

“I’m Putting Myself in a Time-Out”: Suzi “Going Categorical”¹

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When children play, they often say things such as “you be the mommy” or “I’m the teacher” (Gordon, 2002). Children establish these categories of “mommy” or “teacher” as part of their play sequences, which allow them to play in different roles, and assume adult roles even for just a moment. The work done by this type of categorization provides organization to their play. However, children can also create categories in order to accomplish their own personal goals, those that lie outside the purposes of establishing and promoting play categories. The purpose of this paper is to explore how children are able to manipulate those around them via categorical work by looking at the talk of one child, Suzi. More specifically, Suzi is able to use a standardized relational pair and category-bound activities to designate herself as one with authority and thereby promote her social and play agendas.

Before delving into the analysis, it is necessary to define the specific terms that will be used. In this paper, I employ MCA, with its focus on membership categorization devices (MCDs). MCD has been defined in various ways, with perhaps the most succinct definition provided by Stokoe (2012): “the apparatus through which categories are understood to ‘belong’ to a collective category” (p. 281). For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on category-bound activities, defined by Stokoe (2012) as the activities intrinsically tied to categories and category characteristics. Importantly, “one can allude to the category membership of a person by mentioning that person’s doing of an action that is category bound” (Schegloff, 2007, p. 470). I will also touch upon standardized relational pairs (SRPs), which are “pairs of categories that carry duties and moral obligations in relation to the other” (Stokoe, 2012, p. 281).

The following extract has three participants: Brandon (B) and Suzi (S) are siblings, aged 3.1 and 4.6, and I (D) am their caregiver. I have been working with these children for over a year and spend approximately 35-40 hours a week with them. At the time of this extract, Brandon and Suzi are both on their “inside bikes,” which are tricycles and scooters that they are allowed to use indoors. They are playing together, with limited intervention from myself. Earlier in the transcript, Suzi has been reprimanded for not listening to Brandon when he says “no,” and for playing too roughly with him.

139 S: Brandon (5.0) Follow me.
140 B: ↑No::: Not ()
141 S: Can we [go ()]
142 D: [If Brandon’s] saying no Suzi you
143 gotta listen
144 S: I WAS LISTENING
145 D: I: was just reminding you (.) okay (.) Keep
146 your voice- keep your voice down.
147 S: → I’M LEAVING NO ONE FOLLOW ME (.)
148 I’m putting myself in a time out (.) Three
149 minutes. ((*slams door*))

¹ Stokoe (2012).

- 150 (4.0)
151 D: Careful you got it?
152 B: Yea.
153 D: Ok.
154 B: My want to go. ((drives away into another room))

After being reprimanded in lines 142-143 and 145-146, Suzi decides to put herself in a time-out. By doing so, Suzi is orienting to the activities of the positioned SRP of child-caregiver. In this specific instance, the category-bound activities for a child in trouble involve the child going to a time-out, and the category-bound activities for an adult are to initiate the time-out. The category-bound activities for a time-out for Suzi are sitting in a chair in her room with the door closed for a specific timeframe until I come and talk to her about her actions, which she clearly represents in lines 147-149.

Interestingly, even though Suzi goes into a time-out, and is acknowledging her wrongdoings, she is also to some extent defying the SRP of child-caregiver within the MCD of children and caregivers. By going into a time-out, she is accepting the category of misbehaving child, but by actually putting herself into the time-out, she also partially resists the category and the caregiver-child MCD. She seems to anticipate my response to her actions, using the exact phrasing that I, as the caregiver, would use when initiating a time-out (“Time-out. X minutes”). By stating her own punishment before I am able to say anything and by not granting me the right to impose the punishment, Suzi is acting authoritatively and in the role of her own caregiver, and defying her role as a child within the hierarchical framework.

Suzi succeeds at distorting the traditional SRP of caregiver-child in order to ensure that she maintains some authority and power, even while she is still following the “rules” of time-outs and poor behavior by going to her room. This shows how children are capable of manipulating category-bound predicates and paired categories to promote their social agendas. But, there are many more questions that we as researchers can ask. What other relationships of power can children orient to? Can children orient to SRPs in ways that promote social agendas other than those related to power and authority? How often do children and adults follow these SRPs, and when and why do they interrupt them? By observing, recording, and examining children’s play worlds, we are able to glean information regarding their personal knowledge of the real world and their perceptions of how it works.

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