

# Collaborative Use of Mobile Telephones:

## A Field Study of Swedish Teenagers

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### 1 INTRODUCTION

Teenagers of today constitute the first generation growing up with mobile telephones. Studies have shown that young people use mobile phones in ways that are radically different from adults, in that they focus on the expressive rather than the informative use (Ling 1999). Further, teenagers use their mobile phones for social purposes rather than for co-ordinating and making work more efficient.

In this paper, we present results from an ethnomethodologically inspired field study of mobile telephone use among Swedish teenagers. Our results show that the mobile phones often are used collaboratively, in that the teenagers share the phone and its content. These findings need to be considered when designing new mobile technology for teenagers. We therefore argue the necessity of grounding new design in an understanding of teenagers' everyday use of mobile telephones.

### 2 METHOD

"Look to see how it is that persons go about producing what they do produce".

Harvey Sacks LC1:11

Ethnomethodology is concerned with the ways in which people make sense of their social world. People's practical actions are seen as ongoing accomplishments of organized practices of everyday life (Garfinkel 1986).

Using ethnomethodology means studying the details of *naturally occurring* practical actions. Subsequently, data is gathered in a setting where the members are "engaged in activities that they regularly and ordinarily

do" (Goguen 1997:42). This implies using observational techniques, rather than methods such as interviews, surveys, and controlled experiments (Silverman 1998), methods frequently used in design of new information technology.

Bringing ethnomethodologically informed observations into the design process contributes to design that is valid according to teenagers' use of mobile phones in their everyday lives (cf. Weilenmann and Larsson 2000).

This paper is based on field studies conducted among teenagers in central Göteborg, Sweden. During several months, we have been doing ongoing fieldwork among teenagers, listening to telephone conversations, and observing their actions, while taking detailed notes. The fieldwork has been conducted at places where teenagers regularly spend time, such as cafés, public transport, Liseberg amusement park, shopping malls, school cafeterias etc. The field observations have then been analyzed, looking for certain themes in the data, themes that seem to have relevance for the teenagers themselves, rather than just for us as researchers.

### 3 COLLABORATIVE USE

Our main finding is that the mobile telephone is often used *collaboratively*. Teenagers share information on the phone, as well as the phone itself. We have made numerous observations of teenagers browsing through information on their friends' phones, sometimes reading aloud while doing it, or the owner her/himself showing something on the mobile phone for someone else. The information that is shared consists of stored SMS-messages, and entries in the phone book. Two or more persons can be involved in a phone call or in the writing of an SMS-message (Short Message Service).

Below is an example from the field of what we call collaborative use of one girl's mobile phone:

Excerpt 1: On a tram, downtown. Evening.

Three girls are sitting on a tram. One girl (A) is writing an SMS-message. A turns to B, who is sitting next to her, gives B a light nudge, and says "hey". She shows the display to B. A deletes a few letters, then continues to write the message. She says with a whiny voice:

A: I don't wanna send this

A reads aloud parts of her message:

A: "I want to have a home party. I'm leaving soon you know."

Presumably she now sends the message. She then puts her phone in her purse. Shortly after this, her phone rings. She exclaims "NO". She picks up her phone, and without looking on the display, gives the phone to her friend, B, and says:

A: please, can you get it?!

B pushes the phone away, refusing to answer it. A answers the call. A talks to someone about the home party. She ends the phone call after a short conversation.

A: [to her friends] I hate (him)! Shit! [sighs]

B: what did he say?

A: nothing! [she turns toward the window, crosses her arms and sighs]

This example shows a girl with a mobile phone, involving her two friends in the writing of the SMS-message, and then also in the phone call (or at least the answering of the phone call). In this case, the girl asks her friend to answer her phone. Although she ends up answering herself, we have made several observations where mobile phone calls are answered by other than the owner of the telephone. These observations lead us to believe that the notion of the mobile telephone as a personal phone does not seem valid among teenagers.

Below is an example from the field where the phone is shared for somewhat different purposes:

Excerpt 2: Liseberg Amusement park, Friday night

Two girls sit on a bench, one is visibly holding her mobile phone. They are approached by two boys. One of the boys is also holding his phone. The boys ask the two girls where they are from. After a very short conversation, the boys ask for their phone numbers. They hand their phones to the girls, who enter their phone numbers. One of the boys says that he will call tomorrow. The boys walk away.

This (here shortened) example shows how the phones are shared for social purposes. The two boys use their

phones as tools for getting acquainted with other teenagers. Thus the phones are used for getting things accomplished in the local context, rather than merely calling non-present others.

## 4 DISCUSSION

In this paper, we have shown how teenagers use their mobile phones *collaboratively*. The mobile phone itself as well as the information on it, is often *shared* and made public in various ways. The mobile phone is used as a social device, very often with co-present teenagers. Within the same local context, the teenagers use their mobile phones for purposes other than calling distant persons; *they do things together*, and the mobile phone takes part in this collaborative action.

By using ethnomethodology, we can gain information about the detailed practices of teenagers' mobile phone use. We argue that it is important to ground design of new mobile technology for young people, in an understanding of how teenagers' actually use their mobile phones in their everyday lives. Teenagers' ways of using their phones collaboratively and for social purposes other than just calling non-present others, need to be attended to in design.

## 5 REFERENCES

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