses entirely on the minutiae of everyday interactions and how it might be that very young children and their parents are actively and collaboratively constructing meaning in interaction.

Chapter 3 provides an excellent summary of and introduction to ethnomethodology's and conversation analysis's preoccupation with the details of naturally occurring social actions, as it is these seemingly mundane details that reveal the mechanisms of social order. Although designed as an account for the procedure of Keel's own study, this chapter provides a broader contribution – particularly to students and scholars in developmental psychology or early childhood education – for readers looking to understand how it is that children participate in interactions which are both the product of, and vehicle for, extending pragmatic competence.

Chapter 4 begins with a review of canonical actions (i.e. where second pair parts predictably belong to a restricted set of responses). This sets up the first round of data shown by Keel, where children demonstrably orient to the conditional relevance of adjacency pairs. A striking feature of the children's pursuit of a response is the re-framing of the first pair part (e.g. the assessment provided in extract 3, pp. 85–86); even though the turn may be a simple repeat, children orient to the availability of the recipient, and may seek out (e.g. shift eye gaze towards) the other parent/another speaker who may be a better candidate for some acknowledgement of the child's assessment. The data illustrate the inevitable preoccupations of parents – to other children or other tasks – and the persistence with which toddlers will seek an appropriate receipt of their assessment. Not only should the assessment receive a relevant second pair part, this reply should be properly done; that is, matched affect is sought by children in addition to the relevant verbal response. Children's reframed first pair parts may be accompanied by increased volume and/or embodied summons; for example, in extract 4, the child puts her hand under her mother's

chin to physically orient her mother's attention (p. 89). Keel's claim that 'young children not only distinguish different sources that might be the recipients' problem in responding, but also deploy a range of interactional tools to get a response' (p. 115), is made evident in the careful analysis throughout the book.

Differences between typical preference for agreement evident in adult speech and weaker or delayed agreements produced by parents in response to assessments made by their two-year-old children, are made apparent in Chapter 5. The analysis shows an orientation to alignment, with children pursuing a second response from parents, if the first response does not meet the expectations of the first pair part. In other words, parents may agree with the child's assessment, but the performance of this agreement can be heard as lacklustre (see extract 25 as a nice example). The data in this chapter demonstrate the complex processes of socialization where children are active contributors to the ongoing negotiation of rights and responsibilities, and that the roles of 'child' and 'parent' are actively realized in moment-by-moment events. Furthermore, the analysis itself reminds the reader that assessments are not best understood in isolation or aggregation: 'Young children's assessments are [often] performed in the service of a larger goal, such as request for help; they are an inextricable part of interaction and therefore cannot be analysed and/or dealt with in general terms' (p. 108).

Keel's analysis illustrates how parents' agreement with children's assessment unfolds as expected from more universal patterns or performance of preference organization (see Pomerantz & Heritage, 2012). Chapter 6, however, moves on to consider that parents also disagree with their children's assessments, and the analysis here seeks to explain how a trajectory for a particular response type might be achieved. In this data, disagreements are often preceded by a question from the parent, providing an opportunity for the child to revise their initial assessment. A lovely metacommentary on preference organization unfolds in extract 6.1 (p. 162), where an older child's overt disagreement with her younger sister's self-praise prompts their mother's intervention and explicit reference to how things are properly done (i.e. to negate your sister's positive reflection on her own drawing is not kind). Children's rights to complaints are also illustrated in this chapter, because assessments of food or meals prepared for them, for example, are unsafe ground, most often dismissed by parents. This work underscores that preference organization should not be treated as a fixed principle in

talk-in-interaction, where certain actions are nominated as preferred (e.g. agreement) or dispreferred. Instead the form of utterances invokes the preference (e.g. preferred turns produced without delay) and the sequential relevance determines which action might be next positioned as preferred or not (and marked as such).

This ‘detailed study of how children deploy assessments to achieve self-praise, noticings, announcements, complaints or requests displays their orientation toward participants’ membership categories, the responsibilities and rights that are bound to them, and the larger praxeological context, adapting their way of packaging their initial assessment and mobilizing different sequential, formal, linguistic and embodied resources accordingly’ (p. 218). Furthermore, Keel emphasizes (see p. 225ff.) that we should not presume that epistemic knowledge or status is omnirelevant in the talk between children and their parents. As such, Keel makes a distinct contribution to the growing body of research which details the competencies of children under the age of three, showing that *evidence* rather than assumptions about developmental capacities of toddlers better informs our practice in education, psychology, social work, health and other disciplines concerned with children’s wellbeing.

In quoting Sacks (1984, p. 24), Sara Keel shows us through her deliberate analysis of assessments produced by two-year-olds, that ‘the study of small phenomena may give an enormous understanding of the way humans do things and the kinds of objects they use to construct and order their affairs’. In this book, Sara Keel shows us how ethnomethodology and conversation analysis can illuminate very young children’s active competencies in their everyday lives. Sara Keel’s work is a highly engaging read throughout, and will be of great interest to readers concerned with the *how* of social action.

References

- Pomerantz, A. & Heritage, J. (2012). Preference. In J. Sidnell & T. Stivers (eds), *The handbook of conversation analysis* (pp. 210–228). Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118325001.ch11>
- Sacks, H. (1984). Notes on methodology. In M. Atkinson & J. Heritage (eds), *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis* (pp. 21–27). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.