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**The social juxtaposition of mobile
telephone conversations and public
spaces**

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Abstract

This paper examines the use of mobile telephony in public spaces. It looks into the issue of how and why mobile telephony is seen as being disturbing. The two major issues are first, the way in which the device disturbs the web of front and back channel interactions found in a social setting and second the difficulties of managing issues surrounding eavesdropping and courtesy. The paper bases its findings on direct observation of mobile users in their natural environment. The paper finds that mobile telephony in public spaces contradicts the taken for granted notions of public behavior. Beyond this, the paper concludes with a short discussion regarding the potential of the mobile telephone to contribute to or detract from the general development of social capital.

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1 Introduction

People talking on mobile phones are a bother. As I write these words, I am sitting in an airport waiting for a plane. Across from me in the next row of seats is a rather unkempt fellow talking loudly on his new Ericsson blue tooth headset. The headset is hanging from his ear and at the end of the little microphone boom there is a little green light. It is probably meant to indicate that the mike is active. The total effect though is rather odd. I both envy him and loathe him. He has neat toys, but why is he talking so loud, and more to the point, why does it matter?

Both qualitative and quantitative data suggest that it is not just me that is disturbed by the public use of the mobile telephone. Qualitative data from across Europe (Klamer et al. 2000) as well as quantitative data (Mante-Meier 2001) support this point. Data shows that when asked if they thought that “the mobile phone disturbs other people,” almost two thirds of the respondents in a European wide survey either “tended to agree” or “agreed” with this statement. The data shows however, that there are differences between users and non-users. As seen in Table 1, while about 60 % of mobile telephone owners and more than 76 % of the non-users either tend to agree or agree with this statement.

Given these statistics it is perhaps not surprising that the use of the mobile telephone in public spaces is seen as a phenomenon worthy of social analysis. It has been examined in several contexts including its use in restaurants (Ling 1997) and in term of general attitudes toward the use of the device in public spaces (Ling, Haddon and Klamer 2001; Mante-Meier et al. 2000). Others have looked into the use of the mobile telephone in public spaces as a generator of urban myths (Håberg 1997) and the rise of mobile telephone etiquette (Nordal 2000) while Palen, Salzman and

Table 1 Percent of respondents who think that the mobile telephone “disturbs other people” for 9 European countries, December 2000¹

	Own a mobile	Can borrow regularly	Can borrow occasionally	Have not used a mobile
Mean score	60,24	68,78	69,06	76,56
N	5528	788	181	209

$f(4,6776) = 16.862, sig. < 0,001$

Young (2001) have examined the the perceived inappropriateness of using the device in public spaces. Finally, Love has studied the effects of personal space on the use of the mobile telephone (2001).

With the exception of the last study mentioned here, the analyses have focused on data gathered in either qualitative form or via questionnaires. That is, these studies were based on reported perceptions of the mobile telephone. The last study employed a fairly well controlled quasi-experimental design in a laboratory situation. Thus, none of the studies has examined the use of mobile phones in truly natural situations. It is the intention of this study to report on direct observations of mobile telephone use in public spaces.

There are two main issues here. The first is that the use of a mobile telephone in public spaces breaks in on the complex of intended and unintended front and back channel communications that make up social interaction. This effects not only with

¹ The data comes from EURESCOM P903. See (Mante-Meier et al. 2001)

our intended co-present interlocutors but also others who are outside our immediate circle of interaction. The second point is that the use of the mobile telephone exposes third parties to a type of forced eavesdropping. This contradicts our sense of propriety and exposes us to a poor image in what one might call our looking glass self.

2 Laying the groundwork

2.1 Method

As noted above, this is an observational study of activities in their natural settings. Several hundred situations have been observed. The material has been gathered in a range of milieus generally in and around the Oslo area. These include public busses, train and tram stations, paths in the nearby forest, shopping centers, airport waiting areas, scenes on the open street etc. In addition, quasi-public areas such as restaurants and stores have also produced observations.

Generally, it has been relatively easy to find situations wherein people are using the mobile telephone. Approximately 75 % of the Norwegians own one and so the likelihood of seeing people who use the device is quite high (Ling, 2001). In some cases, I planned time to make observations while at other times the situations simply arose literally before my eyes. Thus, while it is not possible to claim reproducibility or generalizability, nor is it possible to assert percentage distributions, the visitor to Oslo will non-the-less find the descriptions here a rough picture of what is happening on the street.

Beyond the observation for the work presented here I carried out a handful of good-natured “experiments” in order to tease out people’s reactions to the use of public space. Generally the “experimental stimulus” in these not very well controlled situations was to simply move into what one might call the personal sphere of persons who were making a mobile phone call in a public space. The point here was not to eavesdrop; others have done this more voyeuristic type of analysis. Rather it was to see their interproximic and interkinesic reaction to my presence. The technique when, for example in a store, was simply to, for example, feign interest in the display of soap immediately to the right of the person using the mobile telephone. By invading their space in a way that one legitimately could in that type of a setting I was able to observe the degree to which the sphere around them was of importance. I could also see their reaction to the new situation. A second type of experiment played on the finding that people close their body language when making a mobile telephone call. In order to test out the boundaries of this I simply tried to catch the eye of people who were waking towards me on the street while making a mobile telephone call. I did not use any hand gestures or unnecessarily try to draw attention to myself; rather I simply looked into their faces as I passed them on the sidewalk. Thus, the interaction was not very intrusive. The point, however, was to determine how accessible one is while they are talking on the mobile telephone. The results of these investigations will be reported below.

2.2 Background discussion

The use of mobile telephones in public spaces draws on several dimensions of social interaction. Verbal vs. non-verbal interaction and co-present vs. remote interaction are two issues here. Obviously, the potential for non-verbal communication is limited when interacting telephonically (Ling 1996). At the same time, mobile telephony in public spaces demands that one use various non-verbal techniques to mark the special nature of their activity. In particular there need to be special strategies to disengage oneself from the pre-existing co-present interactions, there are strategies for maintaining one’s quasi-isolated status during the conversation, there are the issues of reintegration back into the flux of the local setting after the call, and finally there are the considerations of the other co-present persons before, during and after the call itself.

When looking at the area of non-verbal communication, this has been a popular area of academic focus (Burgoon 1985; Archer and Akert 1977; Cherulink et al. 1978, Ekman and Friesen 1969; Felipe and Sommer 1966; Greenbaum and Rosenfeld 1978; Hall 1973; Quek et al 2000; LaFrance and Mayo 1978; Leffler, Gillespie and Conaty 1982, Watson and Graves 1966). Many of these analyses have looked into the undeniable contribution of gesture, kinesics, proxemics, vocalics, appearance, haptics (touch), chronemics, and manipulation of artifacts associated with communication. Beyond these categories there are cultural issues at play. Indeed, for one engaged in researching telephonic communication that is largely shorn of these props and aids, one is sometimes forced to wonder how communication is possible over the telephone at all.

Non-verbal communication is used to mark one's role in a social setting. Just as clearing one's throat is employed, so too is one's use of space and gestures. The use of the mobile telephone is not just the gesture (i.e. the hand to the ear).² Rather, more generally an interaction between the individual and their complete local context is at play. Beyond this, one is also interacting with a completely separate physical location and the complex social situation that finds itself there. Following from Goffman, one is interacting on a double front stage (Ling 1997). That is, one is interacting simultaneously with one's telephonic interlocutor but also with those in our near vicinity via what one might call interproximate and interkinesic communication. In each case, the interaction has its intended forms but also it is filled with unintended elements.

Further, the use of the device brings up the issue of how to include or exclude physically present persons in a conversation with a remote partner. This latter issue is made even more complex in that secondary persons may be present at both ends of the mobile phone conversation. The actual staging of the telephone call may demand that this host of secondary actors be shielded or alternatively included in various portions of the telephonic interaction.³

One way to come through these issues is to adopt the suggestion that verbal and gestural/gazal⁴ communications are two separate but parallel modes of expression (Quick et al 2000). The two modes can work together, and indeed are often quite intimately linked. However, the use of telephonic communication, and in particular mobile telephony that takes place in the presence of others who are not a part of the immediate interaction, points to the idea that the verbal and the gaze/gestural effects can be used in opposite ways for various publics.

Looking first at co-present interlocutors, their interaction can employ the full range of both verbal and gestural/gazal communication. Telephonic interlocutors have the use of speech but necessarily need to replace physical gesture and presentation with what one might call "verbal gesture" or intonation (Ling 1996). It is interesting to note, however, that one retains many of the gestural features of face-to-face interaction in spite of the fact that their conversation partner is not able to see these

² Texting and the use of hands-free devices have another kinesic form for somewhat the same non-verbal message

³ Some of these issues are at play in the use of the traditional telephone. The thing that distinguishes the mobile telephone is that it pops up in unexpected places and unexpected times. Thanks to Naomi Baron for this insight.

⁴ The adjectival form of gaze suffers from a lack of development in English. While we have tactual as an adjective for touch, verbal for speech, gestural for gestures, aromatic for smell, and even savourous for taste, there does not seem to be a common adjective for looking.

effects. Thus, one continues to smile, frown and even use physical gestures via an exclusively audio form of communication.⁵ I will come back to this point below.

Taking one step back, co-present secondary individuals who witness a face-to-face conversation between two partners have access to a slightly more abstract version of both the verbal and non-verbal cues that are available to direct conversation partners. They nonetheless have (perhaps limited) access to both the verbal and non-communication channels of the main interlocutors. They may be able to see the way that those who are more deeply involved in the interaction use body language and manipulate their voices to either enhance or reduce the exclusiveness of the interaction.

The situation is somewhat different in the case of telephony, and in particular mobile telephony in that co-present secondary partners have a somewhat less defined status. They are “together” with the person making the call and indeed may be taken into the confidence of the person on the phone in various conspiratorial ways (Goffman 1971, 220-22). They may be increasingly included, or excluded in the flux of the telephonic interaction (Lohan 1997). In the former case they may even feel free to come with interjections, stage whispers, disruptions (as in the case of small children that need assistance) and can also key on the flux of the conversation, i.e. the end of conversation sequence as a sign that they will soon become the primary audience for the caller in the near future. They are not a part of the telephonic interaction. They can however, read the gestures and the gaze of those who are on the phone to determine the appropriate degree of their own inclusion.

Finally, there are those who are co-present persons but to use Goffman’s term are not accredited members of the social circle. In the case of co-present persons interacting, their body language and the juxtaposition of the accredited members of the interaction excludes those who are not. The response can be a reciprocal set of gestures and stances that mark the boundary between groups.

The use of the mobile phone in public means that one needs to develop a repertoire of gestures that will make the boundary between themselves and the other co-present individuals obvious. In a sense, they owe it to the others who are present to make their status as a telephonist clear. This is done in order to avoid any undue embarrassment to either party.

⁵ It may be that facial gestures such as smiling etc have a linguistic effect, that is that one can literally hear if their interlocutor is smiling.

3 The management of social interaction in public spaces

As noted above there are two troublesome issues one needs to tackle when they, or somebody nearby receives a call. The first is the need for one to untangle themselves from the web of front and back channel interactions in order to take the phone, and the second is the management of the conversation and the accompanying issue of eavesdropping. Before looking at these in the case of mobile telephony it is instructive to look into the density of these issues from a more general perspective.

3.1 The web of front and back channel interactions

While in public, one needs to define themselves with relation to the other persons who are present. In a sense one owes it to the others to legitimate their presence and their inclusion in the social groupings. Since the mobile telephone threatens this order, it is necessary to look into the dynamics of public interaction in order to understand how the mobile telephone disturbs this web of interactions.

As outlined above co-present persons need to legitimate themselves vis-à-vis the social setting. Intimates holding hands, for example, both ties the two together and also provides a signal to others present regarding their status (Goffman 1971, 228-30). It is also incumbent on non-intimate parts of the social circle as well as those co-present persons outside the social circle to provide evidence of their status in a social setting. Within these broad groupings, one needs to adopt an appropriate form of interaction. These forms of public interactions may range all the way from enthusiastic and faux-sexual gyrations (as in the case of an intimate couple in a disco) to tacit recognition that another person is in the same general space (as with two strangers at a bus station late at night).

The management of these situations is, in some ways, like the management of talk in a conversation. When talking there is the general exchange of words. Beyond this there is an equally important back channel flow of gestures, interjections and glances that allow for the management and the pacing of the interaction (Ling 1996). The body language used to maintain a group in a public space has some of the same characteristics. There can be specific gestures that are imbued with meaning, i.e. pointing to something or flipping another person "the bird." Beyond these, there is a whole set of back channel non-verbal interactions, many of which are taken for granted and carried out at the almost sub-conscious level. The introduction of the mobile telephone disturbs the flow of these interactions and thus, makes them obvious to us.

3.1.1 Managing interaction in accredited groups

When observing a collection of people at, for example, a bus stop or walking down the street, how is it that we know who is in a group and how do we know the boundaries between the groups? This is, of course, an effortless task that we do as a matter of course every day without giving it much consideration. It is done through reading the interproximate and interkinesic signs given off by the individuals. Groups of individuals standing at a bus stop often arrange themselves into a small circle and exchange small talk, smiles and glances with those in their circle. Accredited groups of individuals—particularly pairs—who are walking do this by arraying themselves shoulder to shoulder, exchanging glances, talking, exchanging smiles or looks of concern as the case may be.

The mundane nature of maintaining ties does not require much thought or planning. However, it is a constant part of being in public. To the degree that it is made

obvious one sees it in situations where the status of the group is, in some minor way, threatened. One can see it, for example, when groups must negotiate doors, walk past oncoming persons, navigate down a crowded sidewalk, the decision by one or the other partner to stop and look at something along the way, etc. These situations require slightly more advanced interaction. Given these threats to the maintenance of the group, the partners must have at their disposal a set of devices that help them to maintain the status vis-à-vis each other (or within a larger group). There must be an openness to guide and be guided through situations that threaten the immediate status of the group. These can include taking one by the arm, a gentle bump, telling them to turn one or another direction, pointing out a direction, etc.⁶

Observation: Two women are walking shoulder to shoulder in the cafeteria area of a small shopping center. They approach a passage where, because of the lunch crowd, there is only room for one person to pass. As they approach this bottle neck, the woman on the left takes a slightly longer stride with her left foot and plants it, while at the same time drops her right (inside with reference to her partner) shoulder and extends her left (outside) arm in a gesture to her partner to pass. As her partner comes abreast, the woman on the left uses her right arm to “guide” the woman on the right through the passage. In this guiding gesture, the right arm of the woman on the left follows the partner through the passage by placing the hand near the small of her back without actually touching her. Through these maneuvers, the woman on the left came slightly ahead of the woman on the right but instead of rushing ahead, she paused slightly and used the space to “usher” the woman on the right through the passage. The woman on the right complements the maneuver by slightly dipping her left shoulder and knee slightly, a quick bowing of her head and by increasing her pace slightly so that the partner to the left never really needs to stop completely. The gesture of the woman on the left seems to impart a sense of generosity and largess in miniature while the body language of the woman on the right imparts a type of deferential gratitude for being ushered through the passage and perhaps a sense of subservience. The whole operation takes approximately one to two seconds.

In this situation, one sees the nuanced nature of this back channel interaction. The pair of women managed the obstacle of the narrow passage without losing the thread of their conversation and without missing contact with each other. In addition, it seems that they were able to play out some of the inner dynamics of their relationship in terms of small dominance and submission displays. Similar authority based interactions can be seen when, for example, men open doors for women etc.⁷ The point here is that the careful examination of a small hindrance provided some insight into the inner dynamics of a dyad. As we will see below, receiving a call on one’s mobile phone falls into this general category of trials to be surmounted by the

⁶ Intimate partners can also direct an intimate partner by guiding them with a hand on their back, hips or other portions of the body that are generally not accessible to others in public spaces. Again, there are clear cultural differences as to how this is practiced.

⁷ It is interesting to note that in Europe and the US when forced by the press of people, couples will often go single file with the woman taking the lead while in eastern Asia the opposite order is perhaps preferred. In each case persons from the same culture will not find it difficult to navigate these situations. However, when individuals from the two cultures try to walk together there are slight miscues and hesitations.

partners, groups and social settings. Thus, it exposes some of the taken for granted nature of these situations.

3.1.2 Managing interaction with persons who are not accredited within the group

Just as in one's interaction with partners and groups of friends, one needs to manage their interaction with other persons who are outside the social group. In this situation, the purpose is in many respects the opposite. That is, instead of a repertoire of devices for maintaining the interaction, one needs a repertoire of devices for marking boundaries and avoiding unnecessary interaction.

At the most basic level there is a type of willed ignorance, i.e. a recognition that another is somewhere within their general area, but no real openness to interaction. Even in this situation, one needs to occasionally check back to insure that the situation is still as last reported. When one is walking there are other dynamics at play. There are some important features that are seen in this situation and that have relevance for the use of mobile telephones in public spaces. The first is eye-to-eye glances. These are culturally determined, loaded with meaning and carefully managed (Burgoon 1985, 361). Among the various types of non-verbal communication, gaze is the most invasive (Greenbaum and Rosenfield 1978). To catch one's gaze is to catch their attention. As we will see below, gaze has a special function when one is using a mobile telephone.

3.2 The role of embarrassment, eavesdropping and courtesy in social interaction

Moving beyond the visual issues discussed above, one of the issues with the use of mobile telephony in public spaces is its audible dimension. There are ringing sounds and the issue of eavesdropping. It is often said, for example, that it is embarrassing to overhear others' conversations. Thus, postponing, but prefiguring our discussion of the mobile telephone we need to continue with our small detour through the concepts of embarrassment, eavesdropping and courtesy before returning to the analysis of mobile telephony.

According to Goffman (1967) embarrassment is not simply a psychological condition that might, for example, be the result of a weak ego development. Rather than considering the individual, one should look at the situation. What is it in a social gathering that causes embarrassment and what is the function? Following again from Goffman (1967), there are two types of embarrassment. The first type is seen in longer-term situations where one finds themselves in a circumstance without having a legitimate sense that they should be there. Thus, the freshman undergraduate at a faculty party would not necessarily have the aplomb with which to handle the situation. The second type of embarrassment is the relatively rapid realization that one is caught out of character. The classic example for men is realizing that they have had been seen in public with their fly down. Here one goes from a state of feeling that the situation is under control to being unsure of who has seen them, the degree of the gaff and the extensiveness of the repair work needed. It is this type of situation that is of most interest here.

The next issue is to put this sense of embarrassment into the context of eavesdropping. Hearing the conversation of others, or being in the position to hear

the conversation of others is a tricky social situation. Indeed we have a specific name for this⁸ and further we feel that we can legitimately assert its impropriety.

While eavesdropping is not the worst social *faux pas*, when one is caught doing it, one is considered to be out of line. This is potentially embarrassing to both the person doing it, the persons who expose them and the person(s) who have been overheard. However, there are several variations to be considered here. If there is a willful element in the eavesdropping, i.e. one is spying, then one has an openly malicious motivation, at least from the perspective of the person(s) being heard. However, if one only appears to be eavesdropping but is actually carrying on with other things, then there is a disjunction between appearance and intention of the eavesdropper. None-the-less, playing on W.I. Thomas' dictum, if eavesdropping appears to be real, then the consequential indignation of the overheard person can truly be real. Thus, as we move through society we need to protect ourselves against these types of potential claims against our propriety.

The reader will recognize the third variation as being more to the point with regard to mobile telephony. This is what one might call forced eavesdropping. I will consider the telephony implications below, but in this case, the potential eavesdropper is, in a sense, overrun by the eavesdropee. The physical situation, or the level of conversation is such that the non-credentialed person cannot legitimately hold himself or herself outside of the interaction. This happens, for example, when a microphone is left on after a presentation or performance. As the presenters shift back into their roles as normal individuals and perhaps give their unvarnished impressions of the performance or of the audience itself, the forced eavesdropper has no way to withdraw from the situation.

In the first two forms of eavesdropping, it is the eavesdropper who is particularly exposed to the potential for embarrassment. He or she has been caught out and thus their composure is at risk. In the third situation, i.e. enforced eavesdropping, the people within the conversation may be embarrassed, but perhaps the more interesting thing is that the eavesdropper(s) are also embarrassed. This is, however, a special type of embarrassment in that one is "embarrassed for the others," i.e. one is embarrassed for the sake of those persons who are forcing them to be eavesdroppers. There are several points here. First, while the cause of the embarrassment is the actions or the situation of an individual, one is also embarrassed for the whole situation. Regardless of how loosely defined the situation, be it a group of people waiting for a subway or attending the gala dinner for this year's Nobel prize recipients, each individual has a responsibility to the entire situation. When an untoward event arises, they feel, more or less strongly, that the situation is at risk. Second, the potentially embarrassed person has not yet actually been caught out. Rather, the cause for the embarrassment has not yet recognized their *faux pas* and thus has not yet lost face. They are a type of pending event that will become embarrassing as their situation becomes obvious.

Beyond the spectacle of the impending situation, why does the viewer, or the forced eavesdropper, feel embarrassment? After all, their reputation is not at stake. One can suggest that one is embarrassed for another because they – the non-credentialed person who is being forced to eavesdrop – have seen someone in a position in which

⁸ The word eavesdropping comes from the act of standing within the eaves drop. The eaves drop is water that drops from the eaves, i.e. the portion of the roof that extends beyond the outer wall of the house. Thus, if one stands within this space they will better be able to hear what transpires within the home.

they themselves may have been, or potentially will be.⁹ Building on Mead and Cooley, Giddens suggests that identity is a reflexive project. Embarrassment then is when there is a schism between our imagined and a disjointed identity made obvious to us by some *faux pas*, either intended or accidental. Following from Giddens, embarrassment for others is a vicarious version of the same thing. It is a threat to our identity that is linked to our identification with the soon to be embarrassed person.

One final point here is that the felt embarrassment by the observer and the “actual” embarrassment of the person being caught out need not be in correspondence to each other. Even if the person who is being caught out is made aware of their predicament it may not have the same meaning for them that it does for the person viewing it. While the viewer may cringe at the behavior of the party animal openly flirting with a happily married woman, this need not be the same experience for the two individuals directly involved. That is for them to decide. The observer is free to be as embarrassed as they wish. This takes us over to the next, and final stop in this preliminary discussion, i.e. the role of courtesy in society and the way to navigate through, among other things, embarrassment.

Courtesy, etiquette and manners are elements of public performance that are intended to round off and encapsulate difficult situations such as embarrassment. Eating in a restaurant (Ling 1997) talking with others or simply being in a public setting require that one observe a certain set of these types of norms (Jackson 1952, 325, Duncan 1970, 266-69). Courtesy is the code of devices that show to others that one has social assurance and poise. The use of these devices allows one to carry themselves through the difficult reefs of social interaction, however they are defined in a particular culture (Geertz 1972 290; see also Cahill 1990, 391; Gullestad 1992, 165).

Beyond this, one’s own use of manners also has a reflexive character. They are an indication as to how one wants to be treated themselves. They are, according to Duncan a “dramatization of the self” (1970, 266). This is not, however, done in isolation. Rather the buffering effects of courtesy are developed in concert with others. In addition, the rules of courtesy are a part of the way in which one indicates their deference to status. Thus, the higher one rises in the status hierarchy the more often they are “spared the embarrassment of” being put into difficult social situations. The cushioning effects of etiquette become intricate. Geertz notes that as one gains status “the thicker the wall of etiquette protecting the emotional life” (1972). Duncan speaks to the same point when he says:

Anger over ill manners of others arises out of the belief that not following our manners is a way of telling us that we are not really important in the eyes of the transgressor. We excuse a *faux pas* made out of ignorance (and soon corrected) because we still feel the importance of our manners as a social bond. We laugh at comic depictions of vulgarity so long as the majesty of what we hold important is not threatened. But we do not laugh at savage ridicule or continued vulgarity, because they endanger the social principle upon which our manners are based (Duncan 1970, 267).

In relation to embarrassment, courtesy allows one various strategies for showing their aplomb, and thus coming through the situation. When thinking in general about untoward events, such as the use of mobile telephony in unexpected situations, etiquette provides at least the groundwork for how to handle such situations. This said, one must understand that the data indicates that this is still a battleground for

⁹ There are many variations of being embarrassed for others. Such forced eavesdropping is only one version of this. One is quickly reminded of stories (or perhaps actual experiences) of men going into important meetings with their fly down or women having menstrual blood showing in the crotch of their pants that can incite the same sense.

differing opinions. Based on these thoughts I now turn to the examination of the mobile telephone. The device is interesting, as it has made many of these previously taken for granted issues obvious.

4 The management of mobile telephones in public spaces

In the previous section I looked at some of the aspects of how individuals interact in public. A particular focus was placed on the web of back channel functions of various forms for non-verbal communication and the issues of embarrassment, eavesdropping and courtesy. Given this foundation, I will now turn to the use of the mobile telephone in public spaces.

With a traditional telephone, one must physically go to phone. In a sense, there is a specific zone in the home, in the phone booth or in the office that is defined for that purpose. In going to take the phone, one also marks that they are not a part of the on-going social setting, but physically, geographically and mentally engaged in a special activity.¹⁰ Thus, there is a type of mutually agreed upon space where telephony takes place. Indeed, when considering the home, there are special types of furniture available with which one can furnish this space. One can, for example, buy a telephone bench that has a place for sitting, a small alcove for the telephone catalogue and a shelf upon which the telephone can sit. It is also possible to decorate the telephone itself or purchase a special type of telephone such that it passes into the décor of its milieu. Implicit in the use of such design elements is that the device is a part of a stable geographical location. The color and texture of the cover was intended to match that of a broader context. That is, the phone now matched the curtains, the other furniture or the carpet.

All of this speaks to the idea that the action of telephoning, and its location, were a unified concept. One expected a certain type of decorum in the area around the telephone such that a telephonic conversation could be carried out in the appropriate way. Indeed the placement of the telephone has been institutionalized in various settings based on the sense that these two dimensions are linked (Umble 2000).

The mobile phone is a different animal. It is, by intention, placeless (Fortunati 2001). The same physical distancing is available when using the mobile telephone, but since there is not an agreed upon space, this needs to be defined “on the fly.” Thus, the device has introduced a new element into the use of public space. Another difference between the traditional and the mobile telephone is that with the traditional telephone one is “called away” by its ringing. This allows one to employ certain verbal disengagement strategies along with physical movement to temporarily round off the face-to-face interaction. With the mobile telephone, one is not “called away” to the device since it is right there. Because of this, the intrusion into the flux of the face-to-face interaction takes place in a broader geographical range of places, and it is shorn of the familiar, if perhaps contrived, disengagement and reengagement rituals.

In this portion of the paper I will report on the observations of mobile telephone use. I will look at issues associated with first, starting the mobile telephone session; and second, I will look at how the conversation is carried out. This will include a discussion of the differences between voice telephony and texting and the issue of voice modulation (that is people talking loud). Third, I will look at the conclusion of the telephone conversation and the reengagement in the local context.

¹⁰ Goffman notes that even with these protections, the traditional telephone can result in various types of collusive interaction between those who are physically present at the expense of the remote individual (1971, 220 – 22). He addresses the need of the co-present person on the phone to manage two social interactions. The lack of visual access by the remote conversation partner means that one can minimize the importance of the interaction.

4.1 Starting the conversation

The initiation of a telephone call can of course take two forms, one is called or one calls. In the latter case, one has the chance to interact with those around them to perhaps agree on the need to place the call, the contents of the call, and perhaps the strategy or line that will be taken during the call. Thus, to the degree that the call is a type of ritual interaction with those in the immediate vicinity that functions as a preparation for the actual event.

Assuming, however, that one receives a mobile telephone call, and does not call out, a different process is initiated. The disengagement from a co-located interaction in order to answer a telephone is perhaps the trickiest point in a telephonic episode. One must somewhat quickly extract themselves from the pre-existing social situation and all the attendant front and back channel interactions described above. Ideally this is done through the use of various disengagement rituals. In addition, they need to erect various types of exclusion gestures for those in the immediate physical context. Simultaneously they must place themselves into a type of virtual context and initiate the greeting sequence for the telephone call (Schegloff and Saks 1973; Schegloff 1972; Veach 1981). The co-present individuals who have not received a call must go through a similar process in that they must also partition off the telephonist from the local situation. All of this rearranging of the social furniture has to take place within a few seconds. Thus, there are many opportunities in a short time period to offend sensibilities.

Just as there are norms associated with answering the telephone, the analysis here shows that there are starting to be norms regarding how one excuses themselves from pre-existing social situations in order to take a mobile telephone call. These include various types of verbal cues, closing of the body language and, if possible, complete retreat from the immediate area. If this is not possible – when for example, one cannot easily move away – other strategies are used. Observations carried out here indicate that the person taking the call moves from a relatively open to a more closed body language by perhaps turning one's back, looking away from others.¹¹ There is also often a redirection of one's gaze in that the person using the telephone directs their gaze away from other co-present individuals, indeed they seem reluctant to establish eye-contact. In the same way that the person taking the call goes through a process of local disengagement, other persons who are nearby also must take the change into account. Goffman's strategy of studied non-observance is also an alternative as seen in the following example (Goffman 1963, 85-86).

Observation. A couple in their 30's entered a book store and approached a shelf with travel books, the woman was on the left and the man, shoulder to shoulder, to her right. They started to focus on a book that was at about eye-level and the woman reached to pull a book out of the shelf. At this point the mobile phone of the man emitted a single "peep." He dropped his glance from the shelf and as he drew his phone out of his pocket he muttered the half sentence "It must be." By this time he was able to get the phone out, activate the call and begin the greeting sequence.

The woman accepted both the ringing and the half sentence without removing her glance from the shelf of books. The man, however, backed away from the shelf, assumed the closed posture of a mobile

¹¹ In some cases Love (2001) reports the "other" person in the situation taking the more aggressive stance of watching the individual who is calling. This will be discussed below.

telephone conversation and sought out space in some of the less trafficked portions of the store.

One sees several characteristic features in this observation. Among other things one sees how the man and the woman encapsulate the episode through a dialogue of interproximate and interkinesic gestures. The man closed his body language and the woman adopted a pose of studied non-observance. The uttering of a half sentence is also of note. In effect it emphasizes that one must temporarily drop one arena of interaction. It underscored the transition of the man's attention from common task of searching for a book with his partner to the telephone conversation that had already been announced by both the audible ringing and his search for the device in his pocket. If one stretches the analysis a bit further, the half sentence also seemed to indicate that the call was somewhat expected and that it played on a common understanding of the two co-present partners that something like this may happen. One sees something of the same thing in the following observation.

Observation. Three people were sitting in a bus. A woman was sitting next to a window on the left side of the bus. To her left sat a man in the aisle seat and a second man sat across the aisle to the left. The three got on at the same stop and continued a conversation from when they were standing waiting for the bus. The woman's phone rang loudly and she reached for it immediately. As she dug for the phone the two men turned towards each other and started talking among themselves. The middleman turning his head and shoulders toward the man sitting across the aisle further marked the temporary exclusion of the woman. The telephone connection somehow failed before the woman could start the greeting sequence (perhaps she accidentally touched a button when digging for the phone in her bag.) Thus, she again became available for inclusion in the threesome. After about 20-30 seconds her phone rang again. She muttered a small "oh!" as she again recovered the phone. The two men again closed her out of the circle both in terms of the direction of their comments and their body language.

In these examples the individuals who received the calls and also the persons they were with, had to put the pre-existing social situation on hold while the telephone was answered. In this process there was a dance of gestures and utterances that encapsulated the telephonic event, i.e. the way in which the colleagues on the bus used both body language and verbal interaction to provide the woman the space in which she could have her telephone call, not just once, but two times.

If we contrast the acceptance of mobile phone calls for those who are currently in the presence of friends or colleagues with the same situation wherein one is alone one is able to see more clearly the importance of the disengagement rituals.

Observation. A man was standing in a store on a Saturday morning near a bin of small boxes of electrical items. He had a small hand sized box in his left hand and was reading the specifications on the box. His phone rang. He pulled the mobile telephone out of his right jacket pocket and looked at it long enough to activate the telephone. Then he raised the phone to his ear and he started the greeting sequence. As he took the phone to his ear his gaze returned to the box in his left hand and seemingly continued to read the specifications on the box. The conversation was quickly over and the man replaced the phone in his pocket and continued to look at the box.

This situation seems to be quite different from the previous two described above. The call seems to be very brief and “matter of fact.” If the reader allows some speculation for a moment, it may have been such that the man and his wife were out on a Saturday morning shopping trip. They may have had separate errands to run within the larger context of the trip and agreed to call one another when they were done with these separate errands in order to arrange their re-meeting and the continuation of their common shopping trip. In addition, it is possible that the display showed the identity of the caller, i.e. his wife and since the call was expected and the content of the call had been mutually understood beforehand, there was no need for elaborate courtesies during the greeting. This interpretation is of course guesswork, but the form of the interaction and the context within which it took place seems to point in this general direction.

If this was the case, then the man was, in essence, already engaged in a type of social interaction, i.e. the shopping trip with his wife. The separate errands had resulted in a temporary suspension of interaction. The empty space had not been filled by any subsequent engagements. Indeed the man almost had the posture of “killing time.” That is filling in the time while presumably his wife carried out what may have been a more urgent errand. If these guesses are correct, then rather than interrupting a social interaction, the telephone call was the announcement that he soon would revive a lapsed social engagement.

4.2 Staging during the conversation

As noted in the previous section, the person receiving a call as well as those co-present individuals in essence make space for each other. Through a series of gestures, glances and utterances space is set-aside, or perhaps expropriated, so that the telephonist can carry out their call.

Non-verbal communication is the major “communication” channel to others who are physically present in order to mark that one is on the phone. Indeed, the interproximate and interkinesic cues are important elements in helping to define the situation (Burgoon 1985). As described above, the closed stance posture, i.e. hand to ear, hunched over looking down if stationary, with one’s back to others, is one of the characteristics of the mobile telephone call.¹² Some of these elements are seen in the following situation.

Observation. A businessman in his 40’s was standing alone at the National Theater railroad station in the mid-morning. He made a call on his mobile telephone. During the call, he had his head down. At the beginning of the conversation, he turned toward the timetable on the platform and his forehead was only a couple of centimeters from this with his head ducked down. A little later, he backed away from the timetable and sort of danced, rocking back and forth stepping repeatedly on the same spot, kind of playing with a little puddle of water.

The little dance he did plays on the issue of being engaged in the mobile telephone conversation but not in the local social setting. Thus, one is freed, to a certain degree from the normal conventions there. In addition, the man’s posture there is what one might call vicarious tie signs to the telephone conversation. In the Goffmanian sense, there is both the engagement with one’s partner and also a signaling to others that are

¹² Stereotype of the loudmouthed individual blabbing away in public spaces was the perhaps memorable exception to the rule. I will touch on this issue below.

occupied (1971). Thus, the head down, and perhaps odd space juxtapositions and gyrations are signs to those who are physically co-present that one is not to be disturbed. In the same way that a couple's walking hand in hand is a sign to others that they have a certain type of status, the closed posture of the mobile telephone user is also a quasi necessary indication to one's immediate milieu that the individual is not available at the moment for normal interaction.

Another issue here is the use of facial gestures by the telephonist. One can easily observe that those using the mobile telephone often smiled, knitted their eyebrows and used other facial gestures that seemed to be superfluous given the mediated form of interaction. Clearly, many of these outward signs are a reflection of our inner joy or concern vis-à-vis the content of the conversation. Beyond this, however, they also function as tie-signs with respect to one's engagement in the telephone conversation.

Beyond the closed body form and the hand to the ear, another strategy for managing one's aloofness when using the mobile telephone is by means of gaze. The tendency for those who are using a mobile telephone in public is to avoid looking into the eyes of other persons is quite strong. Indeed, as a part of the data collection for this analysis I would try to catch the gaze of mobile telephone users while walking down the street. Generally this was not possible. If one were to catch the eye of a mobile telephone user, their glance was seemingly only a very quick navigation interaction. Since to catch the eye of another is to request an audience, their status as conversants in a telephone call meant that they were not immediately open to other interactions.

In this connection the adoption of hands-free devices can complicate this situation since there are fewer immediate tie signs. Via their use, one appears to be available for interaction whereas the opposite is actually the case.

Another issue that is often commented upon is the colonization of the public sphere by mobile telephone users. The use of space, and behavior within the space, mark one's role in the situation (Hall 1973). As noted in several of the observations the person using the mobile telephone in public areas were often observed moving into less trafficked portions of the space. In order to examine the degree to which this was an important strategy, I actively moved into the immediate area of the telephonist. I did not, for example, march up in front of them and stare into their eyes. Rather, in stores, I would start to examine the wares immediately beside them, etc. I did this in a dozen situations. The result was always that the individual yielded the space to me. They wandered off to another less populated area. If I were to repeat the experiment with the same subject they would again wander off. Aside from slightly bothering the subjects of the trial, this points to the awareness that the individuals seemed to have regarding their surroundings and the importance of maintaining a buffer around themselves. Even though they were ensconced in their telephone conversation, they were willing to surrender their space and move on. Unlike the metaphor of the boorish ego maniac loudly talking on his (sic.) phone, this experiment seems to point that mobile telephone users are aware of the need to maintain the space around them if possible.

Up to this point we have generally talked about those who temporarily give up the interaction with co-present colleagues and replace it with more or less exclusive concentration on the mediated interaction. There are, however, situations wherein one engages in parallel front stages. This can be seen in the following observation.

Observation. A pair of teen girls enters a tram and sit together. They discuss things until the mobile telephone of one of them rings. She takes it out and starts a conversation with another person. She is quite animated in the conversation using several gestures including hitting

herself in the forehead with the palm of her hand when apparently reminded of a forgotten issue. The second co-present girl withdraws and takes on a “tram” face. The conversation continues past 2 – 3 stops on the train and eventually the second girl rises to get off the tram. The girl on the phone remains seated. The two co-present girls go through a quasi-pantomime of farewell gestures including a hug and touching cheeks along with the accompanying “kiss” sound as used in a greeting in France. All the while, the girl on the mobile telephone maintains her part of the conversation. One stop later, the girl completes the call, replaces the mobile telephone in her bag and gets off the tram.

In this case, the girl who received the telephone call had shifted her attention to the phone call and had temporarily parked the co-present friend. However, when the time for parting arose, she was able to manage both the telephonic and the co-present social interaction. Another situation also shows the need to manage two fronts.

Observation. While out walking in a popular forest area near Oslo (Sognsvann) a man pushing a baby carriage is overtaken by another party. One woman in the second party was talking on her mobile telephone. The man pushing the baby carriage and the woman on the mobile telephone recognized each other. The woman on the phone moved the microphone away from her mouth and said ironically to the man pushing the carriage “This is my image.” The man greeted her and she lowered the mobile telephone away from her ear to about shoulder height indicating that she was caught, in a sense, between the telephone and the co-located interactions. The woman on the phone said that her telephonic interlocutor was “Heidi.” This indicated that it was a common friend. The man thought that it was “Heidi” who lived in one location but after several interactions it became apparent “Heidi” had moved. All the while Heidi was on the line presumably hearing bits of the conversation since the mobile telephone was still being held at about shoulder level away from the mouth of the woman. Eventually the woman informed Heidi of her chance meeting with the man pushing the baby carriage. The man and the woman continued their conversation and there were occasional attempts to bring Heidi into the circle but these were more and more strained and eventually the woman asked Heidi if she could call her back later.

This, along with the material from the invasion experiments shows that the ability to ensconce oneself in a mobile telephone conversation while being quite strong is not impermeable. Indeed, in the last observation a co-present person is actually a recognized part of a social interaction in that one who is physically present is aware of the telephonic situation and perhaps even vicariously included (Lohan 1997).

4.2.1 Texting vs. voice telephony

Another form of interaction is text messages. These are different from voice telephony in that there is no real audio component and they are also asynchronous. Thus, one need not attend to them here and now. When one does send a message there is no need to cover over the sound. Nonetheless, receiving and sending text messages has consequences for one’s participation in co-located activities.

Observation. Four girls were on the platform at a subway station. Three were sitting on a bench and the fourth stood facing the others. One tried to place a call but did not get an answer. While she tried to place the call she stood about one and a half meters away from the

others facing them. She was concentrated on the call and generally stood still looking in the general direction of her friends but not focusing on them in any concrete sense. The others talked among themselves. Eventually the standing girl gave up her attempt to call and immediately, perhaps enthusiastically, reentered in the flow of conversation carried on by the others while putting her mobile phone back in her pocket.¹³ Thus, it seems she had been monitoring their conversation while on the phone, but had definitely not been a part of the conversational flow. After less than 30 seconds, she decided to send a text message, perhaps as a replacement for the frustrated call. Still standing facing her friends she took out her mobile phone again and started texting. However, this time she interlaced texting and conversation with her friends. When she was done texting she sat down on the bench beside her companions without immediately re-entering the conversation.

Here one can see that the girl could follow the general flux of interaction while she waited for her call to go through. However, her concentration was completely absorbed when she wrote the text message. There was almost the sense that she had to attend to the SMS (that was perhaps an extension of her frustrated call) before she could free her mind for interaction with her colleagues.

4.2.2 Voice modulation

One of the chief complaints regarding mobile telephone calls is that those who use them are inordinately loud. In the observations that made up this study, it was more the exception than the rule that the sound of the telephonic interaction was intrusive. This said it happened that mobile telephone users spoke with enough verve to communicate their thoughts to both intended and unintended interlocutors. There are three issues that commonly arise when describing why public use of the mobile telephone is problematic. These are the fact that only a part of the conversation is available to others in the immediate situation and the second is the volume of the interaction and the third issue has to do with the observation of etiquette.

Looking at the first, Goffman takes up the issue of “occult involvements” (1963, 76). Based partially on his work in mental hospitals he discusses how one needs to have legitimate behaviors in public. He suggests that occult involvements occur when:

the others present cannot ‘get at’ the general intention by which the individual is apparently governed, and cannot credit the offender’s account should he offer one. This suggests that in ordinary life there is an expectation that all situated activity, if not obviously ‘occasioned’ will have a degree of transparency, a degree of immediate understandability for all persons present” (1963 76).

One might claim that public use of the mobile telephone fits into this definition. However it is also easy to see that the device is in a gray area here. On the one hand, their use in public spaces is becoming increasingly discrete due to the small size of the mobile phones and the development of “hands free” devices. This means that the visual cues are becoming increasingly discrete and that it is more difficult for others to see the user as having a legitimate reason for their behavior. This would argue in favor of Goffman’s interpretation.

¹³ It may be that the person she was trying was not available and did not have a voice mail capability associated with his telephone.

On the other hand, if one assumes that the mobile telephone has become a part of the more general social context and that all people have had telephone conversations, it follows that people generally have insight into the types of things that can happen there. Thus, a mobile telephone conversation is not the same as the mumbles of one who is in a mental institution.

Turning now to the second point, i.e. the volume of the conversation, there are several issues to consider. The first is the ability of noises to either soothe or disturb. Indeed there are whole industries committed to the production of soothing noises. These include music and also those who produce “white noise,” i.e. fountains and background music. In the case of the latter, some sounds may actually be used to create a background against which one feels freer to carry on a conversation. In these cases one can be more animated than when there is nothing to cover up one’s more intimate conversation. By way of contrast there are many sounds that are not acceptable. Flatulence, the sound of the dentist’s drill, screaming children, loud stereos and the ringing sound of another person’s special ringing sound on their mobile telephone can be seen in this light.

Beyond this mobile telephones can make obvious the differences between one’s physical space and “sound” space (Goffman 1971, 33-34, 51). This is not only done via the volume of the speaker’s voice, but it is compounded by the fact that the telephone ringing sound alerts others nearby that a mobile telephone conversation is about to take place.

When considering modulation of the user’s voice, taking the perspective of the mobile telephone user, it is perhaps not all that remarkable that one feels the need to speak loudly into the microphone. First, we are taught to speak loudly and clearly on the telephone, often long before we have a clear sense of how the device functions or even to whom it is that we are speaking for that matter. Young children often find themselves in the position of having an unfamiliar device pushed against their ear and having to suffer the request to “say hello to Grammy.” If they are capable of speech they are further instructed to “speak up” so that the other person can hear (Vetch 1981). In addition, telephone, as users adjust our speech to the audio situation. Thus, if the reception of our own mobile phone is sketchy, or if we have not managed to center the speaker of the phone over our ear, given the low volume of the incoming sound we will feel the need to insure that our outgoing talk has the inertia to carry it through. Thus, if there is no background noise with which to cover over the sound of our calls, they may very well be perceived as being inappropriately loud. Finally, if one becomes engaged in the telephonic interaction to the degree that they forget the physical setting in which they find themselves, one can at least begin to understand some of the elements that lead to easily overheard conversations.

The third point is that of manners and etiquette. As I have alluded to above, forced eavesdropping caused by mobile telephone use is a breach of manners in that one is, in a sense imposing behavior that is appropriate for intimates onto non-intimates. Thus, one perhaps feels that the social situation is steering toward a possible chasm. Beyond this, one can “feel embarrassed for” the situation. That is, the potentially reflexive nature of the situation can, in extreme cases, threaten the reflexive project that we call our identity.

Beyond this, use of the mobile telephone is often an affront to the decorum of the situation. As discussed above, courtesy is a way to buffer untoward behavior. Seeing the use of the mobile telephone as a threat to decorum means that it is among a category of behaviors that require special means to contain and defuse its potential for rudeness. In order to not be seen as being offensive, both the user and the others

who are present need to develop and agree on correct behavior in a particular situation and the ways to round-off potential threats to this more or less common understanding. A public setting often has an explicit decorum; that is a type of encrusted sense of how one should behave.

In spite of the general framework of a setting, there is room for interpretation and unfortunately there is rarely symmetry here. The misuse of the public space is in the eyes of the beholder. If one party asserts their rights too boldly the other side will feel that their status is being affronted. As seen above, those without the experience of using the mobile telephone are more likely to say that the device is disturbing. This rawness may indicate the lack of rituals with which to handle the situation. There are many difficult situations that are dispensed with through almost taken for granted ceremonies. The polite smile or laugh when one makes a slight misstep shows one's polish or poise. When we extend these rules to also cover the use of mobile telephones then certain dimensions of their public use will recede into the background.

Etiquette regarding mobile telephone use is not something that is derived here and now on the spot, rather, it is embedded in the setting. Thus, the manners regarding mobile telephony cannot be derived on a setting-by-setting basis, but rather need to draw on broader social experiences before they also become a crystallized part of interaction that is no longer worthy of comment. Obviously we have not come that far as of yet.

4.3 Reemerging from the conversation

Up to this point we have considered the way in which one hops out of their co-present conversation upon the initiation of a telephone call, their deportment during the call, the differences between voice telephony and texting, and finally why voice telephony seems to be more intrusive. Now, in this section I will look at the reemergence from the mobile telephone session back into the co-located interaction.

Following from the work of Schegloff and Saks (1973) and also that of Vetch (1981) the parting sequence on the telephone contains several parts. In essence they found that as one empties various themes, there are longer and longer pauses in the interaction. Eventually these lead one or both of the partners to initiate a farewell sequence. In this interaction, one may state an open sentence such as "Ok" or "Well" followed by a pause. If the other individual does not fill in the pause with a new theme, they may countersign with a similar phrase. In essence this is a negotiation to start saying their farewells. Following this they may make a quick summary or add some final comments. This done they will exchange their farewells and hang up. Thus, there is not a simple quick closing of the conversation, but a social process through which one must go in order to be seen as a competent conversant.

The interesting thing from the point of mobile telephony is that the closing sequence can also inform the co-present individuals that they must drop the facades they had assumed upon the initiation of the mobile telephone call and prepare themselves for further interaction with the telephonist. One can see these elements in the following observation.

Observation. A pair of men were sitting in the waiting area of an airport towards the end of a working day. They appeared to be working colleagues en route home after a business trip. One received a call and took it. While he was talking, the second man occasionally looked on but also felt free to glance about at other passengers, at the screen

display showing flight departures and at the tabletop in front of him. When the man on the phone started the farewell sequence the second man looked toward the first. After saying his farewell, the first man pushed the “hang up” button on the phone, took a quick glance at the display and lowered his phone (still holding it in his hand). The first man glanced back at the second, smiled and seemed to give a short summary of the call. The two men fell back into discussion.

Here it was quite obvious that the second man was listening enough to know that that farewell sequence had begun and that he would soon be back on stage. After the end of the conversation the telephonist seemed prompted to provide the other with a short summary of the interaction, perhaps as a partial legitimation of the need to suspend the conversation. In other situations, where several persons are present and the conversation is not particularly directed, Yttri has reported that the new topic of conversation is one of the themes that arose in the mobile telephone conversation (2001).

In situations where the telephonist is alone there is also the need to reestablish themselves within the context of the situation. In the observations made for this study telephone users were often seen ending the conversation, attending to the physical need to close down the telephonic connection, and then using a type of sideway glance to re-establish one’s position in the situation. In a sense they were moving from the closed stance of the telephone call to a more open posture.

4.4 The role of the non-participant

As we saw in several of the previous observations the role of the co-present partner, begrudgingly or otherwise, is to provide the telephone user the space with which they can complete their call. While the telephonist withdraws from the surroundings via a closing of their body posture, the other co-present people also provide evidence that they are no longer demanding the attention of the individual on the phone.

As we have seen in various observations reproduced above, the way in which one provides space to the telephonist is via glance, body language and, if possible, providing the telephonist physical space. In the observations done for this study, the adjustments of others to the starting of a telephone conversation were very nuanced indeed. For those who were with the telephonist they either withdrew their attention but continued in the other pre-existing activities. If, for example, they were walking together, they maintained the interproximate and interkinesic relationship to the telephonist. As seen in the example of the two men in the airport, the “other” person simply remained at the table and shifted his attention to other nearby activities.

The situation concerning those with whom the telephonist is not familiar is slightly different. The observations made in this study show that at most they made a darting glance at the individual. On busses and trams they might glance at the telephonist and slightly readjust their posture, but there was no real sense that they had registered the telephone call beyond this.

Obviously there is Goffman’s notion of studied civil inattention and the slightly more strained studied non-observance at work here (Goffman 1963, 85-86). Goffman notes that these strategies allow the participants in a social setting to gloss over the situation and ignore these minor infractions to the previous order. In Goffman’s terms, the various actors have a defensive stance in that they wish to retain their own face and to protect the face of the others present (Goffman 1967, 14). Obviously there can be asymmetry here.

In an interesting analysis of this situation Love (2001) found that in an experimental setting designed to observe reactions to other's use of the mobile telephone in their presence, some of the individuals provided the telephonist physical or psychic space. However, he also notes that some stared at the telephonist. This result may be partially explained in that the individuals, who at the outset of the experiment were not familiar with each other, had developed a slight rapport in that they were both involved in the experiment and indeed had been given a common task.

Indeed, Love's findings that the respect of the telephonist's isolation is not absolute are also mirrored in the material reported above. We have seen that this boundary is not absolute. Indeed there are certain exigencies that can demand the attention of the telephonist. The three that have been illustrated here were the demand for parting between the two teens, the meeting of a common friend and the intrusion experiments. In each case, the person on the telephone was brought back to the physical context and forced to react to the here and now. This was done via short pauses in the telephonic interaction, moving to another location or, in one case, giving up the telephonic interaction in favor of the co-present dealings.

5 Discussion and conclusion

As noted in the introduction there are two general issues that contribute to the disturbing influence of the mobile telephone in public situations. One is the modulation of voices and the resulting forced eavesdropping and threats to the decorum of the situation. The second is the complexity of managing two sets of social contexts with the additional imposition of a virtual interaction mediated via the mobile telephone. Thus, there is the stream of talk, the associated back channel stream of vocalizations and gestures for those included in the various interactions. Beyond this there are the exclusion signals to others who are not an accredited part of the interaction in addition to their parallel exclusion signals. Thus the mobile telephone disturbs not only the audio context but also a whole complex of interactions used to manage our navigation through a conversation and more generally through everyday situations such as bus rides and the like.

One is prompted to ask, however, is this really a problem? Yes and no. To the degree that we have not collectively developed routines and rules for making the transition from co-located to virtual social interaction on short notice it is difficult. To the degree that we feel embarrassed by the forced snooping on other's conversations, the public use of the mobile telephone is a problem. This said we are remarkably flexible in our ability – eventually – to accommodate technologies. Standage (1998), Marvin (1988) and also Fischer (1992) provide insight into the social disruption accompanying respectively the telegraph, electricity and the telephone. Time has shown that the telegraph is forgotten and that the two latter innovations have become taken for granted. The ringing of a home telephone is handled with well-oiled routines – if not excitement in the case of lovelorn teens. Switching on a light is only occasionally the focus of social ritual, as for example when lighting the family Christmas tree or dimming the lights for a “special” dinner. The mobile telephone may, in all likelihood go in the same direction.

There is, however, a broader question here; namely, the sum effect of the mobile telephone on social cohesion, or what Robert Putnam refers to as the social capital (2000). Will the device lead to a more “post modern” interaction wherein we either carry out or are exposed to a series of semi-completed banal interactions without broader context? Or, does the mobile telephone actually allow us to connect spontaneously and instantaneously with others in our social circle while we would otherwise be simply staring out the bus window wishing we were some place else? In sum, does the device add to or detract from the social capital of society?

Clearly, the jury is still out here. There is good evidence for both arguments. On the one hand the mobile telephone leads to what Putnam calls balkanization in that one can escape their immediate situation and interact with only like-minded persons. In the process one does not just drop out, but they also colonize a part of the public sphere and reduce it slightly by their unwillingness to participate. One is reminded here of Garrett Hardin's (1968) concept of the “tragedy of the commons” in that the device provides an advantage to the individual while slightly diminishing the public sphere.

At the same time, the device allows for the development of stronger in-group ties. It leads to the sharing of experiences and emotions more immediately than almost any other mediated form of interaction save face to face. Indeed, when compared to the effects of other technologies such as, for example, the private automobile, the negative effects are quite benign.

In the long run, it may well be that I learn to accept the odd behavior of fellow passengers with bluetooth headsets and encapsulate their behavior. In addition it may also be true that the mobile telephone will allow me to better integrate and coordinate my private life. Hopefully this will not happen at the expense of the broader society.

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