Chapter 8.9
Growing Up Wireless:
Being a Parent and Being a Child in the Age of Mobile Communication

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ABSTRACT

This chapter illustrates the role of the mobile phone in the rise of new cultural models of parenting. According to a phenomenological theoretical approach to culture and everyday life, the author argues that the relationship between technologies, culture, and society should be conceived as a mutual construction. As cultural artefacts, mobile communication technologies both are domesticated by people into their cultural ways of living and create new ones. How are mobile phones domesticated by already existing cultural models of parenting? How does the introduction of the mobile phone affect family life and inter-generational relationships? How does mobile contact contribute in the construction of new cultural models of "being a parent" and "being a child"? Analysing new social phenomena such as "hyper-parenting" and the "dialogic use" of mobile phones, the author argues upon the role of mobile communication technologies in articulating the paradoxical nature of the contemporary cultural model of family education.

BEYOND THE USER-TECHNOLOGY DICHOTOMY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO EVERYDAY LIFE

"Some day we will build up a world telephone system making necessary to all peoples the use a common language, or common understanding of languages, which will join all the people of the earth into one brotherhood" (Dilts, 1941, p. 11, cited in de Sola Pool, 1977, p. 129)

Like an underground current, the same social discourse reappears each time a new technology enters the social world: the technology purportedly produces new unexpected behaviours and causes major changes in the way people live. Whether it is for the worse or for the better is not

important. What matters more is the underlying unidirectional causal-deterministic model that putatively accounts for the influence of technologies in people's lives.

The deterministic approach to social phenomena and particularly to technological evolution has had a long and strong tradition that spans the 20th Century. Even if today no one would say "science discovers, industry applies, man conforms,"[1] the deterministic model persists in both scientific and commonsense approaches. At least within commonsense reasoning and theories, information and communication technologies are supposed to determine not only people's behaviours but also their attitudes, relationships, and even identities. Empowered technologies are perceived as overwhelming unskilled people as if they dominate their lives. Such a view of the role of technologies in people's everyday life has the hallmarks of all commonsense theories. It is self evident, taken for granted, and ready made. It shares commonsense's advantages: it provides easy to grasp explanations for a number of social events and allows people to cope with more dramatic circumstances. Like most practical reasoning, the one concerning information and communication technologies is a shortcut. It reduces the complexity of the phenomenon making it simpler and apparently more manageable.

Often echoed by media discourse and sometimes reinforced by references to simplified expert discourse, commonsense reasoning and layman theories constitute a shared cultural system through which we make sense of technologies in our daily life.

Although the deterministic approach to social phenomena has nurtured commonsense theories more than any other approach, it is not the only one. A major philosophical approach has been supporting concurrent views on social phenomena and providing a different paradigm for understanding technologies in everyday life: the phenomenological approach to social life.

Since Edmund Husserl's and Alfred Schutz's philosophical investigations, scholars in both Europe and the United States have emphasized the role of individuals in constructing culture, social organization, and their relation to the material features of everyday life contexts. Against any form of social and cultural determinism, ethnomethodology has demonstrated that people create their social and cultural world through their everyday actions and interactions (Garfinkel, 1967). Everyday practices of ordinary people are the effective tools that make supposedly passive users behave as active subjects. Defying and subverting any determinism of both dominant culture and the systems of production, social actors invent and create, moment by moment, the meaning and functions of things that circulate in their social space (De Certeau, 1984). Far from obeying implicit logics inscribed in goods, consumers develop their own tactics and follow paths in often unforeseen and unpredictable ways. The uses and gratification approach to information and communication technologies (Katz, Blumer, & Gurevitch, 1974) is consistent with this antideterministic paradigm. Proponents of this stream have shed light on the role of users' needs and goals in the adoption or rejection of a technology and its intended uses.

These approaches to social life and phenomena share a crucial theoretical assertion: the strength of human agency (Giddens, 1979, 1984) and subject intentionality in making the meaningful dimensions of the world people inhabit.[2]

Accordingly, everyday life is conceived as a never-ending cultural work through which social actors produce the meaning, structures, and social organization of the world they live in, as well as their own identities and those of the people they interact with. Everyday language and interaction are the primary tools of this culture construction. However, social structures as well as the material features of everyday life contexts are more than an inert background for culture construction.

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