The interactional construction of identity: An adolescent with autism in interaction with peers

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1. Introduction

In adolescence, social life involves a complex tension between establishing oneself as a unique individual and drawing upon existing, recognizable cultural categories. For individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs), this complexity can cause significant difficulty in collaborating with peers to construct a social identity (Bagatell, 2007). This difficulty stems from three inter-related difficulties in social interaction, communication, and behavior that are experienced by individuals with ASDs (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). The focal participant in this study, referred to as Randal, is diagnosed with high functioning autism, a variant of the disorder characterized by intact intellectual functioning, but marked impairment in the triad of symptoms described above. Despite expressing feelings of being unsuccessful in attempts to form friendships and interact with others, adolescents with ASDs often desire a richer social life than they are able to maintain without support (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Müller, Schuler, & Yates, 2008). In order to provide a context that encourages interaction and the development of social relationships, interventions have been created that recruit typically developing peers to participate in social activities alongside individuals with ASDs, often with adult facilitation (Reichow & Volkmar, 2010). The vast majority of these interventions have been designed for preschool and elementary age children. The data examined in this study are collected in the context of a social group intervention originally designed for young children that has been adapted for adolescent populations (Wolfberg, Bottema-Beutel, & DeWitt, 2012). The social group intervention is contextualized as a teambuilding workshop situated within a summer camp counselor-in-training program. In addition to determining if
interventions are successful in promoting interaction (i.e., through controlled efficacy studies), it is important to understand the nature of interaction that the intervention promotes. Understanding the social interaction dynamics that occur in this context can aid researchers and special educators in understanding the interactional implications of intervention practices that are designed to support peer engagement.

Drawing from the growing body of literature that employs interactional research methods in order to understand children and adults with ASDs (see Bottema-Beutel, 2011; Facus & Fiore, 2007; Musket, Perkins, Clegg, & Body, 2010; Ochs, Zrem-Sadik, Siroti, & Solomon, 2004; Ochs & Solomon, 2010; Steigler, 2007; Sterponi & Facus, 2010; Stribling, Rae, & Dickerson, 2008 for recent examples), this study illustrates how Randal’s identity emerges and changes in unexpected ways through the interplay of identity practices within social encounters and the continued re-uptake and transformation of these practices across encounters. Identity practices are linguistic and bodily modes of interaction that work to construct identity (Bucholtz, 1999). These modes of interaction can be employed to reproduce and contest prior identity constructions or categories, as well as to create entirely new constructions. The concepts of emergence and contextual configurations will be used to frame the process of identity construction and the resources that are mobilized in order to solidify a particular identity. The following research questions are answered through our analysis:

(1) How is Randal’s interactional style illustrated over the course of the group meetings?
(2) What resources do group members draw upon in constructing Randal’s identity?

1.1. Emergence

Social identities develop through complex inter-relations between the people within a social encounter, the events that make up those encounters, and the larger social structures in which people and events are embedded. Prior social constructions of identity also influence newly emerging identities in a feed-forward relationship (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Holland & Lave, 2001; Wortham, 2004, 2005). This dynamic interplay between lower- and higher-order structures can be described as emergence. A process is emergent when higher-order complex structures emerge from the self-organization and interaction of simpler component parts (Sawyer, 2002). The process of emergence is driven by the interaction between individual units or events (such as socialization events, persons, or even neurons) and the emergent configuration (such as social structure, group-level characteristics, or an individual social identity). The concept is proposed as a counter to both reductionist accounts that give explanatory power only to the lower-level units, and holistic accounts that attribute all explanatory power in the higher-order structures (Sawyer, 2002; Thompson, 2007). The former account ignores the influence of institutional and social arrangements, while the latter does not account for individual agency and the local construction of social phenomena.

The interactions between individual persons and social encounters that make up the identification process are not simple, linear, or set upon a pre-defined path. Indeed, an important feature of the emergence framework is that the smaller units are conceptualized as self-organizing with no centralized controller directing the process. As a result, the emergent construction (in this case identity) is not entirely predictable from knowledge of lower-level components. Research on classroom identity has provided illustrations of this phenomenon, as students develop identities that appear unexpected given an analysis of individual speech events or personality traits (Wortham, 2008). Understanding social identification requires an analysis of social encounters as well as the system of interrelating events within a situated context. Emergent identities are temporary and multiple, with movement from one to another traceable over trajectories of events or social encounters with others (Bucholtz, 1999; Wortham, 2005).

1.2. Contextual configurations and the public space of interaction

Each social encounter has a contextual configuration (Goodwin, 2000), an array of semiotic fields that are located in a public space and oriented to by participants in interaction. These fields include a variety of multi-modal phenomena, such as social activities that organize interaction, materials, the body, and the speech stream, all of which can be drawn upon as resources in identity construction. In identity research, Leander (2002) refers to materials or practices that are used to stabilize particular identities as identity artifacts. These artifacts are organized, produced, and used in interaction to ‘thicken’ identity into a recognizable ‘thing’ that can then further inform social encounters (Holland & Lave, 2001; Leander, 2002; Wortham, 2004). Identity is therefore constructed, maintained, and altered in the public space of interaction (Bucholtz & Hall, 2008).

As interactions progress, new semiotic fields become relevant while others cease to be significant (Klin, Jones, Schultz, & Volkmar, 2003; Goodwin, 2000). Following a course of action involves complex attentional and cognitive resources, requiring an orientation to the fields that are relevant in the moment, as well as attentional adjustments as relevancies change in a dynamic fashion. According to Goodwin (2000), a mutual orientation to the pertinent features of the public space is necessary for interactions to move forward. All parties in interaction must systematically recognize the character of the social interaction occurring in order to coordinate relevant next moves and maintain interactional coherency.

To add further complexity, different social situations call for different degrees and types of involvement, and a single social scenario may require that involvement be allocated to several ongoing activities simultaneously. Goffman’s (1963) involvement idiom, defined as the obligatory, bodily display of involvement within situated activities, emphasizes that above
and beyond simply orienting to relevant semiotic fields, an appropriate calibration of involvement (and display of that calibration) to the range of activities is important to sustaining interaction. When the expected degree of involvement is breached in interaction, a feeling of dissatisfaction results:

When an incident occurs and spontaneous involvement is threatened, then reality is threatened. Unless the disturbance is checked, unless the interactants regain their proper involvement, the illusion of reality will be shattered, the minute social system that is brought into being with each encounter will be disorganized, and the participants will feel unraveled, unreal, and anomie (Goffman, 1957, p. 59).

For those diagnosed with an ASD, attuning to what is interactionally salient can be especially difficult. Research has shown that individuals with ASDs can become fixated on objects that do not have a shared significance with others. For example, focusing on a light switch on the wall while observing a scene of two people discussing and pointing at a painting (Klin, Jones, Schultz, Volkmar, & Cohen, 2002). It is of interest then, to attempt to understand how individuals with ASDs take part in identifying, constructing, and transforming the semiotic fields and identity artifacts that are used to construct their identity.

2. Methods

2.1. Subjects and setting

Participants were recruited from a summer camp affiliated with a large university in the western United States. Prior to data collection and following approval by the university’s Institutional Review Board, the research team obtained parental consent and participant assent. The camp serves elementary-age students, and offers sports and leisure activities such as soccer and chess. The camp also offers leadership training programs for adolescents aged 12–18. Embedded within the leadership training program is a social skills track designed for adolescents who experience significant social difficulty. Many of these students have diagnoses on the autism spectrum, and all receive special education services. Individuals enrolled in the social skills track receive staff support in job training and social skills instruction. Approximately 25 teens enroll in this program over the course of a summer. While participants in this program were required to interact with adult camp counselors as they assisted in camper instruction, their interaction with peers in the leaders in training program who were not also enrolled in the social skills track remained minimal. This was especially evident during lunch period, as the two groups ate in separate spaces of the camp. The camp does not explicitly disclose who is in the skills track, and every effort is made to maintain confidentiality (although in many cases the distinction appeared quite obvious).

This study used data obtained for a larger project testing the efficacy of an intervention that involved the introduction of social group meetings to the camp day. A total of 15 adolescents diagnosed with either an autism spectrum disorder or documented ASD symptomology (e.g., impairments in social interaction, communication, and behavior) but did not formally meet diagnostic criteria for an autism spectrum disorder were enrolled in the intervention program. As part of existing camp protocol, staff members screen applicants to the social skills track program to ensure that they are in need of social supports, and that they do not engage in self-injurious or aggressive behavior. The screening process involves candidate and parent interviews, reviews of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), and reviews of psychological assessments. A total of 24 typically developing adolescents (i.e., were not eligible for special education services and were not enrolled in the social skills track) were also recruited to participate. The participants were divided into eight social groups, which were comprised of 1–2 participants with an ASD and 3–4 typically developing peers.

For this portion of the study, one social group was chosen for in-depth analysis. This group consisted of three typically developing teenagers; Hal, a 17-year-old male; Rob, a 15-year-old male; and LeAnn, a 15-year-old female and Rob’s twin sister. Two social skills track enrollees also participated; Cameron, a 17-year-old male, and Randal, a 16-year-old male. Although Cameron was technically enrolled in the social skills track, he only received a minimum degree of extra support, including occasional check-ins from staff. He was also one of only two social skills track participants who regularly ate lunch with teammates who were not in the social skills track.

Through observations during the camp day, it became evident that Randal was quiet, reserved, and kept to himself even more so than the other teens enrolled in the social skills track. He ate his lunch in the general vicinity of other social skills track members, but would usually read a book by himself instead of playing games with the others. Occasionally, he would demonstrate a magic trick when significantly prompted by staff. According to self-report, Randal almost never socialized with peers his own age, preferred to be around one or two other people, preferred board games to more physical activities, played on the computer and read books during his spare time, but hoped to make friends while at camp (it was interesting to note that Randal originally answered this questionnaire item with ‘no’, but then crossed it out and answered in the affirmative).

2.2. Data collection and analysis

This study utilizes discourse analytic methodology combined with participant observation (Bucholtz & Hall, 2008; Erickson, 1996; Forman & McCormick, 1995; Goodwin, 2002; Solomon, 2004). The first author attended each social group session, and spent 4–8 h per day for the extent of the camp season observing and interacting with participants and staff. Social group sessions were video recorded using a Sony handheld camera mounted on a tripod and arranged...
to be unobtrusive. For the larger project, video data of each social group meeting was collected for each of the eight social groups, which culminated in approximately 43 h of video recordings. For this portion of the analysis, one social group where the constructed identity of the participant with autism was particularly clear was chosen for in-depth analysis.

Five and a half hours of video recordings were collected for this social group. These recordings were reviewed by the first author and roughly transcribed by the first and second author. Approximately one-third of these rough transcripts were chosen for more detailed transcription (see Appendix A for conventions), as they were thought to provide an illustration of how Randal’s identity emerged over the trajectory of group meetings. Weekly meetings between the two authors were conducted to interpret the data. As our analytic starting point, we used the conceptual and methodological framework outlined by Bucholtz and Hall (2005, 2008), which advocates micro-analysis of social interaction as an empirical grounding which then moves to the consideration of the larger social and cultural context. Examples that were chosen from this larger data set to be examined in this paper focus on Randal’s identity in this group setting, as well as how the participants went about its construction.

2.3. Social group context

Social groups were presented to participants as a teambuilding workshop, and at the camp’s request there was no mention either before or during the session that social skills track participants were also involved in the workshop. It is unclear the extent to which participants were aware of Randal’s status. Randal’s impairments seemed quite obvious, and because he was segregated with the other social skills track participants for much of the time, it is likely that they had some level of awareness that he was enrolled in this program. Sessions lasted 60 minutes, with the exception of the first session which lasted half an hour. After the first session and a one-week control phase with no meetings, sessions occurred every weekday during a one-week period. All social group sessions took place at camp headquarters in either an indoor space for cold or rainy weather, or an outdoor space for sunny weather and activities that required ample room.

The first author trained a camp volunteer to facilitate the group, and also acted as an assistant and camera operator. The first author made an effort to be minimally involved in group meetings, but it was apparent that too minimal involvement would have appeared out of place. Facilitator training included approximately 8 h of 1:1 meetings with the researcher, involving an overview of facilitation strategies, an in-depth discussion of the rationale for the intervention design, and a review of videos from previously conducted groups. In general, facilitation strategies include guiding social interaction by pointing out interests and commonalities, encouraging dialog about accepting and appreciating individual differences, interpreting idiosyncrasies of individuals on the autism spectrum that may otherwise cause confusion, adapting activities to reflect everyone’s interest and to include a role for each participant, and encouraging ‘buy-in’ from the group members. Sessions followed a standard curriculum, but the facilitator was encouraged to adapt activities and discussion points according to group interests and preferences. Each session began with a brief introduction to the day’s activities by the facilitator, followed by personal updates from group members, a participant-led ice breaker, a team-building activity, and ended with a debriefing discussion.

3. Analysis and discussion

This analysis illustrates the social construction of Randal’s identity in two ways. In the first section we describe Randal’s interactional style, with a particular focus on his orientation to aspects of the social space. For Randal, the degree to which the elements of interaction and activity materials are immediately present and durable affect the extent to which he displays an orientation to these elements in his interactional conduct. In the second section, we show how the group members use this interactional style as an interactional resource, and illustrate Randal’s shifting identity as it emerges from interactive encounters within the team-building workshop.

3.1. Interactional style as an identity resource

The particulars of Randal’s interactional style, and its contrast with the other group members were highlighted in the third group meeting. In this session, the participants were involved in an activity where four of the five group members were blindfolded as they held a rope tied to a bucket containing three small Wiffle balls. The fifth group member who is not blindfolded must lead the other four through a maze of strategically placed traffic cones until they reach a circle marked on the ground with a piece of rope. Once they reach this point, they must figure out a way to get the balls out of the bucket and into the circle, without removing their blindfold or directly touching the bucket. The participant who is not blindfolded can only interact with the others verbally, and is not allowed to touch the participants or any of the materials. If a blindfolded participant knocks over a cone, the group must go back to the beginning and start over.

Two group members took turns acting as the un-blindfolded leader; first LeAnn and then Randal. Since LeAnn’s interactional style is explored as a contrast to Randal’s interactional style, we will illustrate their turns as leader in reverse of the actual events. Randal’s turn will be described first, followed by relevant excerpts from LeAnn’s turn that highlight differences in the two participant’s approach to the task. By the time Randal takes his turn, the group is aware of the difficulty of the task, as LeAnn was not able to devise a way to guide the others in getting the balls into the circle despite
multiple attempts. While leading the activity Randal gives directions to the other group members, but doesn’t give a big picture view of where the group members are in relation to one another or the obstacles along the path. This causes some confusion for the group, and they appear to be restless to know more about what is happening. In the following excerpt, the group members begin to use Randal’s leadership style as a resource in constructing a particular identity within the context of the group’s interactions. (In this segment, Amy is acting as the group facilitator.)

**Example 1: Randal’s turn part 1**

01 LeAnn ↑WE’RE ↓(JUST FOLLOWING ROB
02 Rob [how many degrees Hal] (er wait (.)) Randal
03 LeAnn [GIVE IT TO ME I

04 [DEMA:AND [huh (1.0) AN OVERTHROW
05 Randal [keep walking
06 Cameron [why am i following Rob?
07 Amy HA HA HA

08 LeAnn I [demand an overthrow (.)) the politi[c]s over here
09 Randal [stop

10 Hal [STOP
11 Randal there’s uh
12 Cameron wait (.)) [how did we just miss all the cones?
13 Randal [to your right

14 Hal [Randal’s a master
15 Randal [(?)
16 Cameron yeah [he’s really [(?) side by side
17 Randal [walk

18 LeAnn [RANDAL YOURE SO O gre[at
19 Hal [<wait wait>

20 [across the hallway?
21 Randal [walk (.)) walk forward
22 LeAnn WE’RE IN THE DARKNESS NOW= ((she has stepped under the shade of an overhang))
23 Randal =stop
24 LeAnn ooh its °↑cold°
25 Kristen ha ha ha
26 Randal uh (.)) Hal turn to your (2.0) right
LeAnn remarks that the group ‘is just following Rob’ in line 1, a comment that addresses the lack of clarity as to where they are headed in the maze of cones. Cameron reframes this comment as a question in line 6, but Randal does not offer a response. Instead, he continues to give directions on where the group members should move. In line 2, Rob mistakenly calls Hal the leader before pausing to search for the name of the actual leader and arriving at Randal. LeAnn jokingly ‘demands an overthrow’ in lines 4 and 8. These moves have the potential to jeopardize Randal’s legitimacy as their group leader. This is further instantiated in the group’s failure to comply with Randal’s directive to stop walking line 9; Hal more forcefully repeats ‘STOP’ in line 10, at which point the group members stop walking.

Once they’ve stopped, Cameron notices that they’ve moved beyond the obstacles and made it to the circle, and asks how they were able to miss all the cones. Randal has directed them around rather than through the cones, resulting in a rather swift traversal of the obstacle course. Randal’s achievement is immediately acknowledged by Hal, who refers to him as a ‘master’ in line 14. LeAnn also acknowledges Randal’s skill, and enthusiastically evaluates him as ‘so great’ in line 19. This marks a contrastive shift in the participant’s orientation toward Randal’s competence in the role of group activity leader, which began with LeAnn ‘demanding an overthrow’, but abruptly changed once the participants’ became aware that Randal was using an effective task strategy.

Despite Randal’s evolving positioning in the group, elements of uncertainty remain, as LeAnn jokes that the group is ‘in the darkness now’ in line 22, where ‘it’s cold’ in line 24. This is a description of both the literal state of affairs, as the group is standing in the shade beneath an overhang, and of their psychological state of uncertainty about where Randal is leading them. At this point, two elements of Randal’s interactional style become salient: he is accomplishing the task, but doesn’t give explicit feedback to the group unless it is functionally necessary. A few moments later, Randal is directing Hal to move forward, which is causing the others to be pulled along with him. Cameron asks for clarity on how he is to proceed:

**Example 2: Randal’s turn part 2**

→ 01 Cameron do I follow the rope?=
  02 Randal =walk forward (1.8) stop ((to Hal))

→ 03 LeAnn *the pull of the [rope ( . ) ha ha it guides us* haha
  04 Randal [um you can put your (1.0) your left
  05 (1.0) your [left foot forward ((to Hal))

→ 06 Cameron [Randal
  07 Hal is there=

→ 08 Cameron =Randal=
  09 Hal =is it OH I FEEL IT ((walking into a cone))
  10 Randal stop

→ 11 LeAnn >should we be doing something?<
  12 Randal move your left ( . ) foot backwards ((to Hal))

Cameron’s question directed to Randal in line 1 is not met with an answer; instead, Randal directs a command to Hal. Cameron tries again to secure Randal’s attention in lines 6 and 8 by calling his name, but his attempts are still not taken up. LeAnn provides an interesting interpretation of the situation in line 3, when she says that ‘the pull of the rope . . . guides us’. She doesn’t reference Randal as their guide, but the rope itself. Her whispered tone suggests that the rope is being mysteriously pulled by an unknown force. She asks ‘should we be doing something’ in line 11, indicating that since Randal is focusing exclusively on directing Hal, they are feeling unsure of what involvement in the activity they should have at this point. Randal’s attention remains with the task, rather than with the regulation of his group mates’ uncertainty.

As he leads the activity, Randal orients to the task to the exclusion not only of the psychological needs of the group, but also to the referential content of his conduct. This is demonstrated most profoundly as the group comes to the end of the maze of traffic cones, and Randal directs LeAnn to come to her knees in order to get the bucket closer to the circle that the balls must eventually be dropped into. However, he does it in such a way that the other group members immediately perceive a sexual reference in his remark:
Example 3: Kneeling down

01 Randal  now down on your knees
02 LeAnn  wha:at=
03 Amy  =OH [MY GO:OD
04 Hal  [NOW DOWN ON YER KNEES ((parodying Randal))
05 Randal  now there[there’s (a cone in the center)
06 Rob  [((speaks quietly to Hal, snickering))
07 Hal  listen to Randal

LeAnn’s faltering ‘what’, followed by ‘oh my god’ from Amy, a parodied repetition of Randal’s utterance by Hal, a whispered joke from Rob, and finally Hal’s quipping ‘listen to Randal’ are evidence that the other participants have oriented to Randal’s remark as having an off-color, suggestive meaning. In the middle of this commentary in line 5, Randal continues to give directions to LeAnn on how to complete the task. He shows no evidence of having noticed either the sexual connotation of his remark, or the reaction that it has caused in the other group members. In contrast, when LeAnn takes her turn leading the same activity, she shows that she does notice how her conduct positions the others. In Example 4a, LeAnn also asks the other group members to kneel down as she is trying to devise a way to get the balls from the bucket and into the circle.

Example 4a: LeAnn’s communication style part 1

01 LeAnn  and Cameron you have to pull yours up - <not so far up
02  not so far up> how bout you guys kneel? Let’s all
03  kneel
04  ((LeAnn moves down onto her knees; everyone but Rob also moves onto his knees))

LeAnn’s request ‘let’s all kneel’, is interesting since she shows an awareness that, (1) the others can’t see her, so if she wants them to know she’s kneeling she must say it out loud, and that, (2) kneeling while blindfolded might produce feelings of unease, which the un-blindfolded person is in a position to alleviate by giving details about what is happening in the surroundings. Her precise reasons for kneeling are not completely clear; it could be that this allows her to see the task better, or that she is trying to ensure that everyone feels that they are on an equal footing with no one literally or figuratively positioned above the others, or both. Since LeAnn’s turn was prior to Randal’s, her move isn’t an effort to avoid the reaction that his similar move produced. What is clear is that she is strategically letting the others know that she is also kneeling, giving evidence that there is a social function to her move, in addition to any task-related function of kneeling.

LeAnn communicates in a way that indicates that she is taking into account the psychological needs of the others as it is reflected in their bodily actions and words. For example, she gives ‘big picture’ reasons for her directions, giving the others insight into how their actions relate to upcoming actions and her overall plan. This is illustrated in the next example:

Example 4b: LeAnn’s communication style part 2

01 Hal  pull it tight? I’m not gonna do it yet but (. ) pull it
02  tight?
03 LeAnn  yes so the bucket tips
04 Hal  okay
(...)
05 LeAnn  I need to put the ropes (?) so I can get it right (. )
LeAnn indicates that Hal should pull the rope tight ‘so the bucket tips’. After he asks for clarification on what he is supposed to do. Similarly, in lines 5 through 7 she identifies her plan as involving a proper positioning of the ropes and asks Randal to put his rope on the ground ‘so Cameron can step over it’. In Example 5a below (marked with an arrow), she tells Randal ‘you’re good, you’re not gonna hit the cones, don’t worry’ in response to his tentative movements forward. Randal doesn’t give this type of detail, neither when it was asked for directly nor when the group only implied that they would like to know more about what they were doing and why (illustrated in Examples 2 and 3).

LeAnn adjusts both the content and tempo of her talk in a dynamic and ongoing fashion as she watches how her listeners carry out her commands. Example 5a is transcribed so that verbal utterances appear in the left hand column, and the corresponding actions appear in the right hand column, roughly in line with how they occur in time. As a contrast, an example of Randal giving directions is transcribed directly below LeAnn’s in a similar fashion.

**Example 5a: LeAnn leads the group**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LeAnn</th>
<th>Randal</th>
<th>Cameron</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>08 I need to put the ropes (?) so I can get it right. so Randal, put Your rope on the ground</td>
<td>Randal bends down to the ground</td>
<td>Cameron begins to pivot right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 right. so Randal, put it and Cameron can step over the right</td>
<td>2.0) &lt;right&gt;</td>
<td>Cameron continues to move right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Right [right&gt;</td>
<td>Rob lifts his arm, lifting the rope and bucket, lowers it back down to the ground</td>
<td>Cameron stops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 [this way?</td>
<td>just walk?</td>
<td>Randal stands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 yes. right right</td>
<td>your rope to the ground too</td>
<td>Randal Begins to walk left</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 &lt;right wait NO&gt; Rob put</td>
<td>Cameron steps over the rope</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 [just walk?</td>
<td>rope there’s gonna be a rope there (3.0) &lt;there</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 okay now walk over the ropes there’s gonna be a</td>
<td>Cameron stops</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>okay you’re good</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 (.). Randal stand up (.).</td>
<td>Randal stands</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>[and walk to the(1.0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>left</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 Amy [uh huh ↑huh</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LeAnn’s utterances are carefully timed through repetition and the speed with which she repeats each direction to match the duration of time that the group members are expected to move. For example, in line 26 she repeats ‘left’ at a baseline tempo as Randal takes small steps left, and then switches to ‘right’ for a brief beat, and then repeats ‘straight’ at a quickened tempo. While she is repeating ‘straight’, Randal moves more quickly. LeAnn’s speech is serving as a kind of ‘anchor’ for the participants to coordinate their actions and know that they are moving in the appropriate direction at all times. In contrast, Randal’s commands are more whole-form, and are not rhythmically timed to the group members’ movements. In Example 5b his directions are given in one interactional turn, and LeAnn follows in a separate interactional turn; there is no simultaneous coordination of movements and directions. When too much time lapses (such as the 4s in Example 5b, line 4), LeAnn becomes increasingly more tentative about her movements, as if she is afraid that Randal has forgotten to tell her
to stop. However, Randal doesn’t orient to her hesitation by adjusting how he gives directions or by letting her know that she will not run into an obstacle.

Randal’s interactional style shows a lack of reflexive awareness (Goodwin, 2000), an understanding of how the recipient of action is positioned to co-participate in the interactive framework. According to Goodwin, this awareness is

... not simply an ‘interior’ element of the mental processes necessary for defining the action (as it could be analyzed for example within traditional speech act analysis), but a public, visible component of the ongoing practices used to build the action, something that leads to systematic, relevant changes in the shape of the action. (pp. 1503–1504)

In psychological literature on conversational impairments in autism, the failure to take into account the perspective of the other is discussed as just such an interior element of the mental process, specifically as a lack of theory of mind (Hale & Tager-Flusberg, 2005). A more complex and culturally textured view of perspective taking is offered from linguistic anthropological approaches, and this line of research gives evidence that the extent to which individuals with autism orient to the perspective of the interaction partner depends on the interactional complexity of the situation, the elements involved (Ochs et al., 2004), and perhaps the degree of ‘visibility’ of meanings that need to be accounted for. Randal appears to be able to take the perspective of the other in the most literal sense, as he tailors his directions to the group to reflect their physical orientation in space rather than his own. In Example 2, Randal is facing the participants and must transform the directions ‘left’ and ‘backwards’ in lines 4 and 12 from his own orientation to reflect the perspective of the other group members. These deictic markers, or spatial indicators that shift with regards to one’s position in reference to others, are often shown to be impaired in clinical accounts of autism (Hobson, García-Perez, & Lee, 2010). In this instance, Randal is aware of his spatial orientation in regards to the others, but he seems to neither recognize or overlook the connotations of his words and the multiple socio-cultural meanings that they entail. What Randal orients to is the here-and-now of the task, the most ‘visible’ field of action. Unlike socio-cultural references, the task materials (cones, ropes, blindfolded participants, bucket) are in the visual field, are not transitory, and have a concrete meaning that does not require explicit knowledge of indexical meanings.

3.2. Randal’s emergent identity

The group members orient to the uniqueness of Randal’s interactional style within social encounters, and use it as a resource for constructing a recognizable identity. Identifying the local resources used within interaction is an important step for understanding how a particular identity develops. However, a more complete understanding of the process of identification requires an examination of how these resources are employed across several encounters which are knit together to form a momentarily stable, yet changing identity. The emergence of Randal’s social identity will be discussed next.

In the first few sessions, Randal is a peripheral participant (Lave & Wenger, 1991) who acts as a silent observer while the other group members engage in the task. The following example involves an activity in the first session, where the group members are asked to determine where at camp an array of pictures have been taken. Two laminated pages of photographs have been given to the participants. In order to make the task more difficult, the photographs are either extreme close-ups, images of only part of an object, or are of lesser known camp areas. Hal is seated at the table across from Randal, and positions the picture page so that they can both see it clearly. The other three group members are looking at the second picture page and discussing the pictures. Randal provides almost no input despite Hal’s best efforts to engage him, and Hal eventually gives up trying to work with Randal. Hal demonstrates his discontinuation of working with Randal by pivoting his body to face the other three group members, bringing the page of pictures along with him so that it is no longer in Randal’s direct view.

Example 6: Randal and Hal

01 Hal I know I’ve seen this one before ((speaking to Randal, points on page))
02 LeAnn stairs up to pool or down to pool?
03 Randal ((nods, looking down where Hal is pointing))
04 Hal I’m not sure (. ) Rob ((looking at page of pictures))
05 Rob yeah
06 Hal these two (. ) need to be identified ((moves page away from Randal and out of his line of vision to the space in front of Rob and LeAnn))
After several minutes of trying to elicit Randal’s input and only achieving a brief nod, Hal moves on to more obliging interaction partners. Randal’s level of involvement in the activity does not match the level that the other group members demonstrate, and this appears to strain interaction. After this first session, the group members use other strategies in order to rectify Randal’s minimal input. During session two, the group engages in a variation of a scavenger hunt where they are given a list of questions that promote discussion about the participants’ life experiences. In the following segment, the group is responding to the directive ‘find out which group member has been to the most live shows or performances’. In this segment, Amy and Kristen are acting as the group facilitators.

**Example 7: Life experiences activity**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01 Amy</td>
<td>Randal have you been to a live show before?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02 Rob</td>
<td><em>the slings and arrows</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03 Randal</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ 04 LeAnn</td>
<td>never?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05 Randal</td>
<td>wait yeah (?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06 All</td>
<td>((laugh))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ 07 Amy</td>
<td>what’d he say? ((to Kristen))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08 Kristen</td>
<td>he-he said he has (.). what show did—have you been to?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09</td>
<td>(3.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ 10 Hal:</td>
<td>like a school play?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>(1.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Randal</td>
<td>yeah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ 13 Hal</td>
<td>really?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Randal</td>
<td>yeah I have been to:o (1.0) once to a school play no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>actually two times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ 16 Rob</td>
<td>that’s tight (1.0) which ones (.). do ya know?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>(3.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Randal</td>
<td>yeah one was called (3.0) (?) the other one (1.0) I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>forgot</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Several participants collaborate over a long stretch of talk to both secure and contest Randal’s negative response as to whether or not he has seen a live show. LeAnn follows his response with a surprised ‘never?’ in line 4, and Randal changes his answer to the affirmative in line 5. In line 7, Amy asks the first author for clarification of Randal’s response, contesting Randal’s legitimacy as someone who can provide a reliable answer. After a pause, Rob asks for specifics about what Randal has seen, suggesting that it was a school play in line 11. Randal pauses, and then offers a minimal ‘yeah’, which Hal follows with ‘really?’ in line 14, presumably to get more information. Randal responds that he has actually been to two plays, but doesn’t give any additional detail. Rob asks what the plays were called, but hedges slightly by adding ‘do ya know?’, indicating uncertainty that Randal will actually provide this information. Randal ends this sequence by quietly naming one of the plays, but has forgotten the second one. Randal’s involvement in this segment requires a significant amount of work from the other group members, and doesn’t move beyond brief responses to questions.
The group members begin to spend more energy in pursuing Randal’s participation, but by the third group meeting (which happens to be the one involving the blindfold activity discussed in the previous section) their mode of interaction appears slightly different with him than with each other. In the segments below, the group is doing the blindfold activity for the first time. They spend a considerable amount of time trying to orient themselves to moving around while blindfolded, and occasionally knock into each other or the cones. This creates opportunities for playful accusations about who is responsible for collisions, which in the case of bumping into cones means that they are required to return to the beginning of the maze. In the following segment, a cone has just been knocked over.

Example 8a: A tipped cone

01 Cameron  Who did it?
02 Hal       It was-
03 LeAnn     Kay come ba:ck! ((jogs back, arms flopping))
04 Hal       It was [RANDAL
05 Rob       [Just like, run backwards, [just like-
        → 06 Hal [<I’m just kidding, it was me>, I don’t even kno:ow-

In Example 8a, Hal jokingly accuses Randal of having knocked over the cone. Soon after he adds 'I'm just kidding, it was me', explicitly identifying his move as a joke. This may be for Randal's benefit, who hasn't given any indication that he has taken Hal's comment as a joke. In any case, Hal recants his accusation and the joke doesn't go any further. A few seconds later, Rob bumps into Randal, then Cameron, and then Hal. His behavior with Cameron and Hal is markedly different than with Randal:

Example 8b: Rob bumps Randal

01 Rob who’s this? ((touching Randal)) oh heh sorry Randal

Example 8c: Rob bumps Cameron

01 ((Rob bumps into Cameron))
02 Cameron Woah
        → 03 Rob ↑Sup Cameron ((laughs))
04 LeAnn ((laughs))

Example 8d: Rob bumps Hal

01 Rob ((bumps into Hal)) oh hey wussup
02 Hal sup man ((reaches out and pats Rob))

Cameras and Hal both get a colloquial 'sup', while Randal gets a much more formal apology in Example 8d. While they engage in an easy banter with each other that can signal induction into a peer culture (Kyratzis, 2004), their interactions with Randal up to this point do not veer into sustained bouts of more casual or playful conversation.

Despite this the lack of ease with which the participants interact with Randal, new possibilities for his social identity emerge in the middle of the third session. After the first round of the blindfold activity with LeAnn acting as leader, Randal agrees to lead the task after some prodding from Amy. As an activity leader, he now has an opportunity to be positioned as a more central member. However, when Randal leads the activity the group operates with the restless awkwardness described in the previous section, which at first appeared to maintain his continued identification as a peripheral participant. A turning point comes at the end of the activity when Randal manages to be the only leader across all eight social groups to successfully accomplish getting the balls into the circle. In Example 9, the group has just removed their blindfolds, and Amy asks Randal to explain how he was able to get the balls out of the bucket.
Example 9: Randal’s strategy

01 Amy   Randal will y—will you tell them what you guys did?
02 Kristen yeah actually he should show em
03 Rob     I think I figured out whatcha did you just got (?) and
04          pull down right
05 Amy     yeah
06 Randal  well I did like this and um (. ) Rob was holding it
07          here (. ) and LeAnn here (1.0) and LeAnn (?) so then
08          LeAnn to go back on the other side in order
09          to (?)
→ 10 LeAnn OH THAT IS SMART
11 Kristen just pull it over-
12 Amy      -yeah
13 Kristen  so then (. ) it pops out
14 Amy      nice work
→ 15 Hal    that’s tight
16 Amy      nobody’s ever thought about that (. ) and you guys are
17          the last group to do this
→ 18 LeAnn  *yeah: h* WE’RE ALWAYS THE SMARTEST GROUP
→ 19 Amy    HA HA HA ( . ) the masters

After hearing Randal’s explanation, LeAnn enthusiastically describes his strategy as ‘smart’, and Hal agrees that its ‘tight’ in line 15. LeAnn exclaims that ‘we’re always the smartest group’ in line 18, identifying Randal as part of a ‘we’. Amy then follows by referring to the entire group as ‘the masters’ in line 19, reinforcing an inclusive group identity that encompasses Randal. Since Amy is the group facilitator, her evaluation may have been particularly influential. Their response is analogous to the ‘positive inclusion’ practices discussed in work on children with high functioning autism in inclusive classrooms (Ochs, Kremer-Sadlik, Solomon, & Sirota, 2001). The typically developing children in this analysis point out the child with autism’s successes while accommodating characteristics that may make interaction more difficult. This appears to be the case here as well; Randal has an identifiable and relevant strength that can be used to reframe his style as someone who is innovative and smart rather than socially detached. The group’s willingness to at least partially overlook Randal’s lack of social grace and embrace his accomplishment also reflects the institutional goals of the camp of making everyone feel included and successful.

Amy’s reference to a ‘Master’ (Example 9, line 19) begins the process of positioning Randal as a mysterious and quiet individual who is also highly competent (repeated again in a later session by Hal, in Example 1, line 14). The term ‘Master’ is a socio-cultural allusion to such characters as the ‘Jedi Master’ in the Star Wars movie series, and other young adult fantasy works of fiction and film. It is also in some sense consistent with the socially aloof sub-type of autism described by Wing and Gould (1979) that was used to characterize children who were thought to be indifferent to social overtures, and instead focus on the world of objects. The image of exaggerated abilities or ‘savant’ skills coupled with significant social difficulties is an existing identity category often used in media representations of autism, such as in the movie Rain Man (Sarrett, 2011). Thus, the emergent category weaves together positive elements that reflect Randal’s competence with macro-level cultural constructions of an autistic identity.

The group’s positive orientation to Randal’s aptitude in the workshop tasks continues in sessions five and six, and they continually re-use Amy’s ‘master’ characterization. In this meeting, the group members are challenged to construct a free-standing bridge that can support a full bottle of water using only newspaper and masking tape. Randal proves to be especially adept at tightly rolling the newspaper into strong rod-shaped pieces that can act as support beams for the bridge.
Example 10: Bridge building

01 Rob we just need a heck of a lot [more of these] ((holding tightly rolled pieces of newspaper rolled by Randal))

02 LeAnn [so we need four of these]

03 (. ) with the bases=

04 Rob =Randal’s gotta show me how does that because I’m like

05 (. ) baffled by how he does it

06 Hal [R: Randal ((trilling the R)) <how do we do it>]

07 LeAnn ha

08 Rob like I [seriously tried rolling them tight (. ) and it did not work

09

10 Randal [(? ) (appears to be giving instruction to LeAnn)]

11 Hal Randal’s the master of camp activities

12 Rob [all the leaves are brown (. ) and the sky is gray ((singing))]

13 LeAnn uh ha ha

14 Hal Randal [will you show me how to do it?]

15 Cameron [how do you know how to roll things so [well?]

16 Randal [{"I don’t know"}]

17

18 LeAnn [I’m not rolling I’ll just tape things

19 Hal [how do you roll it- (1.0) tight (. ) and strong (. )

20 and (. ) durable

(...)

21 Hal Randal how do you roll [so (round) ((looking toward Randal’s workspace as he attempts to roll newspaper))

22 Rob [kay this is gonna be a side column so don’t put anything on this

23

24 LeAnn [teach us your ways (uses a low, emphatic tone)]
In Example 10, Hal acknowledges Randal’s ability to perfectly form the paper beams required for the activity, and positions him as ‘the master of all camp activities’ in line 11. Rob, Cameron and Hal ask for insight into how he is able to roll them so well in lines 5, 6, 15 and 19, but Randal does not communicate his strategy. Because Randal remains silent on his approach to the activity, and appears to perform effortlessly and without self-praise, his abilities seem to take on an occult status. In line 24, LeAnn further cultivates the ‘master’ identity category by asking Randal to ‘teach us your ways’, invoking a Jedi or kung fu-like master whom novices seek out for instruction.

In the final session, they are given pictures of themselves doing the workshop activities that they’ve been participating in over the course of the week, and are asked to construct a story by pasting the pictures onto a poster board and writing in narration. The group decides to feature Randal as the story’s hero. In line 2 of Example 11, Cameron introduces a ‘Master Ninja’ character into the story line.

**Example 11: Storyboard activity**

```
01 Cameron so that we can give it to the master ninja
02 Rob ((points to a picture of a senior camp staff, uses gravelly voice)) master ninja:
03 LeAnn ((deep, gravelly voice)) master ninja:
04 Hal I thought Randal was the master ninja
→ 05 Rob no Randal’s the master blindfolded bandit=
   (...) LeAnn =blind the blindfolded ba- bandits [and their leader
02 Cameron ((?) ooh
03 (3.0)
→ 04 Rob ((deep, gravelly voice)) ↓and our leader (. ) Randal
05 (. ) the master warrior
```

In line 5, Rob rejects Cameron’s assertion that Randal is a master ninja, and instead maintains that Randal’s role is the ‘master blindfolded bandit’. A few minutes later, LeAnn ratifies that group’s plan to cast Randal as the leader of the blindfolded bandits, while Rob adds that he is also a ‘master warrior’. Randal is now identified as a heroic leader of a group of brigands, rather than a mysterious character who may have heroic qualities, but acts alone. This category is stabilized by the group’s shared production of, and mutual orientation toward, the story board as a publicly visible identity artifact. In these later sessions, the group members begin to show an expectation that Randal will contribute. They neither give up trying to secure his participation, nor contest his contributions. The storyboard activity may have been particularly difficult for Randal, as it involves an open ended and on the spot construction of a narrative, which can be a challenge for individuals with autism who prefer the concrete over the abstract (Losh & Capps, 2003; Solomon, 2004). However, the group will not accept no for an answer as they elicit his input on the story narrative. This interactive pattern is illustrated in Example 12 below (in this example, Jill is the camp director):

**Example 12: Soliciting input from Randal**

```
→ 01 LeAnn so ji-<what should I say> Jill (2.0) ((looks to
02 Randal)) “I need help* ((breathy, exasperated)) (2.0)
03 what should we [say
→ 04 Rob ↑she needs help↑
05 Cameron orders that [the bandits
→ 06 Randal [Jill discovered that (. ) the trophy is
```
In Example 12, LeAnn insists on getting Randal’s input, repeating her request three times in an insistent, exasperated tone to convey her desire to get a response. Rob picks up the thread, offering a high pitched, exaggerated ‘she needs help’. The elaborateness with which they pursue Randal is at some risk to themselves (although they hedge by appearing as much playful as desperate), and shows that they are ‘betting on trust’ that their elicitations will not result in failure of the interaction moving forward if Randal were not to come through with a response (Sterponi & Fasulo, 2010). Their performance is rewarded, as Randal offers a progression for the storyline and uses LeAnn’s partially completed construction of ‘Jill’ in line 1, to formulate ‘Jill discovered that the trophy is gone’.

A few minutes later, Randal makes a contribution that illustrates a shift in his interaction style; he makes fun of Rob using the same kind of pseudo-insult that Rob himself regularly employs. In line 16, he holds a picture of Rob posing with a contorted expression, and suggests that Rob’s face scared the bandits away. Rob clearly approves of this joke, as he replies with ‘yes’ and ‘it does scare them away’. The activity materials help to scaffold the production of this joke. The photo of Rob posing with a funny face was available for Randal to use because Rob insisted on having it taken. Rob’s willingness to make fun of himself (and to aid in the creation of materials that show him making fun of himself) provides an opportunity for Randal to use concrete and visible materials to a similar end, and to make a successful joke. Randal’s style continues to involve a preference for the here and now, but increasingly involves the infusion of socio-cultural meanings and in-jokes shared by the group into the activity materials. In sum, Randal begins to give interactional contributions that reflect his induction into the peer group.

4. Conclusion

Of the many possible ways that Randal’s identity could have emerged, we illustrate how it comes to follow a particular trajectory from a peripheral participant, to a lone master, to the leader of the ‘blindfolded bandits’. Its emergence is rooted in the interaction of a system of component parts, including the individuals that comprise the social group, Randal’s interactive style, and the activities in which they are engaged. The emergent constructions, such as the social milieu of the summer camp and the iterations of Randal’s identity constructed in prior social encounters, also play a role in its evolution. These components inform, but do not predict, the unfolding of Randal’s identity.
A key feature of Randal’s style is that he shows a propensity to orient to the most visible and task-related components of the interaction space, with minimal displays of attention to purely social or referential elements. Bringing to mind Goffman’s warnings in his discussion of social interaction (1957), mis-calibrations in Randal’s involvement led to awkwardness and possible alienation from the others in the first few encounters. However, in later encounters the benefits of Randal’s interactional style were able to take priority. In light of Randal’s competence, his atypical social style is reframed in positive ways that allow for a central role in the group. This trajectory is perhaps unexpected for individuals with autism, who can experience difficulty in gaining access to their peer group (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). However, identity trajectories can follow unanticipated pathways that do not always reflect individual, seemingly relevant traits (Wortham, 2008). Analyzing the features of Randal’s interactional style as part of a larger system of interacting components that are shaped over the course of several encounters helps to understand this pathway.

Research in inclusive classrooms has found that peers were more likely to frame students with autism in a positive light if they were participating in structured activities (Ochs et al., 2001). When interaction is organized around an activity, as it is in this data corpus, the participants situate their bodies with respect to each other and the materials in the environment to create a visible locus of shared attention and action (Goodwin, 2007). This configuration may be more accessible for individuals with autism, in comparison to situations involving transitory and more abstract semiotic resources. The group members worked to transform material into meaningful artifacts that contributed to Randal’s identity. For example, the components of the bridge were concrete artifacts that were infused with descriptors representing Randal’s competence in their construction. In the story board activity, the materials included photographs of the group engaged in each workshop activity. These photographs were stable representations of prior constructions of Randal’s identity which were transported into the final session. Because these materials had previously been given meaning related to Randal’s competency, they allowed for Randal’s positioning as the hero in their final project and stabilized his identity in an enduring social artifact that was put on display in the camp office. The confluence of a centralized activity space and the shared history of events that led to the group’s common orientation toward Randal helped to ‘thicken’ Randal’s identity into a culturally relevant and recognizable category. In light of this identity, Randal’s involvement was viewed as worth pursuing, which helped to create an opportunity for Randal to be a fully participating member of the group.

This analysis has relevance for inclusive educational programming for adolescents with autism. Importantly, it suggests that the rather bleak portrait of the current experiences of these adolescents while in interaction with their peers, which is often characterized by isolation or bullying (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Ochs et al., 2001), is not an inevitable outcome. While we did not attempt to pin down general practices that are likely to increase the probability of positive identification, we can conclude that a socially desirable identity is a possible trajectory in inclusive settings. Our findings echo prior literature suggesting that arranging activities in which individuals with an ASD can excel provide a forum to highlight culturally valued strengths (Wolfberg, McCracken, & Tuchel, 2008). The match between the skills required in the workshop activities and Randal’s unique strengths were important factors that informed the emergence of Randal’s particular identity. Future research may find that designing interventions that align participant strengths with group endeavors is a practical way to encourage peers to maintain a positive orientation toward adolescents with ASDs.

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Appendix A. Transcription conventions

| Period need a falling, or final, intonation contour, not necessarily the end of a sentence. |
| Question need a question mark, not necessarily the end of a sentence. |
| Comma indicates a “continuing” intonation, not necessarily the end of a sentence. |
| Upward and downward pointing arrows indicate marked rising and falling shifts in intonation. |
| Colons indicate stretching of the preceding sound, proportional to the number of colons. |
| A hyphen after a word or a part of a word indicates a cut-off or self interruption. |
| Word Underlining indicates some form of stress or emphasis on the underlined item. |
| Word Upper case indicates loudness. |
| ‘word’Degree signs enclose whispered speech |
| = Equal sign indicate no break or delay between the words thereby connected. |
| <word>Speeding up |
| >word>Slow down |
| (( )) Double parentheses enclose descriptions of conduct. |
| (word)When all or part of an utterance is in parentheses, this indicates uncertainty on the transcriber’s part. |
| () Empty parentheses indicate that something is being said, but no hearing can be achieved. |
| (1.2) Numbers in parentheses indicate silence in tenths of a second. |
| ( ) A dot in parentheses indicated a “micropause,” hearable but not readily measurable; ordinarily less than 2/10 of a second. |
| | Separate left square brackets, one above the other on two successive lines with utterances by different speakers, indicates a point of overlap onset. |
| (…) Indicates that several turns have elapsed |
| → Indicates a transcript segment that is highlighted in the text |