Parental Smartphone Use and “Bystander Ignorance” on Child Development

Développer une culture médiatique à la maternelle : coup d’œil sur les jeux et discussions des enfants

**Eerik Mantere, Sanna Raudaskoski et Satu Valkonen**

**Résumé**

Dans cet article, les effets de l'utilisation des smartphones sur les interactions directes en face à face ont été conceptualisés sous le nom de « Sticky Media Device ». Il s'agit de voir en quoi l'utilisation des smartphones par les parents suscite des inquiétudes chez leurs enfants. Pourquoi, par exemple, cette utilisation en tant que source de distraction parentale, diffère-t-elle de la lecture d'un livre ou de la réparation d'une machine à café? Nous nous intéressons à cet aspect particulier de l'utilisation des smartphones qui diffère d'autres activités : l'enfant ne peut comprendre le comportement du parent ni grâce à l'appareil ni en regardant quelles actions le parent exécute. En analysant les possibilités d'utilisation des smartphones et en se référant au travail de Tomasello sur l'apprentissage par imitation, nous pensons que notre nouveau concept de « Bystander Ignorance » offre une compréhension des conséquences en termes de développement de l'utilisation des smartphones par les parents. « Bystander Ignorance » signifie ici l'état d'ignorance dans lequel une personne prête à engager une interaction directe avec un interlocuteur est placée lorsque celui-ci utilise son smartphone.

**Abstract**

In this article, the hampering effects of smartphone use to concurrent face-to-face interaction have been conceptualized as “Sticky Media Device”, and concern has been raised about parental smartphone use in particular. Why would parental smartphone use as a source of parental distraction differ from, for example, reading a book or fixing a coffee machine? We explain an aspect of smartphone use that is missing in other activities parents might engage in: the child cannot infer from the parent’s behavior, nor from the device, what type of action the parent is currently performing. By analyzing the affordances of smartphone use and referring to Tomasello’s work on imitative learning, we propose that our new concept of “Bystander Ignorance” offers understanding of potential developmental consequences of parental smartphone use. Bystander Ignorance means the unawareness that a person interested in pursuing face-to-face interaction with a smartphone user has about the aspects of the activity that the smartphone user is currently engaged in.
Introduction

In this paper we examine and conceptualize some phenomena of smartphone use, which we argue to be crucial for understanding the role of smartphones in modern interaction frameworks. We are focusing on the interaction between a parent and a child. The bases of this article are both theoretical and empirical observations. The subject of the paper is very contemporary, since the percentage of smartphone owners has gone up rapidly, and nowadays the majority of people in the Western countries own a smartphone, and the use of smartphone and the diversity of applications they offer have likewise grown fast. Because these new media devices have also become a constant presence in families with children, it is of great relevance to inquire how their use effects everyday interaction in the homes of families, since this is where the primary socialisation usually takes place.

In our previous studies, we have identified some hampering effects of smartphone use to simultaneous face to face interaction, and coined a concept of “Sticky Media Device” to illustrate the phenomenon in which one participant of the face to face interaction is simultaneously using a smartphone and the others have difficulties in getting them away from using it. We have raised worry about parental smartphone use in particular (Mantere and Raudaskoski, 2015; Mantere and Raudaskoski, forthcoming). A common response to the critical notion of sticky media device has been that new technologies have always been met with suspicion and dystopias which, in hindsight, have turned out to be exaggerated. Cannot parental attention be “stuck” on various things and so make responses to a child missing or confused? Why would smartphones differ from, say, a book or a magazine? We argue, that this is actually the point: the smartphones do differ from many other media artefacts in that the applications used often create an interactional field that demands “here-and-now” reactions from the user (ibid.). In addition, in this paper, we bring out that there are also other, yet uninspected, elements in the equation. We present a concept of “Bystander Ignorance” to illustrate one crucial aspect in the social environment of today’s children that is different from those children who have lived in earlier decades.

Parental smartphone use is widely discussed in media and is constantly coming up also in the conversations with professionals. However, there are still only few studies concentrating on the subject. In addition to our work (Mantere and Raudaskoski, 2015; forthcoming; Raudaskoski, Mantere, and Valkonen, forthcoming), only Radesky and her colleagues from the United States have done some research in the area. In their first study (Radesky et al., 2014), they observed 55 occasions of families dining in a fast-food restaurant in the Boston area during July and August 2013. They focused on caregivers’ use of a smartphone. In most of the cases, at least one of the caregivers was using a mobile phone. They concluded the dominant theme to be parent’s absorption to the smartphone use. Parental absorption was not necessarily related to long duration of continuous use, but could also be observed in cases of short intermitted use of the device. There were some parents who, while using the smartphone, were only using the phone and not performing any other activities at the same time. Then there were parents who were simultaneously doing something else while still also focusing on using their smartphones. In the second study,
Radesky et al. (2015) analyzed data from videotapes of parents introducing different foods to their children in a laboratory experiment, previously conducted for other research aims. During the experiment, some parents spontaneously begun to use their smartphones, which gave Radesky and her colleagues an opportunity to utilize the data for their own research. They counted the verbal and nonverbal prompts for interaction, done by parents towards their children, and concluded that parents using mobile phones initiated interaction less, both verbally and nonverbally.

Also Sherry Turkle, who has been studying digital culture for over thirty years, discusses in her latest book (2015) the “extinction” of face-to-face conversation, and considers the issue of children competing with smartphones for their parents’ attention. In addition, a growing amount of authors in the therapeutic and other professional circles have addressed the subject from the bases of their clinical practices. Catherine Steiner-Adair, a clinical psychologist, after listening to many stories of children’s perceptions of their parent’s smartphone use, summarized them in a book, *The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age* (2013). A recurrent theme in the stories she reported was how children felt that smartphones were taking too much attention from their parents.

**Theory and Method**

The idea behind our research is one of studying parent-child interaction and the life of a modern family from the point of view of a child rather than the parent. Parent-child interaction has overwhelmingly been studied from the point of view of parents. The requests children make to their parents have in particular been very commonly demarcated into incidents of begging, disobedience or complains. The ethos has been to find out ways in which children could be made to obey the parents. This is a tendency of thinking about the category of children that has been suggested to prevail in society very general and in diverse, although often unnoticed ways (eg. Kurki, 2013).

Both the theoretical and methodological bases of our research come mainly from the tradition of ethnomethodology. Ethnomethodology (later EM) was founded by the sociologist Harold Garfinkel (1967) as the study of properties of practical common sense reasoning in mundane situations. Garfinkel was interested in the ways in which people build and maintain order in social action. The issue that EM made empirically relevant was the fact that in social situations the actors somehow know what they are doing and share this knowledge. Thus, in order to provide for the stable organization of some set of social activities, detailed consideration had to be given to the participants’ understandings of their empirical circumstances (Heritage, 1984; 1987). The fact that these understandings are not explicitly discussed and cannot easily be explained, does not mean that they do not exist. An original idea of Garfinkel was to reveal these norms by finding out what happens when you act against them. Just like we would become acutely aware of the life sustaining function of air if someone deprived us of it, the social norms became obvious when someone was acting against what was expected. Garfinkel’s idea was that “the operations that one would have to perform in order to produce and sustain anomic features
of perceived environments and disorganized interaction should tell us something about how social structures are ordinarily and routinely being maintained” (Garfinkel, 1963: 187). His famous breaching experiments revealed that in everyday social activities we act under the tacit rules of behaviour and if someone deviates from normal procedures and acts differently, these deviations are usually interpreted as “motivated”, and they often cause anger (Heritage, 1984: 78-84).

Conversation Analysis (CA) lies in the theory of ethnomethodology. CA originated in studying talk-in-interaction, the systematic analysis of the kinds of talk produced in everyday situations of social interaction. Traditionally the focus has been on the description and explication of the competences that ordinary speakers use and rely on when participating in conversation. An assumption throughout CA is that human activities are accomplished as the accountable products of common sets of procedures. We start learning turn taking organization since infancy. Even young babies orient to interaction as something structured by turns alternating between the interactants, and show a preliminary understanding of turn taking organization in their interactions with others (Levinson, 2006). Turn taking organization explicates the rules that apply in ending a turn and beginning a turn – when taking your turn in conversation is treated as normal and when it is treated as something needing an explanation. Not only do we take and give turns according to an order but these turns routinely relate to other turns that came before them or are anticipating turns that might follow. A turn considered as a “greeting” is expected to be followed by “greeting back”. This is what sequence organization means. Certain turns in interaction are expected to appear together, right after one another as an “adjacency pair”. The first turn is called the “first pair part” and the turn that comes after is called the “second pair part”.

Commonly, the turns that form the first or the second pair parts in talk-in-interaction are not so often grammatical sentences and phrases amounting to linguistically correct sentences and phrases. Regardless of their linguistic shortcomings, they are nevertheless routinely treated as perfectly intelligible, normal and competent in real life interactions. This kind of unit, a turn construction unit (TCU), is in its own way complete and is also called “an utterance”. The utterance is the amount of speech that is produced by a person between two places in time where the person who is speaking could change, without it being interpreted as an interruption. Usually these places, called “transition relevant places” (TRP), are marked by silence after the utterance has ended and another one begins. Intonation, obviously also grammar and the content of the speech, as well as the eye gazes of the interactants, commonly play a role in constructing a moment into TRP.

By large, it can be analytically defined that there are two types of interaction contexts:

1. Mundane interaction, where the rules of interaction are the ones commonly known to be “the normal way of interacting” in a given culture in any given everyday situation. When people meet each other without the sign of any institutional system being present (like a teaching situation in school or a doctor’s appointment in a hospital), the situation can be considered as a case of mundane interaction.
2. Institutional interaction, where there is a system of interacting which alternates or gives additional rules to the way people distribute turns – for example when a teacher is teaching and the students are expected not to spontaneously start telling about their thoughts but are obligated to raise their hand as a way of requesting a permission.

For parental smartphone use and its effect on parent-child interaction, it is important to note that it is exactly in the way the turns are allocated that mundane interaction differs from institutional interaction. When there is no institutional frame dictating the meeting and interaction of people, each time a TRP is reached, the implicit question of “who will take the next turn, or will the current speaker continue?” is in some way being addressed. This is so much a common routine that any kind of explicit addressing of this question, like for example raising a hand as a way of showing interest in taking the next turn, will be oriented to as something out of the ordinary and in need of explication.

A subcategory of sequence organization is something called preference organization. This states that not only are certain turns expected to be followed by a specific type of certain other turns, but even in the kinds of second pair parts that make sense, there is often a second pair part that would be preferred over others. For example, after a first pair part of “stating an opinion”, the second pair part of “agreeing to the opinion” is preferred over “disagreeing”, whereas the second pair part of “greeting back” would not even make any sense. Still, preference organization in real life interactions is naturally more complex than just looking at the literary meaning of the turns spoken. Often a turn that grammatically seems to beg for compliance, is actually preferring a disagreement as a second pair part. For example, “I’m too fat!” rarely begs for agreement “yes you are”, but would more likely be an invitation to support the self-esteem of another by disagreeing to the literary content of the first pair part by producing a second pair part that in its content seems to be in opposition to the turn before: “no, you are beautiful!”

The dispreferred turns are usually marked by several elements that try to avoid and soften the effect that the dispreferred turn has. Dispreferred turns, be it a first pair part or a second pair part, are routinely avoided in interaction and when they appear they are commonly produced after a pause or containing pauses between words. Also, the production of words can be lengthened, signs of hesitation, stuttering, starting the sentence again, apologizing and giving explanations are likewise common. As a dispreferred second pair part to an invitation, someone might for example reply: “ummmm….. sorry, I caaan’t.. mh th’. I can’t really come tomorrow. I have to get some work done also in the evening and I must wake up early the next morning. Could we go next week?” The explanations do not usually assign guilt for any person about the fact that a dispreferred turn has occurred. They also depict the one producing the explanation as unable to do otherwise and are appealing to private circumstances rather than some conditions that are readily known and available to the other person also to observe.

CA offers a large collection of tools for studying real time interaction of many forms but is especially well suited for analyzing face-to-face interaction in mundane settings. The ideal data for conversation analytic research is
naturalistic – meaning that the participants were not asked to come to the laboratory to interact about a specific topic in a specific manner but rather that the researchers have gathered the data in a location natural to the lives of the participants and instructed them to behave as they would if there was no collecting of data happening at all. The best method for getting this kind of naturalistic data is to let the recording devices do the data gathering without the presence of the researchers (Mazeland, 2006).

Data

Our data was collected in many phases. It is the product of a large project, “Media, Family interaction and Children’s Well-Being” funded by the Academy of Finland and conducted between the years 2009 and 2015. In the first phase, a middle-sized city in Finland was chosen as the location of the data collection. The different districts of the city were divided into high income and low income categories based on the average salary of the household, according to tax records. An equal amount of schools and preschools were then chosen as the locations where questionnaires were distributed to the parents of 12-year old schoolchildren or 5-year-old preschoolers. A number of 249 questionnaires were returned and statistical analyses were conducted on that data to evaluate how representative it is of average Finnish population. One item on the questionnaire was a question asking about the willingness to take part in a more in-depth study, involving the installation of video cameras into the home of the family. A board game or a video game of a maximum value of 75 euros was promised as a reward for the families that take part in this more through study. We recruited 13 families with a 5-year-old child and 13 families with a 12-year-old child. Many of the children had siblings living in the same household so we began to call the 5 year-olds and 12-year-olds that were the focus of our research as “focal children”.

The parents were then contacted to schedule a day for videotaping. A non-weekend day, which they consider would represent their “normal day”, was chosen. When arriving to the family’s home, the parents were asked which the most relevant locations in the house were from the point of view of the child’s media use. The first camera was installed to videotape the main TV set, the second captured the living room as a whole, the third one videotaped the events in the kitchen and the fourth one was installed to capture the focal child’s main media device (e.g. computer or a video game set) and the area around it. The research assistant started the video recording, instructed the parents how to stop it when the focal child had gone to sleep and left the family with an instruction of “just passing the day as usual”. The following day the assistant returned to collect the cameras and interviewed both the parents and the child about their media use and whether the day of the recording actually went according to what they would consider to be common in their family. The data collected comprises out of four simultaneous video recordings of the 26 families. Because the four recordings cover different areas of the house and sometimes capture simultaneous but unrelated events, it is hard to describe the size of the video data. There is 655 hours of video and it covers a time span of 186 hours.
We have gone through the entire data marking with two different levels of accuracy (to an excel sheet and as more lengthy description) the events inside the house; focusing specifically to describe the parent-child interaction that took place as well as who was initiating it, was it the child or the parent.

Picture 1. Going through the data making summaries in two levels of accuracy (permission granted for the use of the picture).

The quantitative data showed that the 26 families taking part in the more in-depth study with the video recordings did not significantly differ from the 249 families that only answered the questionnaires. The only difference seemed to be that the fathers of the 26 families in the in-depth study were on average more educated than in the 249 only answering the questionnaire. This difference in education level was not found with regard to mothers.

Results

First, as an introduction to the main theme of the paper, we show an episode from the data in which a 7-year-old Zoe (name changed) is looking to have her mother join her into building a puzzle. The mother is watching TV. Her phone is next to her on the couch.
1. Mom: .hh Oh no I should clean the °kitchen° (1.5) °I’m too tired°
2. (15)
3. ((Mom begins to key in her phone))
4. (3)
5. Zoe: This puzzle is not even holding together (1) hhhh hhh hhhhh. (2) soon
6. comes (-)
7. Mom: Huaaa ((Mom starts to make a phone call to the father and while yawning,
puts the phone on her ear.))
10. Mom: How are you doing there.

Excerpt 1.

Just prior the excerpt above, Zoe talked with her mother face to face, sharing eye contact. During the excerpt, Zoe is looking at her puzzle and has no knowledge of her mother starting a phone call. Zoe then asks her mother to help her with the puzzle (Line 9) but hears a surprising answer: “How are you doing there?” (line 10). Zoe commences a repair sequence by asking clarification “Where?” (line 11). This is due to the content of the second pair part that the mother has produced, not making much sense in relation to the first pair part of Zoe. As Zoe turns her head towards the mother, she notices that the mother is in fact not talking to her but is talking on the phone.

Bystander ignorance

This extract exemplifies that due to their mobility, smartphones are ubiquitous devices. It has become a norm to carry them with you at all times and thus they are also a noticeable part of the daily life of families. This means that family members can potentially at any time commence an activity with their smartphones, and the possibilities of other family members in their immediate vicinity to know about their availability for face-to-face interaction are significantly reduced. The participants of a face-to-face interaction that start using a smartphone stop, to a large
extent, giving hints of the goals of their actions to other people around them. If a person is reading a newspaper, we immediately see that they are reading and not chatting with someone. If a person is using a printer, we know they want to print papers. We claim that the posture and gestures of the smartphone user, or the shape and state of the smartphone itself, can be obscure. While using a smartphone, it is harder to infer what the user is currently doing. It is a less obviously dedicated action than it can be for other devices. Having recognized this special aspect, we name it “Bystander Ignorance” (cf. Raudaskoski, Mantere, and Valkonen, forthcoming). The lack of visual and auditive cues to the bystander, the mobility of the device and the bigger amount of variation in the types of action possibilities than is the case with any other device, are responsible for keeping a collection of aspects about the smartphone user’s activity hidden to the person in their immediate vicinity. These aspects include:

I. Phase of action
   (e.g. preparatory phase, execution phase or being already close to terminating the action)

II. Category of action
   (e.g. entertainment, work, information seeking or communication)

In the chart below are presented the technological solutions and functional features of a smartphone that we think are responsible for the phenomenon of “Bystander Ignorance”.

Both technological solutions and functional features (cf. also Raudaskoski, 2009: 48) have an influence on what the bystander could reasonably expect to get as a reply from the executor of the action if they interrupted the actor in order to suggest the commencement of face-to-face interaction. More generally, it could be said that what is hidden to the bystander are the current and future goals of the action the smartphone user is undertaking.
In our data, there were numerous examples of actions that could safely be done in different phases. The series of pictures below depicts the watering of plants performed by one of our five-year-old focal children. We can assume that she has seen her caretaker undertake this action and has acquired the necessary knowledge in performing it herself, to an important degree, through social learning.

Picture 3. Phases of action. Read from left to right and then down: 1) preparation; 2) execution; 3) intermediate assessment; 4) continued action; 5) repair; 6) final assessment.

It is clear that, regardless of the number and type of categories that are likely to emerge from the action of flowering plants, distinct phases can be observed. This is generally also the case for other actions performed in the home environment of families. To the person seeking face-to-face interaction with the performer of this action, there are immediate signs that show the expected preoccupancy of the actor, and hence information about what might be expected as a reaction when issuing them with different kinds of requests. A person commencing a final assessment of watering plants might be more likely to produce a preferred second pair part to a request of joining a shared activity, than a person who has just commenced the execution phase.

In the usage of a smartphone, the phases of action, observable to the bystander, are limited to merely taking hold of the smartphone, to looking at it and to the intermitted swiping or tapping of its screen. Whether the user has just begun writing an email and is expected to be preoccupied with this task during the following five to ten minutes, or whether they are merely reading a status update on Facebook and writing a short comment, is commonly unknown to the bystander.

This brings us to the second hidden aspect of smartphone use. Unlike in the case of plant watering, when using a smartphone, there are often little if any clues to the bystander about which category of action the user of the device is undertaking. Whether the looking, swiping and tapping of the smartphone screen are part of a work or leisure activity cannot easily be seen. Obviously this might be less of a problem if the screen of the device was visible, but due to smaller screen sizes and the modality how smartphones are used (i.e. they are kept close to the face
of the person using them), this is less the case than for example with a traditional computer. Also, perhaps due to this very characteristic of screen sizes, and also the fact that smartphones often contain personal credit card information and immediately show contents of very personal messages, the viewing of another person’s smartphone screen is not as socially accepted as the viewing of another person’s laptop screen. This seems to make smartphones devices more private than any other in the modern world (cf. The Guardian 2016). This has been acknowledged also by manufacturers who now produce phones that can be unlocked with the user’s fingerprints.

Since it is impossible to recognize neither the phase nor the category of action that the smartphone user is performing, the bystander cannot infer the norms of interruption that apply in the situation. The variety of categories is here immense and the ignorance of the bystander goes as far as not even knowing if the smartphone user is undertaking an interaction with another person or just seeking information about a topic. Needless to say that the norms of interruption and the expected reply to an interruption as well as any suggestion for commencing joint activity, differ vastly in these two cases.

**Sticky Media Device**

We argue that initiating interaction with a smartphone user differs immensely from initiating interaction, for instance, with a person who is having a conversation with another person present in the same time and space. In our previous work (Mantere and Raudaskoski 2015; forthcoming), we discovered an interaction phenomenon, which we coined as “Sticky Media Device”. It depicts how smartphones appear to the person who is inviting the smartphone user into face-to-face interaction. The smartphone user’s attention is hard to gain. It appears as if “stuck” on the sticky device. Even if the user’s attention is momentarily gained, it easily reverts to the screen.

The following excerpt depicts the phenomenon of sticky media device and its relation to the issue of bystander ignorance. A 12-year-old Amy (name changed) attempts to get the attention of her mother but only succeeds through sustained effort. The way her mother is interacting with Amy is what we are mainly interested in.

![Picture 4. Mom and Amy at the beginning. Amy is drawing pictures of supermodels in her notebook and mother is using her smartphone](image-url)
Excerpt 2.

1. Amy: This is not so terrible is it, (1.1) #mom#, ((showing a picture from her notebook))
2. (2.0)((mother looks at the picture))
3. Mom: Th’ no::: it’s like (. ) nice.
4. (7.0) ((mom continues to use her smartphone but glances at Amy’s pictures when Amy is going through her notebook))
5. Amy: Go through these from here onwards?
6. (1.1) ((Amy gets up from her chair and walks towards mother with her notebook))
7. Amy: And tell me which one you think is <the best>.
8. Mom: .hhh (. ) oh[hhhhh
9. Amy: [tell (. ) from one to five how many stars you give this one?
10. ((while talking, Amy is knocking on mother’s shoulder with her finger))
11. (2.1) ((mother looks at the picture, starts to put her smartphone on the table but pulls it back next to her body and takes hold of it again with both of her hands and returns her gaze to the screen of the phone))

Pictures 5, 6 and 7. Read from left to right, then down: Sticky Media Device does not dislodge from the mother’s hands.

17. Amy: Mom? ((nudges mother on her arm with her elbow)
18. (0.2)
19. Mom: Well- ((the sound is cut short and followed by a short holding of the breath; mother starts putting away her smartphone))
20. (8.0) ((after putting away the phone as far away from her onto the table as possible, mother finally looks at Amy’s picture))
Mother’s attention is here divided between using her smartphone and attending to face-to-face interaction with Amy. To be more specific, two separate interaction fields preoccupy the mother, and they both request sole focus of her eye gaze and cognition. During this division of mother’s attention, we witness pauses, bending of a word, stopping of the word, loud breath and a sigh. All these are usually present with dispreferred turns and would suggest that the mother would be evaluating Amy’s picture in a way that is contradictory to the expected response, i.e. in a negative way. The micro-pause at line 4 makes the sentence sound sarcastic but looking at the content of the other turns and their whole progression, it seems more likely that this pause is connected to the searching of the correct word, “nice”.

Our opinion is that those elements implying dispreference have actually nothing to do with the way the mother is orienting towards the quality of Amy’s picture of a supermodel, but are in fact connected to her using the smartphone. We are arguing that they would not exist if the smartphone were not present. Also, the necessity to search for a word as common and simple as “nice” suggests that the mother’s interaction is challenged by her simultaneous focus on the smartphone.

Altogether, the mother’s behaviour shows that she is willing to interact with Amy but her distracting smartphone does not seem not to dislodge from the mother’s hands. In lines 14-16 and in the pictures 4-6, we see how the mother is starting to put away the smartphone and is orienting towards evaluating Amy’s picture, only to finally return her full focus back on the device.

One might say that we should be able to see what exactly it is that the mother is doing with her smartphone before we could really analyze its role in these types of interactions. This might at first seem like a valid criticism since the application of the smartphone creates an adjacency pair structure with the user (Raudaskoski, 2009) and therefore becomes part of the interactive frame of the situation. However, we as researchers look the situation very much from the similar position than Amy does: she cannot see what her mother is doing with her smartphone and has thus very little information of both the category and the phase of action conducted by the mother. In other words, Amy is in a situation of “bystander ignorance” in relation to the mother’s smartphone use.

Each time a turn produced by a smartphone user is delayed, contains pauses or inconsistencies, or is left unfinished or started again, the interpretative task of the receiver becomes challenging. Bystander ignorance of the receiver makes it hard to determine whether these aspects relate to the shared social activity of the participants, or whether they exist solely due to one of the participants having their orientation directed towards their smartphone.

Therefore we can conclude that discerning the phenomena of sticky media device and bystander ignorance explicates that the norms and expectations of mundane interaction are often radically breached when one of the interactants is utilizing a smartphone during the face-to-face conversation.
We have drawn attention to a certain aspect of smartphone use that is by and large missing in other forms of solitary activity in which a parent may become absorbed: a child cannot infer, from the body of the caregiver or the shape and state of the smartphone, which action the caregiver is currently in the midst of performing. Young children learning to interpret their environment come across many kinds of objects and artifacts: they grasp, suck and manipulate them and thus become aware of their affordances. This is called the direct learning of affordances. But even the objects of the physical world are usually encountered in a social framework so most of human affordances are in fact “social” (e.g. Ingold, 2000). A child is selectively exposed to different objects by other people. He starts using these individuals as reference points for deciding how to interact with the objects in question (Tomasello, 1999b: 165). Furthermore, already babies begin tuning into and attempt to reproduce the goals and behavioral means an adult manifests with an object. The artifacts come to embody what Tomasello calls “intentional affordances” (1999a: 84; 1999b: 166). Children learn about artifacts’ cultural affordances and while observing the use of cultural tools and artifacts they often engage in the process of “imitative learning” (Tomasello 1999a: 81; 1999b): they try to place themselves in the “intentional space” of the other, discerning the other’s goal or what she/he is using the artefact “for”. This way, children come to know not only the sensory-motor affordances but also the intentional affordances, i.e. the intentional relation that the other person holds with the world through the artefact (ibid. 1999a, 84–85).

In imitative learning, a child usually joins the other person in affirming what this object is used for: hammers are for hammering, pencils for writing (Tomasello, 1999a: 84). We argue that unlike most artefacts in the human environment (e.g. the watering canister and the plant), smartphones serve exceptionally poorly as intentional affordances for children. By explicating how the phases and goals of action of smartphone use are hidden to the bystander, we suggest that the smartphone and its use include less “clues” for tracing the “intentional stance” (Dennett, 1987) of its user than other devices in the home environment. At the same time, it is the device that offers the biggest amount and varieties of use and accompanies its user throughout the day more than any other device. Children’s embodied engagement with an environment is being shaped into meaningful actions through interaction with an experienced practitioner and the structure of mutual accessibility created in joint participation framework (cf. Goodwin, 2007: 59) and intentional affordances. A caregiver using a smartphone not only draws back from the participation framework but also to a large extent stops giving hints of the goal of her/his action. This leads to what we call the “Bystander Ignorance” of the child: the exceptional level and quality of unawareness that a person interested in pursuing face-to-face interaction with a smartphone-user has about the aspects of the activity that the other is currently engaged in.
References


