

## Researching Teenagers' (Mobile) Interaction Orders – Methodical and Methodological Reflections on a Challenging Field

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### **Abstract**

*Mobile phones play an essential role in the everyday lives and social relationships of young people. They are deeply embedded in peer interactions, not only as tools but also as references of interaction. The article is based on an empirical study, which investigates how young people interpret various situations of interaction through, and related to, mobile phones. Providing a useful heuristic to reconstruct the inherent rules, claims and expectations of such situations, Goffman's concept of the interaction order was modified in regard to youth-specific and mobile media-specific dimensions with the help of a grounded theory approach.*

*The article deals with the methodical strategies that were applied as well as respective methodological questions that arose during the research process. In order to gain insights into the participants' episodic and semantic knowledge about mobile media related situations, group interviews/discussions, mobile phone diaries and individual interviews were conducted. Each collection strategy is discussed in respect to its preconditions and execution. Additionally, problems regarding the role of the researcher in relation to the participants will be explicated.*

### **1. Introduction**

We observe it every day in public spaces, in trains and busses, in shopping malls and in the streets: People looking at their mobile phones, talking to absent others, swiping their touchscreens or typing a message. Mobile media have become a fundamental part of our everyday lives or, as Ling puts it, today mobile communication is taken for granted and embedded into our society (Ling, 2012).

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Together with the worldwide distribution of this technology since the late 1990s, there has been a conjuncture of studies dealing with mobile media. The range of issues and questions is broad: from theories on connectivity and network society, shifts in the concept of privacy, to empirical work on media appropriation and communication behavior, as well as studies about (allegedly) new phenomena like cyberbullying or mobile phone addiction.<sup>1</sup> One segment of society that has been strongly taken into account from the very beginning is the age group of adolescents. Studies about mobile media and youth have been conducted in many regions of the world: the USA and Japan (Katz & Sugiyama, 2005; Ito, 2005), the United Kingdom (Haddon & Vincent, 2009), South Korea (Yoon, 2006), Italy (Colombo & Scifo, 2005), or Finland (Oksman & Rautiainen, 2003), just to name a few. Albeit focusing on different theoretical and empirical aspects, all these studies' findings suggest one common tendency: a high relevance of mobile media in the lifeworlds of young people.

This observation is substantiated by several quantitative studies. According to an annual survey on young people's media usage in Germany, there has been a rapid dissemination of mobile technologies in the last few years. In 2013, nearly every respondent (96%) aged 12 to 19 owned a mobile phone, with 92% even in the youngest cohort (12-13 years). 72% reported they already had a smartphone, i.e. multifunctional phones with advanced computing capacity and the ability to go online (Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest [MPFS], 2013, p. 51). This number remarkably increased – parallel to the fast diffusion of the devices in the global technology market – more than fivefold within three years; in 2010 the rate was only 14% (MPFS, 2010, p. 7).

Due to the possibility to access the internet via mobile media any time at any place, adolescents were online 179 minutes per day on average – that is 48 minutes more than the year before (MPFS, 2013, p. 28 f.). But despite the vast range of options and a growing number of information and entertainment applications ('apps'), the 'classic' activities like phoning and texting were still in first place when asking for the most frequently used functions (MPFS, 2013, p. 55). This finding suggests that the mobile phone is still primarily used for interpersonal communication and that it is rather the *channels for mediatized interaction* among young people that have changed. The most mentioned applications for smartphones were instant messenger programs (81%) like WhatsApp, which achieved very high download rates recently, followed by online communities like Facebook (59%) (MPFS, 2013, p. 53).

Building on such quantitative and qualitative studies on mobile media usage, I carried out an empirical project in Germany, which investigates interaction orders among teenagers in regard to mobile media (Eisentraut, 2015). It is interested in how young people interpret various situations of interaction *through*, and *related to*, mobile phones. From a sociological perspective, I ask for the implicit rules, claims and expectations that apply to specific situations. Since the practices and relationships of teenagers are looked at against the background of *social order* of society, situations are conceived of as spatiotemporal constellations, in which actors produce and reproduce order through their interactions.

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<sup>1</sup> Instead of referencing the great variety of books and articles on the topic, I prefer pointing out the recently launched journal *Mobile Media & Communication*, which is a good example for the increased interest in the research field.

However, the main focus of this contribution is not to present the empirical findings of the project, but to instead problematize the *process of researching* in particular. The reason for choosing a methodical and methodological approach is the impression that many of the experiences I made during the data collection as well as the related problems I had to deal with were mostly not mentioned in the literature. While doing fieldwork and interacting with my research participants, I often found myself in situations that generated questions which seemed worth reflecting further upon. In this sense, the present article can not only be seen as a possibility for me to finally address these questions but also as a problem-centred contribution for similar projects. Aiming at discussing the methodical and methodological challenges of the field, the article sets two goals, as it a) critically discusses the data collection strategies and thereby b) reflects upon the researcher's role while studying interaction orders among teenagers.

First, I will introduce the theoretical framework of the project. Then I will outline the data collection strategies, which were designed as a three-step approach. Consisting of group interviews/discussions, mobile phone diaries and individual interviews, each method will be discussed separately in respect to its preconditions and execution. Additionally, problems regarding the role of the researcher in relation to the participants will be reflected on for each method. In order to grant insights into the *process* of researching, both collected data as well as anecdotal observations made before or during the data collection are used. In the final chapter, I will take a look at the implications of the presented reflections for further research in the field of youth and mobile media studies.

## 2. Teenagers, mobile media and the interaction order

For teenagers, mobile phones are not just one technology beside others. Mobiles are carried around the whole day, whether at home, during leisure time or at school. As some kind of permanent digital companions they are socially and emotionally meaningful to adolescents and thus important for processes of socialization (Schulz, 2012). In their pioneer study on the adoption of mobile technology among Norwegian teens, Ling and Yttri (2002) distinguish three pivotal dimensions of practice. The first dimension refers to an *instrumental use* like coordinating meetings and planning activities in social groups on short notice. Secondly the mobile phone is relevant for what the authors call *expressive use*, which means rather emotional and phatic communication facilitated by mobile media. And thirdly, mobile media are part of *in-group discussions* or agreements. Teenagers talk about which type of mobile or which label is trendy or which functions are required. And they also talk about where, when and in which ways the mobile phone should be handled or not. As Stald (2008) remarks, this kind of exchange in peers supports formation of identity by negotiating cultural, social and individual codes and social comparison with others. Mobile phones “offer possibilities for testing oneself in the light of shared values, norms and codes, for negotiating collective and personal identity, and for establishing a sense for belonging” (Stald, 2008, p. 161). The findings imply that mobile phones are deeply embedded in peer interactions. Furthermore they suggest that mobile media are not only *tools* but also *references* of interaction. They are either *used* or they are *referred to* in situations, and it is also possible that both activities are happening simultaneously. Starting from these observations, the research project focuses on interactions *through* and *related to* mobile media, and investigates processes of ordering among young people.

In order to study situations of interaction and their inherent structures, Erving Goffman's

concept of the *interaction order* provides a still useful heuristic. Being interested in the social organization of interactions such as encounters or social occasions, Goffman understood situations as structured by implicit rules and expectations, which the involved interactants take into account for their actions:

“The workings of the interaction order can easily be viewed as the consequences of systems of enabling conventions, in the sense of the ground rules for a game, the provisions of a traffic code or the rules of syntax of a language” (Goffman, 1983, p. 5).

Even if it was Goffman's claim to study interactions as an analytical realm of its own right, he always emphasized the connection to macrosocial structural patterns. He was interested in how the normative order or behavioral rules of certain situations (e.g. business meetings) structure the possibilities for interaction. While the idea of interactions being ordered by societal and situative norms was a helpful theoretical starting point for the study, Goffman's original concept of interaction order had to be modified and extended at some points during the research process, particularly as it neither gives attention to (a) the specifics of interactions among teenagers nor (b) the role of mobile media for interactions. In order to modify the concept, the relevant literature dealing with youth interactions as well as literature on mobile media was analyzed with regard to processes of ordering. Further concepts were developed during the coding of data. As an outcome, a multidimensional concept of interaction order was constructed, which integrates different dimensions of social order – each one potentially structures interactions between actors or is reinforced (or modified) by actors, respectively. While one set of dimensions concerns youth-specific interaction orders (a), the second set concerns media-specific dimensions of order (b), as the following sections will show.

(a) Dealing with the particular age group of adolescents affords thinking about their position and embeddedness in society as well as their scope for interactions against the background of asymmetric power relations between different age groups. In this sense, one element of social order that seems relevant for young people is the *generational order*. According to this theoretical concept, teenagers and children are understood as a social (not a natural) category that is defined in relation to adults; by attributing certain rights, obligations and needs to adolescents and ensuring the different social positions of the age groups through institutions, the generational arrangement of society is maintained (Alanen, 2005; Bühler-Niederberger, 2011, pp. 173ff.). A good example for the workings of the generational order in the context of media use can be found in the widespread prohibition of mobile phones in schools. By banning the devices from the classroom (and partially even from the playground), adults define legitimate and illegitimate times and spaces for certain practices of adolescents – whereby they structure the range of possible interaction and keep up the existing normative order inherent to the educational system.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the generational order can come into play in interactions between teenagers

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<sup>2</sup> Explanations for the rejection of mobile phones are multifaceted, but obviously the related practices are perceived as a potential threat to educational conceptions as they contradict adult expectations towards appropriate or ‘normal’ student behavior (e.g. being attentive towards the teacher). The phenomenon is embedded into a broader discussion on new media and their (mostly dangerous) ‘effects’ on young people (e.g., Spitzer, 2012).

and parents, e.g. when rules and boundaries are negotiated. Sometimes being the reason for arguments, the mobile phone can on the other hand be a tool for negotiation, as it gives both children and parents new possibilities for making concessions (cf. Williams & Williams, 2005).

Besides the structuring impact of the generational order, there are processes of ordering that are more directly linked to the interactions among teenagers, like *gender order* or the hierarchy within peer groups (thus, one can speak of *peer order*). These dimensions affect the mutual assurance of shared codes, rules and norms between peers. With regard to mobile media this could be the question of what practices are legitimate (and which are not) and to whom these practices apply. Peer order and gender order potentially become relevant within various forms of social relationships between teenagers: They come into play in school class (e.g., Breidenstein & Kelle, 1998), friendships (e.g., Breitenbach, 2000) or romantic relationships for instance.

b) Another open question needs to be clarified: Since Goffman originally worked out the concept of the interaction order so as to analyze situations “in which two or more individuals are physically in one another's response presence” (Goffman, 1983, p. 2), it remains unclear how mediatized interaction between *spatially distant* persons can be integrated into the theoretical approach. It is necessary to apply a theory of mobile media to the concept of interaction order.<sup>3</sup> As mobile phones facilitate permanent virtual co-presence and multiple parallel interactions with (spatially distant and co-present) others, they create what Ito and Okabe (2005) call *technosocial situations* which challenge the previous definition of social situations. In this perspective mobile media constitute places beyond physical co-presence, in which individuals define new rules, conventions and expectations for interactions.

“Mobile phones create new kinds of bounded places that merge the infrastructure of geography and technology, as well as technosocial practices that merge technical standards and social norms” (Ito & Okabe, 2005, p. 260).

Situations of mediatized interaction are not only structured by the normative order of physical settings and the question of whether individuals are located in private or public spaces (think of taking a private call at the workplace). Instead, there is a complex interplay of physical and virtual places, technical possibilities and affordances of the medium, and implicit social rules and expectations associated with the respective situations. An important theoretical challenge comes with the appearance of what can be understood as *co-situatedness*. Actors are not involved in *one* (face-to-face) situation only, like in Goffman's time, but in several situations, which simultaneously demand attention and confront them with different – sometimes contradicting – social expectations.

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<sup>3</sup> Goffman, who died in 1982, had of course no chance to think about the consequences of mobile phones for his own work. There are some occasional statements towards other communication media, though, which indicate a rather unsystematic engagement with the subject. He mentions telephones and mails, for instance, as “reduced versions of the primordial real thing [face-to-face interaction, SE]” (Goffman, 1983, p. 2). Elsewhere, he defines the term “contact” as “any occasion when an individual comes into an other's response presence, whether through physical copresence, telephonic connection or letter exchange” (Goffman, 1983, p. 6).

Moreover, whether a situation – mediatized or not – is even perceived as such by the interactants, is rather an outcome of a shared experience of an ongoing collaboration and a feeling of synchronicity of communication (Rettie, 2009) than a physical precondition like spatial co-presence. Against the background of changing concepts of spatiality and temporality (e.g., Wilken & Goggin, 2012), including a media-theoretical perspective into the analysis of social situations surfaces as essential.

Mediatized interaction must hence not be conceived as a reduced version of the ‘real thing’ or as separated from physical situations – instead mediatized and face-to-face interaction are intertwined and they produce co-situational constellations. As mentioned, the mobile phone plays an important role for teenagers when they interact with parents, schoolmates, partners or friends – be it in form of mediatized interaction or as interactions related to mobile media. Researching these situations means that one can observe various implicit rules, claims and expectations that are – in Goffman’s words – the “ground rules” (1983, p. 5) for the game. By integrating different youth-specific and media-specific dimensions of social order in the course of the study, the theoretical and analytical scope of the concept of interaction order was broadened.

### **3. Researching a challenging field**

As indicated above, the goal of the research project was to reconstruct and typologize different mobile interaction orders among teenagers, through the use of non-standardized data so as to come as close as possible to everyday knowledge. The grounded theory approach, initially introduced by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) appeared as a fitting qualitative methodology in this respect. Especially Strauss’ refined version of grounded theory (Strauss 1987; Corbin & Strauss 2008), which conceives of researching as an alternating process of collecting (or constructing)<sup>4</sup> data, interpretation of data and building theory, is a flexible and yet structured research style. In contrast to Glaser’s understanding of grounded theory, which promotes a more inductive approach, it allows for referring to practical and theoretical foreknowledge within the process of researching. Picking up Herbert Blumer’s idea of sensitizing concepts (1954), who stressed that in social theory concepts should always be understood as vague and preliminary, Strauss emphasized the relevance of foreknowledge as source of inspiration and interpretative device for research. Such

“[s]ensitizing concepts give researchers initial but tentative ideas to pursue and questions to raise about their topics. Grounded theorists use sensitizing concepts as tentative tools for developing their ideas about processes that they define in their data” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 30).

Goffman’s concept of the interaction order, in particular his definition of social situations as being structured by implicit norms and rules, functioned as a sensitizing concept. The concept already worked as a heuristic tool already in the phase of designing collection methods. By means of ethnographic field access and interviews with young people of

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<sup>4</sup> In her constructivist approach of grounded theory, Charmaz (2014) emphasizes that the process of gathering data already is an act of defining them.

different age, sex and educational background, I aimed at obtaining insights into teenagers' everyday knowledge about situations related to mobile media.

Different strategies for data collection were considered and eventually a three-step approach was designed. It encompassed a) group interviews/discussions, b) mobile phone diaries and c) individual interviews. Since the approach was conceived step-by-step in the course of the research process, I will introduce the aims of each data collection strategy and then delineate the process against the background of arising methodical challenges. Additionally, I will discuss methodological questions regarding the researcher's role for each method by using examples from fieldwork.

### 3.1. Group interviews/discussions

In order to gain first impressions of the everyday knowledge and the relevancies of young people towards mobile media related practices, group interviews were deemed to be the most adequate collection strategy. Due to the taken-for-grantedness of mobile media usage I presumed that respondents were more likely to talk about respective issues in the presence of same-aged 'discussion partners' like friends or classmates. I developed an interview guideline with a broad range of questions covering different aspects of mobile media usage. i.e. it included questions about the everyday life meaning of mobile phones, preferred functions and routines of mobile media use, assessments of others' media behavior and problematic issues like the banning of mobiles in the school. Even though the guideline ensured to cover the same topics in every interview, it allowed for immanent questions so as to remain open for spontaneous relating to the participants' narratives. Besides questions about typical forms of usage and related issues, I developed situational questions. In order to generate narratives about specific *situations* with specific *interaction partners* regarding mobile media, I applied the strategy of the episodic interview (Flick, 1997). Being "sensitive for concrete situational contexts" (Flick, 1997, p. 2), the method generates two different kinds of knowledge: episodic and semantic knowledge.

"[E]pisodic knowledge comprises knowledge which is linked to concrete circumstances (time, space, persons, events, situations), whereas semantic knowledge is more abstract, generalized and decontextualized from specific situations and events" (Flick, 1997, p. 4).

The method was developed originally for individual interviews and not applied to group settings, but in the course of the data collection I increasingly learned that the combination of discussion parts (among the participants) and interview parts (between participants and researcher) were actually a fruitful strategy.

Connecting with a secondary school<sup>5</sup> was the initial step into the research field. I presented the research project to the principal and asked him for permission to do group interviews in different classes. As the principal showed great interest in the mobile phone usage of his students – although from a rather worried perspective – I was allowed to conduct two group interviews per grade (7-10), meaning eight sessions in total. In the sense of a theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the first sample was selected

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<sup>5</sup> The school type corresponds to lower secondary education (the German 'Hauptschule'). The school in this example, like many others, offers the possibility to reach a secondary school certificate after 10th grade (corresponds to 'Realschule').

according to the age of participants. Thus the sample was theoretically structured through the a priori assumption that mobile interaction orders differ between different age groups, e.g. that adolescents aged 12 or 13 years possibly have more frequent intra-familial interactions and a close relationship with their parents, while older teenagers develop a network of peer-relations over time, which become more and more meaningful for processes of identity construction.

Prior to the first interview sessions I wanted to obtain consent from the participants and their parents. Thus, the principal and I agreed that he would forward my request to the class teachers, who would then distribute respective forms to their students and finally assemble the groups. My only criterion for the teacher's selection of groups (besides the consent of adolescents and parents): a number of 4 to 6 participants per class and session.

The group interviews were organized during lessons in the morning and took place in a small room, which was actually used as a schoolbook library for the teachers. Knowing nothing about the participants beforehand, I was waiting for them in this location. Since I had agreed on two sessions a day, at least the second interview had to have flexible starting times. As a solution the school secretary made announcements through the loudspeakers, calling for the participating students to leave their class. As I had a limited time slot of circa one hour, I had to introduce myself and explain the reasons for my coming within the first few minutes of the session. All they knew was that some man from a university wanted to ask questions about their mobiles.

In the interviews it became obvious very soon that these circumstances combined with the local setting had some influence on the participants. Gathered around a table together with 3-5 classmates during school time, surrounded by schoolbooks and looking at a person asking questions partly resulted in behavior typical for school situations. Some of the respondents were frequently putting their hands up when asked something – even though I made clear that I am not a teacher, but rather someone who is interested in their personal opinions and everyday life, that answers cannot be wrong and that everyone in the group is allowed to speak whenever she/he wants (without raising an arm). Probably not only the spatial setting did induce the participants' ascription to the researcher being some kind of a teacher, but also my corporal and habitual appearance as an adult and academic person.

During the group interviews I tried to reduce role-related restraints by using youth language, being on first-name terms,<sup>6</sup> showing interest for the respondents' phone model or a new application, and by encouraging respondents to tell 'forbidden' things like using the mobile phone during the lesson although there is a prohibition of phones at the school.

Interviewer: But all of you have your mobile phones with you right now. I mean, actually it is forbidden, right?

Everyone: Yes.

Interviewer: Um, I assume, you still find some ways // André: to write messages or so // to write messages or to make a phone call. Can you describe how you do it?

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<sup>6</sup> In German language, besides using either first name or surname, there is another linguistic distinction of addressing someone formally or informally which is even more clear-cut. While the English language only knows one personal pronoun for direct addressing ('you'), one can choose between 'Du' (informal, familiar) and 'Sie' (formal, distanced) in German.



Nadira (14): (pretends to text covertly)

Jessica (14): Yes, exactly! (laughs)

André (15): Pedro, do you remember me having this arm on the table and then writing under the table... (laughs)

Nadira: Look, everyone sits like this (gesturing again) and does it.

Interviewer: During lessons?

Nadira: Yes.

Pedro (15): He is the craziest guy anyway, this one. (points to André)

André: Yes, I had a fake hand from Halloween that I hanged in here (shows his sleeve cuff), and then it looked like a real arm. I was texting all the time under the table but it looked like I had both my arms lying on the table (laughs). I actually only did it because it was so funny.

In contrast to these members of an 8<sup>th</sup> grade who appeared talkative from the beginning, there were some participants, especially the young and the female ones, who seemed much more shy and insecure towards the researcher. One of the groups, consisting of three girls from 7<sup>th</sup> grade named Luisa (13), Mirjam (14) and Nahal (13) and a boy called Michael (13), is a good example in this regard. The three girls were obviously close friends as they all wore the same type of training jacket, sat closely side by side with their arms linked to one another, exchanging looks and giggling, whereas Michael sat alone calmly at some distance to the trio. In order to get the conversation started and ‘to break the ice’, I asked them to tell something about their mobile phones:

Interviewer: Maybe you can tell me shortly, if you own a mobile phone, which model it is and since when you have it. Maybe we start with you, Luisa.

Luisa: I have a mobile phone. I know... I got a new one recently, because I broke my old one. I don’t know the name of the model. Um, Blueberry or something like that...

Interviewer: Do you have it at hand?

Luisa: Yes. (laughs)

Interviewer: You can take it out and show it, if you like.

Luisa: No (laughs), that is totally embarrassing.

Interviewer: Why do you think it is embarrassing?

Luisa: It’s such a big mobile phone. No, it’s such a big phone... I got it from my sister.

What was meant to be an easy start turned out to be a sore point I had touched. Picking out Luisa from the group and asking to show her mobile phone in front of everyone was apparently the wrong strategy for creating an atmosphere of trustful communication. Trying to escape this slightly awkward situation, I intuitively took out my own mobile phone. Subsequently the respondents dared to join the conversation and started arguing about phone models:

Interviewer: I got this one. (shows his mobile)

Luisa: Yes, that one is looking better // Everyone: (laughs) // mine is so thick...

Michael: Is that a Samsung?

Interviewer: Yes.

Michael: S4 or S2?

Mirjam: S2.

Both examples are instructive with regard to the interplay between collection strategy and ordering processes within peer groups as well as to the role of the researcher in the field. *Firstly*, while the two groups as a whole strongly differ concerning the shares of conversation, openness and accessibility, they are at the same time differentiated internally. These hierarchies or social structures are not fixed, but steadily produced and reproduced through interactive processual ordering (Strauss, 1993) by the participants as representatives of social worlds. In this sense, the researcher not only observes teenagers making contributions in an interview situation, he also observes how the respondents interact with each other and thereby (re)produce order.

The discussion atmosphere in the first group can be described as open and relaxed as everyone is trying to contribute with a funny anecdote. André shows up as the 'class clown', having the biggest conversation parts and commenting on the other participants' inputs, mostly in a humorous way. Here, the strategy of generating narratives by asking for specific practices – although (or particularly because) they object adult expectations – perfectly meets my expectations as the group seems used to talk without inhibition in the presence of each other. For I am interested in episodic and semantic knowledge, there is a great dependency on verbal data. The mixture of interview and discussion elements appears to provide this knowledge as the participants mutually stimulate and evaluate their contributions. This is in turn only made possible through a high degree of familiarity among the participants.

In contrast, a division between a circle of three close friends and one rather separated appearing teenager coins the other group. The researcher is confronted with two separate units that need to be addressed. While Michael is isolated from the girls (and apparently in the class as well), the collection strategy of asking the whole group for joint experiences or activities is much more difficult, as there is no 'group' from the perspective of the participants. There are only few interview sequences where Luisa, Mirjam and Nahal relate to Michael's contributions and vice versa. Contrary to the first example, the participants do not constitute themselves as one group. Moreover, the three female teenagers perform a tight-knit community, bodily and discursively, in which a certain degree of secrecy towards non-members is expected, and giving insights into the private sphere in front of an audience is interpreted as "totally embarrassing". While the reasons Luisa considers her mobile phone inappropriate cannot be comprehensively clarified, the incident nevertheless offers information about the implicit rules and expectations of the situation, i.e. the interaction order between three teens that performatively constitute themselves as a clique on the one side and non-members on the other.

*Secondly*, considering the interviewer an 'outsider' to an unfamiliar field and, conversely, a representative of a social world unfamiliar to the respondents implies questions about the researcher's impact on ordering processes. Being a representative of an adult, male, academic, non-migrant world, the interviews must be understood as cross-generational and partially as cross-gender, cross-ethnic or cross-class. Not all of these dimensions have to come into play during interactions with participants, but surely they *can* structure a

situation if any of the involved actors considers them to be meaningful. Against this background, one reading of the incident with Luisa could be that she was afraid of showing an outdated device to an adult ‘mobile expert’. Through the relation between researcher and participant, the researcher co-produces an interaction order that becomes at the same time object of research. Similar interpretations can be made for further situations with other research groups, e.g. the described school-typical behavior. As mentioned, I tried to elaborate strategies to reduce role-related restraints in the course of the conversation. The circumstances and the (school) setting of the interview corroborated the very role I was attempting to downplay, though.

### 3.2. Mobile phone diaries

As a second data collection strategy I applied a mobile phone diary – combined with subsequent individual interviews that will be described in the next subchapter. Drawing on methods of youth and media research (for mobile phones: cf. Schulz, 2012), the participants were asked to make daily notes about their mobile media behavior for one week. Aiming at individual descriptions of everyday experience in the form of self-documentation, the diary was designed to draw on the relevancies of the participants and ensure a high level of reflexivity.<sup>7</sup> Methodically, one can ask to what extent it is at all possible to capture taken for granted practices (mobile media usage) and thereby to reconstruct implicit social rules of situations, i.e. interaction orders. At this point of the research process<sup>8</sup> the question must be answered carefully, but it seems that the greatest challenge is the sensitization of participants in relation to explicating interactional situations. Whereas in the group interviews specific episodic knowledge can be triggered through questions of the researcher and reciprocal contributions of participants, the diary is structured differently. Although giving illustrative examples for specific situations (e.g., “Someone is looking into your mobile without permission”) and asking for interaction partners (“Who was with you?”), most diary entries made by participants refer to *individual* mobile media use. Many entries concern activities of self-employment, like, for instance, playing games, watching videos, listening to music or reading status updates on Facebook, while others describe the functional involvement of the mobile phone in everyday life routines such as using the device as an (alarm) clock. While the information grants insight into individual media practices, it is only of limited value for the reconstruction and typologization of mobile interaction orders. Presumably because the participants filled in the diary in solitary situations, they often describe media practices in solitary situations as well.

As for the coordination of the mobile media diary, other challenges arose. Since all participants had installed the instant messenger WhatsApp on their mobiles and were frequent users according to their own statements, I coordinated dates via this

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<sup>7</sup> The diary comprises of one column for each day of the week and a short instruction with exemplary situations relevant for the diary (“You received a message from a friend”, “Your phone rang in an inappropriate situation”). Furthermore there are three questions as a guideline for each entry: “1. Where have you been? Who was with you? 2. Why did you use your mobile phone? Try to describe what you did as precise as possible! 3. Did someone in your presence use his/her mobile phone? Try to describe what happened as precise as possible!”

<sup>8</sup> The data collection, particularly in terms of diaries and consecutive individual interviews, had not been completed at the time this article was written.

communication tool. WhatsApp turned out to be practical for reminding the participants to commence the diary use and for making appointments for the subsequent interview. The decision for using the software offered more than a convenient way for communicating between researcher and participants, as it gave additional insight into mobile media practices of teenagers. It simultaneously brought to the fore some problems that were unpredictable at that time, as the following example shows:

One day, I met one of my participants by chance in the bus. A classmate called Romina was accompanying her and we started talking about my research and the mobile phone diary. In the course of the conversation, Romina, approximately 15 years old, began to tell us about her own mobile media usage and asked if she also could have a diary to join my research. I gave her one copy and in turn asked her to give me her number so that I could contact her for agreeing on the starting time, giving her instructions concerning the diary and making an appointment for the associated interview. I wrote her the same day in order to express my thanks for her participation in my research, and she answered politely. Like most WhatsApp-users, Romina had uploaded a profile picture and a status message. Apparently she was in a romantic relationship, since the picture, taken in front of a mirror, showed her and a young male embracing her from behind and kissing her. Romina's status message was also related to her partner as it said "I love you" and displayed a heart symbol.

When I gave the start signal one week later, I realized that her profile picture and her status message on WhatsApp had disappeared. Since I wasn't sure if it was a technical issue regarding the application, I dialed the number using the landline phone in my office. No one answered. On that day I made a few more calls to potential participants for promoting the mobile phone diary. One or two hours later my telephone rang, the display showing a number I did not know. At the other end of the line a male person asked me who I was. Assuming that I had one of my respondents on the phone, I uttered my name and asked in turn for the caller's name. He answered that I had called his girlfriend. Now I understood that the caller was Romina's boyfriend. As I began to explain the reasons for my call, the young male suddenly interrupted me and pointed out the high charges for the phone call. I asked if I could call him back, and he agreed. When I dialed his number a few seconds later, he did not pick up the phone anymore.

What had happened here? After reflecting on the situation, two interpretations seem plausible. Either Romina had lost her interest in participating in the diary. So she blocked me on WhatsApp<sup>9</sup> and asked her boyfriend to check on the number that called her. The other explanation is that her boyfriend was displeased with Romina taking part in my research. As a result he asked her to block my contact and to not answer my call. Both readings tell something about the researcher's role in the field and at the same time about expectations and implicit rules related to mediatized interaction.

*Firstly*, one can ask if the researcher did something 'wrong' regarding the way he interacted with the (potential) respondent. Is the type of contacting young people via a chat program maybe too informal or obtrusive? Considering the social role of the researcher, it seems probable that at a certain point of the coordination process, Romina ascribed characteristics to the researcher that led to a disruption of the relation. As the

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<sup>9</sup> 'Blocking' is a function I later learned about. It gives users the possibility to ignore certain chat partners, which means they are not anymore able to write messages and see status information.

incident is connected to the partnership of Romina – her boyfriend playing the role of the messenger, or even being the cause for Romina’s behavior, respectively – one can identify the cross-gender aspect as a problematic category in this case. Assuming that the researcher is perceived somehow as a disturbance or a threat (to young participants or their partnerships) requires considering not only age-specific but gender-sensitive communication strategies as well.

*Secondly*, the incident sheds light on the specifics of mediatized interaction. Blocking the WhatsApp contact indicated a disruption of the relation between respondent and researcher. As the latter obviously did not react adequately to this signal – which would have been to quit communicating – and instead tried to make a phone call, he misinterpreted the implicit rules and expectations of the situation. Being directly involved in producing (or, in this case: neglecting) a mobile interaction order is even more far-reaching. Giving an almost unknown person access into private or intimate information through the digital self-presentation in terms of the WhatsApp profile<sup>10</sup> does not mean that there is a trustful communication or a feeling of commitment towards the researcher implied. In this sense, doing research about mobile media usage *by means of* mobile media creates situations that are relevant both methodologically and theoretically.

### 3.3. Individual interviews

When the first mobile phone diaries were completed, I coordinated dates for individual interviews. I initially intended the diary entries to offer anchors for conducting the interview, i.e. the questions and topics were supposed to be structured by the participants’ documentations. Due to the mentioned deficits of the method (documenting solitary media use instead of social interaction), however, the diary was rather used as a possibility for getting in touch with participants so as to arrange an interview. Again, I will offer an example which entails the interview situation itself as well as the coordination of the interview in order to illustrate different problems:

Once again, I used WhatsApp to contact participants. Planning on doing three individual interviews in a row on one day, I sent messages to Marcel (14), Letizia (14) and Dahlia (14), asking whether it would be possible for them to meet me after school to talk about the diaries. Marcel asked me in return whether I could stop by during school recess in the morning to collect the diaries and talk with him “and the others”. I explained that I would like to conduct the conversations separately and that it would take more than 15 minutes, the length of a break. We agreed to meet in a café after the end of school at 15:30. Meanwhile Dahlia answered that we could meet at 14:00. Since both students were in the same class, I wondered why their lessons would end at different times, so I asked if she was sure. I promptly got a message back – not from Dahlia but from Marcel, clarifying that Dahlia had given me the wrong information and that she also would be in the location at 15:30. Eventually the third respondent, Letizia, answered and asked whether she had to come alone. I informed her that it would be okay if she brought someone with her, and that I already had two appointments at 15:30. I proposed another appointment one week later. As she seemed a little insecure throughout the chat, I finally offered her to join the meeting with Dahlia and Marcel, but suggested that I had to talk with each one of them

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<sup>10</sup> Giving information about their relationship status is a widespread practice among the participants.

individually, so two of them would have to wait. She agreed and seemed happy with our compromise. On the same day in the evening, I received a message from Letizia, “You can also join the date with Marcel and Dahlia. But I have to talk to everyone individually. If it doesn’t take too long for you, it would be alright :-)”. It was the message I had sent Letizia a few hours earlier – obviously she had intended to send a copy to someone else and I was the wrong recipient.

The idea of having three single interviews – each in the presence of two other persons – did not materialize as intended when I finally got to meet the three participants the next day. When I interviewed Marcel about his diary, I realized that the two girls were increasingly getting bored with the situation and commented on Marcel’s narratives again and again. After 20 minutes I decided to involve everyone in the conversation and switched to a group interview. Although I was able to collect interesting data, it was different from what I had planned.

The example shows potential difficulties concerning negotiations of preconditions for interviews. *Firstly*, the expectations of the respondents do not correspond with the expectations of the researcher regarding the arrangement of the interviews. Marcel (and probably other students) thought the conversation would be just a short talk about the diary. Although the researcher had explained the interview conditions while giving a general introduction of the research in front of the class, some participants apparently had no clear idea of the procedure. Instead of talking to a whole class, like I did, one might consider offering information talks to each single participant or small groups in order to ensure a transparent process. This should ensure that everyone comprehends what to expect of the interview situation and at the same time prevent people from participating in research under conditions they do not fully agree to.

That leads to the *second* insight with regard to the researcher’s role in the field. In contrast to the group interviews, the respondents are now faced with the situation of meeting the researcher alone – particularly in another setting than school (locally and temporally), this can create insecurities and contingencies. Compared to group interviews, there is no ‘hiding’ behind other (maybe more confident) participants and no possibility for slowly getting used to the situation – the young people are at the front stage from the very first question posed. Given the fact that the interviews are cross-generational, role-related constraints are even reinforced and become more significant in individual interview settings. This impression was confirmed through further interview situations, where some of the interviewees appeared very shy and hardly dared to make eye contact with the researcher. This applied in particular to the female respondents, who are not only confronted with an adult person but with a male one. Letizia’s question, whether she “had to” come alone, points to this cross-gender problem. A similar situation occurred when coordinating appointments with a group of girls at a grammar school.<sup>11</sup> After having conducted a group interview with the three respondents in a very communicative and apparently trustful atmosphere during lunch break at school, I suggested to conduct the individual interviews in a location outside school. As my proposition was answered rather vaguely and one respondent herself suggested to have the conversation at school again, I sensed they felt uncomfortable with the idea of sitting in a café alone with a male adult. As the participants in the example above try to find a way of doing the interview together

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<sup>11</sup> The German ‘Gymnasium’.

– which I allow for eventually – they constitute themselves as a ‘group’ of teenagers that demarcates itself from the researcher as a representative of an adult world. Detaching single persons from the group appears precarious against this background and requires sensitive proceeding and negotiation of conditions.

*Thirdly*, the example gives insight into interaction orders as well as mobile interaction orders among teenagers. Marcel, being sort of a spokesman for his classmates, strongly affected the coordination process. Answering me on behalf of his friend Dahlia hints at the hierarchy within their relationship or the peer group order, respectively. The problem of parallel communication (Dahlia and Marcel chatting with me, and at the same time chatting with each other) as well as the misdirected message from Letizia draws attention to implicit rules related to mobile media usage among young people. Through the interview, I learned about a WhatsApp group,<sup>12</sup> which included almost all students of the class. The participants told me that there was a steady exchange of information among the group members – also about the diary and the interviews. Hence, there is a high possibility that in fact every word of mine, every ‘private’ communication, was ‘shared’ with the whole group. In this case, the researcher literally lacked the knowledge of the “ground rules” (Goffman, 1983, p. 5) for the game: Young people do not primarily understand themselves as single participants, but as members of a (digital) peer community.

## 4. Conclusions

When I started doing research on mobile interaction orders among teenagers, I had certain expectations and presumptions about young people’s lifeworlds and their media practices. Some of them resulted from previous studies, some from rather mundane observations. Both theories and personal experience worked as sensitizing concepts according to the grounded theory methodology. The approach not only helped to re-think and modify one of the most important theoretical frameworks for this research, namely the interaction order, but also encouraged to ask questions about adequate strategies of collecting (or constructing) data. As mobile phones can be understood as permanent digital companions, a crucial challenge was to gain insight into taken for granted practices and hence the ‘tacit knowledge’ within these practices. What I experienced during the fieldwork, however, does not only offer answers to how suitable the single methodical approaches are, but also sheds light on a range of more fundamental methodological questions. The methodical strategies employed are not only quite different with respect to the situation of data collection, but also with respect to their preconditions and preparatory requirements. The selection of a certain setting, the appearance or ‘look’ of the researcher or the mode of recruitment are all important factors that structure the participants’ expectations towards the situation and eventually the interaction between participants and researcher.

1. The combination of *group discussion and episodic (group) interview* proved as a fruitful strategy to generate narratives, as the group-members often triggered reciprocal contributions and in this way brought to the surface both episodic and semantic knowledge. Moreover, the strategy highly depends on internal differentiation and ordering processes within research groups. The compilation of the group should thus be

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<sup>12</sup> The chat program not only offers private text chats between individual persons but also group chats, in which every member of the group can read every message.

thoroughly considered. The interviews indicated that groups consisting of friends only were more talkative and frank than random samples of a school class, for instance.

The *mobile phone diaries* were supposed to reconstruct everyday knowledge about specific interactional situations, but mostly generated data on solitary media use. Therefore one has to think about possible designs that are open enough to draw on the relevancies of the participants and at the same time focus sufficiently on the main research questions in order to generate useful data. Furthermore, a better integration of the tool into the lifeworlds of teenagers could improve the outcome. The use of digital (mobile) diaries instead of physical ones might ensure that the users have the possibility to document their experiences any time at any place and are not restricted to certain time slots.

*Individual interviews* afford an even more trustful atmosphere than group interviews, as the respondents are directly confronted with the researcher and do not have the possibility to 'hide' behind their friends or schoolmates. That is why a good preparation with regards to place, time and procedure of the interview situation is crucial. As the examples showed, creating transparency by means of information talks is a decisive factor – ideally, the first conversations with potential interviewees should take place in group settings as young people are often more trustful and confident in the presence of familiar persons.

2. With regard to the methodological reflection on the researcher's role in the field, not only the interview situation, but also the phase of preparation and coordination offers instructive insights. The research field consists of young people and their mobile media related practices. It consists of interactions and relations between teenagers, and the interaction orders that are produced and reproduced within social situations. The researcher is not part of this field. One is an 'outsider', as one always represents different social worlds. Role-related ascriptions and expectations of the adolescent participants are already structured through local settings: Conducting research in a rule-governed organization like school is different from doing interviews in an informal setting like a café. While the place for an interview can be changed, the appearance of the researcher is only partially modifiable. Even if one can choose a certain outfit (e.g., to make a 'casual' impression), adapt the way of speaking (e.g., teenage slang) and apply certain communication strategies, the researcher still remains an outsider to the field. When participants constituted themselves as a group (of teenagers) who inform and accompany each other, which contradicted my methodical aims at some points, they underlined my outsider status. The same happened when I unknowingly intruded into the private (digital) sphere of one female participant. As representatives of, for instance, an adult, male, non-migrant, academic etc. world, social scientists doing fieldwork not only observe young people re(producing) order in specific situations, but themselves *co-produce* interaction orders, generate expectations or even undermine implicit rules of certain situations. This notion brings us back to the modified concept of interaction order, which was extended in terms of youth-specific and mobile media-specific dimensions. Generational order, peer order, gender order or co-situational constellations are not only relevant dimensions for ordering processes among adolescents, but also can come into play in interactions between researcher and participants. That should be taken into account when interpreting data and leads to the last point.



3. Conceiving of qualitative research as a dialogic, interactive process is a widespread methodological principle in the literature. But what does interactivity imply when the study wants to explore rules of interactions? If one is interested in (mobile) interaction orders among teenagers, the interactive structuring of situations becomes highly relevant not only in the participants' narratives about past situations but also in the actual situation of collecting (or constructing) data. At this point methodological and theoretical notions intersect. As the respondents and the researcher interact within specific situations, the process of collecting/constructing data concurrently becomes a process of *constructing interaction order*. That means, the whole interactive process of researching potentially turns into data, starting from the first contact for recruiting until the last small talk after the interview. The whole process of fieldwork comes into focus. As shown, some of these interactions between researcher and participants even vividly illustrate the workings of the (mobile) interaction order and give hints for the modification or elaboration of theory.

The same applies to the role of mobile media within the research process. On the one hand the technology is a practical communication tool for getting in touch with respondents. On the other hand the study aims at a reconstruction of taken for granted practices as mobile media are deeply embedded into everyday life and social relationships. Against this backdrop, (mobile) communication with research participants can be helpful in two ways: While the use of mobile phones promises benefits with regard to field access – since the participants appear easily accessible and familiar with the technology – the coordination of the fieldwork is more than just a necessary interaction. It actually allows for observing and disclosing the workings of mobile interaction orders and offers the possibility to learn the 'ground rules' for the very game that is supposed to be studied.

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